

The Role of Clothing and Fashion
in the Household Budget
and Popular Culture,
Britain 1919-1949

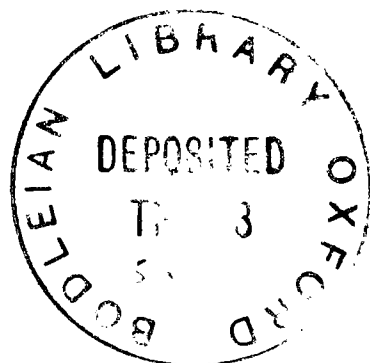
A Thesis
Submitted for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy
in Modern History

by

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31 January 1997
(revised version 15 October 1998)



Short Abstract

The Role of Clothing and Fashion in the Household Budget and Popular Culture: Britain, 1919-1949

The central theme of the thesis is how clothing and, to a lesser degree, fashion affected the lives of women in the period from 1919 to 1949. The practical impact of clothing on women is rarely assessed to the same degree as other essentials of life such as food and housing, yet obtaining, maintaining and renewing clothing stocks were issues of the utmost importance to women, particularly those from low-income households, in the inter-war period and the Second World War.

The first half of the thesis concentrates upon the role of clothing in the home and in popular culture in the inter-war period. Of particular importance is the role of clothing in the household budget, a subject which has received limited attention from social historians. In households with limited incomes, finding the means to purchase clothing was problematic, and women often resorted to unconventional methods of saving and spending. The role of clothing in middle-class households is examined as well, with an emphasis on the many varieties of shops which supplied ready-to-wear clothing, as well as sources of made-to-measure clothing. And, while antiquarian and sociological studies of fashion abound, little has been written on the practical impact of fashion in the lives of ordinary people. With the

development of a mass market after the First World War, the influence of fashion was extended to most of the social classes. Rather than re-examining the changing modes themselves, it is useful to study the impact these fashions had upon people: in the way they regarded and treated one another; and in the way they perceived themselves.

The study of the inter-war years thus offers a foundation from which to examine the role of clothing in the Second World War. The price of clothing and footwear rose steeply in the early months of the war, but stabilised once rationing and austerity measures took hold. The ways in which women budgeted, saved for and purchased clothing are discussed, with an emphasis on how these methods differed from pre-war habits. Although the development and implementation of government initiatives is described, the latter portion of the thesis concentrates on the practical effects of such schemes in the day-to-day lives of the British people. The role of fashion in the wartime economy is addressed as well. Austerity programmes stalled any extreme changes in fashion, people wore the same clothing year after year, and uniforms were almost universal. Nevertheless, issues of fashion and style remained important to the public, who in any case were encouraged to maintain high standards of dress and appearance as a sign of patriotism.

The Role of Clothing and Fashion
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The role of clothing and fashion in the household budget and popular culture has attracted little scholarly attention, despite its centrality to the historian's understanding of daily life in the past. This is unfortunate, for the historian requires a comprehension of people's social behaviour as much as a knowledge of their political or economic conduct.

The assumption that clothing and fashion are frivolous topics has had the effect of discouraging the serious historian; as a result, most existing literature is devoted to topics of an antiquarian nature. The appearance and construction of garments that were worn at given periods has been well-documented, but less attention has been paid to the lives of the people who wore the garments.

The history of clothing does not, furthermore, consist solely of the history of fashion. Clothing was a necessity of life: not only did it serve as a practical shield against the elements, but it was also a required element for inclusion in society. Clothing was not something that people thought of in a purely functional way; it was also fundamental to the way that people regarded themselves and each other. It was a visual signpost that could indicate a person's status in society, their occupation, and even their personal interests.

The central theme of the thesis is how clothing affected the lives of

women in the period from 1919 to 1949. At its heart is the search for a fuller understanding of the lives of women in the years encompassing the end of the Great War and the end of World War Two, and the history of clothing serves as a useful back door, so to speak, to their world. Where women are concerned, especially those from the lowest income groups, it is perhaps only via an indirect route that one can gain further insight into their lives, lives which emerge only rarely from anonymity. Finding the voice of these women through traditional sources and inquiries is next to impossible, but if one begins with subjects which affected them most intimately – clothing being a prime example – their voices become, suddenly, much more distinct.

The practical role of clothing in women's lives is rarely assessed to the same degree as other essentials of life such as food and housing, yet obtaining, maintaining, and renewing clothing stocks were issues of the utmost importance to women in the inter-war period and the Second World War. This was particularly true for women from the poorest households, whose struggle to keep their families fed and clean was compounded by the difficulties of obtaining decent clothing and footwear for everyone. The inconstancy of their family's income meant that it was very difficult to save sufficient funds for the purchase of clothing, and so women had to resort to unconventional means of saving: they might organise savings schemes with friends and neighbours; or they might seek credit – however usurious the rates – in order to buy clothing immediately. The clothing they could afford with such limited funds was inevitably of low quality, which meant that it

had to be replaced frequently; and it was also the case that high rates of interest inflated the price of clothing well above the amount that it would cost if purchased with cash. Often it was impossible for the lower-income housewife to obtain new clothing for her family, in which case she had to resort to the second-hand market and its dubious wares.

Even once such clothing was obtained, it required a great deal of effort merely to maintain it in wearable condition. Many hours were spent by women in mending and laundering their family's garments; and these chores were made more difficult by a lack of materials. It cost money to launder clothes efficiently and thoroughly; sufficient supplies of hot water and soap, as well as equipment such as a mangle to wring out wet and heavy laundry, were often inaccessible to the poorest households.

Inevitably, the worry and labour involved in the provision and maintenance of clothing stocks meant that, for the woman from a low-income household, keeping her family clothed was nothing more than a nightmarish responsibility. In households where the income was more constant – where, even if funds were not abundant, at least they did not fluctuate wildly from week to week, and where the housewife could organise her spending without the worry of a week without money – the provision and maintenance of clothing was incomparably transformed for the better.

Women from this 'middle range of incomes' had access to cash sums, or were able to save money with relative ease; and this allowed them access to shops which stocked good-quality garments that were fairly priced. Clothes

could be purchased for reasons other than cheapness: quality of construction, and attraction of appearance, became important considerations as well. Even the way that clothing was cared for became less troublesome. The labour of wash-day was made easier by better equipment and more abundant supplies of soap and hot water; or it might be avoided altogether, and transferred to another woman – usually one from a low-income household – in the person of a washerwoman.

The effect of clothing on women's lives was not a purely practical one, furthermore, for clothing – its appearance, quality of construction, and relative abundance – affected the way that people perceived both themselves and those around them. The sort of clothing a woman wore depended not only on her personal background, but also upon society in general. Both internal influences (such as a woman's age, income, or occupation) and external influences (for example, the cinema or periodic press) determined what kind of clothing she wore; and they also affected how women thought about their, and others', clothing.

With the outbreak of World War Two in 1939, and continuing for the next decade, the practices and attitudes women had in regard to clothing were altered to reflect the requirements of life on the home front. In the early years of the war, the price of clothing rose sharply, and available stocks plummeted. Fearing that morale would be affected by such shortages, the government implemented a series of measures intended to guarantee 'fair shares' where clothing was concerned. The introduction of clothes rationing in 1941 meant

that methods of budgeting and saving had to be altered, for the amount of clothing – both new and used – one could legally purchase was strictly controlled. Utility controls, introduced later that year, regulated the price and manufacture of both cloth and made-up garments, and were intended to reduce inessential demands on materials and labour. They were complemented by the Austerity directives, released in 1942, which governed the design and manufacture of most types of clothing. The appearance of clothing during the war reflected such economic austerity: styles were plain, even severe; and changes in fashion stalled. ‘Fashion’, during the Second World War, meant little more than attractive clothing that was well-maintained.

The austerity measures were successful, in that they led to a decrease in consumer spending, as well as a more equitable system of distribution of existing clothing stocks; but it was also the case that the British people were confronted with wardrobes whose contents were steadily diminishing. Never the less, women from all economic backgrounds coped with such shortages in a resourceful manner, despite the many responsibilities of daily life in wartime Britain. Although many women had been directed into paid work outside the home, or had joined one of the auxiliary services, they were also required to cope with rationing and shortages of most other essentials, food in particular, as if they had no other duties to occupy them.

Women responded to economic controls by obtaining their clothing from alternate venues – for example, ‘Bring and Buy’ sales – or by swapping

with other women. Most importantly, they learned how to extend the life of the clothing they already had. 'Make-do and Mend' – the slogan which the government used to encourage economy where clothing was concerned – involved not only the careful repair of existing garments, but might also entail the creation of new garments from materials at hand which hitherto had not been employed in the construction of clothing.

Merely because clothing stocks were so sharply reduced did not mean that women were encouraged to be lax in their personal appearance. Women – particularly young women – were expected to maintain an attractive, well-groomed appearance. It was considered by the government, as well as by the British people, that high standards of appearance contributed to high levels of morale, and at the same time demonstrated to the enemy that it had not adversely affected daily life. Their efforts were, of course, made easier by a freeze in fashionable change; women could be confident that prevailing styles in clothing would not alter abruptly, rendering their existing stocks of clothing unfashionable.

Women accomplished this not only by keeping their existing garments in as good a condition as possible, but also by rejuvenating the appearance of those garments by creatively adding new details – bright buttons or a scrap of trim – or by remaking their garments entirely. An old dress might be turned into a blouse; old scraps of cloth could be sewn together into a patchwork skirt. Women also managed to cultivate a pleasing appearance by concentrating on related aspects of their appearance such as their hats,

hairstyles, and cosmetics.

The *sort* of clothing women wore was changing as well. Many women spent their working lives in uniform; and even civilian clothes were so similar as to give the appearance of uniform. Clothing had to be simple and relatively comfortable so that women might undertake their war work with minimal distraction and inconvenience.

In 1947, all this was shaken by the appearance of the 'New Look' in women's fashionable clothing, which had been looming for some time, but which was brought to exuberant life by designer Christian Dior. The original *couture* designs were extremely lavish and feminine; their wearer's bust and hips were padded, while her waist was whittled by built-in corsetry. Most astonishing were the skirts of these dresses: long – sometimes only inches from the floor – and *very* full. The 'New Look' designs – in appearance, the polar opposite of modest, utilitarian wartime fashions – were flamboyantly and flagrantly defiant of economic austerity and the restraint it required.

Despite all the attention accorded to the new designs, they were not particularly popular in Britain at first, largely because the continuation of wartime economic controls meant that personal spending remained limited well into the post-war period. Clothes rationing had *not* ended in 1945, but instead continued, along with other economic controls, as part of the Labour government's plan for the post-war resuscitation of the shattered British economy. The clothes ration hovered at a handful of coupons per month – enough for one or two garments a year – and Utility restrictions on clothing

production meant that 'New Look' designs, even if produced by British manufacturers, could not legally be sold in the UK. Instead, they were sold abroad as part of the export drive to rebuild Britain's economy.

The 'New Look' only became popular after clothes rationing was abolished in March 1949. Even then, it was a very different sort of 'New Look' from the one first envisioned by Christian Dior and his fellow *couturiers*. It did retain a longer skirt, but none of the Parisian excesses were seen in the ready-to-wear versions of the 'New Look' that were sold in High Streets across Britain from 1949 onwards.

In the end, it was an egalitarian, accessible 'New Look' that prevailed, reflecting the temper of British society in the immediate post-war period. Restraint in most things was necessary if a truly just society were to be attained. The vision of that better world had been described by William Beveridge, but it was given credence by the wartime government itself, however unwittingly, with its emphasis on 'fair shares' for all. If a world of 'fair shares' were to become reality, then certain sacrifices would have to be made; and when compared to the benefits of National Health, for example, the opulent excesses of the 'New Look' might be foregone with ease.

Two major conclusions can be drawn from this thesis in regard to the social history of women in Britain in the years between 1919 and 1949. First, the ability to 'make do' and to manage on a limited income, particularly where clothing was concerned, and also to value sensible, hard-wearing styles of dress, was not something that women suddenly learned during the war

years, but rather was a well-developed skill born out of the economic distress of much of the inter-war period.

Second, while fashionable change in clothing can rightly be characterised as largely irrational, the women's decisions and actions regarding clothing were fundamentally **rational**. Related subjects concerning domestic life and their effects on the lives of women have been written about extensively, but a comprehensive survey examining the role of clothing in daily life has not been attempted, perhaps because of a lingering prejudice that it, like fashion, is irrational and therefore unworthy of serious academic attention. However, as this thesis will demonstrate, the relationship between women and clothing in the period under study was a thoroughly rational one. The strategies women employed to save, budget, purchase and care for clothing were as well thought-out, prudent and sensible as those they employed when considering issues such as food and housing, and are equally deserving of scholarly attention.

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Acknowledgments

My greatest debt of thanks is owed to Mr. Philip Waller, who supervised my work for this doctoral thesis. I feel very fortunate to have worked under the direction of such a fine scholar and teacher, and I thank him for all the time and effort he invested in assisting me with the research and writing of my thesis. I am also very grateful to Dr. Ross McKibbin for his suggestions and assistance during the course of my studies. My father and stepmother, Prof. Stuart Robson and Dr. Mariel Grant Robson, were an invaluable source of support and information as well, and I thank them both.

Many thanks also to Prof. Charles Feinstein and Mrs. Janet Howarth for their kind interest in my work and the invaluable suggestions they made in terms of the direction my thesis should take. I am also very grateful to Dr. Brian Harrison for his guidance with the early stages of my work, which I very much appreciated.

My studies at Oxford were funded in the first instance by a Commonwealth Scholarship, which was jointly administered by the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the British Council. I was very fortunate to have benefitted from their financial support, without which I could not have contemplated a long programme of study abroad. The final year of my doctoral research was funded by a Doctoral Fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, for which I am also very grateful.

I would like to thank the staff of the libraries and archives in which I conducted my research, most particularly: the Bodleian Library in Oxford; the Newspaper Library in Colindale, London; the Hulton-Deutsch Photographic Archives in London; the British Library Reading Room; the Public Record Office at Kew; and the Tom Harrison Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex.

I am most deeply grateful to the women who so kindly agreed to participate in the oral history project, the results of which serve as the heart, in many ways, of this thesis. Mrs. M. W. was the first to volunteer to be interviewed, and thereafter served as a liaison with the other ladies. She not only persuaded her friends at the seniors' residence that they ought to be interviewed, but she also set up and arranged all the subsequent interviews for me. I doubt that the project would have been nearly as successful without her resourcefulness and assistance.

Lastly, I would like to thank Kate Robson and Susan Meingast for their assistance with the illustrations in this thesis; and my colleagues at Multi-Vision Publishing Inc., in particular Stevie Cameron and Lilia Lozinski, for their support and encouragement.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother

Margaret Wendy Robson
1940-1991

Abbreviations

ARP - Air Raid Precautions

ATS - Auxiliary Territorial Service

BT - Board of Trade files in the Public Record Office

d - pence

FR - File Report (from the Mass-Observation archives)

LCC - London County Council

INF - Ministry of Information files in the Public Record Office

M-O - Mass-Observation

NIESR - National Institute of Economic and Social Research

PRO - Public Record Office

s - shilling

TC - Topic Collection (from the Mass-Observation archives)

WAAF - Women's Auxiliary Air Force

WRNS - Women's Royal Naval Service (also referred to as 'Wrens')

Chapter One:

Introduction

The role of clothing and fashion in the household budget and popular culture has attracted comparatively little scholarly attention, despite its centrality to understanding daily life in the past.¹ The historian who wants to gain an understanding of life in the past must acquire a comprehension of people's social behaviour as much as a knowledge of their political or economic conduct, for most people's thoughts were and are occupied by modest everyday issues: what to eat, what to wear, what to do on a day off, the health and happiness of their family, and how to make ends meet.

Historians who have studied social life in early twentieth-century Britain have seldom evaluated the practical significance of clothing with the same degree of interest as other components of the household budget such as food and housing. This is unfortunate, for obtaining, maintaining and renewing household clothing stocks were important features of daily life for women at most income levels. This was particularly the case given the economic turmoil of the inter-war and Second World War era. It was especially true for women from the poorest households, whose struggle to keep their families fed and clean was compounded by the difficulties of

¹ This is the case with Arthur Marwick, Britain in a Century of Total War 1900-1967 (London, 1968); C. L. Mowat, Britain between the Wars (London, 1955); A. J. P. Taylor, English History, 1914-1945 (London, 1970); and D. Thompson, England in the Twentieth Century (London, 1969). Although food, housing and even leisure are discussed by all the above authors in some detail, little attention is paid to clothing. A welcome exception is Ross McKibbin's recently published Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951 (Oxford, 1998).

obtaining decent clothing and footwear for everyone. Clothing was not something that women thought of in a purely functional way, furthermore, for it was also fundamental to the way that people regarded themselves and each other. Clothing was a visual signpost that could indicate people's status in society, their occupation, and even their personal interests; it meant more to people than a series of changes in the appearance of clothes. Quentin Bell argued forcefully in 1947 that fashion 'governs our behaviour, informs our sexual appetites [...], makes possible but also distorts our conception of history and determines our aesthetic valuations.' Altogether it is a 'force of tremendous and incalculable power.'²

Fashionable change contains elements that are unpredictable and even irrational, yet most women's actions and motivations in regard to clothing in this period followed decided patterns and were highly rational and pragmatic. As this thesis will demonstrate, the strategies they employed in their purchase, care and wear of clothing operated within set margins and constraints and were as well-thought-out and sensible as those strategies which they practised in regard to food and housing. Thus they provide as much insight for the historian as study of these other key components of the family budget has done.

At the heart of this thesis, then, is the search for a fuller understanding

² Quentin Bell, On Human Finery, first published 1947 (London, 1976), p. 62.

of the lives of women in the years encompassing the end of the Great War and the end of World War Two; and the history of clothing serves as a useful back door, so to speak, to their world. Where women are concerned, especially those from the lowest income groups, it is perhaps only via an indirect route that historians can gain further insight into their lives, lives which emerge only rarely from anonymity. Finding the voice of these women through traditional sources and inquiries is rare, but if the historian focuses upon subjects which affected them most intimately – clothing being a prime example – their voices suddenly become much more distinct.

Men were by no means unaffected by clothing and considerations of fashion, yet it played a less central role in their lives. Certainly they were influenced and affected by clothing and changes in fashion, but relatively few men (excepting, of course, bachelors) were directly involved in the budgeting, purchase, and subsequent care of clothing. It is also the case that the lives of men are more readily accessible to the historian, and as a result benefit less from an inquiry into their habits and attitudes regarding clothing. Men's lives took place in a comparatively public sphere, while women's lives, in contrast, were more private. It is in the details of their everyday lives that the historian is most likely to acquire a sense of what women, and the world around them, were like. As Elizabeth Roberts has observed, women in the inter-war period appear 'to have found their chief satisfaction in running their homes economically and seeing their children grow up. Their major

preoccupations were [...] feeding, clothing and housing their families.’³ This was the stuff of most women’s lives: the home and their families. Young women might experience the outside world of paid work and leisure for a few years, but almost always this ended with marriage and motherhood.

This was the case with women from all income groups: ‘working-class’, ‘middle-class’, and all the innumerable gradations in between. Such class-based terminology, however, can be misleading, and so for the purposes of this thesis the descriptions ‘lower range of income’ and ‘middle range of income’ have been used, except where class-based terms were encountered in primary source texts. Any enquiry into the habits and standards of living of the British working and middle classes is bound to become entangled in thorny issues of class identity. Where did the different classes begin and end? Ought they to be defined according to income, occupation, educational standard, neighbourhood and residency, culture and behaviour, or a combination of the above? And could a person’s own assessment of class status be taken as accurate, or could that class only be adjudged by some supposed impartial observer? Such questions have been and continue to be the focus of much study and further review of them here is unnecessary.⁴

³ Elizabeth Roberts, ‘Women’s Strategies, 1890-1940,’ in Labour and Love: Women’s Experience of Home and Family 1850-1940, ed. Jane Lewis (Oxford, 1986), pp. 243-44.

⁴ See David Lockwood, The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness (London, 1966); Ross McKibbin, Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951 (Oxford, 1998); R. S. Neale, ed., History and Class: Essential Readings

This is not the case, however, where the history of clothing is concerned. In order to appreciate the deficiencies of existing literature, one must first carefully survey that work which has already been done on the subject of the history and theory of clothing and fashion.

* * *

Although a comprehensive survey of clothing in Britain in the inter-war and wartime periods is lacking, there is none the less a significant corpus of more general work on the subject which deserves some attention.

Chief among general histories of dress in the period is Elizabeth Ewing's History of Twentieth-Century Fashion, which charts the changes in western women's clothing in the twentieth century.⁵ Ewing avoids extensive descriptions of various styles and instead seeks to show how fashion interacted with events, attitudes and cultural change. Because the scope of her study is so broad, however, covering fashion in all the major centres (France, Britain, America and, to a lesser extent, Italy and Japan) from the turn of the century to the mid-1990s, it cannot serve as more than an index and reference point. Moreover, the scholarly apparatus is slight: there are no footnotes or named sources, merely the occasional specification of the date of

in Theory and Interpretation (Oxford, 1983); and Harold J. Perkin, The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1889 (London, 1989).

⁵ Elizabeth Ewing, History of Twentieth-Century Fashion, first published 1974 (London, 1992). The third edition of Ewing's book was revised and updated by Alice Mackrell (Ewing died in 1986), who wrote an additional chapter on the mid-1980s to mid-1990s.

a newspaper or magazine article following a direct quotation. In this sense, Ewing's work is aimed chiefly at the general reader who is curious about the history of fashion.

Similar in approach is Jane Mulvagh's Vogue History of Twentieth-Century Fashion. While informative and painstakingly researched, it is principally a survey of changing styles and fashions as seen in the pages of the American, British and French editions of Vogue.⁶ Vogue essayed to be the Bible of the fashion world, but its point of view was conservative and elitist: few women actually wore the clothes profiled in Vogue, although many more were eventually affected by dilutions of haute couture styles. Mulvagh's book is, in many ways, more a history of the magazine than a history of clothing and fashion in the twentieth century.

Equally limited is Forties Fashion and the New Look.⁷ Written by Colin McDowell, a respected journalist and fashion writer, this is an entertaining, well-researched and lavishly illustrated book, undertaken as a companion volume to the Imperial War Museum's 1996 exhibition of the same name. However, McDowell does not attempt a scholarly assessment of the role of clothing and fashion during the Second World War and immediate post-war period: his purpose was to produce a popular history and

⁶ Jane Mulvagh, Vogue History of Twentieth-Century Fashion (London, 1988).

⁷ Colin McDowell, Forties Fashion and the New Look (London, 1997).

it succeeds admirably as such.

A significant amount of research into the history and significance of dress has been done, but not by social historians: in most cases it has been the work of antiquarian scholars, social theoreticians and sociologists. The antiquarian's emphasis has been on detailed aspects of the material background of garments (how they were made, by whom, out of what materials, and how much they were or are worth). This type of study is particularly important for purposes of conservation, as well as for ensuring authenticity in period costuming and illustration. Although the antiquarian's approach to the history of dress is more narrowly based than the social historian's, the sort of specialised knowledge it represents is useful: even as a competent political historian must know who did what during any particular government's tenure before exploring the question why, so too must a clothing historian know what was worn when and by whom.

Most general costume histories are antiquarian in focus, offering year-by-year summaries of fashionable clothes.⁸ Many more treat only a particular

⁸ See J. Anderson Black and Madge Garland, A History of Fashion (London, 1975); C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington, A Picture History of English Costume (London, 1960); Douglas Gorsline, A History of Fashion: A Visual Survey of Costume from Ancient Times, first published 1955 (London, 1991); and Georgina O'Hara, The Encyclopedia of Fashion: From 1840 to the 1980s (London, 1986).

decade, designer, or city.⁹ Such books are valuable reference tools, but their text is sparse and descriptive, usually thinly referenced, and secondary to the photographs and illustrations.

Among recently published works an outstanding example of the antiquarian's approach may be found in Jane Ashelford's The Art of Dress: Clothes and Society 1500-1914.¹⁰ This is not a general costume history, for Ashelford has made the focus of her book the magnificent collections of costume held by the National Trust.¹¹ In several instances she has been able to trace an item of clothing back to its original wearer, the proof residing in a contemporary portrait featuring both garment and owner. She has also included chapters on occupational dress and children's clothing.

Perhaps the most well-regarded among costume historians has been James Laver who, in a remarkable career spanning some four decades, wrote or contributed to more than thirty published works on costume, social morés and customs. His work encompasses not only reference volumes that chart

⁹ Good examples of these types of book are Elisabeth Flory's Hommage à Christian Dior (Paris, 1986); Lesley Jackson's The New Look: Design in the Fifties (London, 1991); and Rose Hartman's Birds of Paradise: An Intimate View of the New York Fashion World (New York, 1980).

¹⁰ Jane Ashelford, The Art of Dress: Clothes and Society 1500-1914 (London, 1996).

¹¹ The National Trust has three significant collections of costume. They are found at Snowhill Manor in Gloucestershire, Killerton House in Devon and Springhill in Northern Ireland.

changing fashions in dress,¹² but also books of theory that speculate on more abstract aspects of the human relationship to clothing and fashion, namely the anthropological origins of costume and the influence that sexuality has on dress.¹³

Laver's work was and is of landmark importance, for he wrote about clothing and fashion as if they were significant and worthy subjects in an era when they were habitually belittled or ignored by other academics. His writings are, however, deficient as social histories in that they do not develop in sufficient depth the role of clothing and fashion in the lives of ordinary people. His work is also vitiated by its prejudices: note, for example, the condescending treatment he accords aboriginal peoples when discussing their attitudes towards dress; or the way he depicts women as obsessed by fashion in dress, and lacking in rationality as a result.¹⁴

In addition to antiquarian histories of clothing, there is a large corpus

¹² See James Laver, English Costume of the Nineteenth Century (London, 1947); Costumes through the Ages (London, 1963); Costume in Antiquity (London, 1964); The Concise History of Costume and Fashion (London, 1969).

¹³ Examples are James Laver, Modesty in Dress: An Inquiry into the Fundamentals of Fashion (London 1969) and Taste and Fashion: From the French Revolution to the Present Day (London, 1937).

¹⁴ Laver, Clothes (London, 1952), pp. 21, xiv and xv.

of literature on the theory and sociology of dress.¹⁵ Foremost among its exponents was Thorstein Veblen, an American whose best-known work, The Theory of the Leisure Class, has informed the sociology of dress since it was first published in 1899.¹⁶ Veblen's theories have been the subject of intense scrutiny by several generations of scholars and require no general elaboration here, apart from where they touch upon matters of dress.¹⁷

According to Veblen, a conspicuous consumption of goods was the best way to display one's membership in the leisure class – the economic class at which work ceases and leisure is the norm. While few households could claim full membership of the leisure class, Veblen theorized that a large proportion nonetheless aspired to membership. In these households, then, vicarious leisure was the norm. With the dominant male figure unable to do

¹⁵ Several other notable works of theory in regard to dress are: Roland Barthes, The Fashion System, first published 1967 (New York, 1983); René König, The Restless Image: A Sociology of Fashion (London, 1973); Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher, Dress, Adornment and the Social Order (New York, 1965); and Gilles Lipovetsky, L'empire de l'éphémère: la mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes (Paris, 1987).

¹⁶ Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class, first published 1899 (Boston, 1973).

¹⁷ See John P. Diggins, The Bard of Savagery: Thorstein Veblen and Modern Social Theory (New York, 1978); David Riesman, Thorstein Veblen: A Critical Interpretation, first published 1953 (New York, 1975); David W. Seckler, Thorstein Veblen and the Institutionalists: A Study in the Social Philosophy of Economics (London, 1975); and Rick Tilman, Thorstein Veblen and his Critics, 1891-1963: Conservative, Liberal and Radical Perspectives (Princeton, 1992).

more than make a pretence of leisure – he needed to work to support the household – it was left to the women and children to display the family's capacity for leisure to the outside world. One of the chief ways in which this could be accomplished was through elaborate, physically-encumbering styles of clothing.

Veblen further observed that as a household's economic status diminished, so too did its ability to maintain an appearance of leisure; but that very great economic rigours would be endured by the entire household before the pretence of leisure was entirely abandoned, the last to abandon it being, invariably, the wife or mother of the household.

Veblen elaborated on the notion of conspicuous consumption by observing the principle of conspicuous waste: namely, that the consumption of goods must be as costly and superfluous to notional allowances for well-being as possible. Where dress was concerned, Veblen felt that conspicuous waste was the 'great and dominant norm'¹⁸ and that 'the requirement of expensiveness is so ingrained into our habits of thought in matters of dress that any other than expensive apparel is instinctively odious to us.'¹⁹

Stimulating and shrewd though these arguments are, it would be a mistake to adopt and apply unreservedly Veblen's theories regarding dress to the inter-war and wartime eras, particularly where the history of clothing and

¹⁸ Veblen, p. 121.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 119.

fashion in Britain is concerned. His work dates from a period of economic growth and prosperity; he was also writing in America, land of apparently limitless horizons and endless possibilities. Veblen's assertion that dress is 'the expression of the pecuniary culture'²⁰ may have had relevance in fin de siècle metropolitan America but it assuredly was not true in Britain in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Quite the contrary: in Britain, conspicuous under-consumption was the norm throughout the inter-war and wartime periods, and nowhere was this more evident than in matters of dress.

The inapplicability of Veblen's theories in regard to Britain in this period was remarked upon as early as 1947, when author and art critic Quentin Bell took issue with some of Veblen's findings in his study On Human Finery. Whereas Veblen had theorized that members of each class in society 'accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal,'²¹ Bell maintained that 'the history of fashionable dress is tied to the competition between classes, in the first place the emulation of the aristocracy by the bourgeoisie and then the more extended competition which results from the

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 118.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

ability of the proletariat to compete with the middle classes.’²² This, too, was an oversimplification of the case: class structure was significant in the history of dress but it was not of paramount importance. As this thesis will demonstrate, pressures of a more internal nature – within geographic regions, neighbourhoods, families – also exerted considerable influence on the sort of clothes people wore and the way they thought of those garments.

Bell also disagreed with Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption where dress was concerned, arguing that by the beginning of the 1920s it was no longer valid because of the growing emancipation of women.²³ As will be demonstrated later in this thesis, Bell was correct in his argument that conspicuous consumption had ceased to be the norm among the middle classes, but he was incorrect in attributing it solely to the changing status of women. More crucial were the depressed economic conditions of the times, which made restraint in expenditure and habits of under-consumption the norm and indeed a necessity in the majority of British households.

A variant of mainstream theory on clothing and fashion has been advanced by feminist scholars. Works published in this area have tended to remain strictly in the realm of sociological theory. Of note among such studies are Anne Hollander’s Seeing through Clothes and Jane Gaines and

²² Bell, p. 155.

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

Charlotte Herzog's Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body.²⁴ The first analyses the links between clothes or costumes and mass media culture; the second is an eclectic collection of essays that concentrates on the role of fashionable clothing in film. Studies such as this are typical. In neither a theoretical nor practical sense has any significant work been done by feminists in the field of the history of clothing and fashion.

Why have feminists shied away from the history of clothing and fashion? One answer perhaps lies, as with historians in general, with the perception of these subjects – and hence their shared history – as trivial. This is understandable, given the difficulty many feminist historians encountered initially in being taken seriously by mainstream historians: why would they want to diminish their credibility, precarious as it has often seemed, by writing about stereotypically feminine topics? Furthermore, the fact that women are so intimately connected with issues regarding clothing and fashion, and hence (from a feminist perspective) tend to subordinate themselves, makes clothing history an unappealing subject. It has been more congenial to write about women who have challenged convention and freed themselves from oppression, rather than women who allegedly contributed to it.

Yet this reluctance to connect the history of women with the history of

²⁴ Anne Hollander, Seeing through Clothes, first published 1975 (London, 1993); and Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog, Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body (London, 1990).

clothing has led to an unfortunate blank in women's history. Common sense should motivate the historian to examine the issues which affected women most intimately, however mundane and seemingly frivolous those issues might appear. It is only by acquiring an understanding of women's lives as they were actually lived that the historian can then turn to other issues – for example, women's attitudes in regard to equality of the sexes, politics, or paid work – and bring a depth of understanding or insight to bear on the subject.

* * *

A dearth of sources is another factor responsible for the lack of attention accorded to the history of clothing. Conventional avenues of inquiry – census returns, social survey data, official government papers, and so forth – yield much in the way of information about household budgets, patterns of spending, and the nature of poverty in the inter-war period, but they offer only limited insight into daily life. They must be combined with other sources which, although not statistically representative as such, can illustrate and humanise what would be, otherwise, little more than a compilation of arid facts and figures. In this thesis, 'traditional' sources are relied upon as a foundation for further study, and are overlaid with information culled from less orthodox, but no less worthy, sources. The inter-war social surveys, independently conducted by surveyors such as Caradog Jones, Seebohm Rowntree, and Llewelyn Smith, as well as surveys undertaken by government ministries, help to establish standards of living

and patterns of expenditure among both lower-income and middle-range of income households. Equally useful are the data gathered by quasi-governmental agencies such as the Social Survey Department (later the Wartime Social Survey) and, in particular, Mass-Observation. The latter, established in 1937 by Tom Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, relied upon established survey science (as in, for example, their anatomy of Bolton, or 'Worktown') but also invited more impressionistic witnesses. Observers were called upon to describe, in minute detail, the sort of clothes passersby were wearing, or to list the most predominant colours of outerwear they saw. Mass-Observation enlisted the help of many individuals, who kept diaries, responded to occasional questions, and sent in reports when requested.

Evidence such as this – collected from a significant number of people in as scientific a method as possible – should not be the end of the matter for the historian, who needs to be alert to the value systems underlying it.²⁵ An additional source is autobiography, as well as those semi-autobiographical novels which are written on the strength of personal experience. Even in these works, however, it can be difficult to find much information about the smaller details of daily life, for many authors concentrate instead on the great

²⁵ See Diana Gittins, 'Oral History, Reliability and Recollection,' The Recall Method in Social Surveys, eds. Louis Moss and Harvey Goldstein (London, 1979), p. 83: 'Quantitative sources [...] are by no means infallible [...] Censuses and survey are, of course, just as much the result of theoretical frameworks, definitions and preconceptions as any qualitative research.'

happenings of their time and neglect to mention what they ordinarily ate, what they wore, or how they spent their leisure. One reason that it is difficult to unearth personal impressions of day-to-day life in the past is that autobiographers, as well as contemporary biographers, had a fairly narrow idea of what posterity would judge important and interesting. As well, personal accounts from certain periods often conform to a broad type. Thus the economic adversity suffered by many in the 1930s spawned numerous autobiographies which describe the hardship of life in the depressed areas of high unemployment, while the war years, in contrast, gave rise to numerous accounts of life in the armed forces. In neither period was a great deal of attention paid to 'ordinary', everyday life outside these categories; and this holds true for most of the private diaries, later edited and published, that were kept at the time.

Details of daily life, then, are scarce in most first-person accounts; and there is a particularly obvious dearth of autobiographies and diaries of people who considered themselves 'ordinary' – people from the middle range of incomes, who were neither rich nor poor. For this reason, an oral history project was undertaken as a complement to existing sources, in the hope of uncovering and recovering some of these elusive details.²⁶ A number of leading questions were put: What sort of clothing did 'ordinary' people wear?

²⁶ See Appendix A for more information about the oral history project; also see Appendix B, a summary of information on the participants, and Appendix C, the transcript of one of the interviews.

How did they budget and save for these garments? Where did they shop for clothing? And what sort of clothes did they consider to be 'smart' or 'appropriate' or 'comfortable'? The results of the project – several hundred pages of transcribed interviews – have been used throughout this thesis for illustrative purposes to sharpen the image or to highlight the record. As is the case with other first-person accounts, the oral history interview assists the historian by adding a human face to what would otherwise be rather impersonal facts and figures; but caution has been exercised. On its own, oral history is little more than an indicator of one individual's experiences and opinions. Here it has been found most useful when employed in conjunction with other data, both quantitative and qualitative.

Occupying a middle ground between the official and independent survey material and more individualistic information is the popular press. Newspapers and magazines were read by large numbers of people and can serve as an indicator of public feeling and interests, though again caution must be exercised: press barons and their editors, both then and now, were not above attempting to shape and control public opinion through their publications. This attention, however, was mostly directed at their editorial and news content, and the less politically sensitive portions of their publications – the women's page and household features, for example – appear to have been more genuinely reflective of their readers' interests and opinions. Furthermore, newspapers and magazines were mediums of

commerce, and their regular component of advertising is a particularly useful source of information. From these the social historian can discover what was available in the shops and how much goods might cost – information that is frequently difficult to unearth from other sources.

A number of newspapers and magazines have been used as references throughout this thesis, in particular the Sunday newspaper the News of the World, the women's fashion magazine Vogue, and the women's weekly magazine Woman's Own.²⁷ The decision to use these particular periodicals was not an arbitrary one, but rather was made after examining the circulation and readership of each. The aim was to select for special study those newspapers and magazines that were most representative of significant areas of public tastes and opinions. The Hulton Readership Survey, first undertaken in 1947, is generally reckoned the most reliable source for information on the circulation and readerships of magazines and newspapers.²⁸ Because paper rationing meant that circulation was strictly

²⁷ Unsuccessful attempts were made to gain access to their internal archives. Because all three publications are still in print, their editorial offices were easily contacted. At the News of the World, it appears that no internal archive has been maintained apart from a few shelves of back issues; and although there appear to be archives at both Woman's Own and Vogue, requests for access were dismissed on the grounds that the archives are not open to students.

²⁸ All references to circulation figures and readership statistics are found in The Hulton Readership Survey (London, 1947), pp. 17-19 and 27. See Appendix D for more information on the size and structure of the Hulton survey, as well as for circulation figures regarding the three periodicals that were examined.

maintained at pre-war levels for much of the 1940s, the figures from 1947 can be used in reference to the war years, and even for the 1930s.

The only newspaper which was examined, week by week, for the whole of the period under study was the immensely popular Sunday paper News of the World, which had a readership second, overall, only to that of the Radio Times. Significantly, it was a firm favourite among 'working-class' readers.

While just under 20 per cent of women from upper-income level households, and a little more than a third of women in households from the middle range of incomes, read News of the World, over half the women from the lowest income groups, representing the bulk of the British population, read News of the World. Its price – one pence – made it accessible to most families, many of whom could not afford to take a daily newspaper. As a result, it boasted a total readership of almost eight-and-a-half million women, or 44 per cent of the adult female population of Great Britain.

In content it was different to the News of the World of today; its tone was far less sensational, though often bombastic and resolutely populist. In the inter-war period it consisted of a steady flow of true-crime reports, sheet music, serial stories, sports and betting, movies and entertainment, and a woman's page, plus numerous advertisements for medicines, sweets, soaps, and mail-order goods. The stalwart of the woman's page, horoscope excepted, was columnist Julia King. In mid-1939 her contribution, full of recipes,

household hints, beauty advice and information on the latest fashions, amounted to a good third of the woman's page.

Poles apart from the News of the World, in both content and readership, was Vogue magazine. Unsurprisingly, the Hulton survey found it to be most popular among women from higher-income households, with almost 17 per cent reading it regularly (though the figure drops to just over 13 and a half per cent when housewives alone are considered). Its readership dropped consistently along with family income, and hence it was read by only three to four percent of women in households from the lowest income levels.²⁹

The British edition of Vogue, founded in 1916 (it had sister publications in Paris and New York) was a stylish, colourful, and expensive fortnightly magazine, although it became a monthly magazine during the war because of paper restrictions. Its subscription rate, in 1939, was £2 6s 6d a year, or a shilling an issue. This would rise to half a crown, due to the increased cost of paper, from August 1940 onwards. For a rich woman, the woman at whom the magazine was targeted, two-and-six a month was a mere pittance; but for many women it was a substantial sum that could not be wasted on such trivialities as magazines. An illustration of the type of life the

²⁹ Presumably these lower-income readers did not buy Vogue for themselves but had access to back numbers, whether as cast-offs from wealthier households, or in doctors' waiting rooms, public libraries and the like.

'ideal' Vogue reader lived can be found in an August 1939 report which detailed, with numerous photographs, a fancy-dress party that was held at one of the great country estates near London. All the guests – and there seem to have been hundreds – were attired in Georgian costume, while the footmen and coachmen all wore satin knee-breeches and powdered hair. A single one of the ladies' elaborately reproduced late-eighteenth-century gowns may well have cost more than a manual labourer could hope to earn in months – and all for one night of fun.³⁰ Although such excesses disappeared from the pages of Vogue during the Second World War, they nevertheless convey a sense of the Vogue readership being a world apart. The historian must be careful, however, to distinguish between Vogue's *ideal* and its *actual* readership. Many of the women who read Vogue may have belonged to far less affluent strata of society than were featured in its pages, and took vicarious pleasure in reading about parties to which they would never be invited, and gowns they could never afford. There is little concrete evidence, furthermore, to suggest that the rich and titled upper classes of whom Vogue was so enamoured actually read the magazine.

Woman's Own, the third periodical to be comprehensively examined for the whole of the inter-war and wartime periods, was similar to Vogue, in that there appears to have been a large discrepancy between the readership the magazine coveted, and the one it actually found. In many ways, it aspired

³⁰ Vogue, 9 Aug. 1939, pp. 24-27.

toward a comfortably-off middle-class readership, but in reality it was most popular among women from the middle range of incomes and lower income groups, and was a particular favourite among housewives. After its debut in 1932 its readership grew steadily, reaching 2.69 million women by 1939. Its rival weekly, Woman, had a slightly higher readership – 2.92 million women – but Woman's readership was skewed towards women from higher income backgrounds, while Woman's Own was the more popular of the two among women from the middle range of incomes. For this reason it was chosen for study, instead of Woman, because it had a broader appeal.

Its layout was not particularly stylish, and its contents throughout the 1930s were a mix of romantic fiction, horoscopes, recipes, household hints, and advertisements for food, cosmetics, and family medicines. As well – and this was one of the features which made women's weekly magazines in general so popular – there were the patterns. Knitting patterns were usually found complete in the magazine, though in 1939 were outnumbered by sewing patterns, which were available by post for a shilling. 'Bargain patterns,' for 4-1/2d, were also available each month. The designs for staid skirts, blouses and frocks seem calculated to appeal to middle-aged, middle-class women. This may have been part of Woman's Own's allure: even as many Vogue readers were not rich enough to afford the luxuries it showcased, so too was Woman's Own popular among women who lived on the margins between the lower and middle range of incomes. While not

poverty-stricken, their family income was never quite sufficient for the vision of cosy, middle-class contentment which Woman's Own embodied. The price of the magazine, however, was accessible enough – twopence – though it rose to threepence in mid-1940.

* * *

Having explained the sources used, it now remains to give a general outline of what is to follow. In Chapters Two and Three, the methods by which women budgeted, saved for, purchased and then cared for their family's clothing are analysed, with particular emphasis on the sometimes unorthodox means by which they accumulated enough cash for the purchase of clothing. The many and varied venues through which clothing might be obtained are also examined in some detail. Chapter Four is given over to an investigation of the ways in which clothing had a more than utilitarian impact on the lives of women. The sort of clothes women wore – and why – is explored, as is the relationship between clothing and status.

The second half of the thesis is concerned with the changes which affected women's practices and attitudes in regard to clothing during the Second World War. Conditions of economic austerity dominated every consideration of clothing and fashion for almost a decade, and not surprisingly this was reflected in the way that women purchased, wore, and even thought about their clothes. In Chapter Five, the development of economic controls and wartime austerity is discussed, as well as the public's

reaction to rationing and other restrictions. Chapter Six looks at the ways in which women coped with wartime shortages and consumer spending controls: how did they obtain and then maintain a decent stock of clothing for themselves and their families? The sort of clothes that women wore in this period, and also the ways in which they attempted to maintain a smart and attractive appearance, are discussed in Chapter Seven. And, in conclusion, Chapter Eight examines the coming of the 'New Look' in the post-war period, and the popular reaction to it in Britain.

In sum, therefore, this thesis examines the role of clothing and fashion in both the household budget and in popular culture in the period between 1919 and 1949. By examining the links in the everyday history of women that clothing provides, our understanding of the social history of the inter-war period and the Second World War becomes more complete, as does our knowledge of Britain's past as a whole.

Chapter Two:

Clothing in the Lower Income Household

The first four decades of the twentieth century, ending with the beginning of the Second World War, were a period of 'contradictions.'¹ In general, the standard of living was rising steadily: people were increasingly healthy, better fed, better housed, and better clothed. However, in chronically depressed areas such as Clydeside, Cumbria, Lancashire, the West Riding of Yorkshire, South Wales, Tyneside and Ulster, unemployment levels remained high even after the mid-1930s, when other areas of Britain were recovering from the worst of the depression. In 1932, unemployment stood at 45.6 per cent in North Shields, and 37.5 per cent in Swansea, diminishing by 1937 to only 30.6 per cent and 23.5 per cent respectively. In contrast, unemployment in Reading reached a high point of 11.8 per cent in 1932, and fell to 7.4 per cent in 1937.² For families in the prosperous areas of the south of England, relatively high wages and low prices contributed to decent – and improving – standards of living. In stark contrast, a substantial proportion of families in the 'Special Areas' continued to live in conditions of extreme poverty.

These conditions were chronicled by the social surveys of the period, the majority of which examined working-class standards of living in poverty-

¹ Diana Gittins, Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure, 1900-1939 (London, 1982), p. 33. See also Derek H. Aldcroft, The Inter-War Economy: Britain, 1919-1939 (London, 1970), p. 385; and John Burnett, A History of the Cost of Living (London, 1969), p. 319. ..

² M. P. Fogarty, Prospects of the Industrial Areas of Great Britain (London, 1945), pp. 31-33.

stricken communities. Of particular interest to the surveyors was the working-class household budget, and many attempted to devise a 'bare minimum standard': that is, exactly how little money it took for a family to survive, though not necessarily to flourish.³ While the inter-war surveyors concentrated on issues of diet and housing, estimates for clothing and footwear expenditure were provided in most of the surveys.⁴ For example, H. Llewellyn Smith, in the New Survey of London Life and Labour, (1931) allowed 4s 2d a week for a family of five.⁵ At the end of the 1930s, the amount allocated by social surveyors had increased little: a preliminary report on the findings of the Bristol social survey in 1938 allowed 4s a week in clothing expenditure for a family of four whose income was 88s a week.⁶

According to R.F. George, all these estimates could be traced back to Seebohm Rowntree's figures from his first survey of York in 1901, with adjustments in line with inflation. As such, they did not take into account

³ See Caradog Jones, The Social Survey of Merseyside (London, 1934); John Boyd Orr, Food, Health and Income (London, 1936); B. Seebohm Rowntree, Poverty and Progress: The Second Social Survey of York (London, 1941); and H. Llewellyn Smith, The New Survey of London Life and Labour (London, 1931).

⁴ Hereafter, the term 'clothing' includes footwear, hats, and other accessories, except in those social surveys where clothing and footwear were assessed separately.

⁵ New Survey of London, vol. III, p. 74.

⁶ Herbert Tout, The Standard of Living In Bristol: A Preliminary Report of the Work of the University of Bristol Social Survey (Bristol, 1938), p. 21. For more late-1930s estimates, see Mark Abrams, The Condition of the British People, 1911-1945, 1946 (Bath, 1970), p. 87.

any changes in the sort of clothes people wore, and in the production of those clothes, or any changes in how they were worn. For example, at the turn of the century a middle-class woman typically wore a long skirt over several layers of petticoat, topped with a lavishly embroidered blouse and a fitted jacket. Thirty years later, her chosen afternoon outfit was a simple frock, made from a few yards of material, and was worn with minimal undergarments. In many respects, clothing had become simpler and less difficult to manufacture; and fashionable clothes were available to a larger proportion of the public than ever before. Inflation alone could not account for the changes in pricing that were likely to result. Hence, George devised an entirely new minimum standard for clothing, first calculating the annual, per capita costs of clothing in 1936. For a man, clothing would cost 47s 6d; for a woman, 34s 0d, and 30s 0d for a child. This can be broken down into weekly estimates, with an additional figure for the young, working woman who needed more money to clothe herself than did the average housewife. The elderly were allowed seven pence a week; men aged 16 and over, 11d; women aged sixteen and over, eight pence a week; a single woman, aged between 16 and 30, 1s 1/2d; and a child under 16, seven pence a week.⁷

These figures were estimates only of the absolute minimum that a family had to spend to keep itself decently clothed: there were no margins

⁷ R. F. George, 'A New Calculation of the Poverty Line,' Journal of the Royal Statistical Society (Part I, 1937), pp. 83-86.

allowed for issues of taste and fashion, or for quality. To get a more accurate sense of how much people actually spent on clothing, one must turn to those surveys which investigated real expenditures by working-class families. In 1940, the Ministry of Labour published its survey, 'Weekly Expenditure of Working-Class Households in the United Kingdom in 1937-38.' The sample of working-class households was wide and representative, with over 13,500 responses, and encompassed both industrial and agricultural workers and their families in England and Wales. Clothing expenditure was highest among industrial workers, with an average of 8s 2d spent a week on men's, women's and children's clothing, materials and footwear, as well as associated cleaning and repairs. In contrast, agricultural workers spent only 5s 3d each week per household, while rural households spent slightly more: 5s 10-1/2d.⁸ If the figures for the industrial households are broken down, it is apparent that urban families were able to spend more than twice as much on their clothing as the social survey estimates had budgeted. For example, though amounts fluctuated considerably from season to season, each week a family might spend 2s 3-3/4d on men's clothing, 2s 7-1/4d on women's clothing, one shilling on children's clothing, and 1s 6-1/4d on the family footwear.⁹

⁸ 'Weekly Expenditure of Working-Class Households in the United Kingdom in 1937-38,' Ministry of Labour Gazette, Part I: Industrial Workers (Dec. 1940), p 303; Part II: Agricultural Workers (Jan. 1941), p. 8; Part III: Budgets Collected from a Selection of Households in Rural Areas in England and Wales (Feb. 1941), p. 29.

⁹ Ministry of Labour Gazette, Dec. 1940, p. 303.

It seems clear, then, that the average working-class family was able to spend much more on clothing than the amounts notionally allocated by the social survey budgets. However, the Ministry of Labour sample encompassed families from all areas of the country, both flourishing and depressed: while it may have painted an accurate picture of a standard of living that was improving nation-wide, it did not reflect the financial hardships which long-term unemployment could cause.

In a survey conducted in one of the depressed areas, the Social Survey of Merseyside of 1933, Caradog Jones analysed the budgets of 332 working-class families, with weekly incomes ranging from 27s to £5, though the majority of incomes were roughly £2 to £3 a week. The amount spent on clothing varied from nothing to 8s 9d, with an average amount spent of between 2s 3d and 3s 2d.¹⁰ Although modest in the extreme, such expenditures were beyond the scope of the family whose breadwinner was unemployed, and which had to rely on Unemployment Assistance Board allowances. In Men Without Work, the Pilgrim Trust compared the average wage a man might expect if working, and the amount he was likely to receive from the UAB. Depending on his age, he might be given anything from 22s 4d to 32s 5d, which

¹⁰ Jones, p. 208. The average weekly income of all families surveyed was 62s 6d a week (p. 147).

represented, at most, two-thirds of his wage whilst employed.¹¹ Although unemployment in the depressed areas as a whole was generally no higher than thirty per cent, in certain localities the percentage of unemployed workers might be fifty per cent or more.¹² The family with a pound or thirty shillings in income plainly could not spend as much on clothing as did the average family in the Ministry of Labour survey, nor could low wages in the depressed areas allow for five to eight shillings a week in clothing expenditure among the fortunate ranks of the employed.

The cycle of poverty in working-class life, which Seebohm Rowntree illustrated in his second survey of York, was made even more debilitating by the high levels of long-term unemployment in the depressed areas.¹³ Most families suffered from a high degree of poverty while their children were young, though usually it was alleviated when those children reached their teens and began to contribute to the family income. In areas of chronic unemployment, however, families remained trapped in a mire of penury and

¹¹ The Pilgrim Trust, Men Without Work (Cambridge, 1938), p 119. The table is reproduced below in full:

Ages	Average Wage		Average UAB Allowance		UAB as % of wage
18-24	33s	7d	22s	4d	66%
25-34	45	0	29	3	65
35-44	50	1	32	5	65
45-54	51	0	26	8	52
55-64	49	9	22	6	45

¹² Fogarty, pp. 31-33.

¹³ Rowntree, pp. 157-58; and Men without Work, pp. 102-3.

debt, with the largest families suffering the most. Indeed, it was the Pilgrim Trust's observation that almost all families with children at home suffered from 'definite want – either of food or clothing.'¹⁴ Stomachs had to be filled, the rent had to be paid, and bodies had to be clothed. The dreadful diet of the impoverished family, as well as the substandard conditions in which many people lived, have been well-chronicled by social historians; yet the housewife's daily struggle to find and obtain her family's clothing has occasioned little study.

* * * * *

In some respects, the High Street of the inter-war years was not altogether different from its modern counterpart, for many well-known specialist clothing and shoe shops, as well as large department store chains, were flourishing in the 1920s and 1930s. Such shops, however, tending to cater to middle- and upper-class customers, were beyond the experience of many working-class families, and this was particularly true in the depressed areas. Not only was their merchandise prohibitively expensive, but they usually were located far from working-class areas, and thus were doubly inaccessible. Mindful of the growing middle-class market, department stores and chain stores concentrated, from the turn of the century onwards, more and more on improving their amenities, and less on competitive pricing.¹⁵

¹⁴ Men without Work, p. 105.

¹⁵ James B. Jefferys, Retail Trading in Britain 1850-1950 (Cambridge, 1954), p. 329.

The Co-operative Wholesale Society, and its network of several thousand drapery shops, is often mentioned in connection with working-class spending and purchasing habits, and among the more well-to-do strata of the working class – skilled labourers in prosperous regions – it was immensely popular. The quarterly dividend has been cited as one of the main perks of membership, but prices were higher than in other shops, mainly as a way of offering more attractive dividends. Furthermore, credit was limited (though hire-purchase systems were slowly introduced in many Co-ops in the 1930s) and hence it remained the province of the comfortable, skilled labourer.¹⁶ In Rich Man, Poor Man, John Hilton estimated that, of the three hundred working-class families he surveyed, only one in ten could afford to shop at the Co-op.

Blessed are those [...] who can shop at the Co-op. But if you are below a certain level of living you find you have to forgo the boon of the Co-op with its quarterly divi. You must buy where you can pick up left-over scraps or where you can get tick.¹⁷

It is this difficulty in obtaining credit, or 'tick', that kept most working-class customers, especially in the depressed areas, away from shops with a middle-class customer base. For many families with incomes less than £3 a week, buying good quality clothing and footwear with cash was impossible. For example, all-leather ladies' shoes could be purchased for ten shillings a

¹⁶ Molly Weir, Shoes were for Sunday (London, 1970), p. 49. See also Jefferys, pp. 323-24; and Paul Johnson, Saving and Spending: the Working-Class Economy in Britain 1870-1939 (Oxford, 1985), p. 140.

¹⁷ John Hilton, Rich Man, Poor Man, (London, 1938), p. 105.

pair in Selfridge's Bargain Basement in the early 1930s.¹⁸ The shoes themselves were good value, and comparatively inexpensive. To a working-class housewife with an income of £2 or £3 a week, those shoes equalled anywhere from twenty to twenty-five percent of her weekly income: ten shillings spent on one pair of shoes were ten shillings that could have been spent on food, or coal, or reducing her debt to the landlord.

Clearly, then, it was impossible for the poorest housewives to buy clothing and footwear for their family in up-front, cash payments; their principal option was to spread the payments across many weeks, and to use the credit offered by a local trader or clothing club. Critics bemoaned the reliance of the poverty-stricken household on credit but, as Paul Johnson observes, there was 'scant incentive to save any excess income that might be left over at the end of the week, since there was a good chance that it would be required in the near future.'¹⁹ Giving a shilling or two a week to the 'tally man' to pay for clothes that were *already* being worn was much easier than gobbling up most of one's income on one garment or, even worse, trying to save up enough money week by week. Money pledged to the clothing club was gone, unable to be poached in an emergency, but money kept aside at home could be used so easily for other purposes.

The Women's Group on Public Welfare confirmed that families from

¹⁸ Advertisements for Selfridge's Bargain Basement, News of the World, 2 Feb. 1930, p. 11 and 5 Mar. 1933; p. 16.

¹⁹ Johnson, p. 222.

the lowest income levels preferred these other methods for obtaining their clothing and footwear. In 1935, visits were made to the homes of 77 long-unemployed families, who were asked where they obtained their clothing: clothing clubs, second-hand clothes dealers (including pawnbrokers) and market stalls were most popular, though this differed according to region.²⁰ A substantial proportion, it should be noted, had bought no clothing at all whilst unemployed.

With perhaps only three or four shillings a week to spend on clothing, poverty-stricken women in the depressed areas tended to frequent small, local shops, where their faces were known and credit was more readily available. At such shops, purchases were often made with the cash received from several different forms of clothing clubs. Most informal were the neighbourhood associations familiarly known as 'diddlum' or 'draw' clubs. A group of women would pay in a certain amount to the club over a period of weeks: the sum might be constant, at one shilling a week, or it might increase

²⁰ Women's Group on Public Welfare, Our Towns: A Close-Up (Oxford, 1943), p. 57. Below is the full chart:

<u>Methods of Buying Clothing</u>	<u>Cities visited</u>		Total
	London	Birmingham	
Pawnbrokers and Second-hand Clubs and Tally-men	15	12	27
Stalls and Markets	7	10	17
Shops for Cash	10	2	12
None bought whilst unemployed	5	3	8
	8	5	13
Total	45	32	77

week by week, from sixpence to a shilling, then to one-and-six, and so on. According to lot, they drew upon the sum collected each week to buy clothing or household essentials, with one woman acting as organiser and collector of funds. Though an effective enough means of short-term saving, they were inherently perilous, as there was little beyond neighbourhood pressure to compel a fellow member to keep paying in her shilling each week after she had spent her lump sum.²¹ Drawing a 'late number' was terrible luck, for a woman then had to pay in her shillings for several months before she could draw on the whole.²² Even then, she might never have a chance to spend the lump sum, for some organisers had been known to abscond with club funds.²³ This was particularly true of Christmas and Whit Sunday clubs, in which the organiser minded everyone's contributions until the end of the paying-in period. The same arrangements, though less risky, were often used by local churches, schools or charities as a means of aiding the needy to save

²¹ Melanie Tebbutt, Making Ends Meet: Pawnbroking and Working-Class Credit (Bristol, 1984), pp. 48-49 and Johnson, p. 152. Some women devised ingenious schemes for saving money for clothes. The Pilgrim Trust encountered one woman who paid a little extra in rent each week; by the time she had paid an entire's week's rent in advance, she could spend that week's rent on clothes. See Men without Work, p. 125.

²² Clara Grant, Farthing Bundles (London, c. 1931), p. 90. Grant was a teacher and missionary at the Fern Street Settlement, Bromley-by-Bow, in the early inter-war period.

²³ See, for example, Maud Pember Reeves, Round About a Pound a Week, 1913 (London, 1994), p. 72.

for clothing for high days and holidays.²⁴

A formalised version of these 'rotating credit associations'²⁵ eventually developed in the form of clothing clubs run by multiple shops or by financial organisations, the Provident Clothing and Supply Company being the largest and best-known.²⁶ These employed salesmen to take orders for cheques – a pound cheque involved 21 instalments of one shilling – and collect weekly payments. With some clubs, the cheques were redeemable at participating shops, while other clubs offered catalogues of merchandise that could be purchased with the cheques.²⁷ The 'tally men' were notoriously persistent, often persuading housewives to buy shares or cheques whose repayments were far beyond their means, though some customers were not averse to taking advantage of the almost unlimited credit allowed them. In his autobiography, East-ender Ron Barnes remembers how his aunt ran up huge debts with one clothing club after another, laughing off the imprecations and threats of the army of salesmen at her door. Alternatively, some families would order a large shipment of merchandise, pay a few instalments, and then disappear in a midnight 'flit' when the goods arrived. Most housewives were not so daring and, if payments had slipped for a week or two, would

²⁴ Lawrence Neal, Retailing and the Public (London, 1932), p. 59.

²⁵ Tebbutt, p. 47.

²⁶ Jefferys, pp. 334-35.

²⁷ See Hilton, p. 130, for a detailed contemporary description of cheque trading.

resort to hiding at the tally man's approach:

He would be banging at the door [...] They would be sitting in their kitchen, their hands clutching at their apron in anxiety and shame, while the tally man shouted for all to hear, 'Come on. You know you owe me two quid, don't you? You ain't paid for three weeks, you know.'²⁸

Children were often delegated to deal with the tally man's demands and, in his autobiography of life in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Thomas Callaghan describes how one Provident salesman was regularly given the terse explanation, 'Me muffer not in, you,' from one toddler.²⁹ If the salesman did manage to corral the debtor herself, often all she could offer him was the 'glad and sorry' routine: 'I am glad you have called, but I am sorry I can't pay.'³⁰

The job of clothing club salesman must have been a frustrating and depressing one, with low wages and much attendant unpleasantness. Classified papers like the Exchange and Mart contained columns of advertisements for 'agents wanted', as did the central pages of popular newspapers like News of the World. All promised no risks, little or no

²⁸ Ron Barnes, Coronation Cups and Jam Jars: A Portrait of an East End Family through Three Generations (London, 1976), pp. 83-84. See also Pat Ayers and Jan Lambert, 'Marriage Relations, Money, and Domestic Violence in Working-Class Liverpool, 1919-39,' in Labour and Love: Women's Experiences of Home and Family, 1850-1940, ed. Jane Lewis (Oxford, 1986), pp. 204-5.

²⁹ Thomas Callaghan, A Lang Way to the Pa'nshop (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1978), p. 11.

³⁰ R. S. Lambert and H. L. Beales, Memoirs of the Unemployed (London, 1934), p. 169. First published in the BBC journal The Listener.

money down, lots of repeat business, and high wages and satisfaction.³¹ In reality, there was a great deal of competition between firms, and while customers may have been happy to order goods, extracting payment for those goods often proved very troublesome.

Occupying a middle ground between the neighbourhood diddlums and the formalised clothing clubs were the '20 week' or 'turns' clubs run by large companies, the most well-known of which was Littlewood's.³² In their first catalogue (Spring 1932), the Littlewood's Club System was explained:

Littlewood's Clubs meet the growing popular demand for the many benefits of club membership. A Littlewood's £1 Club consists of 20 members. Each member agrees to pay 1/- weekly for 20 weeks; or 2/- for 10 weeks – the amounts being collected from them weekly by the Club Organiser [...]

By means of a 'draw' it is arranged that one Member receives his (or her) goods after the very first weekly payment; a second member after the second week's payment; and so on.³³

The goods offered in early catalogues were a mixture of household items such as furniture, kitchen utensils and appliances, garden tools, flooring, bedding, and of course clothing. Ladies' coats cost between one to two pounds, blouses were two for ten shillings, and men's suits cost between

³¹ See Exchange and Mart, 25 May 1933, p. 9, for 'agents wanted' advertisements. In News of the World, 3 May 1931, p. 15, S. Tapper of Manchester advertised for agents, as did the Champion Credit Club of Manchester on 4 Apr. 1937, p. 9.

³² Advertisements for other catalogue/mail-order clubs frequently appeared in News of the World. For example, see advertisements placed by World-Wide Wholesale Warehouses, 6 Dec. 1931, p. 8; Great Universal Stores, 6 Mar. 1932, p. 12; and the John England Club, 1 Sept. 1935, p. 12.

³³ Littlewood's Mail Order Stores, Spring 1932 catalogue, p. 5.

one and two pounds.³⁴ Though cash sums of one or two pounds were beyond the reach of most working-class families, a catalogue slogan helpfully reminded them that 'a Twenty Week Club Buys Most at Littlewood's'.³⁵

It is difficult to assess how popular the 'turns' clubs were in comparison to other forms of clothing clubs, though one contemporary observer felt that they, along with the neighbourhood 'diddlums', were much more prevalent than formalised clubs like the Provident.³⁶ Where the tally men were constantly dunned by their creditors, a company like Littlewood's was exposed to little risk, because it was 'dealing with a series of cash transactions, and financing credit for nobody.'³⁷ Furthermore, most of the agents employed by the large companies were local women, who were able to use local knowledge to assess the credit worthiness of each customer. Some used their position for benevolent purposes: Hazel May Paget, a Grattan's agent in Yorkshire from 1928 to 1993, recalls how she helped families who were especially hard up:

I'd say 'well I'll put it in for you, then you'll pay me double next week.' A lot used to do that. But I never saw a customer stuck, if they had kids going to school and wanted a pair of shoes I used to get the shoes – I knew I'd get the money eventually [...] I think

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, catalogues for Spring 1932, Feb. 1934, and Autumn 1934.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, Feb. 1934, p. 97.

³⁶ Neal, p. 60.

³⁷ Barbara Clegg, The Man Who Made Littlewood's: The Story of John Moores (London, 1993), p. 57.

that's why I had so many customers.³⁸

Most clothing clubs were not national operations, but instead were run locally by small shopkeepers, who issued cheques that were redeemable for goods in their shop only.³⁹ The disadvantages involved were two-fold: the customer was allowed to use her cheques in one store only, and was often also restricted to a limited selection of goods. Low in quality – perhaps even shop-soiled – they were comparatively expensive as well. The clothing club member was unlikely to complain, though, as it was vital that she did not lose the goodwill, and accompanying credit, of the shopkeeper.⁴⁰

While it is difficult to assess the proportion of families that made use of clothing clubs, it is clear that they were much more popular in the depressed areas than in those areas enjoying relative prosperity. In Merseyside, for example, Caradog Jones estimated that around seventy per cent of the families he surveyed bought their clothing through one form of club or another.⁴¹ Contemporary observers frequently attested to the widespread dependence upon clothing clubs by poor families. In Retailing

³⁸ 'Shopping: Mail Order,' BBC Television programme, July 1995. In the same programme, Harold Dawson, an Empire agent from 1928 to 1971, was interviewed. He observed that 'it was the women who sold the stuff. There's no doubt about that. Ninety per cent was sold by women.'

³⁹ Jefferys, p. 335 and Tebbutt, p. 187.

⁴⁰ Robert Roberts, The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century, first published 1971 (London, 1990), and his discussion of the housewife's utter reliance on 'tick', pp. 81-82.

⁴¹ Jones, p. 209.

and the Public, for example, R.E. Neal asserted that club trading of all kinds was 'very much more widespread than is generally imagined, and in the large industrial districts very often represents the only method by which the poorer class of customer can obtain credit.'⁴²

Clothing could also be purchased in weekly or monthly instalments through one of the numerous mail-order catalogue firms that proliferated in this period: in the News of the World, virtually all the advertisements for clothing were placed by mail-order firms, with an average of seven different firms placing advertisements each week in the 1930s.⁴³ Although similar to catalogue companies like Littlewood's in some respects, the mail-order firms dealt directly with customers – no clubs – and offered substantial credit. Competition was fierce between these firms, and they canvassed aggressively for customers in their advertisements. One firm pointed out that a frock purchased from them cost only '1d per day', while a men's outfitters

⁴² Neal, p. 61. See also Grant, p. 90; Hilton, pp. 129-131; Reeves, pp. 61-63 and 72; and Men without Work, pp. 124-125. Mass-Observation's interviews with the women of Bolton in 1938-39 also reveal a heavy reliance on the club cheque system. M-O TC 18: Personal Appearance, Box One, File C.

⁴³ A survey was made of the number of *different* firms placing advertisements in the News from 1930 to 1938. The first issue of every month was analysed, and care was taken to count only one advertisement per firm. One should note that most firms placed two or even more advertisements in each issue of the News. Furthermore, the average number of mail-order clothing firms placing advertisements decreased fairly consistently throughout the decade. In 1930 and 1931, the average was nine firms; by 1937 six firms or fewer were advertising in each issue.

proclaimed 'The Willerby Way / Wear As You Pay.' Another catalogue was reassuring: their goods were sent with no deposit or down-payment, for their policy was 'Free Approval – We Trust You.'⁴⁴

The terms these firms offered were no harder to meet than the tallyman's: usually, one or two shillings in deposit, and then instalments of a shilling or two a week, or seven or more shillings a month.⁴⁵ Prices were fairly low as well, with artificial silk frocks typically costing ten to twenty shillings, ladies' coats two or three pounds; and two to three pounds for a men's suit. A baby's layette could be had for thirty shillings (with a deposit of two shillings).⁴⁶

It is difficult to gauge what sort of quality the clothing and footwear offered by the mail-order companies may have been. Certainly the well-established companies, whose advertisements appeared regularly in the News of the World throughout the decade, were likely to offer reasonable quality in spite of their low prices. Many of these companies, in fact, had money-back guarantees in case of dissatisfaction. On the other hand, it seems that the established firms were more discriminating about offering credit – sometimes

⁴⁴ News of the World, advertisements for Leach and Hardy, 6 Apr. 1930, p. 5; Willerbys, 2 Feb. 1930, p. 11; and J. A. Davis, 1 May 1932, p. 10.

⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that relatively expensive items were advertised frequently in the News of the World. Bicycles, pianos, and suites of furniture could all be purchased by instalment (popularly known as the 'never-never'), for few families had enough money saved up to buy such items in cash.

⁴⁶ News of the World, 3 Apr. 1932, p. 7.

the clip-out application forms asked customers to state their occupation – and it is unlikely that they would welcome a housewife in desperate straits.⁴⁷ The fly-by-night species of mail-order firms, whose tiny, blurred advertisements appeared infrequently (and rarely more than once) in back pages of the News of the World, were a means for some of the seedier clothing clubs to recruit new ‘organisers’, and only occasionally offered to send readers a free catalogue.⁴⁸

While the established mail-order firms, then, seem to have been quite reputable, and sold clothes of decent quality, contemporary observers agreed that the formalised clothing clubs offered exceptionally poor value for money. Local credit associations, such as those run by a church or school, served only as a means of saving enough cash to buy clothing or footwear, and allowed the member to shop where she pleased, as did the neighbourhood diddlums. Clothing clubs, in contrast, tied her to a shop, group of shops, or a catalogue, and the merchandise available to her was almost always of indifferent quality. One critic described their wares as ‘tripe – by this I mean shoes with compressed cardboard soles, cotton blankets, kiddies’ blazer suits of very inferior flannel, in fact most “Tally” goods are very conspicuous by their poor

⁴⁷ For example, see the advertisement for Master’s menswear in Rye, News of the World, 2 Feb. 1930, p. 15.

⁴⁸ One such firm was Samuel Driver Ltd. in Leeds, whose extremely small advertisement specified ‘spare-time agents wanted [...] free gift to all applicants’. News of the World, 3 Jul. 1936, p. 12.

quality.⁴⁹ Social workers in Liverpool informed the Pilgrim Trust that the clothing clubs were 'a most uneconomic form of purchase and that the buyer drops something like one shilling in every three.'⁵⁰

While it is true that the merchandise most women obtained through clothing clubs was second-rate, it was the only means of buying new clothing and footwear for the financially strapped family; again and again commentators of the time observed that, without the credit offered by clothing clubs, many poor families had no means whatsoever of obtaining new garments.⁵¹

For this reason, it is interesting to note how relatively unimportant sales were to people from low-income households. Advertisements for the traditional post-Christmas and mid-summer sales appeared regularly in papers such as the Sunday Express, with its solidly middle-class readership, but they were rare in News of the World and The People. More significantly, while a firm might advertise concurrently in the Sunday Express and the News of the World, it was usually only the readers of the Sunday Express who were apprised of up-coming sales. Selfridge's department store regularly advertised in both the Sunday Express and the News of the World, but advertisements placed in the News of the World only mentioned sales in its

⁴⁹ Our Towns, p. 59.

⁵⁰ Men without Work, p. 125.

⁵¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 56, and George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, 1937 (London, 1989), pp. 85-86.

Bargain Basement, while store-wide sales and events were detailed in the Sunday Express.⁵² Impoverished housewives may well have wanted to shop at the sales – the discounts offered were tempting – but they were, as always, constrained by the restrictions of the weekly budget, and the fact that purchases at highly-publicised sales were not possible on a by-instalment basis.

* * * * *

The new clothing and footwear supplied by the tally man was a luxury, usually reserved for use on Sundays and holidays, the most important of which were Christmas and Whit Sunday.⁵³ For everyday wear, many families had to make do with clothing that was as inexpensive as possible, and that meant buying their clothes second-hand. Second-hand clothes had a dubious reputation: although cheap, they usually were unwashed and occasionally crawling with vermin.⁵⁴ Many families who never would have

⁵² News of the World, 2 Oct. 1932, p. 8 and the Sunday Express, also 2 Oct. 1932, pp. 18-19. Conversely, firms which advertised heavily in the News might only place limited advertisements in the Express. See the Sunday Express, 6 Apr. 1930, p. 20, for a small advertisement featuring bedding only by Graves of Sheffield. In the News, however, Graves' advertisements were prominent and promoted ladies', men's and children's clothing. For an example, see 4 May 1930, p. 5.

⁵³ See Chapter Four, p. 124, for a discussion of the importance of the Whit Walk in working-class households.

⁵⁴ Manchester University Settlement, Ancoats: A Study of a Clearance Area; Report of a Survey made in 1937-1938 (Manchester, 1945), p. 36; Rose Lowe, Daddy Burt's for Dinner (London, 1976), p. 5; Our Towns, p. 57; and New Survey of London, vol. III, p. 297.



A second-hand clothing shop,
Elephant and Castle district of London



October 1938: a second-hand clothing stall set up outside a house in Whitechapel, London.

considered buying second-hand clothes in times of prosperity were driven to do so in the 1930s: one observer of a second-hand market in Great Harwood, Lancashire, described how 'the poorest stuff is sold at astonishingly low prices [...] Two years ago the women would not have looked at these things. Now they scramble for them.'⁵⁵ This is borne out by Robert Roberts's assertion that such second-hand clothing stalls were only frequented by the destitute; certainly this was true in the years before the Great War, his period of recollection. Twenty years later, however, the degree of privation in the depressed areas was such that the shoddiest of second-hand garments were eagerly purchased.⁵⁶

In some larger towns and cities in the depressed areas, there might be a number of shops which specialised in second-hand clothing. In Newcastle-upon-Tyne, for example, Scotswood Road (a main road leading to Blaydon) was lined with second-hand shops. One of those shops was owned by Thomas Callaghan's Aunt Dolly, who specialised in good-quality clothing. Her stock consisted largely of cast-offs from well-to-do local households; though Callaghan does not mention what sort of payment his Aunt Dolly

⁵⁵ A. Fenner Brockway, Hungry England (London, 1934), pp. 16-17. A similar description is offered by Wal Hannington, The Problem of the Distressed Areas (London, 1937), p. 72.

⁵⁶ Roberts, The Classic Slum, p. 39.

made for her stock of clothes, it is unlikely that she was given them for free.⁵⁷ East-Ender Arthur Harding was himself a wardrobe dealer in the inter-war period, paying suburban housewives for their cast-offs – men's suits and coats were most saleable – which he then auctioned off at a dealers'-only sale, to be sold in a second-hand shop, or kept to sell at a local market come Sunday.⁵⁸

Such markets, with many stalls selling second-hand clothes, were a fixture of life in the depressed areas.⁵⁹ Any town or city of even middling size had its weekly market, with a proportion of the stalls given over to second-hand goods. In London, a survey of twelve street markets was undertaken in 1930-31: out of a total of 2,631 stalls, 892 sold new and used clothing. The largest clothing market was Wentworth Street in Whitechapel, where 454 of 797 stalls sold clothing, though at most of the other markets only twenty per cent of stalls sold clothing. Much of the new clothing for sale in the London

⁵⁷ Callaghan, p. 80. Rag-and-bone men collected old clothes for a penny per bundle, but these were usually rags in the literal sense, as buttons and trimmings were commonly cut off before the clothes were handed over. See Eileen Elias, On Sundays We Wore White (London, 1978), p. 109.

⁵⁸ Raphael Samuel, East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding (London, 1981), p. 231. Harding was born in 1886, in the Bethnal Green neighbourhood immortalised as the 'Jago' by Arthur Morrison, and spent much of his adult life in and out of gaol. In the inter-war period he set himself up as a wardrobe dealer, an occupation he maintained during the Second World War.

⁵⁹ Markets had a positive effect on prices in local shops: in one London district with no market close by, prices 'were anything from 20 to 100 per cent higher than those charged for similar articles of at least equal quality' in an adjoining district that had its own market. See New Survey of London, vol. III, p. 295.

markets appears to have come from East End sweatshops, and hence was quite inexpensive – ladies' knickers for a shilling, silk stockings also a shilling, and fashionable dresses usually less than a pound.⁶⁰ Most market stalls only accepted cash (although one does occasionally read of a hybrid market stall-cum-clothing club⁶¹) and so the second-hand stall remained the province of the poor. Its prices were astonishingly low: two or three pence a garment, but for that the buyer obtained little more than rags.⁶²

The market trader needed to have eyes in the back of the head, for less scrupulous customers were given to 'a little hoisting': while one woman engaged the trader's attention at one end of the stall, another would make off with as many garments as possible; these were later pawned or sold.⁶³

Frequently, second-hand clothes were donated to local charities and churches, which then sold them off cheaply at jumble sales. Even the knock-down prices at these sales, however, might prove too much for some families, who hoped for a handout. Parcels of clothing were sent directly to impoverished families, or handed out to the most ragged children in local

⁶⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 326. A contemporary guide to the markets of London listed nine weekly markets with a large number of second-hand stalls, and included a total of twenty-three markets selling both new and used clothing. Mary Benedetta, The Street Markets of London (London, 1936), pp. 2, 33 and 109.

⁶¹ Occupying this curious middle-ground was the 'Scotch stall' described by Jane Walsh in Not Like This (London, 1953), p. 19.

⁶² Brockway, p. 164.

⁶³ Barnes, p. 59; Samuel, p. 9.

schools. Although such gifts were welcomed, they were rarely put to use as the benefactors had intended. Working-class accounts of the descent of 'do-gooders' upon their neighbourhoods often describe how, when the coast was clear, the grateful recipients sprinted to the nearest pawnshop or wardrobe dealer and exchanged the clothing left with them for cash.⁶⁴ In Salford, the police charity took the precaution of branding the inside of clogs that it gave to poor families, but this did not prevent a large number of clogs with suspicious scuff marks on their interiors from appearing in local pawnshops.⁶⁵

Some parishes provided 'new' clothing for the destitute, but it was distinctive (again, to discourage pawning), highly unattractive, and marked the recipients with a badge of shame.⁶⁶ Many parishes, however, had only limited funds for the provision of clothes, and aid was doled out sparingly.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Arthur Harding's mother made a career out of stealing clothes from church sales; she justified it because 'these things are sent down to the churches to be *given* to us, not to make us pay for them.' See Samuel, pp. 24-25.

⁶⁵ Elsie M. Osman, For the Love of Ada ... and Salford (Swinton, 1984), p. 9.

⁶⁶ Weir, pp. 103-104. Pat O'Mara, Autobiography of a Liverpool Irish Slummy (London, 1934), p. 6, describes the clothes worn by workhouse inmates. In Judy Giles's 'A Home of One's Own: Women and Domesticity in England, 1918-1950,' Women's Studies International Forum, vol. 16, no. 3 (May/June 1993), pp. 247-48, several oral history participants describe the humiliation of having to wear charity clothes donated by the Daily Mail, which were marked with a huge "DM" to discourage pawning.

⁶⁷ Helen Forrester, Twopence to Cross the Mersey (London, 1974), pp. 139-140.

Second-hand clothes were also available at the pawnbrokers, a familiar feature of urban life throughout Britain.⁶⁸ Many pawnbrokers had a shop, distinct from the pawnbroking side of the premises, in which they sold off some of the items which had not been redeemed by their pledgers. By law, an item could be redeemed from pawn, upon payment of the original loan plus interest, for one year and seven days. After that, if the loan was not renewed, the item was sold.⁶⁹ The rate of forfeiture was, however, very low— around five per cent⁷⁰ – and items of clothing left unclaimed were rarely in the first flush of youth or fashion. The novelist Helen Forrester recalls, in the second volume of her autobiography, being so poor that she had to clothe herself with the odds and ends for sale at the pawnbrokers, and only could afford torn, soiled or hideously out-of-date garments.⁷¹

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The role of the pawnbrokers was central to the life of the poverty-stricken woman yet, oddments tables aside, it served not as a means of *obtaining* clothing, but rather as a means of *keeping* that clothing, as well as many other household essentials. Imagine a week where the breadwinners'

⁶⁸ In smaller towns and villages there were relatively few pawnbrokers, and so the rural poor tended to be very reliant on their local shopkeepers for credit. See Johnson, p. 170.

⁶⁹ Tebbutt, p. 8.

⁷⁰ Johnson, p. 173.

⁷¹ Helen Forrester, *Liverpool Miss*, 1979 (London, 1982), p. 258. Originally published as *Minerva's Stepchild*.

income did not stretch to meet the essential expenditures of food and rent; indeed, many housewives commonly faced this dilemma. Just down the street, however, one could obtain a small loan to tide the family over until the next week, and its promise of better earnings to come. As a guarantee, the pawnbroker accepted all sorts of household goods, but clothing was by far the most popular item to pawn, especially the family's 'Sunday best.' After all, why 'keep good clothes and boots loafing in the house all week when they could be pawned?'⁷² What harm would it do to give them to 'Uncle' (as he was frequently called) on Monday, have the loan of a few shillings during the week, and then with Friday or Saturday's pay redeem them – paying one or two pence interest – in time for wear on Sunday? In some families, any decent piece of clothing or pair of boots was whisked into pawn as soon as it was brought into the house, and languished 'in pop' indefinitely.⁷³ There was also the matter of interest to be paid, at a rate of roughly one pence per two and a half shillings borrowed, plus a valuation charge of one-half pence per pledge.⁷⁴ Over time, the loan might grow from a mere stop-gap shilling or two, until nearly all the family income was borrowed against each week.

⁷² O'Mara, p. 63. See also Paul Johnson's discussion of 'Sunday best', which he terms an 'idle asset' during the week, p. 23.

⁷³ Helen Forrester describes how gifts of clothing, sent by wealthy friends to her formerly well-to-do parents, were put in pawn immediately and rarely ever again emerged. See *Liverpool Miss*, pp. 70 and 106, as well as Walsh, p. 26.

⁷⁴ Johnson, p. 166 and Tebbutt, p. 8.

The housewife, dependent on the pawnbrokers' Monday shillings, might have to pawn her coat, any extra items of clothing she possessed, or even the family bedding.

These transactions were frequently the source of much shame and embarrassment for women.⁷⁵ Husbands and children, protective of their good clothes, often objected to their being pawned, and so the whole process might have to go on in secret. Not having enough money at the end of the week to get the 'Sunday best' out of pawn caused anguish and sometimes rows, with little sympathy extended to the wife and mother who had only been trying to make ends meet. Encountering a better-off neighbour or relative while she was en route to the pawnbrokers was similarly mortifying, for her bundle of clothing tied up with safety pins – 'all Uncle's bundles seemed to be wrapped in the same fashion' – made excuses impossible.⁷⁶

The pawnbroker was held in higher esteem than the tally man, though he was a good deal less easy to dupe. With his gimlet eye, and merciless recollection of the number of times a given item had been in pawn, 'Uncle' was respected (if not feared) by most of his customers, though this did not stop women from pleading with him for an extra sixpence on the pawn of their husbands' Sunday suits. In The Autobiography of an Irish Slummy, Pat O'Mara recalls how 'it was always a source of worry as to when Mr Harris [the

⁷⁵ Ayers and Lambertz, pp. 203-4.

⁷⁶ Barnes, pp. 11-12.

pawnbroker] would term a pledge no longer pledgable. Prior to pawning, frayed cuffs and edges of suits were always discreetly smoothed out and sewed up by prudent pledgers.⁷⁷ This only managed to stave off the inevitable, as clothing was a rapidly depreciating asset, and if worn too often became unusable, at least as far as its potential for pawn was concerned.

Like the clothing clubs, habitual visits to a pawnbroker were financially ruinous, as Walter Greenwood observes in his semi-autobiographical novel Love on the Dole. The women who visit the local pawnbrokers, Price and Jones, are trapped in a cycle of unending debt:

Next Friday or Saturday [...] they would hand over their wages to Mr Price in return for whatever they had pawned today. And next Monday they would pawn again whatever they had pawned today, paying Mr Price interest on interest until they were so deep in the mire of debts that not only did Mr Price own their and their family's clothes, but, also, the family income as well. They could not have them both at the same time. If they had the family income in their purses then Mr Price had the family raiment and bedding; if they had the family raiment and bedding then Mr Price had the family income.⁷⁸

The dependence of many low-income households upon their local pawnbrokers was criticised for much the same reasons as their membership in clothing clubs; yet, like the clubs, the pawnbroker was invaluable to the poorest families. Week after week, a housewife was sure to find herself short a shilling or two: she could let her family go hungry, or let the rent lapse, or she could visit the pawnbrokers. Such charities as existed were hard-pressed

⁷⁷ O'Mara, p. 64. See also Barnes, p. 81.

⁷⁸ Walter Greenwood, Love on the Dole, 1933 (London, 1993), p. 32.

to offer even occasional help to needy families; there was no way they could offer aid to everyone, every week. Hence the reliance upon 'Uncle', the 'Sunday best' safety-pinned into a bundle, and the ha'penny after ha'penny in debts that slowly accumulated.

* * * * *

The limited space available in low-income households for the storage of clothing has been proposed as another reason for the family's 'Sunday best' being put into pawn each week: in the pawnbrokers, one historian has suggested, clothing was hung up properly and kept dry and vermin-free when not in use.⁷⁹ This is echoed in one oral history of the 1930s, with the subject recalling that the family's best clothing 'was parcelled up on Sunday night, and that's why your best suit was always so well looked after – it was in pop through the week.'⁸⁰ On the other hand, some autobiographies speak of the close, stuffy conditions in the pawnbrokers; of the creases which were impossible to remove from clothes that had been in pawn; and of the vermin which migrated from suit to suit.⁸¹ Furthermore, there was usually a charge of one half pence to hang up a garment during the week; it was unlikely that a family with an acute storage problem – because of overcrowding, or bugs, or damp – had the extra pennies to pay for the privilege of having their clothes

⁷⁹ Johnson, p. 177.

⁸⁰ Colin Bundy and Dermot Healy, 'Aspects of Urban Poverty,' Oral History (vol. 5, no. 3), p. 91. From an interview with Mr R.W., born in 1908.

⁸¹ Walsh, p. 26; O'Mara, pp. 63-64; Forrester, Liverpool Miss, p. 281.

decently stored. What is indisputable are the conditions that prevailed in the homes of the poor: John Burnett has estimated that, on the eve of the Second World War, at least one-third of the homes in Britain were 'very sub-standard property' and little more than slums, and a further third of homes were 'sanitary but lacking in modern amenities.'⁸² In Ancoats, a slum area destined for clearance, social surveyors found that 80 per cent of the dwellings were infested with bugs, 30 per cent with beetles, and 10 per cent with mice.⁸³

The overcrowding described by Victorian social observers, though much abated, was not yet a condition of the past, and it was commonplace for the upstairs room or rooms in poorer dwellings to be crammed with beds. There was little space for other furniture; certainly built-in cupboards and chests of drawers were rare fixtures indeed. Rather, most clothing was hung from nails or pegs, with lice and disease free to migrate from garment to garment.⁸⁴

In such conditions, it is hard to imagine how a housewife might manage to keep the family clothing clean, yet most women managed to do so – without the aid of modern conveniences which late-twentieth-century families take for granted. Automatic washing machines were available, but cost a minimum of twenty guineas, and hence did not figure in the wash-day

⁸² John Burnett, A Social History of Housing 1815-1970 (London, 1978), p. 242.

⁸³ Manchester University Settlement, pp. 53-54.

⁸⁴ Reeves, p. 52.

of most households. Wash-boilers, heated by either gas or electricity, were becoming more popular as they decreased in price – the cheapest sort of gas boiler could be had for one and a half pounds – but even this moderate expense was impossible for poverty-stricken families.⁸⁵ Many homes in the depressed areas, furthermore, were supplied with neither gas nor mains electricity; some did not have running water.⁸⁶ This deficiency was cited by Margery Spring Rice in Working-Class Wives, published in 1939, where she described women 'having to fetch water from the bottom floor of a four-storied house or from 100-200 yards or even a quarter of a mile along the village street.'⁸⁷ In South Wales, coal-miners' cottages had little provision for washing either people or clothes, though miners at the end of their shift emerged black from head to toe.⁸⁸

Where the actual process of cleaning clothes and linen was concerned, most women simply heaved the wash into an enamelled or galvanised tub,

⁸⁵ Political and Economic Planning, The Market for Household Appliances (London, 1945), p. 320. See also Christine Zmroczek, 'The Weekday Wash,' This Working-Day World: Women's Lives and Cultures in Britain 1914-1945, ed. Sybil Oldfield (London, 1994), pp. 9-14.

⁸⁶ The Ancoats survey revealed that 18 per cent of the dwellings had no arrangement whatsoever for domestic washing, and that in a further 30 per cent of dwellings the washing facilities were 'defective.' Manchester University Settlement, p. 54.

⁸⁷ Margery Spring Rice, Working-Class Wives: Their Health and Conditions, 1939 (London, 1981), p. 100.

⁸⁸ George Orwell was particularly horrified by these conditions when he toured the industrial north and mining areas in 1936. See Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 47.

and proceeded to scrub away. 'Dolly' or 'poss' sticks, used for centuries to beat out the dirt, were still widely used in the inter-war period, as were galvanised wash-boards.⁸⁹ Once clean, clothes were rinsed several times (and 'blued' if they were white), and then they had to be wrung free of excess water, either by hand or with a mangle. While mangles of the plainest sort cost only a pound or two, and could in fact be purchased by instalment,⁹⁰ those women who were not lucky enough to have one might pay a neighbour a penny or two for the use of hers. ⁹¹ After the clothes were mangled came the long drying period: if the day were fine, one had the use of a relatively clean yard, and the smokestacks were not belching out soot and cinders, then the wash might be dry in an afternoon. If it were rainy, and the clothes had to be hung inside, in a damp, crowded room, then they could take days to dry. A housewife's problems were complicated if her family only had one set of wearable clothes, for then the drying *had* to be accomplished overnight.⁹² Lastly came hours of ironing: although electric irons (which cost £1 or more) were widely used by the late 1930s, many women still had to use flatirons, heated on the range,

⁸⁹ S. Minwel Tibbott, 'Laundering in the Welsh Home,' Folk Life (vol. 19, 1981), p. 46. Tibbott asserts that 'the wash tub and wash board method was still in use in most homes until after the Second World War.'

⁹⁰ An advertisement for a Qualcast wringer appeared in News of the World, Oct. 2 1932, p. 15. It cost 35s 8d, though 'easy terms' were available.

⁹¹ Samuel, p. 57 and Elizabeth Flint, Hot Bread and Chips (London, 1963), p. 32.

⁹² Brockway, p. 85; Rice, p. 100.

and effective only for a minute or so before re-heating.⁹³

This was a wearisome enough process, but most women had to cope with worse: soap flakes, which dissolved more quickly in water, and which reduced scrubbing, were available from the turn of the century onwards, but were relatively expensive if compared to non-branded soaps.⁹⁴ Though writing before the Great War, Maud Pember Reeves accurately described the dilemma which would continue to confront women in the depressed areas twenty years later. The housewife 'would like to spend 5*d* on soap, 1*d* on soda, 1*d* on blue and starch. She is obliged in many cases to compress the expenditure to 3*d* or 5*d* all told. She sometimes has to make 2*d* do.' Reeves continued, 'it is difficult to realise the soap famine in such a household.'⁹⁵ Many women had to use cake soap of varying quality which had to be finely grated before use, and if the clothes being washed were particularly dirty – such as a foundry- or railway-worker's overalls – the soap used was soda-

⁹³ For more detailed descriptions of wash day, see the written accounts of working-class life in the New Survey of London, vol. IX, p. 399; as well as Mary Wade, To the Miner Born (London, 1984), pp. 80-83; Margaret Forster, Hidden Lives: A Family Memoir, first publ. 1995 (London, 1996), pp. 99-100; and Weir, pp. 140-41.

⁹⁴ Lux soap flakes cost from 2*d* to 6*d* (News of the World, 4 May 1930, p 11). Lux and Sunlight soap flakes were both introduced in 1900, while Persil washing powder came on the market in 1909. Detergent in its modern form did not appear in British shops until the 1950s. Information provided by the Lever Brothers Educational Unit, Wetherby, West Yorkshire.

⁹⁵ Reeves, pp. 60-61.

based, caustic, and left their fingers raw.⁹⁶ Heaving the clothes from tub to tub, and emptying and filling bucket after bucket of water, was physically exhausting, as was the laborious task of running clothes through a mangle several times.

At the beginning of the inter-war period, Manchester City Council surveyed households in Manchester and Harrogate on the amount of time involved in home laundering each week. If only two or three people lived in one home, the laundry took approximately five-and-a-half to six-and-a-half hours each week. As family or household size increased, however, so did the amount of time spent on laundering: roughly eight hours to do the laundry of four people; over nine hours to do six or seven people's washing; and ten hours or more for larger households.⁹⁷ By the eve of the Second World War, it is unlikely that the amount of time devoted to the washing of clothes and linen had decreased significantly among women living in the depressed areas, because few such women had access to semi-automatic or automatic clothes washers.

Public wash-houses had long been seen as a means of alleviating some of the difficulties associated with laundering. In 1918, the Report on Public Baths and Wash-Houses in the United Kingdom was published. It asserted that wash-houses removed the discomforts of wash-day from the home, and

⁹⁶ Weir, p. 143.

⁹⁷ Cited in PEP, p. 35.

were cheaper to use than home laundry facilities, as washing could be done more efficiently and economically than at home. However, it also observed that many women were resistant to using local wash-house facilities, because they disliked being seen going to and from the wash-house, as well as having to do their laundry side by side other women. Furthermore, for reasons of safety most wash-houses did not admit children, and so the housewife who wanted to use a public laundry had to find someone to mind them.⁹⁸ It also noted that there were only 52 public wash-houses in the United Kingdom, 36 of which were in London.⁹⁹

A quarter of a century later, wash-houses remained few in number. The 'Heating of Dwellings Inquiry', undertaken in early 1942, ascertained that only 13 per cent of households with an annual income below £160 had access to a communal laundry. Of those households, 67 per cent never made use of its facilities.¹⁰⁰ In urban areas, blocks of flats or tenements often had their own, private, wash-houses; much competition attended their use, however, and some charged sixpence or more per hour.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Agnes Campbell, Report on Public Baths and Wash-Houses in the United Kingdom (Edinburgh, 1918), pp. 46, 50 and 51.

⁹⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁰⁰ Heating and Ventilation (Reconstruction) Committee of the Building Research Board of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, Post-War Building Studies No. 19: Heating and Ventilation of Dwellings (London, 1945), p. 182.

¹⁰¹ Weir, p. 140; and Our Towns, p. 19.

Few households, then, had access to public wash-house facilities. The one remaining option – sending washing out to a laundress or private laundry – was financially impossible for many families. Among 2,378 households with incomes below £160 a year, surveyed by the Heating of Dwellings Inquiry, only 22 per cent made even occasional use of a laundry.¹⁰² This evidence is corroborated by a later survey, mentioned in the Inquiry findings, which asked ‘Do you send any clothes to the laundry?’ Only 30.4 per cent of households classified as ‘lower working class’ were able to do so; this figure rose to 47.4 per cent among ‘lower middle and upper working class’ respondents.¹⁰³ The services of a laundry or laundress were not particularly expensive – four or five shillings a week at most – but were nonetheless beyond the financial scope of most households with only two or three pounds to spend.¹⁰⁴ The most that a family with an income below £160 a year might conceivably spend on laundering, each week, was one to two shillings; this included fuel for the heating of water, as well as soap, blue, bleach and

¹⁰² Heating and Ventilation of Dwellings, p. 182.

¹⁰³ *Op. cit.*, p. 136. This second inquiry was done in June 1942, but no other particulars are given regarding the size or scope of the sample. In June 1939, Mass-Observation conducted a survey on ‘Clothes-washing motives and methods.’ Sixty working-class housewives in Bolton were interviewed: 42 did their laundry at home, 12 took it to a public wash-house, and 8 sent all or some of their washing to a laundry. M-O FR A18, June 1939.

¹⁰⁴ Expense aside, many poor families had little more than one set of clothing each, and would have nothing to wear if clothes were sent out to a laundry. See Rice, p. 100.

starch.¹⁰⁵

An impoverished woman, though unlikely to send out her washing, might well spend her days doing other families' laundry, for work as a laundress was a popular means of augmenting the family income.¹⁰⁶ Such work also had the unfortunate effect of making the miseries of wash-day an unending torment. As many homes had only one living room, which was attached to the scullery, that room was invariably damp, steamy, and filled with piles of laundry. As Walter Greenwood recalls,

It was difficult to see [my friend's] mother because of the steam vapour which clouded their small kitchen. A cast-iron cauldron full of clothes bubbled on the cross-bar of the grate. I could hear the fire roaring under the copper in the scullery. A tin bath heaped with scrubbed washing stood where the hearth-rug should have been and, under the window, was a mangle with worn rollers and a tin receptacle below to catch the water [...] The kitchen table, heaped with sodden clothing, was swimming in soapy water.¹⁰⁷

Other family members found themselves constantly in the way, with little room to relax or warm themselves in front of the fire – that spot was given over to drying linens. Furthermore, the exertions demanded by a continual

¹⁰⁵ Heating and Ventilation of Dwellings, p. 183.

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Roberts has noted that it is very difficult to ascertain the income derived from laundering. A Lancaster woman whom she interviewed did recall that, in the inter-war period, she usually took in three baskets of washing a week, for which she charged 2s 6d each. See "Women's Strategies, 1890-1940," in Labour and Love, p. 232.

¹⁰⁷ Walter Greenwood, There Was A Time (London, 1967), p. 31. See also the memoirs of Lady Astor's maid, Rosina Harrison, My Life in Service (London, 1975), p. 8, and her descriptions of her mother doing the Marquess of Ripon's laundry.

flow of washing often meant that the laundress had little time or energy to devote to cooking for her family, or cleaning the house. For the families of laundresses, wash-day, dreaded by all, came every day.

Laundering habits were a matter of much significance, even amongst those women who did not take in others' washing. In low-income neighbourhoods, the woman who sent out her laundry was regarded as getting 'above' herself, while even the day on which laundry was done was the source of comment. The best housewives, it was widely agreed, got their washing out of the way early in the week; the later a woman left her laundry, the more slovenly were her habits in general. A short verse recalled by Robert Roberts in A Ragged Schooling illustrates the equation made between respectability and the day of the week when the family wash appeared on the line:

Them as wash on Monday have all the week to dry,
 Them as wash on Tuesday do little that's awry,
 Them as wash on Wednesday are not so much to blame,
 Them as wash on Thursday are folk that wash for shame,
 Them as wash on Friday most likely wash in need, [i.e. have run
 out of clothes]
 But them as wash on Saturday – they are sluts indeed!¹⁰⁸

This does not mean, however, that every woman was a dedicated laundress, and that clothes and linen were washed to a universally high

¹⁰⁸ Robert Roberts, A Ragged Schooling: Growing up in the Classic Slum, 1976 (London, 1987), p. 91. See also Angela Rodaway, A London Childhood (London, 1960), p. 23: 'It was slovenly [...] to do the week's washing on any day of the week but Monday, snobbish to send it "out".'

standard. The sheer work involved seems to have defeated some women, not to mention the dreariness of the task. Elizabeth Flint wrote of her mother's relaxed attitude towards laundering:

Wash-day was on Monday really, but Mum did not always bother. Sometimes she did the washing on Tuesday, but sometimes she left it for another week. She hated washing, and the clothes never looked much better even after they were washed.¹⁰⁹

The Pilgrim Trust also noted that standards of housekeeping tended to fluctuate sharply, with housewives in some areas maintaining a high standard of cleanliness, while in other areas the dreadful conditions seemed to have frustrated most women's attempts at cleaning and washing.¹¹⁰ To launder clothes thoroughly and well, women could not scrimp on soap, hot water, or effort. Living in the depressed areas, in miserable conditions, few women could avoid economies on fuel and laundry materials, and the struggle to cope with these privations inevitably sapped the strength of even the most conscientious housewife.

* * * * *

Unlike washing machines, sewing machines had reached a fairly high degree of sophistication by the 1930s, and were a fixture of many middle-class homes. Few low-income families had the necessary capital to buy one outright, but many sewing machines were purchased by instalment – by one

¹⁰⁹ Flint, p. 24.

¹¹⁰ Men without Work, p. 114.

estimate, as many as 85 per cent of all machines sold in 1938.¹¹¹ Singer sewing machines, for example, cost 2s 6d a week direct from the manufacturers.¹¹²

There is little evidence to suggest that women in low-income households were able to devote much time to creative sewing, as opposed to the re-modelling and mending of older clothes. The cost of hire-purchasing a sewing machine, added to the cost of materials and patterns, conspired against many women who had the skills, acquired from relatives or while at school, to create reasonably stylish clothes at home. In the depressed areas, most women could afford to buy new clothes, no matter how cheap, only very occasionally. Would the purchase of a sewing machine, used primarily to create new clothing, really be a sound use of their limited income?

Hand-made clothes, furthermore, were regarded as somewhat embarrassing by many people from impoverished backgrounds. In the words of Molly Weir, 'when I was a wee girl if you said that something looked "hand-made" it was the greatest insult you could hurl at the disparaged article.'¹¹³ This probably stemmed from the traditional reliance of poor

¹¹¹ Bundy, p. 89. The estimate regarding the hire-purchase of sewing machines appears in Hilton, p. 133.

¹¹² News of the World, 8 Apr. 1934, p. 4. Used sewing machines were frequently advertised in Exchange and Mart, typically costing from fifty shillings for a manual model, to 10 guineas for an electric Singer machine. See the issue of 5 Jan. 1933, p. 6, for several examples.

¹¹³ Weir, p. 96.

families on clothing made by hand, at home: before the advent of ready-made clothing, families who could not afford the services of a dressmaker or tailor had to make their own garments as best they could, with scant attention paid to current notions of style. When fashionable, ready-made clothing did become widely available in the decades following the Great War, it was a revelation to the poorer classes; little wonder, then, that when obtaining new clothes, so many among them preferred to buy ready-made garments – no matter how shoddy – instead of making them at home.¹¹⁴

Many women from low-income households confined their sewing to mending, a never-ending task given the shabby condition of the family's clothing: second-hand clothing was already worn out, and the low-quality garments available through clothing clubs quickly became tattered as a result of constant wear and harsh laundering. The creativity involved in such tasks, however, should not be underestimated, for a great deal of ingenuity had to be employed. A woman might find herself picking apart an out-grown coat, re-cutting it, and re-sewing it to fit a smaller child; or she might have to find some way of patching a garment mended so many times that little more than the patches remained. If a family had lived for a year or more on the dole, new garments were an impossibility, with growing children a terrible

¹¹⁴ The same attitudes prevailed in regard to food: 'when you are [...] underfed, harassed, bored and miserable, you don't *want* to eat dull wholesome food. You want something a little bit "tasty.'" Hence the prevalence of chips, white bread and sugary tea in the diet of the poor. Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 88.

difficulty. Some children only ever wore garments that had been made over from those discarded by an older sibling or parent, while others had to be kept home from school if their clothes could not be made decent.¹¹⁵

The mending of shoes and boots was usually the province of the man of the house, though more well-to-do families might send them to the cobbler for repair – if they had enough money for his fee, and extra shoes to wear in the meantime. Many fathers became skilled at the repair of their family's footwear, and devoted much time attempting to eke out a few weeks' more wear from cracked and thin soles and uppers. When repairs proved impossible, then newspaper or cardboard was stuffed in the holes – a decent remedy, at least until it rained.¹¹⁶

* * * * *

Having examined the relationship between poverty-stricken women in the depressed areas and their practical concerns regarding clothing, there remains the question of how these issues affected women on a day-to-day basis. In an analysis of the health and well-being of 80 unemployed families, the Pilgrim Trust concluded that at least a third of the wives were 'unhealthy' or suffered from 'anaemia or nervous disability.' It concluded that 'the wives bear the brunt of unemployment.'¹¹⁷ Contemporary observers frequently

¹¹⁵ Brockway, p. 16; Lambert, p. 126; and Weir, p. 96.

¹¹⁶ See Lambert, p.100; Reeves, pp. 63-64; and Forrester, Liverpool Miss, pp. 200-201.

¹¹⁷ Men without Work, p. 127.

noted the utter weariness and ill-health produced in women who were trying to keep their family fed on a wholly inadequate budget, or who struggled against high rents and insanitary conditions.¹¹⁸ To these worries must be added the struggle of trying to keep the family decently and respectably clothed, as well as the never-ending drudgery of laundering and mending their clothing.

¹¹⁸ A powerful image of this despair is drawn by George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 15. Describing a woman he saw as his train passed by some slums, he was struck by her 'desolate, hopeless expression.' It made him feel that she understood, as well as he did, 'how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe.' See also Reeves, p. 64; and Roberts, The Classic Slum, p. 41.

Chapter Three:

Clothing and the Middle Range of Households

In the previous chapter, the ways in which poverty-stricken working-class families obtained and cared for their clothing were surveyed. It is a fallacy to suggest, however, that all working-class households in the inter-war period were mired in the depths of poverty. The decade of the 'Dirty Thirties' was a period of much economic depression, unemployment, and consequent hardship, but such experiences were not universal among the working classes. The returns of taxable incomes in 1938-39 (all incomes less than £125 were excluded) disclose that many more families lived above the 'bare minimum standard' than below it.¹ 25.4 per cent of the total, or 2,483,000 taxable incomes, fell between £135 and £150 a year; roughly speaking, these represent the families under examination in Chapter One. However, 47 per cent of taxable incomes – 4,600,000 – were valued at £150 to £250 per annum. A further 19.3 per cent of incomes, or 1,890,000, were assessed at £250 to £500.²

In several inter-war social surveys, chronic poverty was estimated to affect families with incomes of £160 a year or less,³ while middle-class life

¹ See Chapter Two, p. 27, for a discussion of what constituted the 'bare minimum standard.'

² G. D. H. Cole, Studies in Class Structure (London, 1955), p. 75. Taken from the Commissioners' of Inland Revenue annual reports.

³ In The Social Survey of Merseyside, p. 147, the average income of the working-class families sampled was 62s. 6d. a week, or just over £160 a year. See also Abrams, p. 87; Rowntree, Poverty and Progress, p. ; and Tout, p. 21.

emerged above the watershed of £250 a year.⁴ Between these income levels fell almost half of all taxable incomes; and if the middle class proper – those families with £250 to £500 a year – is included, then two-thirds of all incomes are involved. It is the families living in this middle range of incomes,⁵ and their experiences in regard to clothing, which are the subject of this chapter.

Where clothing was concerned, questions of appearance and fashion were affected by notions of class,⁶ but day-to-day issues – the place clothing occupied in the family budget, its purchase, and its care – were determined, in the main, by income. Within the middle range of incomes, differences in the practical consideration of clothing were mostly a matter of degree. The household with £500 a year spent considerably more on clothing than a household with an income of only £200; different shops were patronised; and methods of storing and cleaning clothing differed as well. Broadly, though, there was more to unite these households in their practical consideration of clothing than there was to divide them. There was nothing like the gulf that separated households in this middle range from those living below the bare

⁴ See Philip Massey, 'The Expenditure of 1,360 Middle Class Households in 1938-39,' Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, vol. CV, part 3 (1942); and D. Caradog Jones, 'The Cost of Living of a Sample of Middle-Class Families,' Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, vol. XCI, part 4 (1928).

⁵ See Chapter One, p. 4, for a discussion of class-based terminology, and why the phrase 'middle range of incomes' has been substituted for 'middle-class'.

⁶ See Chapter Four, pp. 171-75, for further discussion of the relationship between clothing and class status.

minimum standard, or like the gulf that separated them from those of the rich. As illustrated in the previous chapter, housewives in poverty-stricken families had little freedom of choice in regard to clothing and footwear: the cash for their purchase was laboriously accumulated through savings programmes, or else dubious avenues of credit were embarked upon. The garments and footwear that could be obtained with such meagre funds were invariably of low quality, and hence had a limited life-span of usefulness. Restricted funds also dictated labour-intensive methods of cleaning and repair.

In vivid contrast, households at the most affluent levels, roughly one to three per cent of all incomes, had a surfeit of choice where clothing was concerned. An abundance of income rendered practical issues immaterial, or as something to be dealt with by domestic staff. Considerations of price were unimportant, while quality was sought after as a reflection of exclusivity and chic, rather than durability. In particularly fashion-conscious circles, exquisitely made clothing was worn for a season at most; whether a garment might last through many years of frequent use and laundering was not a consideration in its purchase.

Between these two extremes lay the middle range of households, and it is their practices and attitudes with which this chapter is concerned. As noted earlier, most of the British population fell into this group, which for the purposes of this discussion includes those families with incomes between

£160 and £500 a year. There are relatively few published primary sources that chronicle the day-to-day life of middle-range families. Biographical sources are scant, particularly if compared to the abundance of published material written by and about those from impoverished or privileged backgrounds. Such primary sources that do exist, furthermore, contain little useful information about daily life, and even less about family practices concerning clothing.⁷

Because of the dearth of primary source information on middle-range families, an oral history project was undertaken as a complement to existing sources. When completed, it not only illuminated the circumstances of daily life in the middle range of households, but also provided detailed information on practices concerning clothing; information that was almost entirely lacking from published and archival sources.⁸

The residents of a block of retirement flats in Oxford were approached and agreed to take part in a small oral history project, and interviews took place with ten women. The women who participated came from London, Wales, and south, central and northern England; all except one had moved to

⁷ See Paul Thompson, The Voice of the Past: Oral History (Oxford, 1978), pp. 4-5: "The overwhelming majority of published autobiographies are from a restricted group of political, social, and intellectual leaders, and even when the historian is lucky enough to find an autobiography from the particular place, time, and social group which he happens to need, it may well give little or no attention to the point at issue."

⁸ See Appendix A for a detailed survey of the methodology and approach of this oral history project.

Oxford relatively recently. Most were in their eighties, though their birth dates ranged from 1906 to 1926. All grew up in middle-range households: though two described their families as 'poor,' they experienced none of the real discomforts of poverty, and might be classified as artisan working-class by social scientists. Their fathers were all engaged in trade or clerical occupations; none belonged to the traditional professions. The only mothers who worked were those of the two women mentioned above, although several mothers had worked before marriage. All the women grew up in fair-sized or larger, and reasonably well appointed homes, and typically had positive (if not idyllic) memories of their childhood. Domestic help was available in most of the households.

What united these women more than anything – and they came from very different backgrounds – was income. Although Mrs. D. H. and Mrs. K. C. grew up in somewhat difficult circumstances, they were careful to stress that they 'didn't want for anything.'⁹ Neither experienced hunger, nor were they deprived of clothing or footwear; both lived in decent housing; and their parents were never unemployed. In this respect, although Mrs. K. C. characterised her family as 'really, really poor I think. As people go, I mean,' the poverty they experienced was of a kind altogether less harsh than that suffered by families living below the bare minimum standard. The rest of the women who were interviewed grew up in circumstances that were even

⁹ From the interview with Mrs. D. H.

more financially secure, with Mrs. G. M. noting, 'There wasn't a shortage [of money], you see – that makes a difference.' This *expectation* of income was key to middle-range status, for the household that did not have a certain and assured income quickly fell in status, and might even slip into poverty.¹⁰ Crucial to the maintenance of a stable pattern of expenditure was capital, which allowed the middle-range household to maintain its standard of living even in times of irregular income receipts. Below-the-minimum households, by contrast, had a "negligible amount of capital at [their] disposal and the prospect of an uncertain and irregular income stream."¹¹

This absence of a shortage of money or, more precisely, its relative reliability and regularity if not actual abundance, united middle-range families in their practices regarding clothing. For example, Mrs. M. R. grew up in a small village in West Yorkshire, living in a terraced house; her father was a builder and stonemason. In contrast, Mrs. A. M., whose father was a retired violinist, grew up in Essex in a large, detached house. Their lives as children, and then as young women, were markedly different, yet their practices concerning clothing were similar: they wore much the same sort of clothing as children; their mothers bought their clothing and footwear in

¹⁰ Margaret Forster's grandfather, a prosperous butcher, provided a comfortable standard of living for his young family. His sudden death deprived his wife and children of any steady income, and catapulted them into poverty. Forster, pp. 57-59.

¹¹ S. J. Prais and H. S. Houthakker, The Analysis of Family Budgets, first published 1955 (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 155-56.

similar shops, or made their clothes at home; and as young women they dressed much the same. This is not to suggest that the family incomes were comparable, for it is likely that Mrs. A. M.'s family had a significantly higher income. Rather, it illustrates how families in the middle range were united in their daily practices by a relative security of income.

It should be noted that for families living at the bottom end of the middle range, with perhaps just a few shillings more a week than families living below the bare minimum standard, the issue of clothing could still cause great difficulties. Recent newcomers to the LCC estate in Watling in the 1930s felt great embarrassment over the relative shabbiness of their clothes – clothes that were satisfactory enough in their old neighbourhoods, but did not fit in with the middle-range standard of living they felt compelled to adopt.¹² This dilemma was also discussed by F. D. Klingender in his 1935 treatise on clerical labour: a junior clerk may have had a higher income than many manual workers, but he was also expected to dress to a higher standard, and the expense of good clothes quickly ate into any financial advantage he may have held.¹³ However, the strains felt by such families, while distressing, were not of the same nature as the difficulties experienced by families living

¹² Ruth Durant, Watling: A Survey of Social Life on a New Housing Estate (London, 1939), p. 89. See also John Burnett, A Social History of Housing 1815-1970 (London, 1978), p. 233, in regards to the economic hardships experienced by council tenants.

¹³ F. D. Klingender, The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain (London, 1935), p. 80.

below the bare minimum standard. On one side of the standard people worried about whether there would be *any* clothes to wear, whereas on the other side they tended to be concerned about the quality of their clothes relative to their status. Families at the lower end of the middle range of incomes certainly spent less on clothing than those at more affluent levels, and hence had both fewer clothes and clothes that were of less good quality; but they had a security of income, and therefore a relative abundance of clothing, of which truly poverty-stricken families could only imagine.

* * *

Given the wide range of incomes under examination – anywhere from £160 to £500 a year – how much might a middle-range family typically spend on clothing and footwear? In a survey of the expenditures of 1,360 middle-class families in 1938-39, Philip Massey estimated that households with an income of £250 to £350 a year spent approximately £32 on clothing and footwear, or 12s 5d a week; and families with £350 to £500 a year spent £40 in total, or 15s 6d each week.¹⁴ This represented 8 to 12.8 per cent of their total income. Similar figures were cited by Mark Abrams in 1945, who calculated that 9.3 per cent of personal expenditure in Britain went towards clothing and footwear, and by Caradog Jones, who sampled the household expenditures of 186 middle-class families in 1928, and arrived at a figure of 11.1 per cent for

¹⁴ Massey, p. 175.

clothing.¹⁵ Jones also referred to the conclusions of the 1918 Sumner Committee, which noted that clothing expenditure tended to rise when other, more 'essential needs' had been met.¹⁶ Because rent and food costs were proportionately less for families living above the bare minimum standard – a family with £250 might spend 26 per cent of its income on food, while a family with only £140 had to spend 33 per cent or more of its income on smaller amounts of inferior food¹⁷ – middle-range families could afford to spend more on clothing.

At the same time, paradoxically, middle-range families were also able to spend *less* on their clothing essentials. The clothes that were available to a family living below the bare minimum standard were poorly made and extortionately priced; often they wore out before they had been paid for in full. A housewife in this situation may have preferred to save up and buy good-quality clothing, but the vagaries of her household income, the distance of middle-class shops from her neighbourhood, and the blandishments of the

¹⁵ Abrams, p 80; and D. Caradog Jones, 'The Cost of Living of a Sample of Middle-Class Families,' p. 483. Jones mentioned a study done in 1920 by the Association of H. M. Inspectors of Taxes, which estimated that middle-class expenditure on clothing was approximately 11 per cent (p. 484). None of the above surveys included households with incomes between £160 and £250, which fell at the lower end of the middle range of incomes.

¹⁶ Jones, vol. I, p. 488, referring to the conclusions of the 1918 Report on the Working-Class Cost of Living Committee (Cd 8980).

¹⁷ See Massey, p. 180, for figures on middle-class budgets. Rowntree's Human Needs Standard (July 1933), which allowed 17s 10d for food, out of a total expenditure of 53s 2d, was the model for the second estimate. See also Jones, vol. I, p. 156.

tally men all conspired against her; and as a result she paid more for basic items of clothing than would a middle-range housewife. A middle-range woman, for example, might buy a pair of leather shoes for twelve-and-six, and could expect several years or more of wear from them. A woman with only a shilling or two to spend would resort to poorly-made club shoes (bought at high rates of interest), or she could find a used pair at the market. In neither instance would the shoes stand up to hard wear, and soon she would have to find the money for another pair.

While the housewife living 'below the minimum' had few options open to her regarding the purchase of clothing and footwear, the middle-range housewife could choose from a wide range of opportunities. Income, again, was crucial, for most middle-range housewives could count on having enough money to provide for their family's clothing and footwear needs, and that such money would be forthcoming at regular intervals. They could easily budget for growing children, for special occasions or holidays, or for appealing sales and bargains. They could even buy clothing on a whim.

The savings strategies so widely used in the poorest households were mostly absent from middle-range homes. Money for clothes and footwear did not have to be laboriously accumulated through participation in risky diddum or draw clubs: it could be taken out of the 'housekeeping', or saved from that housekeeping allowance over a short period of several weeks. None of the women interviewed in the oral history project had any

recollection of their mothers', or indeed of themselves, having to save for long periods to accumulate enough money for clothing purchases.¹⁸ For example, Mrs. G.M. observed that, in regard to clothing purchase, her father 'just produced the money when [Mother] wanted it,' while Mrs. E.H. noted that if her mother 'found she'd got some left from the housekeeping she'd use it, but otherwise she'd just say she needed money.'

Another feature of their attitudes regarding saving and spending was a horror of debt and systems such as hire-purchase. If an item was wanted, it was saved for and then its purchase was made in cash. Mrs. A. M. was careful to stress that her mother 'always paid cash; never hire-purchase or anything like that. Always cash.' She also observed that 'my parents always encouraged us to buy the very best that we could afford, so in a sense your purchases were governed by the amount of money you had in your pocket, and if you wanted something desperately then you had to save up for it.' The option of taking out credit and paying in instalments was not considered. In shops where the family held an account, payment might be deferred, but only until the end of the week. One then went to 'pay the books', which is described in one autobiography as 'a serious and immovable duty of the

¹⁸ Finances were rarely discussed in front of children. Mrs. A. M. observed that 'money was taboo,' and that 'finance was never, *ever* discussed.' As well, Mrs. M. B. had 'the impression, very strongly, that everything was very carefully monitored, as to what we should know. And that, I think, was fairly general, too.'

housewives of the day.’¹⁹

The only form of savings strategy in widespread use among middle-range women was membership in the Co-op: goods were slightly more expensive than elsewhere, but this was balanced by a dividend paid out at quarterly intervals. A woman who shopped at the local Co-op might spend more over a period of several months, but was eventually rewarded by a gratifyingly large lump sum.²⁰ Mrs. D. H. recalled that the dividends were ‘quite good. Sometimes it was as such as half a crown in the pound, which was very good.’

Co-op membership, which was most common among women at the lower end of the middle range of incomes, and much more popular in the north of England than in the south, carried with it a veneer of respectability that other schemes did not. There is very little evidence to suggest any widespread involvement in clothing clubs among middle-range families. A vicar on the Watling estate, talking to Ruth Durant in the late 1930s, observed that local people paid for their clothing with ‘Provident Checks’ issued by local shops. It is likely, however, that this was confined to families on the cusp of the bare minimum standard, for a family without financial difficulties – essentially, one in the middle range of incomes – had no compelling reason

¹⁹ Peggy Jay, *Loves and Labours: An Autobiography* (London, 1990), p. 15. Written by LCC councillor and former wife of Douglas Jay.

²⁰ Johnson, p. 140.

to join a clothing club.²¹

Neighbourhood savings schemes were similarly unpopular among middle-range families, and not just for financial reasons. The relative isolation of middle-range women was a significant factor here, for few women would dream of discussing their personal problems (especially financial ones) with a neighbour, no matter how friendly. Mrs. E. H.'s mother, when going to play bridge with the three 'maiden ladies' who lived next door, was careful to put on a hat; and when she arrived, her neighbours were all wearing hats, too. Such formality did not encourage confidences or the sharing of difficulties. Few of the women interviewed in the oral history had memories of their mothers spending time outside the home, or of their spending time with female friends: their family was the centre of their life, and when problems arose they remained within the family.²² Women from less affluent backgrounds, who had been transplanted from their old, familiar, inner-city neighbourhoods to new, suburban estates, were also afflicted by feelings of dislocation. Their standard of living may have been improved, but they had no one to talk to or to share their troubles with, and

²¹ Durant, p. 89.

²² See Alan A. Jackson, Semi-Detached London: Suburban Development, Life and Transport, 1900-39, 1973 (London, 1991), p. 137. 'Women who lived in a Surrey suburb for over a year hardly knew their neighbour's names and contacts were minimal: "People just nod, and pass on."'

many suffered from acute loneliness.²³

Another feature of life below the bare minimum standard, the pawnbroker, was again conspicuously absent from life in the middle range. This was partly for reasons of geography – most pawnbrokers were situated in working-class neighbourhoods which middle-range housewives were unlikely to frequent – but mostly because of household economics. The pawnbroker was invaluable as a short-term avenue of credit, credit that would be extended to the poverty-stricken housewife by few others: perhaps by the tally man, but never by ‘respectable’ shopkeepers. Without the pawnbroker’s credit, a shortfall during the week meant going hungry, or further arrears in rent.

Very few middle-range housewives ever found themselves in this situation. If they did fall short during the week, as some woman admitted doing, then their husbands could top up their housekeeping, bearing in mind that falling short was unlikely to involve going without food or fuel. Furthermore, middle-range women had access to shops that would happily provide short-term credit to a valued customer.²⁴

²³ Durant, pp. 26-27; and Ann Hughes and Karen Hunt, ‘A Culture Transformed? Women’s Lives in Wythenshawe in the 1930s,’ in Andrew Davies and Steve Fielding, eds., Workers’ Worlds: Cultures and Communities in Manchester and Salford, 1880-1939, (Manchester, 1992), p. 90.

²⁴ It is unlikely that the seats on the ‘pawnshop buses’ described by Terence Young in his study of Becontree and Dagenham were filled with middle-range women, but rather were used by those women whose families were among the 10 per cent of estate dwellers living below £160 a year. Terence Young, Becontree and Dagenham: A Report made for the Pilgrim

* * *

It is clear, then, that middle-range women had regular and consistent sums available to them for clothing purchase, and therefore had little need of those methods of saving which were so prevalent among poverty-stricken families. This enabled them to make efficient and economical use of their money, and to shop in pleasant, welcoming surroundings. How, then, did they organise their purchases of clothing and footwear, and where did they make these purchases?

The types of shops that a middle-range housewife favoured for ordinary clothing requirements depended to a large extent on where she lived, and what sort of transportation was available to her. Of the ten women interviewed, two lived in the countryside, two lived in villages, three lived in towns, two lived in the suburbs of cities, and one lived in a city.²⁵ The shops that their families used on a day-to-day basis ranged from local, independent drapers to Oxford Street department stores, but were similar in their convenience of location for the family concerned.

Mrs. A. M.'s childhood home was about three miles away from the nearest village, which does not appear to have had any drapers or clothiers; but there was a regular bus service to the nearest market town, and her mother tended to shop at the large drapers there: 'L. F. Stowes, and this was a

Trust (London, 1934), pp. 76 and 317. This is also cited by Paul Johnson, p. 171.

²⁵ Of course, these circumstances changed when they started work or married; most notably, the country dwellers all moved to towns or cities.

family emporium kind of store. It had everything. And we would go into the material department [...] and we looked through the pattern books.' Mrs. F. P.'s family, living in a similarly remote area of Hampshire, did not have access to a bus service, and so the three miles to the nearest town (a nearer village had no clothing or shoe shops) had to be covered on foot. This may partially explain her mother's reliance on the catalogue firm Oxendale's, because it was easier to collect her purchases from the village post office than it was to carry back parcels after a shopping trip in town. Some larger London stores offered a mail-order service, distinct from catalogue firms, which allowed customers to place and receive orders by post, perhaps after seeing something appealing in a newspaper advertisement.²⁶ In particularly remote areas pedlars still tramped their rounds. Molly Hughes, living in the (then) wilds of Enfield, wrote that the once-a-week 'cotton man' was 'hailed [...] as though he was an albatross,' for he carried with him many essentials, as well as a good selection of underwear, stockings, and ladies' garments.²⁷

Towns and larger villages tended to have a good selection of drapers and clothiers, though the independent firms were suffering in the face of competition from a growing number of multiple shops and variety chain stores. Multiple shop organisations, which typically carried a narrow range of

²⁶ Molly Hughes, *A London Family Between the Wars*, 1940 (Oxford, 1979), p. 76. For representative advertisements, see the *Sunday Express*, 2 Mar. 1930, p. 16, with a half-page Selfridge's advertisement, or the 3 Jan. 1937 issue of the *Express*, with its full page advertisement for Ponting's.

²⁷ Hughes, p. 6.

popular styles, had first appeared in the late nineteenth century; by 1930 there were over 8,000 branches nationwide.²⁸ Montague Burton Limited, which specialised in men's bespoke tailoring, and Freeman Hardy Willis, which sold men's and ladies' footwear, are two of the best-known multiple firms that emerged in this period.²⁹ Variety chain stores, which had been of limited importance in the pre-World War One period, had quickly grown and had captured nearly 20 per cent of the retail market by 1938.³⁰ Marks and Spencer Limited, British Home Stores, and F. W. Woolworth and Co. were several significant variety chains in the period. Though much smaller than a full-fledged department store, but with a good selection of merchandise and consistently low prices, they were beginning to predominate over more traditional forms of retailers, the independent draper in particular.³¹

Of the five oral history participants who grew up in towns or villages, all remembered visiting local shops with their mothers. Whether those were independent concerns or branches of a larger firm is generally unclear, however, for most women's recollections did not extend to the names of the shops involved. Loyalty to familiar names and local faces may have exerted

²⁸ James B. Jefferys, Retail Trading in Britain 1850-1950 (Cambridge, 1954), p. 62.

²⁹ The independent, bespoke shoemaker was virtually wiped out by the multiple firms that specialised in shoes and boots. See the New Survey of London Life and Labour, vol. II, p. 381; and Jefferys, pp. 353-356.

³⁰ Jefferys, pp. 69-70.

³¹ Hermann Levy, The Shops of Britain (London, 1948), p. 86.

an influence, as well as the generally superior standards of service that the older establishments could offer. Novelist Richard Adams, who grew up in Newbury in the inter-war period, had vivid memories of Camp Hopson's, a large, local emporium:

As a little boy, I was always impressed by the air of quiet, controlled activity and order, carried on by what seemed a great many black-clad, committed people intent on the tasks of the business; by the division of the place into different departments and the differences in atmosphere between each. The rooms seemed huge, extending back deeply from the street-front almost like corridors, and the old-fashioned wooden counters very broad and solid.³²

Eileen Whiteing, again looking back on the inter-war period, observed that members of her family were treated as 'VIP's' when they visited the local drapers, with instant attention from the staff, and chairs to sit on while her mother made a 'leisurely selection of some [...] garment or another.'³³

In this respect, the multiple firms could not compete, for most had the barest of shop fittings and comparatively indifferent service. Their prices, however, were generally lower than in the independent shops, while their merchandise was of recognisably good quality – many firms carried nationally-known branded goods.³⁴ The variety chains, similarly, had utilitarian decor but attractively low prices: none of the goods in

³² Richard Adams, The Day Gone By, first publ. 1990 (London, 1991), p. 85.

³³ Eileen Whiteing, Anyone for Tennis? Growing up in Wallington Between the Wars (London, 1979), p. 30:

³⁴ Jefferys, p. 333.

Woolworth's cost more than sixpence, while Marks and Spencer's reintroduced its five shilling price limit in 1926.³⁵ Furthermore, the national firms, particularly those multiples that specialised in women's clothing and footwear, had an aggressively modern appeal to them, and offered a good selection of up-to-date fashions at an accessible price.³⁶ In comparison, the independent drapers seemed old-fashioned and fusty. The national firms' combination of low prices, good value and current styles succeeded in winning them a large share of the market, and by 1939 the large-scale retailers were responsible for the sale of over 45 per cent of all clothing and footwear.³⁷

One nationwide group of shops that was popular with customers at the lower end of the middle range was the Co-operative Wholesale Society. By 1938, it had over two thousand drapery shops across England, though most were located in northern regions.³⁸ The local Co-op, in which members bought shares and in turn received credit and dividends, was immensely popular among those who could afford its slightly higher prices. Its membership is usually described simply as working-class but, because of its high prices and lack of ready credit, the Co-operative movement was most appealing to those families whose incomes placed them at the top fringes of

³⁵ Goronwy Rees, Saint Michael: A History of Marks and Spencer (London, 1969), p. 98.

³⁶ Dorothy Davis, A History of Shopping (London, 1966), p. 293.

³⁷ Jefferys, p. 74.

³⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 335-36.

the working class or at the lower end of the middle range of incomes. That the Co-ops were popular is clear: by 1930 they had almost six and a half million members, with total retail sales of £217.3m.³⁹ However, they had a limited share of the retail market in clothing and footwear – varying between 5.5 and 8.5 per cent in the inter-war period – and found it difficult to compete with the up-to-date styles and low prices of the multiple firms. Some of their difficulties, according to James Jefferys, were due to poor buying practices: each store had its own buyer who stocked the store on a rather haphazard basis, and rarely was an expert in current styles.⁴⁰ Only three of the women who were interviewed could recall shopping at the Co-op, and several who might otherwise have shopped there – Mrs. M. R. from Yorkshire, and Mrs. G.M. from Cumbria – were not allowed to do so; their families were local tradespeople and shopped only at local, independent establishments.

For those middle-range women who lived in or on the outskirts of a city, the department store played a significant role in their clothes shopping habits.⁴¹ Much of this was due to ease of access. Mrs. E. H., who grew up in a

³⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 461.

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 58 and 85.

⁴¹ In the inter-war period, the term 'department store' was used to describe any large shop with a series of departments, and included not only the flagship stores of Oxford Street, but also smaller, local shops like the beloved 'Jonesandhiggins' of Eileen Elias's childhood. In this paper, the department stores described are the large, urban firms like Lewis's, while smaller, local stores have been considered along with the independent drapers mentioned above.

suburb of Cardiff, recalled that 'you'd get on a bus – the buses were very frequent; the trams ran all the time [...] so I think everybody used to go into town. And on Saturdays Mother always went into Cardiff with a friend of hers, and on great occasions they let us go with them.' Mrs. S. G., growing up in Kent, was a half-hour train ride away from Oxford Street; and Mrs. M. W., who lived in a Lancashire textile town some ten miles from Manchester, could also take the train to the department stores. For their families, the department stores were an entertaining supplement to local shopping, but for the family of Mrs. M. B., who lived in central North London, department stores were its main source of clothing, apart from that made by a dressmaker.

Most department stores had been founded with the aim of offering inexpensive goods to the middle-range household, but by the inter-war period the major firms concentrated less on publicising their low prices, and instead focused attention on the amenities and refined atmosphere of their premises. The interiors and fittings of department stores were deliberately designed to exude a welcoming, luxurious atmosphere: shopping was transformed from drudgery into a happily-anticipated experience. Gordon Selfridge insisted that customers in his stores were treated as honoured guests. 'This is not a shop,' he was quoted as saying,

it is a social centre. I would rather lose sales than give women visitors here the impression that the store exists only to sell goods. I want them to enjoy the warmth and light, the colours and styles, the feel of fine fabrics. That is the basis of this

business.⁴²

Advertisements for Selfridge's were similarly voluble: 'A fine Dignity, Quality or Character seems to envelop all goods bought at Selfridge's.

Members of the public are constantly repeating to us their appreciation of this atmosphere of refinement.'⁴³

Customers were attracted to the department stores not only because of the sumptuous surroundings, but also because of the comprehensive selection of goods on offer. Women shopping for clothing and footwear could expect to find hundreds of square feet of floor space devoted to ladies' wear, shoes, coats, hats, accessories, materials and notions, as well as departments for men's and children's wear. The individual departments themselves had a wide range of goods, all of which had been purchased by experienced buyers with an eye for fashion and current styles. Some larger shops offered specialist services: in D. H. Evans, for example, a woman could choose a pattern for a frock she liked (costing 9*d*), then visit the drapery department to pick out fabric and trimmings, after which the fabric was sent upstairs to be cut out (free of charge). The frock was pieced together in the dressmaking department for five shillings, and then fitted for two shillings,

⁴² A. H. Williams, No Name on the Door: A Memoir of Gordon Selfridge (London, 1956), p. 95.

⁴³ Full page advertisement for Selfridge's October Event, Sunday Express, 30 Sept. 1934, p. 20.

with final delivery in three days.⁴⁴ The department stores were also useful as a source of inspiration, according to Mrs. E.H., who would look through their stock of ladies' wear before deciding on the final details of a frock she was making.⁴⁵

In spite of the good prices, wide selection, and pleasant surroundings, there is little evidence to suggest that women from areas not in easy reach of department stores made use of them on a regular basis. They were very popular among middle-range women living in the large cities or the suburbs, but few women living farther afield found it necessary to make the journey to the stores to buy their, and their family's, day-to-day clothing. A woman on a day trip to London might look through John Lewis's or Selfridge's in the course of her other activities, but it does not seem that the department stores were reason enough for a journey into the city.⁴⁶ Mrs. S. G.'s family frequently visited London during half-term, but spent most of their time in museums. It was 'more, really, for culture. We might have got a few things at a shop.' Mrs. K. C. also spent time in London with her husband, but again that was for cultural reasons. 'Chiefly for museums and things like that,' she

⁴⁴ D. H. Evans advertisement, Sunday Express, 1 July 1934, p. 21.

⁴⁵ Mrs M. B. observed that department stores set the standard for everyone else. 'Even now, I would always go to John Lewis's, to have a look – to price [something]. Generally speaking, it's a very good gauge.'

⁴⁶ Less densely-populated areas simply did not have any big stores. Lewis's, for example, would not open stores in areas with fewer than 1m potential customers. Asa Briggs, Friends of the People: The Centenary History of Lewis's (London, 1956), p. 177.

noted, though they did have a look at Selfridge's.

Department stores were by then placing less emphasis on low pricing policies; indeed, prices in the multiples and variety chains, which concentrated on volume sales of a narrow selection of goods, tended to be significantly lower. At sale time, however, the department stores were renowned for their ability to offer rock-bottom prices, with substantial reductions on the prices of formerly expensive, even luxury goods. In January 1930, Selfridge's was offering 'wonderful knitwear bargains', with jumpers for ten to twenty shillings, and knit jumper and skirt sets for 49s 6d. At Galeries Lafayette, afternoon dresses in crêpe de chine were reduced to 35 shillings.⁴⁷ Seven years later, at Harvey Nichol's January sale, wool dresses could be had for fifteen shillings, while tweed coats were reduced from four and one-half to two and one-half guineas.⁴⁸

Despite these lower prices, few of the women who were interviewed recalled making a special effort to visit the sales. Mrs. S. G., living in Kent, remembers that her family deliberately avoided London during sale time, and instead shopped locally; no one else remembered going to the sales as a child. Several women, however, made a point of searching out bargains in the sales when they had left school and started work. Living on a limited income, they could not afford more expensive items such as winter coats, or items from the

⁴⁷ Selfridge's advertisement, Sunday Express, 5 Jan. 1930, p. 14; Galeries Lafayette advertisement, p. 11 of the same issue.

⁴⁸ Sunday Express, 3 Jan. 1937, p. 11.

more expensively-priced ranges of ladies' wear in the stores.⁴⁹ Mrs. M. W. recalled that she 'often used to wait for the sales, and look at C&A, and Marshall & Snelgrove's [...] to see if I could pick up a bargain.'

It is difficult to ascertain whether independent shops, as well as the multiple firms and variety chains, made sales as important a feature of their calendar as did the department stores. While firms such as Selfridge's, Galeries Lafayette and Whiteley's advertised extensively in the popular press, very few of the multiple firms made a point of advertising their sales, although many of them placed advertisements that were not sale-related in the pages of glossy magazines like Vogue. End-of-season sales, for clothing and shoe shops, were a way of ridding themselves of superfluous stock, and less a means of attracting customers *en masse* to their premises, as was partly the case with the department stores. Selfridge's, in particular, expanded the traditional post-Christmas and mid-summer sales into frequently-held 'Events' and 'Store-wide Extravaganzas.' Indeed, practically every issue of the Sunday Express in this period had a half- or full-page advertisement for a Selfridge's promotion.

* * *

Department stores, multiple firms, variety chains, and independent clothiers and drapers – all served as conventional sources of clothing and

⁴⁹ Mrs. E. H. made about two and a half pounds a week as a secretary, while Mrs. D. H., who was a book-keeper, was paid two pounds a week.

footwear for the middle-range household. Alternate sources, or methods of purchasing clothing and footwear that did not involve formal shop premises, were of great significance as well, though those favoured by middle-range families differed significantly from those used by poverty-stricken households.

Second-hand clothing, so crucial to families living 'below the bare minimum', played a less critical role in the middle-range household. The only person who was likely to wear another's cast-offs was a beleaguered younger sibling: among the women who were interviewed, all those with an elder sister had been made to wear her used clothing at one point. In the words of Mrs. G. M., 'it wasn't very pleasing.' Particularly displeasing was the condition of clothes that had already received several years' wear. Mrs. F. P, whose sister was two years older, had

to wear my sister's clothes that she'd grown out of – those things got worn out, because I remember, really, they were rather worn when I had them. Because my sister was much bigger than I am [...] and she was rather a tomboy! So they were always in rather a sad state by the time I had them!

This is the only area, however, where used clothing was consistently employed, and it should be noted that this would only apply *within* the family. The notion of purchasing used clothing, with no certainty about its provenance, was highly distasteful to the middle-range housewife.

Although the middle-range family made little use of second-hand apparel, it was vital to the supply of such clothing and footwear. The cast-offs

of the middle range often arrived in poverty-stricken households because of charitable endeavour: donated to a church jumble sale, or given in a more personal way – perhaps to a servant. Mrs. E. H. recalled that her mother used to mend carefully any garments that had become worn, and then give them to Janet, their maid, ‘because [Mother] could afford new, and somebody else couldn’t. They could have what she mended – there was no *reason* for her to wear it once it was mended.’

Clothes that were not given away could be sold via a variety of routes. In some areas there were dealers who collected used clothing from the door; Thomas Callaghan’s Aunt Dolly was one such entrepreneur. Every Monday morning,

she would set off from the shop at an early hour, and walk for miles [...], visiting her regular contacts, well-to-do people, who always reserved their good cast-offs for her. And she was well liked and respected by these people. She always took with her a large counterpane in which to secure any article of clothing, shoes, or handbags, that may [sic] be given to her.

The clothing she received – and Callaghan does not mention if it was given to her or if she paid some token amount – was then sold in her second-hand clothing shop in Newcastle, or at the Saturday morning market.⁵⁰ Other sorts of dealers were described by Arthur Harding, who worked as one himself in the 1920s and 1930s. Known as ‘hawkers’, they made their rounds in suburban London districts. In exchange for used clothing, they offered china

⁵⁰ Thomas Callaghan, *A Lang Way to the Pa’nshop* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1978), p. 80.

cups and saucers, or ferns in pretty pots; though after 1920, according to Harding, they were increasingly likely to buy the clothing outright. The clothing they collected was then sold at their own market stall, if they had one, or sold on to a second-hand shop.⁵¹

Avoiding the middle man, an enterprising middle-range man or woman could place an advertisement in the classified section of The Times, or in a weekly paper, such as the Exchange and Mart, which was entirely devoted to the private sale of goods. A typical advertisement, placed in the latter in the 1930s, ran as follows: 'Gentleman clearing wardrobe offers following suits: dinner, £1; brown, two trousers, £1; grey plus-four, 15/- [...] No dealers.'⁵²

Second-hand clothing and footwear were often sold on in market stalls, but such markets also specialised in cut-rate, brand-new clothing, much of it as 'seconds' from London factories or northern mills. Though extremely popular among the poor, middle-range housewives tended to avoid the clothing stalls in markets, although they might still purchase food there.⁵³ Scruples over cleanliness were one factor: used and new clothing stalls were not segregated and, according to the New Survey of London Life and Labour,

⁵¹ Raphael Samuel, East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding (London, 1981), pp. 224-25.

⁵² Exchange and Mart, 15 June 1933, p. 7.

⁵³ For example, Mrs. E. H.'s mother frequently visited Cardiff covered market, but never purchased clothing there.

'the most disgusting-looking objects are sometimes to be seen for sale,' with 'no safeguarding of the public against the dangers inherent in old clothes.'⁵⁴ Furthermore, street markets generally took place in working-class neighbourhoods, areas which were unknown to most middle-range housewives. A survey of twelve London markets in 1930-31 reveals that, although there were 892 clothing stalls from which to choose, all were in markets in predominantly working-class neighbourhoods such as Bethnal Green, Whitechapel, or Lambeth.⁵⁵ Above all, middle-range families did not shop for their clothing in markets because they had no compelling financial reason to do so. The clothing and footwear available in markets were of low quality: either they were used, or they were second-rate versions of items that were on sale in the multiple firms and variety chains. Prices may have been low, but the middle-range housewife sought sturdy, long-wearing quality in the clothing and footwear she bought for her family – attributes that were singularly lacking in the dubious wares on display in most market stalls.

One alternate source of clothing that does seem to have been popular among some middle-range families was the reputable mail-order and catalogue firms. Here one must be careful to differentiate between stores that allowed their customers to order from advertisements or in-house catalogues, and those that were wholly catalogue-based. Whiteley's, the London

⁵⁴ New Survey of London, vol. III, p. 297.

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 326.

department store, advertised itself as 'The Great National Postal Shopping Headquarters', and had a large mail-order catalogue. Selfridge's, on the other hand, did not have a catalogue *per se*, but did allow customers to place orders by post or telephone.⁵⁶

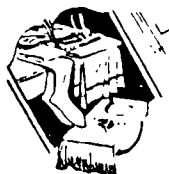
Distinct from store-based firms were those which operated entirely through a catalogue. Among the reputable firms that advertised in the Sunday Express, the Daily Mirror, and the News of the World were Yewdall's, Ambrose Wilson, Willerby's, J. A. Davis and Co., Oxendale's, and S. A. Barry. Littlewood's Mail Order Stores, which rarely advertised, was one of the largest mail-order firms, and operated independently from Littlewood's Stores.⁵⁷

It is difficult to judge how popular the reputable mail-order companies were, for they were not included among large-scale retailers in assessments of total retail clothing and footwear sales.⁵⁸ The volume of their advertising suggests that they occupied a significant portion of the market. That their customers were largely confined to the lower end of the middle range of incomes also seems likely by virtue of the medium in which their

⁵⁶ For the Whiteley's advertisement, see the News of the World, 1 May 1932, p. 5. See the Sunday Express, 2 June 1935, p. 14, for a full-page Selfridge's advertisement that referred to postal orders. Shopping usually had to be done in person during the sales.

⁵⁷ Littlewood's Mail Order Stores started in 1933, while the store-based operations were not established until 1937. Information provided courtesy of The Littlewood's Organisation.

⁵⁸ Jefferys, p. 74. For a discussion of the differences between reputable firms, and those that were merely fronts for clothing clubs, see Chapter Two, pp. 43-44.



Smart Women prefer Littlewood's

M.Q.
1045
10/
EACH



Lady's
Wool
Frock

Size S.W.
and W.
only.

Made in fine Botany Wool, with V-neck, contrasting striped bow and all-round belt fastening with neat buckle.

You will find this a really serviceable, hard-wearing frock, representing full value.

Colours available: Nigger Brown, Green or Lido-Blue. Available in sizes as shown in Chart below.

When ordering, please state size and colour required.

Size.	Bust.	Hips.	Lengths.		
S.W.	36"	40"	44"	46"	48"
W. . .	38"	42"	44"	46"	48"

You'll Need a Short
Bright Cloth Coat
For Summer!



M.Q.
1037
10/
EACH
Size S.W.
and W.
only.

Think how useful to be able to slip into one of these cosy little coats on a summer evening or to wear it over your sports frocks!

The style illustrated is particularly smart, with its all-round belt, two pockets and wide revers.

You'll certainly get your money's worth out of it.

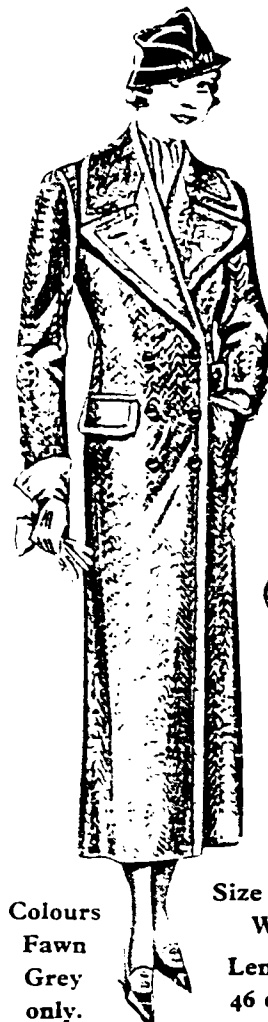
Colours available:

Fawn, Red, or Lido Blue.

When ordering, please state size and colour required.

**BUY THE BETTER
WAY—
THE LITTLEWOOD
CLUB WAY.**

M.Q.
3003
30/
EACH.



Colours
Fawn
Grey
only.

Size S.W. and
W. only.

Lengths 44,
46 or 48 ins.

What Could be Smarter
Than this Tailored Wool
Tweed Coat?

Man-tailored in a slim-fitting double-breasted style, with half-belt and vent at back. Large revers, two pockets, and half-lined with good quality Art. Silk. All seams taped.

This represents outstanding value. Colours available: Fawn or Grey only.

Sizes available, as shown in chart on left.

When ordering, please state size and colour required.

advertisements most often appeared – the News of the World, with its largely working-class and lower-middle-class readership.

Mrs. F. P.'s family was the only one that consistently used a mail order firm, although Mrs. G. M. remembered ordering a ball gown from one catalogue and being horrified to find another girl wearing the same dress when she arrived at the dance. Several women asserted that there were no catalogues or mail-order firms in the period; whether that was a trick of memory, or a reflection of the fact that they never had any contact with mail order firms, is difficult to judge. Those who remembered the catalogues but did not use them explained their reluctance by a wish to see the clothes, and have a chance to try them on, before committing themselves to purchasing anything. This is understandable if illustrations from a typical catalogue of the period are examined: drawn in black and white, the stylised sketches give little idea of the actual shape of the garment, and the colour or texture of its fabric and trimmings.⁵⁹ Those women who regularly ordered from catalogues did so because they wanted inexpensive clothes of reasonably good quality, and because they valued the convenience of mail order, with its rapid delivery to the door or the nearest post office. Of lesser importance was the specific appearance of the clothes they had ordered; in any event, if they really disliked an item, most firms had a liberal return policy.

⁵⁹ Littlewood's Mail Order Stores, Spring 1934 catalogue, pp. 94-95 and 101.

The most popular means of acquiring clothing that did not involve its purchase from a traditional shop was having it made to measure. This could involve a trip to the dressmaker or tailor, or clothing could be made at home. Given the near-universal presence of mass-market, ready-to-wear clothing in the inter-war period, it is easy to forget that less than a century before most clothing had been made by hand at home, or by a skilled tailor or seamstress. The sale of piece goods, or simple lengths of fabric, had dropped consistently in the early decades of the twentieth century, but that was due to the increasing reliance of poorer households upon ready-made garments.⁶⁰ Among those families who could afford a sewing machine, and were therefore saved the toil of stitching together garments by hand, the manufacture of clothing at home remained a popular option.

Increasing numbers of women, furthermore, were setting themselves up as skilled dressmakers, for the only investment required was a sewing machine and a boxful of notions and trimmings. In the 1931 Census of England and Wales, 9,282 women identified themselves as independent dressmakers or managers of a small dressmaking shop.⁶¹ Most dressmakers offering their services to the middle-range household worked out of their homes in this limited fashion, and worked for only a handful of customers.

⁶⁰ Jefferys, p. 332, citing the Board of Trade Working Party Report on Light Clothing, 1947.

⁶¹ Census of England and Wales, 1931, Occupation Table 1. A further 115,793 women worked as dressmakers in larger firms.

At the other end of the trade were the skilled court dressmakers and Savile Row tailors, where clothing was entirely hand-made, and prices were accordingly astronomical.⁶² Because of increasing mechanisation, however, the luxury end of the market was in partial decline, and the average middle-range family would not have come into contact with it in this period.⁶³

Fees charged by a dressmaker varied considerably according to the area in which she worked, as well as the degree of skill she could apply to the manufacture of clothing. Remarkably, almost all the women who were interviewed remembered going to a dressmaker as a child – even those from the lower end of the middle range of incomes. If a dressmaker was not used, it was because their mother, or in one case a grandmother, preferred to make the family's clothing; it was not for reasons of economy.⁶⁴ The proportion of a wardrobe that was made to measure was influenced, of course, by family income, but the question of whether a family would go to a dressmaker in the first place does not seem to have been governed by scruples over the cost. Although Mrs. D. H.'s family was living on a very limited income – her widowed mother worked as a housekeeper – the money was found to have

⁶² New Survey of London, vol. II, p. 305. The survey estimated that there were over 7,100 tailoring and dressmaking establishments in Greater London (pp. 263-64).

⁶³ *Op. cit.*, p. 256.

⁶⁴ Interestingly, Mrs. K. C.'s mother had trained as a court dressmaker, and worked for a local draper's shop during World War One while her husband was in the merchant marine.

the children's coats made by a tailoress, though their Sunday frocks and school clothes were purchased in the shops. In several other cases, a dressmaker was employed to make up their Sunday best, but as with Mrs. D. H. their weekday clothes came from the shops.

Only a handful of the women continued to visit a dressmaker once they had left school and were working. Mrs. M. W., for example, had many of her clothes made by the same trusted dressmaker who had made her childhood party dresses. Although 'she wasn't cheap,' she was 'an extremely clever seamstress' who sewed only for Mrs. M. W. and one other family, and she seems to have had the final word on which styles did and didn't suit her clients. Mrs. M. B., who had most of her clothes made to measure in childhood, did not continue to use a dressmaker once she had left school and was working; she was, by that time, 'absolutely standard size,' and so it was 'easier, and cheaper,' to buy off the rack from a department store.

Among those women who had married and had children in the 1930s, none remembered using a dressmaker for their children's clothing, which reflects, as with Mrs. M.B., the increasing availability of attractive, stylish, good-quality apparel in the shops. Most of the women favoured conservative, quite traditional clothes for their children, and these were readily available in most shops and department stores.

Sewing for oneself remained extremely popular in this period, and

most middle-range families had a sewing machine.⁶⁵ Needlework class for girls, as part of their home economics education, was a standard component of the curriculum at both state and independent schools, but the classes seem to have been of limited practical use. Few schools could devote the resources or time to giving their pupils a thorough grounding in the principles of dressmaking and finishing techniques, and instead concentrated on tedious exercises or embroidery.⁶⁶ Sewing machines were rarely used for, as Eileen Elias recalls in her autobiography, 'you were expected to learn to sew by hand. It was part of your education.' In sewing classes at her school, the girls began with felt penwipers and hair tidies, graduating to babies's clothes, the patterns for which had to be drawn by hand. Elias was a dismal seamstress:

The nice clean white thread with which we were all provided became [...] grubby and dirty; the seams wouldn't go straight; the stitches wouldn't keep the same size; and worst of all, it took me longer than anybody to begin, for I could never thread the

⁶⁵ Political and Economic Planning, The Market for Household Appliances (London, 1945), does not contain any statistics on sewing machine ownership. A sewing machine was present, however, in the family home of all the oral history participants, while another oral history project, also revolving around middle-class women in the inter-war period, revealed that most owned a sewing machine. See Catherine Hall, 'Married Women at Home in Birmingham in the 1920s and 1930s,' Oral History, vol. V, no. 2 (Spring 1977), p. 78.

⁶⁶ Felicity Hunt, Gender and Policy in English Education: Schooling for Girls 1902-44 (London, 1991), p. 119: 'the elementary schoolgirl faced a battery of domestic subjects although not all girls were taught all of them [...] There were wide regional variations in practice, to some extent dictated by the expense of such teaching, much of which required special facilities and resources. Nevertheless the principle was set fast and needlework was *always* taught.'

needle.⁶⁷

All the women who were interviewed remembered their sewing classes from school; many had rather unpleasant memories. Mrs. M. W. was ejected from sewing class at her convent school because she got 'ink on my sewing! [...] And when [the sister] taught us to use the machine, I used to break the needle! [...] In the end, Sister Angela threw me out – she said I wasn't to go again!' Mrs. E. H. also found sewing class a waste of time:

We used to make the most improbable garments. I remember having to make a pair of knickers or something out of flannel, which nobody wore, and it had no gusset in the crotch, you know – you couldn't have got it on. Mother was very disgusted, you know: 'Waste of material!'

In fact, none of the women felt that they had learned to sew at school, but instead acquired most of their practical sewing skills from their mothers, from having learned by trial and error on their own, or from privately-taken sewing classes.⁶⁸

There seems to have been a distinct division between those who actively enjoyed sewing, and those who positively detested it. The women who did not sew expressed no real regret over their inability to make their own clothes, or their children's clothes. On the other hand, those women

⁶⁷ Elias, pp. 205-6.

⁶⁸ Mrs. F. P. was sent to sewing classes, held in a nearby village, with her sister; Mrs. M. W. took some sewing classes after she was married. Sewing classes were available on the LCC estates in Becontree and Dagenham: in 1932-33, three dressmaking courses were held at the evening institute. Young, p. 175.

who enjoyed sewing felt that they had a significant advantage over women who did not make their own clothes, for they had an attractive, extensive wardrobe for a fraction of the cost of ready-made clothes.

Materials were inexpensive: Mrs. E. H. remembered that ordinary, 'quite nice materials' could cost less than two shillings a yard, while a satin-backed silk crepe – not synthetic – cost less than five shillings a yard. She estimated that it would cost less than three pounds to make a dress out of Viyella fabric; such a dress cost at least five pounds in the shops. Woman's Own magazine, which had a pattern and material service, offered the cutout pieces of a frock, ready to make up, as well as a matching collar, for 8s 6d.⁶⁹

Patterns were cheap as well. A 'bargain' pattern cost as little as four and a half pence (for a plain housedress), a reasonably stylish pattern for a frock cost about a shilling, and a 'designer' pattern – perhaps a Vogue interpretation of a chic Paris style – was two to five shillings. Patterns could be ordered by post, from a source such as Woman's Own or the Vogue pattern book (which was sold separately from the magazine), in the fabric and notions department of a store, or in a small draper's.

Living on a limited income, many young women found that making their own clothes was the only way they could afford a stylish and extensive wardrobe. For those who did not sew, knitting or crocheting jumpers and other woollen items was a way of stretching their clothing budget. No

⁶⁹ Woman's Own, 4 Feb. 1933, p. 573.

expensive equipment was required, wool was relatively inexpensive, and knitting patterns were cheap and widely available.⁷⁰

* * *

It is clear that the relative security of income enjoyed by the middle range of households greatly affected the ways in which they purchased their clothing. In regard to practical issues of laundering and storage, income remained an influential factor. At the lower end of the middle range of incomes it contributed to more pleasant surroundings, superior equipment, and better resources; more affluent families, furthermore, could even be relieved of much of the labour associated with wash day.

In contrast to the substandard housing of the poorest families, most middle-range families enjoyed a good standard of housing. Almost four million new homes were built in the inter-war period,⁷¹ many of which conformed to a fairly standard layout. Semi-detached, with a hall, sitting room, kitchen or scullery, bathroom, and two or more bedrooms, almost all had gas and electricity laid on, with a boiler fitted in the kitchen.⁷² Such

⁷⁰ See Woman's Own, 5 Nov. 1932, which had six pages of knitting patterns, most of which cost 6d.

⁷¹ Burnett, p. 242. Of these, 1.5 m were state-subsidized homes on estates such as Watling or Dagenham.

⁷² Jackson, p. 118.

homes were clean, airy, and bug-free.⁷³ In contrast to the poorest homes, their interiors had space for furniture, and so bedrooms could be equipped with wardrobes and chests of drawers. Improved storage conditions meant that clothing remained clean, dry, and free of vermin, and remained in good condition for longer. Its life span of usefulness – already longer, because of better quality, than the shoddy clothes of the poor – was thus extended.

Though relatively small, the kitchens in these homes – separate from the living areas – meant that household chores could be undertaken with limited disruption to the rest of the house. This dramatically reduced the unpleasantness associated with wash day: hot water and a sink were at hand, and there was even room for a mangle and extra tubs. Outside, most homes had their own gardens, where the washing was hung to dry; on fine days the mangle and tubs could be moved outside. It was also the case that many middle-range families lived in older homes which were even more spacious than the semis of the 1920s and 1930s. Several of the oral history participants grew up in large late-Victorian or Edwardian semi-detached or detached houses, most of which contained a scullery area that was separate from the kitchen.

Relatively few middle-range households used a communal or

⁷³ On some estates, observed George Orwell, 'new tenants are systematically de-loused before being allowed into their houses [...] Bugs are bad, but a state of affairs in which men will allow themselves to be dipped like sheep is worse.' See The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 67.

municipal wash-house: a 1942 survey showed that only 16 per cent of households with an annual income of £160 or more had access to a communal wash-house, but among those households 40 per cent made any use of it.⁷⁴ Most laundering was carried out in the home, or on the premises of a private laundry.

The actual process of clothes laundering, as described in Chapter Two, was much the same in middle-range households, though income had a significant effect on the nature of the equipment and supplies that were used. The middle-range housewife could spend more on fuel, and so had access to greater amounts of hot water than women in the poorest households. She could also spend more on soap: branded soap flakes such as Sunlight or Lux were popular, and cleaned clothes more efficiently, and less harshly, than the less expensive soda- and lye-based alternatives.⁷⁵ The 'soap famine' described by Maud Pember Reeves, which was so burdensome to poorer families, was absent in middle-range households.⁷⁶

Washing machines were rare in this period, even among more affluent households. A fully automatic machine cost a minimum of twenty

⁷⁴ Heating and Ventilation (Reconstruction) Committee of the Building Research Board of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, Post-War Building Studies No. 19: Heating and Ventilation of Dwellings (London, 1945), p. 182.

⁷⁵ Mrs. A.M. had vivid memories of Mrs Higgins (the washerwoman) using Sunlight soap, Robin starch, and Reckitt's blue for whitening, while Mrs. M. W.'s mother used green Fairy soap that came in a cake.

⁷⁶ Reeves, p. 61.

guineas, while a hand-operated electric model, in which the water was heated electrically and the clothes were agitated and wrung out manually, cost from four to ten pounds;⁷⁷ one model was romantically named 'The Housewife's Darling.'⁷⁸ Mrs. E. H.'s family acquired a washing machine in the 1930s, which she described as an

extraordinarily archaic, prehistoric-looking washing machine, which was three tubs. The first was for washing, with an agitator in it; the second for rinse; and I think there [were] some sort of rollers to put it through [...] It was terribly clumsy – I don't think they were terribly big tubs, but they were all along one wall, in the cellar, so I suspect it was space that made it possible as much as anything.

None of the other women's families had a washing machine in this period, although Mrs. G.M. had one when she lived in a college house – her husband was an academic – in the late 1930s. It, too, was quite primitive, and garments had to be put through a mangle separately. Far more common in middle-range households were electric or gas wash-boilers. Ranging in price from one and a half pounds for the cheapest sort of gas boiler, to eight pounds or more for an electric boiler, they made the initial stages of laundering easier, but did not help with the arduous task of scrubbing, rinsing, and wringing out clothes.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ The Market for Household Appliances, p. 319.

⁷⁸ Woman's Own, 3 June 1933, p. 245.

⁷⁹ The Market for Household Appliances, p. 320. See Chapter Two, p. 58, for more information on the mangle, which was one appliance that poorer families might be able to afford.

The variety of incomes that fell within the middle range did lead to differences in practices, but these revolved less around the actual laundering process, and centred more upon the labour that carried out the process. Housewives at the lower end of the middle range tended to do their own laundry; as discussed above, the actual process was easier and more pleasant than in a 'below the minimum' household. The mothers of Mrs. K. C., Mrs. D. H., Mrs. F. P., Mrs. M. W., and Mrs. M.R. all did their own washing: partly, it seems, for reasons of housewifely pride, but mostly because of the cost of hiring someone else to do so. The other five women who were interviewed remembered that laundry was done by a washerwoman or by a domestic servant, or else it was sent to a laundry.

Three of the families had a washerwoman who came each Monday, and who appears to have lived nearby. Arriving early in the morning, and working for much of the day, she washed and starched the clothes, and hung them to dry in the garden, though the ironing was left for a household servant or the housewife herself to do.⁸⁰

Many middle-range families made use of a laundry, although the proportion that did so tended to vary according to income. In a 1942 survey, 3,343 households were asked if they sent any clothes to the laundry: 72.1 per cent of the respondents in Group B, described as upper middle class, did so; in

⁸⁰ These were the families of Mrs. G.M., Mrs. A.M., and Mrs. E.H., though the washerwoman stopped coming to the third household mentioned when the family got a washing machine.

Group C, which was lower middle and upper working class, the proportion was 47.4 per cent of households.⁸¹ Among those families that did use a laundry, 89 per cent sent only 'heavy' items – bedlinen, blankets, tablelinens and so forth – to a laundry, while everything else was washed at home.⁸² In Mrs. M.B.'s and Mrs. S. G.'s childhood homes, 'heavy' items were sent to a laundry, while a domestic servant washed smaller things such as shirts and underwear. Having a domestic servant do all the laundry seems to have been regarded as impractical, particularly in those households without live-in help, and which relied instead upon a daily maid or a cleaning woman who came once or twice a week. Because washing was such a slow process, 'if your daily, your maid did that, she wouldn't have time to do anything else.'⁸³ Sending out the washing involved little more than bagging it up, ready for collection by the laundry; then, as Molly Hughes recalls, 'in due course it returned, all spick and span in blue tissue paper, little black studs and pins.'⁸⁴ Cost was calculated by the number of items being washed, or by their weight, and typically ranged from two shillings for a large bag of laundry that was not dried or finished, to two or three shillings per dozen items that were finished

⁸¹ Heating and Ventilation of Dwellings, p. 136. The information was taken from a separate enquiry that was done in June 1942.

⁸² *Op. cit*, p. 183.

⁸³ From the interview with Mrs. E. H. For a discussion of the declining numbers of domestic servants, see the New Survey of London, vol. II, pp. 444-45.

⁸⁴ Hughes, p. 76.

(starched, ironed and delivered).⁸⁵

Ironing was a mammoth undertaking in an era with few synthetic fabrics, and does not seem to have been included in the duties of a washerwoman, although items sent to the laundry could, as noted above, be ironed for an additional charge. It was usually done by the housewife herself, or by a maid in those homes with domestic help. Though electric irons were available in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as models that were heated by gas or methylated spirits, most women still used flatirons. None of the mothers of the oral history participants used electric or gas irons in this period, though Mrs. G. M.'s mother had a rather elaborate flatiron, with inserts that heated consecutively on the range, and so did not interrupt or slow down her work.

In the previous chapter, the social significance of laundering habits was discussed, and in particular the way in which they were seen to reflect a woman's overall competence as a housewife. To a large extent this remained true among middle-range women, particularly at the lower end of the range of incomes. Doing one's own laundry, and not shirking the rigours of wash day, was a point of pride for some women. Mrs. M. R., when asked if her mother had any domestic help, replied that '[Mother] did her work herself,' while Mrs. K. C. recalled that her mother, despite their relative poverty, 'was very methodical; very clean; very particular' in regard to the laundering.

⁸⁵ New Survey of London, vol. V, pp. 348-49. There were over 1,500 laundries in Greater London in this period, employing mainly female workers (p. 344).

On the other hand, those women who could afford the services of a washerwoman or laundry seemed only too happy to hand over the work of wash day to someone else. Molly Hughes felt no guilt – ‘Why, thought I, have a washing day?’⁸⁶ – nor, it seems, did the mothers of the five remaining oral history participants. Laundry was a time-consuming and tiresome chore, and it was easy and inexpensive to have someone else do the washing. Furthermore, washerwomen like Mrs. Starkey and Mrs. Higgins (who worked for the families of Mrs. G. M. and Mrs. A. M. respectively) depended on the money they earned from doing more well-to-do families’ washing.

The conventions surrounding wash day – the way that it was still considered a ‘religious Monday exercise, whatever the weather,’⁸⁷ or the way that linens had to be whiter than white – were, it seems, a way of asserting respectability, and were close cousins to the well-scrubbed front step and starched lace curtains that were so precious to many a housewife’s heart. Income, as with issues of clothing purchase, allowed some middle-range women to free themselves from the conventions of wash day, though it should be noted that the labour involved did not disappear, but rather was transferred to another person, usually another woman. To the washerwoman, too, would pass the baton of respectability: it was her responsibility that the washing be done on time, and then be immaculately

⁸⁶ Hughes, p. 76.

⁸⁷ From the interview with Mrs. D. H.

arrayed in the back garden of her employers.

* * *

Having assessed the practices of middle-range households in respect of clothing and footwear, it is clear that income played a key role at every stage. Middle-range families, by definition, enjoyed a security of income that was unknown in the households under examination in Chapter One, and with that security of income came a degree of freedom – the freedom to make choices concerning every practicality that touched upon clothing. The middle-range housewife did not have to save laboriously penny after penny for her clothing purchases; rather, she took what she needed from her housekeeping allowance, asked for a bit extra, or saved for a week or two. Saving money, in the middle-range household, seems to have been done for almost moral reasons, instead of out of necessity. With cash in hand, the middle-range housewife did not have to rely upon the credit of the clothing clubs, their monstrous rates of interest, and their shoddy goods. Instead, she had access to reputable shops which were full of well-made, attractive apparel that was, for the most part, fairly priced. Thus transformed, shopping was pleasant, even entertaining. Because the middle-range family had access to good-quality housing, clothing and footwear was properly stored; most importantly, laundering practices were transformed. Income allowed the middle-range housewife to do her own washing in comparatively pleasant surroundings, or to transfer the labour involved to someone else.

With the exception of clothes washing, where practices were less homogeneous, clothing practicalities were remarkably similar throughout the middle range of families, particularly in light of the wide range of incomes involved, as well as differences in background and geography. There was a very real gulf between practices in households living 'below the bare minimum', and those that were able to flourish, in a relative sense, above it; the dividing line a mere matter of shillings. The middle-range housewife took her responsibilities seriously, and took care to spend the money she had budgeted for clothing and footwear wisely – but these responsibilities were by no means a grim chore, nor did they provoke worry and anxiety, as they did in the poorest households.

Chapter Four:

Appearance, Style and Fashion
in the Inter-War Period

Having discussed the practical issues associated with clothing in the inter-war period, it remains to examine less definable issues of appearance, style and fashion. Why did people wear the particular clothes they did? What did those clothes mean to them? What relationship did clothing and general appearance bear to status? And how did issues of appearance affect the way that people perceived the status of others?

The answers to these questions hinge upon the context in which clothing was worn. People did not choose and wear their clothing in a vacuum, but rather were influenced by many factors, both internal and external. The individual context of people's day-to-day lives – what they did, where they went, and whom they knew – exerted an internal influence upon their appearance, and upon the aesthetic choices they made in selecting their clothing. At the same time, individuals lived within a larger context which encompassed all levels of society, and which externally influenced their decisions and attitudes towards clothing.

It is impossible to establish every individual context in which clothing was worn, but it is possible to define a variety of contexts which were broadly representative of the majority of women. These varied not only according to a woman's economic or class status, but also depended on aspects of her personal circumstances such as age, marital status, whether she had children, whether she was employed, and how she spent her leisure time. Throughout her life, a woman occupied a series of roles – schoolgirl, worker, wife, mother

– and as they changed and evolved, so too did the particular context in which she purchased, wore, and thought about clothing. Each context carried with it different clothing needs, and different attitudes towards the appearance and function of clothing.

In the inter-war period, a substantial minority of working-class families lived in conditions that fell below the bare minimum standards set by social surveyors. Such a family, living in one of the depressed areas, frequently consisted of a couple, married since their early twenties, with four or more children.¹ The problems which the father faced in the labour market derived from his shortage of skills and the structural or cyclical unemployment in his trade. His wife stayed at home while the children were small, but once they had entered school she might then supplement the family income with work as a char or washerwoman.

Once the eldest children had turned fourteen and left school, they usually contributed a portion of any earnings to the family income, if they were able to find work locally. Altogether, the family was unlikely to have more than £2 to £3 a week on which to live; and, after rent, food and fuel had been paid for, little remained for the provision of clothing. In good weeks, the housewife might be able to set aside two or three shillings for clothing

¹ The number of children in a family could itself determine whether a family was poverty-stricken or not; a small income might support parents and one or two children, but be entirely insufficient if there were more children. See Tout, pp. 44-45.

club payments or a trip to the market, but in bad weeks – weeks when her husband could not find work, and there was barely enough money to pay for food – then no provision could be made for clothes.²

Inevitably, economies had to be made, and the housewife's endeavours in respect of clothing were focused on those members of the family who worked or who went to school, and who had to maintain a presentable appearance during the week.³ Small children, too young to go to school, were dressed in whatever garments were at hand: ragged hand-me-downs from older brothers or sisters, or those things which could be obtained most cheaply from second-hand stalls at the market.⁴ It was of no importance whether a garment was appealing in appearance, fitted well, or was of good quality, for the stringency of the economies which the housewife had to make prevented much consideration of attractiveness or quality. Often this meant ill-fitting garments that were intended for a much younger or older wearer, or ragged clothes that did little to shield a child from the elements. One solution was to pile on layers of inadequate clothing, in the hope that a greater bulk of

² See Chapter Two, pp. 33-36, for a discussion of income and expenditure in 'below the minimum' households.

³ Forrester, *Liverpool Miss*, pp. 13-14. See also Reeves, p. 64: 'the mother has no need to appear in the light of day.'

⁴ Interviewed by Mary Chamberlain, a Lambeth woman described where children's clothes were obtained: 'Tot stalls. That's how they used to clothe the children. All the tot stalls used to do a roaring trade down [Lambeth Walk].' *Growing up in Lambeth*, p. 114.



January 1923: an impoverished family poses for the camera at their front door.

material might keep a child warm and dry.⁵ Another recourse was to use cheap, but highly inflammable materials such as flannelette to clothe babies and toddlers. Writing on the eve of the Great War, Maud Pember Reeves described the mothers' dilemma:

Better, they think, that a garment of flannelette than no garment at all! They would use material which is not inflammable if there were any they could afford which is as warm and soft and unshrinkable as flannelette [...] Enough unshrinkable stuff to make a child a new warm, soft dress can be bought for 6d. A woman with 6d to spend will buy that stuff rather than let her child go without the dress. It is what we should all do in her place. A child must be dressed. ⁶

Finding decent shoes for her children was a 'nightmare' for the housewife living in poverty, and school-aged children were the first to be shod.⁷ In the poorest households, young children went without boots or shoes in fine weather, and wore whatever was available at other times.⁸ School-aged siblings might grow out of their boots while there was still some wear left in them, or cheap canvas plimsolls – sixpence a pair – could be found at some markets.⁹

⁵ Reeves, pp. 47-48; see also Roberts, The Classic Slum, p. 40.

⁶ Reeves, pp. 64-65.

⁷ Forrester, Liverpool Miss, pp. 200-201.

⁸ Walter Greenwood recalled, in his autobiography, how a boy from his street 'wore girls' lace-up boots with high heels, picked up, no doubt, from the second-hand stalls of the market.' There Was A Time, p. 28.

⁹ These were found at a market in South Wales, but quickly became sodden when it rained. Brockway, p. 163. Wet weather also tended to dissolve the cardboard that patched the worn-out soles of boots and shoes. See Callaghan, p. 20, and Forrester, Liverpool Miss, p. 200.

A child's fifth birthday marked the first significant change of context which he or she would undergo in regard to clothing. Having been parcelled off to school, he or she was, for the first time, under the scrutiny of the wider world; and so a neat and presentable appearance was doubly important. This is not to suggest that the poorest families generally were able to clothe their children for school as well as they would have liked: a report made to the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Education Committee in 1939 suggested that 13% of schoolchildren were 'deficient in footwear and 21 per cent were deficient in clothing.'¹⁰ School uniforms were rarely compulsory for pupils at council schools in the poorest neighbourhoods, because few families could obtain the necessary and correct items of clothing.

Given the limited amount of money that poverty-stricken housewives could set aside for clothing and footwear purchases, many contrived to manage remarkably well. As illustrated in Chapter Two, this was achieved through careful budgeting, reliance upon alternative methods of saving, and dependence on local avenues of credit, such as the pawnbroker or tally man. These strategies, however, were only useful when there was a reasonably steady flow of income into the household. In particularly lean periods, when no work was available and the family was reliant upon the dole or charity, there was barely enough money to pay for rent and food, and nothing for

¹⁰ From a survey of 31,000 children registered for evacuation in September 1939. Our Towns, p. 54.

clothing and footwear. There was humiliation involved for those children whose clothes had become so shabby that their school referred them to the parish for clothing relief. In the Glasgow district where Molly Weir lived, 'parish clothes' were

made from scratchy woollen material, with a built-in itchy quality which made them agony to wear, and the genius who thought up the dull grey porridgy colour should have had a medal for successful depression of the human spirit. These clothes were instantly recognisable by their ugliness and harsh durability [...] To have to be dependent on the Parish for clothes seemed to us a fate worse than death.¹¹

Clothing her children for school represented only part of a woman's struggle, for there was still the matter of 'Sunday best' outfits, as well as good clothes for the high holidays such as Easter, Whitsuntide and Christmas. Clothing club salesmen were happy to extend credit to even the poorest households, and many women indebted themselves in the attempt to provide good clothes for everyone for Sunday. Church attendance may indeed have been in sharp decline in this period – Seeborn Rowntree observed that church-going had fallen by 25.1 per cent in the inter-war period – but the wearing of 'Sunday best' was done for reasons of social, rather than religious, significance.¹² To be seen in weekday clothes on a Sunday was 'a badge of shame', even in the poorest neighbourhoods, and those who went

¹¹ Weir, pp. 103-104.

¹² Rowntree, p. 420. Caradog Jones estimated that only 15 to 20 per cent of the population of Liverpool were even occasional church-goers; a figure which did not take into account the city's high Roman Catholic population, which may have unbalanced his estimate. Jones, vol. III, p. 326.

without had to suffer the derision of onlookers.¹³ Families that had fallen on hard times, and could no longer afford 'Sunday best' for their children, might even go so far as to hide them at home: 'no matter how fine the weather, [the children] were kept cooped up all day in kitchen or bedroom so that face might be maintained before the neighbours.'¹⁴ As families walked about the neighbourhood in their 'Sunday best', it was clear to all that they were managing, while the wearing of weekday clothes advertised a household's privation.¹⁵

'Sunday best' was also worn to weddings and funerals. The rigid observance of mourning, most pronounced during the last century, had been in decline for several decades, and it was acceptable to wear one's best clothes – which were likely to be black, in any event, because it saved on washing – to a funeral.¹⁶

Depending on the region of the country, there was also the matter of an annual spring holiday, one for which all children were expected to have a new outfit. In the northern counties of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire,

¹³ O'Mara, p. 63.

¹⁴ Roberts, p. 39.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the significance of 'Sunday best' see Johnson, pp. 181-182

¹⁶ Wal Hannington noted that 'a funeral procession in the Rhondda Valley bears the mark of extreme poverty,' because none of the participants had been able to afford new clothing for some time. The Problem of the Distressed Areas (London, 1937), p. 72.

Whit Sunday was of paramount importance, though elsewhere it was much less significant; in other regions Easter was the favoured spring holiday.¹⁷ The observance of May Day, which had been especially popular in rural communities in the south of England, was decreasing in most areas, largely because of growing suspicion of its modern communist associations.¹⁸

For an average family in the north of England, then, new clothes for the Whitsun holiday were just as important as good clothes for Sunday. Merely wearing 'Sunday best' was not acceptable: for Whitsun, children had to have new clothes, preferably white, and airily insubstantial in appearance as well, no matter how inclement the weather. Roman Catholic children, furthermore, were required to have accessories such as a head-dress, rosettes and a sash, purchased from the Church: without these embellishments they were not allowed to participate in the Whit Walk.¹⁹

The various Whit Walks were the focus of Whitsun in the inter-war period, and huge numbers of people both participated and watched the parades. In 1922, for example, over 25,000 Roman Catholics took part in the Whit Walks in Manchester and Salford. To avoid congestion of the streets, the different Christian denominations marched separately: the Roman

¹⁷ Steve Fielding, 'The Catholic Whit Walk in Manchester and Salford, 1890-1939,' Manchester Region History Review, vol. I, no. 1 (1987), p. 3.

¹⁸ Helen Wood, "Managing for Clothes in the Depression Years of the 20s and 30s," Costume, no. 27 (1993), p. 6.

¹⁹ Fielding, p. 6.



The Manchester and Salford Protestant schools
Whitsun procession, late 1920s.

Catholics on Friday, with Church of England congregations processing on Monday. Competition between the churches was keenly felt, each hoping for the finest weather and largest turn-out.²⁰

Women 'beggared themselves' in the attempt to provide appropriate outfits for their children; clothing for adults was less important, and best clothes could be worn without fear of ridicule. Outfits were purchased at usurious rates of interest from clothing clubs, then immediately pawned once the great day was over, though payments might continue for many months. Those children without any Whitsun finery were condemned to languish at home, out of sight of the neighbours, 'because it was a kind of disgrace.'²¹

Less frequently, outfits were needed for important occasions such as a child's first communion, or a chapel 'anniversary.' As was the case with outfits for Whitsun, the clothes worn on these occasions had to be as sumptuous as possible, or the wearer risked humiliation. Jane Walsh, whose mother refused to spare more than four pence for a confirmation frock, ended up wearing a second-hand dress that dated from the end of the Victorian period, complete with leg-of-mutton sleeves. In contrast, one of her school friends, whose family had scrimped and saved, was given a beautiful dress to

²⁰ Fielding, p. 4. In her interview, Mrs. M. W. described the efforts that were made in Rochdale to separate the Whit Walks of the different denominations.

²¹ Tebbutt, pp. 33-34. Information from oral histories conducted by Tebbutt. See also Elsie Osman, For the Love of Ada ... and Salford (Swinton, 1984), p. 39, who spent many Whitsun holidays inside because her parents could not afford new outfits for the children.

wear, made of white silk with a blue satin underskirt. The appearance of her own dress 'a nightmare', she felt 'a stab through [her] heart' when she thought of her friend's good fortune.²²

Holidays, in the sense of a week-long vacation away from home, were not a fixture of life in the poorest households. Though vacation time was plentiful enough in the households of manual labourers (usually in the form of seasonal unemployment, rather than holidays with pay), few families could afford to spend their vacation at a seaside resort, no matter how modest their accommodation. One week at the seaside for a family of four cost at least ten pounds, inclusive of rent.²³ A vacation away from home was more easily afforded by young people, though by no means on a regular basis. Helen Forrester was sent to Morecambe Bay by the charity which employed her, but scraping together her train fare and the few articles of clothing that were required was a herculean task. A young couple's resources would be exhausted by the cost of travel, lodging, and food, so where holiday clothes were concerned – swimming costumes, sundresses and the like – they did

²² Jane Walsh, Not Like This (London, 1953), pp. 16-17. See also Chamberlain, Fenwomen, pp. 44-45, and her interview with Meg Ladell, who had to wear old-fashioned boots, 'like grandmothers wore', to a much-anticipated chapel anniversary. Helen Forrester had to borrow a neighbour's wedding dress for her confirmation: 'to buy a dress for a single occasion was impossible.' Forrester, By the Waters of Liverpool, pp. 94-95.

²³ J. A. R. Pimlott, The Englishman's Holiday: A Social History (London, 1977), p. 232.

without.²⁴

For schoolchildren, the context in which their clothes were purchased and worn was a limited one, encompassing school, play with their friends, a weekly holiday, and festivals several times a year. When schooling came to an end and their working life began, the context in which they lived expanded dramatically. With work came income, and though much of that income was returned to their parents to pay their keep, most young people were allowed to retain a portion of their earnings. With those earnings came the wherewithal to socialise, and the need for clothing that would fit in with an adult world of work and weekend leisure.

Most teenaged girls went to work in a factory, mill, shop or office once they reached school-leaving age: the census of England and Wales for 1931 shows that there were approximately 344,000 unmarried women working in the textile industries; 361,000 unmarried women working in shops; and 530,000 unmarried women typists or other non-managerial clerks. A further 1.1m unmarried women worked as domestic servants in private households.²⁵

²⁴ Forrester, *Liverpool Miss*, pp. 184-185. See also Greenwood, *Love on the Dole*, pp. 199-124, for the poignant description of Harry and Helen's one and only holiday together: Harry has won some money, and they spend five glorious days at a boarding house by the sea.

²⁵ *Census of England and Wales*, 1931: Occupations, Table I. The number of domestic servants decreased steadily throughout the inter-war period. Llewellyn Smith observed that the decline in servant-keeping was most pronounced among small households, which formerly had employed one or two servants. For reasons of cost, and because of the perceived

In 1935 the average woman's wage was 27.2 shillings a week, with clerical and shop workers earning slightly more, on average, than women in industrial occupations.²⁶ It was common practice for young people to hand over, or 'tip up', their wages to their mother, and receive back an allowance, widely referred to as 'spends.' With this money – usually a shilling or two – a girl was expected to pay for much of her own clothing, and for leisure activities as well.²⁷

For mill or factory work, a young woman wore her oldest, most worn-out garments, quite possibly the remnants of her school clothes. 'Traditional' working-class garb such as clogs and shawls was becoming less evident: though George Orwell observed much clog-wearing in industrial Lancashire in 1936, farther afield it was not as common. And, while at the turn of the difficulty in finding young women who would work in service, these households now relied on a 'daily' who came in several times a week. See the New Survey of London, vol. II, pp. 444-5.

²⁶ Oksana Newman and Allan Foster, The Value of a Pound: Prices and Incomes in Britain, 1900-1993 (London, 1995), p. 77. Collated from the Ministry of Labour Gazette. A survey of women's wages in a Manchester clearance area revealed that women aged over 18 earned between 20 and 30 shillings a week, while women under 18 earned substantially less: almost three-quarters earned between nine and 16 shillings a week. See the Manchester University Settlement, pp. 17-18.

²⁷ Andrew Davies, Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Manchester and Salford, 1900-1939 (Buckingham, 1992), pp. 83-84. Davies cites Joan Harley's study of leisure and young people in Manchester, which estimated that young women in predominantly working-class neighbourhoods had on average about 2s6d in 'spends' each week. See Joan Harley, 'Report of an enquiry into the occupations, further education and leisure interests of a number of girl wage-earners from elementary and central schools in the Manchester district,' unpublished M Ed thesis (University of Manchester, 1937).

century few working-class woman in the north of England would have been seen in the street without a shawl, by the 1930s it was usually worn by older women. Young women, Orwell noticed, took to shawls only 'under pressure of dire poverty.'²⁸

Women who worked in shops or offices, or those in service, had to consider their appearance more carefully. Shop assistants and office workers habitually wore plain, dark dresses of conservative style, though their wages were so low that few could afford more than one or two outfits which were suitable for work. Frances Donaldson, who had a well-paid clerical post, recalls in her autobiography that she was asked by her employer to talk to the secretaries in the typing pool, who in his opinion smelled unpleasantly. She had to explain to him that the odour was unavoidable, because

one needs to own more than one dress which, too thin in the winter, is too thick in the summer, and also many sets of underclothes, so that these can be frequently changed. Hot water and plenty of soap are also essential and not easily obtained in working-class houses.

She also observed that the secretaries earned only 25 shillings a week: if their wages were doubled, none of the women would smell.²⁹ The slightly higher wages that women office workers and shop assistants were paid were absorbed, effectively, by the cost of the smarter clothes they were expected to

²⁸ George Orwell, The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters, Vol. I, first published 1968 (London, 1970), pp. 201 and 216; and Roberts, p 41. See also Greenwood, Love on the Dole, p. 42.

²⁹ She did not record her employer's reaction to her advice. Frances Donaldson, Child of the Twenties, 1959 (London, 1986), p 139.

wear.³⁰

The wages of domestic servants were extremely low throughout this period, though any average amount is hard to calculate given the variety of positions and households in which servants worked. One household manual from 1930 recommended that a cook-cum-general servant be paid £45 to £50 plus her keep; and that a house-parlourmaid should receive £35 to £40 plus keep.³¹ Most domestic servants were required to wear a uniform: in some households it was provided free of charge; in others, its cost was deducted from the servant's wages, or she was expected to obtain it herself. It is difficult to give any general description of the uniforms that were worn, as they varied considerably from household to household. A daily cleaning woman, working in a middle-range household, might be given a pinafore or coverall to wear over her own dress,³² while a parlour maid in an upper-class household was expected to change her uniform several times during the day, depending on her duties. A plain, black uniform was worn in the morning, while she was busy cleaning and polishing; in the afternoon, when visitors were expected, she donned a more formal outfit that included a decorative

³⁰ Male black-coated workers also encountered difficulties in obtaining suitable clothes for their occupation. See Chapter Three, p. 76.

³¹ Florence Jack, The Women's Book (London, 1931), p. 38. Llewellyn Smith estimated that a female, non-resident, full-time servant, working eight hours a day, earned 20s a week; while part-time cleaners, or 'dailies', earned 5s for an eight-hour day. See the New Survey of London, vol. II, pp. 452-3.

³² Appendix A, fig. 2 is a photograph of charladies dressed in typical work clothes.

apron and headdress.³³

Although most young women worked long hours, no matter what their occupation, it was only during this period of paid work before marriage that they were able to claim much leisure time for themselves. The amount of leisure that a woman enjoyed, as well as its nature, was dependent on her personal circumstances. Poverty put an end to many activities, though not all; while the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood took up most of a woman's time and energy. As Margery Spring Rice asserted, 'Leisure is a comparative term. Anything which is slightly less arduous or gives a change of scene or occupation from the active hard work of the eight hours for which [a woman] has already been up is leisure.'³⁴ In an enquiry on leisure conducted as part of the social survey of Merseyside in 1933, women from class 'C', which encompassed all manual workers, were asked to name their leisure-time activities over the course of a week. While most of the women typically mentioned activities such as reading, going to the cinema, and taking walks, 85% of the respondents also spent part of their leisure time

³³ Descriptions of female servants' uniforms are dotted throughout the text of Pamela Horn, The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant (London, 1975). Fifty years' previously, the cast-off clothes of employers had been a much-appreciated bonus for girls in service: in Flora Thompson's village, the prevailing modes were a year or two behind because of the influence of these second-hand garments. By the inter-war period, however, young women from all economic classes were aware of current fashions, and would have been less keen to wear out-of-date garments. See Flora Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford, first publ. 1945 (London, 1975), pp. 102-3.

³⁴ Rice, p. 99.

doing housework, and 48% mentioned going shopping.³⁵

Walter Greenwood, describing life in 1930s Salford, observed that the lives of young women in his neighbourhood consisted of

five and a half days weekly in a spinning mill or weaving shed, a threepenny seat in the picture theatre twice a week, a ninepenny or shilling dance of a Saturday night, a Sunday afternoon parade on the [road] which enclose[d] the public park, then work again, until they married when picture theatres became luxuries and Saturday dances, Sunday parades and cheap finery ceased altogether.³⁶

Most young women workers were married by their mid-twenties; and if there were no marriage bar in their occupation to ensure they were sacked, it was only a matter of time until pregnancy brought an end to paid work. Marriage signalled the end of independently-earned money that could be spent as a woman wished; hence, it meant an end to leisure, as well as the pretty clothes which were so much a part of leisure activities. To many women, then, the period between school-leaving and marriage was a succession of halcyon days, never to return through the decades of marriage and motherhood that followed.

The finite nature of this period of paid work and leisure was clear to

³⁵ Jones, vol. III, p. 275. The second social survey of York also included an enquiry into leisure, asking families to chart how they spent their leisure time over the course of a week. In one family, the mother, aged 42, spent most of her time doing housework and shopping, though she did spend one evening filling out football coupons, and one at the cinema. Her daughters (aged 22 and 24), in contrast, spent much of their free time at the cinema, at dances, and on walks; often they were accompanied by their boyfriends. Rowntree, pp. 436-37.

³⁶ Greenwood, Love on the Dole, p. 42.

young women, and most took advantage of it as best they could. Their leisure activities can be divided broadly into two groups: those for which they had to pay, such as the cinema, dancing, and visits to the public house; and those which could be enjoyed free of charge, such as taking walks, window-shopping, or simply hanging about the house or neighbourhood with friends. For all of these activities, a young woman needed fashionable, smart clothing that was quite different from her work-day wear.

Chief among paid leisure activities were trips to the cinema. Though of limited importance before World War One, the cinema experienced a remarkable growth in popularity in the inter-war period. By 1934 there were 4,305 cinemas nationwide, which seated a total of almost four million people.³⁷ Tickets cost 10-1/2d on average,³⁸ and admitted the bearer to a programme which consisted of a newsreel, several cartoons, and two films, one of which was the main advertised feature. Altogether, the entertainment lasted some three hours or more.

Cinema-going was very popular among women, who comprised some 75 per cent of the adult audience; and it was a particular favourite of children

³⁷ Simon Rowson, 'A Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry in Great Britain in 1934,' Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, vol. XCIX, part 1 (1936), p. 76.

³⁸ Rowson, p. 70. In York, cinema tickets cost from 6d to 1s 6d. Rowntree, p. 412.

and young people.³⁹ There was also a class bias among cinemagoers, with adults from the skilled working classes, or the lower end of the middle range of incomes, attending more often than adults from unskilled backgrounds, who could not afford frequent cinema visits; adults from the upper end of middle-range households were similarly under-represented in the cinema audience.⁴⁰ There was, however, a 'social hierarchy' of cinemas, ranging from rough-and-ready 'flea-pits' to plush super-cinemas.⁴¹ Their audiences were fairly homogenous, although Andrew Davies has suggested that a certain fluidity arose from fluctuations in the household budget: in lean times, people went to a cheap, and perhaps rough, cinema; but when they had more money, they treated themselves to tickets at one of the film palaces.⁴² Certainly the relatively low cost of admission to cinemas – a cheap ticket cost as little as sixpence – meant that it was an accessible form of leisure for young, working women. It was less accessible to married women with small children, for even when a spare sixpence could be found, who would mind

³⁹ Jones, vol. III, p. 219. A 1933 enquiry into the leisure-time activities of 266 school-leavers, cited in the second social survey of York, revealed that 28.4 per cent of girls aged 15 and over went to the cinema at least once a week. Rowntree, p. 413.

⁴⁰ Wartime Social Survey, The Cinema and the Public, ed. Kathleen Box (London, 1946), p. 4. The cinema was much more popular in the north of Britain than in the south, with London an exception.

⁴¹ Jeffery Richards, The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-1939, first published 1984 (London, 1989), p. 17.

⁴² Davies, Leisure, Gender and Poverty, p. 78.

the children? There was also the question of setting aside some spare time for such an outing: cleaning, cooking, and child-minding filled most women's days.

Another popular leisure activity, particularly among young women, was dancing. This encompassed not only the *palais de danse* that grew to prominence in the 1930s, but also many smaller, licensed (and, frequently, unlicensed) dance halls; the informal dances organised by church groups or friendly societies; and the dancing schools which held modest soirées in tandem with their lessons. Dancing classes cost between 6d and 2s per lesson, which generally ran for an entire evening.⁴³ Privately-organised dances cost from 1s to 3s 6d, depending on whether refreshments were served; admission to the dance clubs was somewhat less expensive, at 3d to 6d during the week, and double the amount on Saturdays.⁴⁴ Dancing was more popular among young women than among men, and it was quite normal for young women to dance with each other, without recourse to male company, for an entire evening.⁴⁵

A growing minority of women in the inter-war period spent some of

⁴³ Paul Wild, 'Recreation in Rochdale, 1900-1940,' in Working-Class Culture, eds. J. Clarke, C. Critchen and R. Johnson (London, 1979), p. 148. There is an evocative description of a dancing academy in a working-class Merseyside neighbourhood in the third volume of Helen Forrester's autobiography, By the Waters of Liverpool, pp. 218-28.

⁴⁴ Rowntree, p. 375; and Jones, vol. III, pp. 277-78.

⁴⁵ Jones, vol. III, p. 277.

their leisure time in the public house. In its survey of pubs in Bolton, or 'Worktown', conducted in the late 1930s, Mass-Observation estimated that some 16 per cent of public house customers were women, though this depended on the class of pub and the time of week: women were more in evidence in town-centre pubs than in the newer, suburban establishments, and their attendance in both rose substantially on weekends. Certain taboos still held sway over women in public houses, and in many establishments they were allowed to sit only in the lounge or parlour area, often apart from their husbands or beaux, who sat in the taproom or vault. For a woman to stand and drink at the bar was unthinkable.⁴⁶

Although there is some evidence that young women were drawn to the newer style of public house, which made a feature of popular music, in the main the women who frequented public houses were married, and accompanied their husbands to traditional, neighbourhood pubs.⁴⁷ Regular visits to the public house were less common among young, working women, although Mass-Observation surveyors noticed that groups of young women sometimes visited town centre pubs after finishing their weekend shopping.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Mass-Observation, The Pub and the People: A Worktown Study by Mass-Observation, ed. Tom Harrison, first publ. 1943 (London, 1987), pp. 134-35 and 144.

⁴⁷ Rowntree, pp. 356-8.

⁴⁸ The Pub and the People, p. 148.

Visits to the cinema, an evening of dancing, or a few drinks in a public house: all were activities which required some expenditure. There were many leisure activities, however, that cost nothing, and were particularly popular among young people from impoverished backgrounds. Even if they had no money in their pockets, there was nothing to stop them from taking a walk through a nearby park, or strolling around neighbourhood streets in groups. For couples, it was a pleasant way to pass the time, free from the smothering confines of home and a crowded kitchen or front room. It was also an effective way of meeting and courting the opposite sex; one which cost nothing, though the stylish clothes which helped to attract favourable attention were certainly not free. Joe Toole, who lived in Salford in this period, recalls in his memoirs that he spent most Sunday evenings strolling with his girlfriend along the Regent Road, where 'young people paraded and sported their cheap but hard-earned clothing.'⁴⁹ The 'monkey parade', as it was commonly called in the north of England, was most popular on Sunday, and hence attracted much criticism from civic-minded opponents, who feared it would lead to thuggery and gang activity.⁵⁰ J. B. Priestley was careful to point out that young people took part in the 'monkey parades' because there was nothing else to do on Sunday evenings – their high-minded critics had

⁴⁹ Joe Toole, Fighting Through Life (London, 1935), p. 92.

⁵⁰ Davies, Leisure, Gender and Poverty, pp. 102-106; and Roberts, p. 155.

ensured that few venues for public entertainment were open on Sundays.⁵¹

Window-shopping was an agreeable way of passing the time, as were trips to the local market. According to Sally Alexander, 'shopping was a ritual, a tribute to a special occasion, and one willingly saved up for it.

Window-shopping, on the other hand, was a more regular enjoyment, like the cinema or dancing.'⁵² It cost nothing, and a young woman could happily spend her Saturday afternoon in contemplation of the newest vogues and silhouettes in the window displays of fashionable boutiques and department stores.⁵³ One could even browse through the department stores, which allowed customers to mill about freely, though smaller shops were less welcoming in this respect. Another source of free entertainment was the local market, made colourful by buskers, hawkers and the beguiling cries of the stall-holders themselves.⁵⁴

Such were the leisure activities in favour among young women with limited resources; and for an evening at the cinema or dance hall, or for a

⁵¹ J. B. Priestley, English Journey, first published 1934 (London, 1994), p. 183.

⁵² Sally Alexander, 'Becoming a Woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s,' in Metropolis – London: Histories and Representations Since 1800, eds. G. Stedman Jones and D. Feldman (London, 1989), p. 264.

⁵³ For a discussion of the growing importance of window displays, see Briggs, Friends of the People, p. 153.

⁵⁴ Markets were 'a free attraction, and extremely welcome when you were broke.' Toole, p. 37. See also Andrew Davies, 'Saturday Night Markets in Manchester and Salford, 1840-1939,' Manchester Region History Review, vol. I, no. 2 (1987), pp. 3-12; and the New Survey of London, vol. III, p. 300.

Sunday evening walk with a beau, a woman needed at least one set of stylish and pretty clothes. The ability to dress fashionably, if only for a few years in their youth, had come late to women in the labouring classes. Changes in the silhouette of women's clothes, which reduced the amount of fabric needed for most garments, were a factor, as were innovations in the manufacture of textiles, most notably the development of rayon, or artificial silk.⁵⁵ Together, these had the effect of significantly reducing the cost of stylish clothing, and young women from poor backgrounds finally could afford to buy fashionable clothes. The first girls to set aside traditional garments such as the shawl and clogs did not escape unscathed, however, and one woman was vilified as a 'forward little bitch' when she dared to wear a coat and shoes to her job at a weaving mill.⁵⁶

For a Saturday evening of dancing or cinema-going, a typical young woman put on her best 'art silk' frock, purchased from a mail order company for sixpence deposit and then two-and-six a month. To accompany this she wore delicate rayon stockings (a shilling a pair and carefully mended after wear) and strappy, frivolous, high-heeled shoes, bought from the tally man for only sixpence a week. On, too, went a layer of vanishing cream and rouge, a string of shiny glass beads and earrings that pinched. To crown it all, a little

⁵⁵ In the decade following the outbreak of the Great War, the amount of fabric required to manufacture a set of woman's clothing was halved, from 20 yards or more of material to under ten yards. See Jefferys, p. 331.

⁵⁶ Roberts, The Classic Slum, p. 7.

hat – carefully re-trimmed from last year’s – that perched on hair that had been painstakingly set into waves using rag curlers.⁵⁷ This outfit, or a similar one if she could afford a second set of good clothes, was also worn for ‘Sunday best.’

The very apogée of a young woman’s foray into style and fashion was her wedding outfit. In some areas, most notably the east end of London, a traditional white wedding dress was almost mandatory, and one woman who wanted a more practical outfit was dissuaded by the shocked reaction of her family: ‘It was considered among the poorer class that any girl who did not marry in white only had one reason, and that was that she had to get married.’⁵⁸ The photographic archives maintained by Hulton-Deutsch include hundreds of photographs of weddings, and an examination of those weddings which took place in largely working-class London parishes reveals that most of the brides wore a traditional ensemble that included a formal white dress and veil.⁵⁹ There is no way of knowing the degree of affluence of

⁵⁷ For descriptions of the clothing worn by young women on their evenings out, see Greenwood, Love on the Dole, pp. 42 and 56; Forrester, By the Waters of Liverpool, pp. 20-21; and Roberts, pp. 222-23. Permanent waves, done in a hairdressing salon, were increasingly popular in the inter-war period, though initially they were prohibitively expensive. In Lewis’s salons, for example, they cost over fifty shillings. See Briggs, p. 176.

⁵⁸ Alice Linton, Not Expecting Miracles (London, 1982), p. 72.

⁵⁹ See the ROM/WEDD/BRI files at the Hulton-Deutsch/BBC Picture Library, London. Walter Greenwood described such wedding-day finery as ‘utterly useless’, though its wearer might enjoy a ‘glorious moment’ as the centre of all attention. Love on the Dole, p. 31.

the couples in question, however – they may have been relatively well-off, and so could afford a church wedding with all the trimmings. A couple from an impoverished background would almost certainly have spent what money they had on the rent of a room or flat, or on hire-purchase furniture, rather than on a dress that could only be worn once. In that case, the bride wore her smartest clothes: they were usually purchased specially for the occasion, but ‘Sunday best’ could be worn without comment.⁶⁰

After marriage, a young couple might continue to socialise with friends for a while, though the financial pressures that resulted from setting up their own household precluded their going to the pictures or dance halls as often as when they had been courting. With the birth of their first child, however, came the beginning of a descent into debt and intermittent penury, a situation which was compounded by the arrival of each successive child. The young wife was soon in the same position as her mother before her: struggling each week to find the money to pay for boots for the children, or for her husband’s Sunday suit, she was rarely able to afford clothing or footwear for herself.⁶¹ Though she might initially resist the temptations of the tally man, and the convenience of the pawnshop, she succumbed eventually, for where else

⁶⁰ Margaret Forster’s mother, married in 1931, ‘wouldn’t run to the expense’ of an elaborate, traditional outfit, and wore a blue dress that her sister, a professional seamstress, had made. Forster, pp. 89-90.

⁶¹ In its survey of poverty-stricken families, the Pilgrim Trust remarked: ‘a feature that was noticeable in almost every household was the refusal to economise on the food or clothing for the children, though the parents would go short.’ *Men Without Work*, p. 126.

would credit be extended to her?

A married woman in her mid-twenties might easily look decades older. George Orwell glimpsed one such woman as his train passed by her back door: she had 'the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery.'⁶² Describing the patrons of a pawnshop, Walter Greenwood observed that their

faces, though dissimilar in features, had a similarity of expression common, typical, of all the married women around and about; their badge of marriage, as it were. The vivacity of their virgin days was with their virgin days, gone; a married woman could be distinguished from a single [woman] by a glance at her facial expression. Marriage scored on their faces a kind of preoccupied, faded, lack-lustre air as though they were constantly being plagued by some problem. As they were. How to get a shilling, and, when obtained, how to make it do the work of two.⁶³

The clothes worn by married women served as a further distinguishing feature. Writing in 1913, Maud Pember Reeves observed that most women had a blouse or two, several skirts – an old, patched one for home, and a slightly better one for wear in the street – an old coat or shawl, and a hat of some kind; many had to do without footwear entirely.⁶⁴ Twenty years later, little had changed, and married women from the poorest neighbourhoods dressed in 'dull greys and blacks, some with flowered pinafores and most of

⁶² Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 15.

⁶³ Greenwood, Love on the Dole, p. 31.

⁶⁴ Reeves, p. 64.



Charladies enjoying a cup of tea, mid-1930s

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them wearing black shawls as protection against the cold wind.’⁶⁵ Shoes were ‘squashed out sideways, collapsed around the misshapen feet inside, and with heels so worn that [the wearers] trod on the sides.’⁶⁶ In some households, a woman’s clothes might be so shabby that she was too embarrassed to venture into the street, and so shopping and errands had to be done by the children.⁶⁷ Margaret Forster’s mother, who gave up a well-paying and interesting clerical job to get married, had trouble accepting the economies she was expected to make in respect to her clothing.

Maybe it was wrong to want trivial things like new clothes but she couldn’t help it. She loved clothes and she hadn’t bought a single garment in the six years of married life. Her once-smart office clothes were almost threadbare and she didn’t even have the money to buy some material to make a new blouse [...] She needed a new coat but coats were anything between four and six pounds and quite out of the question – the cheapest was twice [her husband’s] wage and [her son] Gordon’s shoes were more important, he had to have them [...] She was tired of buying cheap this and cheap that when once, when she had her own job, she could have what she wanted (within limits, but perfectly acceptable ones). It soured her soul, the penny-pinching.⁶⁸

The fact that women were invariably the last to be considered where the provision of clothing and footwear was concerned directly contradicts Thorstein Veblen’s assertion, as outlined in Chapter One, that women were the last to abandon any pretence of leisure: in point of fact they were the first

⁶⁵ Forrester, *Twopence to Cross the Mersey*, pp. 57-58.

⁶⁶ Rose Gamble, *Chelsea Child* (London, 1979), p. 50.

⁶⁷ Rice, p. 99.

⁶⁸ Forster, p. 116.

to shed such pretensions.⁶⁹ In inter-war Britain, it was the man and, to a lesser extent, the children of the household who displayed to the outside world the family's capacity for leisure.

As a family's eldest children began to leave school and contribute to the family income, its financial circumstances gradually improved, and once again there was enough extra money for luxuries such as attractive clothing and trips to the cinema. By this time, however, perhaps fifteen years into a woman's married life, the pretty clothes and gay evenings of her youth were a faint memory. She was not old, but she looked old; and she felt old. Her figure had been ruined by frequent pregnancies, and her youthful prettiness blighted by drudgery and worry. Spending money on her appearance at this stage would only attract cries of 'mutton dressed as lamb.' Better to give her children any surplus shillings she could accumulate, and remain a vicarious spectator. Clara Grant, a mission worker in the East End, observed that 'the older mothers sometimes "pay" for the grandeur of their offspring.' Grant felt that this occurred in a psychological sense as well as in an economic one, and urged her readers to think charitably of their 'sisters growing old in old frocks.'⁷⁰

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⁶⁹ Veblen, p. 120.

⁷⁰ Clara Grant, *Farthing Bundles* (London, c. 1931), pp. 90-91. Grant was a teacher, and worked with the Fern Street Settlement in Bromley-by-Bow in the early part of the inter-war period.

In middle-range households, the range of contexts in which clothing was worn were far less dependent on economic factors, though considerations of income tended to remain at least a peripheral influence. Middle-range households were characterised by the relative abundance of income which they enjoyed: unlike poverty-stricken households, middle-range ones could always afford the necessities of life, and often there was enough surplus income for non-essential items as well. Because economic considerations were less central, abstract decisions about clothing were affected by notions of class status, as well as opinions regarding appearance and style.

As illustrated in Chapter Three, a middle-range family had, by definition, few pressing financial worries.

Once fixed expenses such as a mortgage, transport costs, food and fuel had been accounted for, the housewife might have as much as two and a half pounds to spend on her family's clothing and footwear each month – significantly more than an impoverished housewife was able to spend.⁷¹ There were several important factors, furthermore, which meant that the buying power of the middle-range woman's shillings and pence was very much greater. First, she had fewer children, perhaps two or three to a poor family's four or

⁷¹ Massey, pp. 175-176.

more, which allowed her to spend proportionately much more on clothing each child.⁷² Second, she was able to obtain that money regularly, and as cash sums, whereas the housewife living in poverty had to save for long periods, or borrow at high rates of interest, in order to gain access to cash sums. These factors made a world of difference to the context in which the middle-range housewife's children were clothed and shod.

Babies were provided with an extensive layette, much of which was made by the expectant mother. Convention dictated that infants be swathed in numerous layers of clothing – nappies, petticoats, long dresses, pelisses, bibs and bonnets – all requiring meticulous laundering and ironing.⁷³

Toddlers and young children were similarly enveloped in layers of uncomfortable undergarments: itchy woollen combinations were usual throughout the winter months, while 'Liberty' bodices were *de rigueur* for girls. Throughout the inter-war period, the clothing worn by small children varied little, though it became progressively less bulky and cumbersome.

Typically, a little girl would wear a plain dress that was covered with a white pinafore or brown holland smock. These garments were easily made at

⁷² See G. D. H. and M. I. Cole, The Condition of Britain (London, 1937), pp. 26-29, for a discussion of decreasing family size in the inter-war period.

⁷³ Woman's Own childcare expert, Nurse Vincent, advised expectant mothers that they needed a minimum of four sets of woollen or cotton tops and leggings for their baby, plus three dozen muslin nappies, several shawls, nighties, bonnets, booties, towels, sheets and blankets. Woman's Own, 25 July 1936, p. 598. In contrast, babies from poorer households, whose families could not afford such extensive layettes, were thought under-swaddled by contemporary observers.

home, or could be purchased inexpensively at a local draper's or department store. Tailored garments such as winter coats were purchased ready-made, and were expected to last several years.⁷⁴

Footwear was also expected to wear well, though the virtues most admired in shoes and boots – a good fit and sturdiness of construction – did not come cheaply. Solidly-made, sensible button-up boots and lace-up shoes were preferred by most middle-range mothers, who were deaf to their daughters' pleas for daintier models. One woman remembered having 'a real old to-do in the shop' with her mother who, to her chagrin, always insisted on sensible styles.⁷⁵

Although it appears that most children were allowed to voice an opinion about their clothing and footwear, their likes and dislikes were rarely allowed to interfere with the quest for solid, good value. Children were felt to be susceptible to 'faddy' styles, and to allow a child to bedeck himself or herself in frivolous garments would reflect poorly on the whole family. Children were seen as an extension of their parents, and as such their appearance had to exhibit a love of solid, sensible values, and a disdain for anything flashy or cheap.⁷⁶ Standards had to be maintained, and to that end

⁷⁴ Elias, pp. 28 and 31. Similar descriptions were given by Mrs. M. B., Mrs. E. H., and Mrs. D. H. in their interviews.

⁷⁵ Interview with Mrs. M. W.

⁷⁶ Eileen Elias was given the cast-off clothes of a cousin who lived in the newly-built Hampstead Garden Suburb, 'which didn't suit me, for they were slightly trendy like the Garden Suburb itself.' Elias, p. 85.

the appearance of even the youngest members of the family was important. Though the world of pre-school children was centred almost entirely around the home, this did not mean that economies could be made on their clothing; far from it. An ill-dressed child would be seen and commented upon by relatives and by neighbours; suspicions that the housewife was slack in her standards would be voiced.

Once a child began school, the context in which he or she lived expanded, though not as dramatically as with children from impoverished families. Although schools in middle-range neighbourhoods (grammar schools in particular) usually required uniforms for their pupils, neighbourhood pressure had long dictated the sort of clothes that pupils were expected to wear. A typical uniform for girls consisted of a white blouse, worn under a dark-coloured gymslip, with a tie or sash in the school colours. In the summer, a straw panama hat was worn, replaced by a beret in wintertime.⁷⁷ Girls were expected also to have separate clothes for any school sports or activities in which they took part. The components of the uniform could be made at home, or bought at the school 'outfitter's'; in neither case was the expense prohibitive. Some schools even had exchange schemes, whereby clothing that pupils had grown out of was offered for sale at a reduced rate.⁷⁸

In addition to their weekday clothes, middle-range children were also

⁷⁷ See Elias, pp. 201-202. All of the women who participated in the oral history project wore similar uniforms to school.

⁷⁸ Interview with Mrs. G. M.

provided with a 'Sunday best' outfit. In the case of a young girl, this typically consisted of a silk or velvet dress, with few decorations apart from a lace or embroidered collar, and was accompanied by sensible shoes, a hat, gloves and a good coat.⁷⁹ As with everyday clothes, flashiness was frowned upon, and traditional, rather plain styles were favoured by most mothers. Whether an item was fashionable was less important than how well it was made, and what sort of value for money it represented; and a pleasing appearance was reckoned to have little in common with current notions of style. 'Sunday best' could easily double up as mourning attire as well, for standards of mourning had relaxed and one's best clothes, if sufficiently sombre in appearance, were acceptable.

As was the case in the poorest households, 'Sunday best' was a signal to the outside world, though for middle-range families it had little to do with financial worth. Rather, 'Sunday best' was worn to advertise a household's conformity to sober, sensible standards of family life. Whether or not a family actually went to church on Sunday was of diminishing importance in this period; what counted was its visible adherence to the idea of Sunday as a day apart.

Less was made of holidays such as Whitsun: certainly one's very best clothes were worn on high holidays, but these were generally the same clothes that were worn on Sunday the rest of the year. The idea of purchasing

⁷⁹ As described by Mrs. M. W., Mrs. E. H., and Mrs. S. G.

an outfit to be worn on a one-off basis was shocking to the middle-range housewife; even outfits for the special occasions of first communion or a family wedding were worn as 'Sunday best' thereafter. New clothes were often purchased at Easter or Whitsuntide, but only because they were needed for Sunday throughout the forthcoming season.⁸⁰

A week or two at a seaside resort in Britain – rarely abroad – was an essential part of the middle-range calendar. Holiday clothes as such were scant: swimming costumes for all, and light, cotton sundresses for girls. Shorts were not commonly worn by girls or women in this period, though Mrs. G. M. wore a pair for a rambling expedition in the mid-1930s. It was a mixed party of men and women, and she had decided 'if we're going to climb with the men we'd better have trousers.' She and the other women made their own shorts, but felt 'so self-conscious' throughout.⁸¹

By far the greatest change in context in a middle-range girl's life was the transition from pupil or student to working woman or housewife. Primary education generally finished when they were 14, but a significant proportion of girls from middle-range households continued their education with a

⁸⁰ In Cardiff, where Mrs. E. H. grew up, Roman Catholic families had new clothes for Easter; and so her family had new clothes for Whitsun, because her mother did not want people to think they were Roman Catholic.

⁸¹ See Elias, pp. 173-185, for a vivid description of her family's annual trip to the seaside. Seven of the ten women who participated in the oral history project remembered annual holidays (always in Britain) with their families; Mrs. D. H., Mrs. K. C., and Mrs F. P. recalled that holidays were rare in their households, possibly because of limited funds.

period at secondary school, or with vocational training; comparatively few went on to university.⁸² This was followed by work as a secretary, shop assistant, nurse, teacher, or another traditional woman's occupation.⁸³ Most young women continued to live at home, though many were drawn to London, with its promise of interesting careers and a degree of freedom from the constraints of home life. Mrs E. H. and her sister, who moved to London in 1936, were determined to 'dig the gold up out of the pavements,' and indeed they soon found employment as secretaries, earning five pounds a week between them. Not only were they able to afford a small flat of their own in Fulham, but they also took frequent trips home to see their family, went to the theatre, belonged to a tennis club, and skated in the wintertime. Their experiences were characteristic of many young working women, for whom money was limited – few were paid more than two or three pounds a week – but who were nonetheless able to afford a good standard of living on their salaries. Much depended on careful budgeting, however, and often the financial assistance of parents.⁸⁴

⁸² Of the women who were interviewed, none finished school at 14: all had one or two years at a secondary school, followed by secretarial or teachers' college, or training in nursing. Mrs. K. C. was the only woman to go to university, where she trained as a teacher.

⁸³ Four of the women who were interviewed were secretaries or clerks, three were teachers, two were nurses, and one was a shop assistant.

⁸⁴ Mrs. M. W. had so little money left after she had paid for her train ticket to work that her parents bought most of her clothes; while Mrs. G. M.'s parents helped her with expensive items such as winter coats. There was, of course, a two-tier system in offices: working-class girls had ill-paid positions

For work, jumpers and skirts were worn, or dresses in dark colours; these usually had a detachable collar or scarf, which were easily laundered, as the dress itself was not. Standards in most workplaces were smart, and young women workers were expected to dress sensibly. Any excursion into the mad world of fashion was discouraged: in the words of one woman, a teacher before she married in 1934, standards of dress were 'very conservative [...] absolutely correct, if you know what I mean. I think you'd have been frowned on if you tried to do anything different.'⁸⁵ It does not appear that these strictures were particularly irksome to working women, for most had a healthy disdain for the wiles of fashion, and the follies committed in its pursuit by the imprudent. Most women wore clothes that were pretty yet sensible; clothes that were the 'sort of thing' everyone else was wearing. The latest styles, if they were attractive and suitable enough, would find their way into the wardrobe of a middle-range working woman, but 'gaddy' or 'outlandish' fashions were ignored.

The leisure activities of young middle-range women differed quite dramatically from those of women from poorer backgrounds. Because of their comparative security of income, middle-range women could afford to pursue a wide range of activities, and so their leisure time was not dominated by a handful of relatively inexpensive pursuits, as was the case with young

as filing clerks or typists, while middle-class girls, who could afford secretarial college, were given better-paid and slightly more prestigious posts.

⁸⁵ Interview with Mrs. K. C.

women from impoverished households. While there are no reliable statistics that chart class bias in leisure, oral evidence suggests that the cinema and dance halls were less central to the leisure pursuits of middle-range women: such women certainly visited the cinema regularly, and also went dancing, but these activities were only part of a diverse range of interests.⁸⁶

Much of a young middle-range woman's leisure time was centred around the home, for in comparison to a 'below-the-minimum' household, hers was relatively spacious, comfortable, and pleasant. It was normal for young women to spend most of their evenings at home, passing the time by reading, listening to the wireless or gramophone, playing the piano, knitting or sewing.

An evening out might consist of a trip to the theatre, or to a concert. The theatre was in a serious decline in this period: the cinema had stolen much of its audience, and many theatres, not to mention most of the music halls, had been forced to close, or had resorted to broadening their appeal with drawing-room comedies and light musicals.⁸⁷ Though deserted by much of the labouring classes, the theatre remained popular among young middle-

⁸⁶ Mrs. E. H., Mrs. M.R., and Mrs. M.W. were the only women interviewed who recalled going to dance halls or the cinema, however occasionally; much more significant, and frequently mentioned in most of the interviews, were evenings at home and sporting activities.

⁸⁷ In Liverpool there were six theatres in the early 1930s, three of which were music halls. In the course of a week they might entertain some six per cent of the city's population, a figure dwarfed by the 40 per cent of the population who visited Liverpool's cinemas. Jones, vol. III, p. 279.

range women; one survey on leisure estimated that some 21 per cent of women from a clerical or shop-keeping background were regular theatre-goers.⁸⁸ It was particularly popular among women living in London or the provincial cities: Mrs. E. H., for instance, often met her sister at the theatre (tickets cost less than a shilling), straight after work; and then after the play they would enjoy a late dinner together.⁸⁹ Street clothes could, by that time, be worn without comment in the stalls of most theatres.

Though picture-going and dancing were popular among women from middle-range families, as well as those from poorer backgrounds, contact between the different economic classes was limited. Not only was there a hierarchy of cinemas, with middle-range patrons favouring plush, more expensive establishments, but there was also a class bias evident in the dance halls.⁹⁰ At one end of the spectrum were cheap and rough venues, frequently operating illegally; at the other extreme were opulent *palais de danse*, with their top-flight dance bands and luxurious surroundings. With entrance fees of several shillings or more, only young people from the middle range of incomes could afford to dance there on a regular basis.

Among the middle-range women who were interviewed, only a few recalled having visited commercial dance halls. In contrast, memories of

⁸⁸ *Op., cit.*, p. 275.

⁸⁹ See also Rowntree, pp. 413-15: theatre prices in York ranged from 4d to 2s 6d at the York Theatre, and from 5d to 1s 6d at the Variety Theatre.

⁹⁰ Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, p. 90.

'village hops', tennis club dances, and college balls abounded. For an informal dance, or indeed for most outings – to the cinema, a concert, or the theatre – it was acceptable to wear work clothes, or perhaps one's 'Sunday best' outfit if a smart appearance was essential.

For a particularly grand evening, though, only a special frock would do. 'We really did go to town for dance frocks,' explained Mrs. K. C., who lovingly described a dress she had worn more than sixty years earlier:

I mean, our dance frocks were lovely. I dreamt of a dance frock one night, and I came down, and I told Mummy what it was, and she made it exactly. Little tight bodice with little tucks here, to bring it in, and then there were two frills underneath, in white, and then the long, flared skirt, and then a red rose [at the waist], and she made it exactly.

Such occasions were an infrequent highlight of the average young woman's social calendar, and few had need of an extensive evening wardrobe. Far more useful were clothes for the various sports in which they participated. Most regularly mentioned in autobiographies and oral history interviews was tennis for, as Eileen Whiteing has observed, 'this really *was* the period of "anyone for tennis?" since everyone belonged to some kind of tennis or cricket club [...] It was unthinkable not to wear all white clothes on these occasions.'⁹¹ To the expense of a gleaming white tennis kit had to be added the cost of a racket and tennis balls, as well as club membership fees, which ranged from one to three pounds a year, though public courts could be rented

⁹¹ Eileen Whiteing, *Anyone For Tennis? Growing up in Wallington between the Wars* (London, 1979), p. 51.

for sixpence an hour.⁹²

Swimming, rambling, hockey and cycling were also popular among middle-range women, though the associated expenses deterred poorer women from participation. Although the rambling clubs in York, for instance, made every effort to include working-class men and women, their membership was composed almost exclusively of 'black-coated workers.' The cost of the excursions and equipment (sturdy walking boots were not cheap) was one deterrent.⁹³

For most women, this period of paid work and carefree leisure came to an end with their marriage.⁹⁴ The change in context that marriage and motherhood produced was less dramatic than in the case of women from impoverished backgrounds, largely because middle-range couples did not generally experience financial woes, nor the cyclical poverty which accompanied such difficulties. The salary that a young, middle-range man would earn was sufficient to keep him and his wife; even the arrival of two or three children would not overtax the family's resources. The main

⁹² Rowntree, p. 389.

⁹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 397. Admission to swimming baths was cheap, but one needed a swimming costume; and for cycling one naturally needed a bicycle.

⁹⁴ Mrs. M. B. was obliged to leave her work as a physical education instructor when she married: 'I was one of those who suffered: when you marry, you lose your job.' Most middle-range women wore a traditional white gown for their wedding, though pictorial evidence – the hundreds of wedding photographs in the Hulton-Deutsch archives – suggests that a substantial minority of women were married in a suit or knee-length dress. This, for reasons of practicality (or propriety) rather than economy.

changes in context in a middle-range woman's life arose, therefore, from social factors rather than economic ones.

Because she no longer worked outside the home, she did not need a work wardrobe as such, though for housework she might wear inexpensive cotton dresses. These, however, were not for show, and the housewife who ventured out in her overall and slippers risked being labelled as slovenly. Most of the time, she wore what was most comfortable to her: a skirt and jumper, or a frock; the same sort of clothes she had worn to work. For trips to the shops, to school to collect her children, or to a friend's home for morning coffee – on all such occasions she was on public view, and had to maintain a smart appearance. 'Smart', to the middle-range housewife, was not a term that intimated a degree of stylishness; rather, it described a person whose clothes were neat, tidy, pretty (but not excessively so) and suitable for the life she led. Although many women may have economised on their clothing in favour of their children's, this was rarely to the degree that their appearance failed to conform to standards of respectability. Because of the stability of income which a middle-range family enjoyed, careful management of that income ensured that each family member was decently clothed, including the housewife herself. This did not mean that she could afford up-to-the-minute styles from exclusive boutiques – but why would she want such clothes? A wardrobe of cutting-edge fashions would only make her stand out from all the other young wives and mothers who, like her,

were most comfortable in practical, hard-wearing garments that offered good value for money. This 'classic look' was popular because 'it lasted.'⁹⁵ It may have been the case that fashionable clothes were cheaper than more conventional styles – George Orwell observed that 'one pair of plain solid shoes costs as much as two ultra-smart pairs' – but the ultra-smart styles also dated very quickly, and were therefore regarded as poor value for money.⁹⁶ Though often unremarkable in appearance, such clothes were nonetheless perfectly suited to the world in which a middle-range housewife lived.

The context of her life was almost entirely dominated by family concerns and responsibilities, and activities which did not centre on the family were of little importance to most middle-range married women. Pastimes such as tennis and other sports could be enjoyed only infrequently – perhaps when the family was on holiday together – and hence the need for related clothing decreased. Evenings out became a rarity as well, though good clothes were still needed for Sundays and special family occasions.

By the time her children were grown, a woman's youth was twenty years or more behind her. For her, the intervening years had been relatively comfortable ones, with only occasional anxiety over finances; and her experience of clothing had not been a negative one, as was the case with women living in poverty. Attractive and well-made clothing had generally

⁹⁵ Interview with Mrs. K. C.

⁹⁶ Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 82.

been available to her, and she had never had to do without decent garments in order that her children might be clothed and shod. Indeed, throughout her adult life she had been able to wear clothing she liked, and which suited her circumstances in most respects. Her clothes may not have been particularly chic; but that was through her own choice. Even with her children grown and gone, she was disinclined to spend more on clothing for herself, for what purpose would it serve?

* * *

It is evident that the context of a woman's life determined the sort of clothing that she wore, as well as her attitude towards it; and this context consisted not only of the internal influences described above, but also of external influences that were felt across society. Many of these were transmitted through the media: through the cinema, and through newspapers, magazines, and other forms of printed matter, women were exposed to images and descriptions of fashion and dress that affected the way they perceived their own clothing.

The importance of the cinema as it fit into patterns of leisure has been described above, and its popularity as a pastime is undisputed. Motion pictures were also significant in the effect they had on their audiences, most noticeably because they acted as a highly effective form of escapism – George Orwell even claimed the cinema was one of a host of 'cheap luxuries' which

had helped to avert revolution in Britain.⁹⁷ The cinema allowed people a glimpse of exciting worlds that were remarkably different to their own: no wonder that American films, radiating Hollywood sunshine and expensive production values, were so much more popular than home-grown offerings.⁹⁸ As J. B. Priestley observed, 'with the English public, films made in London will never be able to compete in the romantic glamour department with those made in far-away Hollywood.'⁹⁹

Central to the cinema's escapist appeal were its stars, whose glamorous lives were so different to those of their fans, though their origins often proved to be reassuringly humble. The most popular actresses, especially those hailing from Hollywood, were bathed in the glow of constant public scrutiny, and details of their professional and public lives were examined in lavish detail: the life story of Ginger Rogers, for example, occupied a full page in four consecutive issues of the News of the World in 1936.¹⁰⁰

The appearance of film actresses was all-important, and much

⁹⁷ Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 83. '

⁹⁸ Jones, vol. III, p. 283. From a survey of Liverpool cinemas, carried out by the Juvenile Investigations Committee in 1932. See also Simon Hartog, "State Protection of a Beleaguered Industry," in British Cinema History (London, 1983), eds. James Curran and Vincent Porter, pp. 59-73, for a discussion of the unsuccessful attempt to combat American domination of the cinema with abysmal 'quota quickies.'

⁹⁹ J. B. Priestley, Midnight on the Desert: A Chapter of Autobiography (London, 1937), p. 181.

¹⁰⁰ News of the World, 16 Aug. - 6 Sept. 1936.

attention was paid to the clothes they wore, both on and off the screen. In the early 1930s, Marlene Dietrich (then considered a mere imitator of Greta Garbo) caused a furore with her 'freakish' trouser-wearing, though later in the decade she was acclaimed as Hollywood's best-dressed star.¹⁰¹ A movie star's appearance could even alter accepted notions of how women should look: the curvaceous figure of Mae West caused a seismic reaction when she first shot to fame in the early 1930s, leading the News of the World to observe that 'since the ample chassis of Mae West was first permitted to populate the screen a revolution seems to have taken place in the matter of what a fashionable feminine figure should look like.' Formerly, it continued, the 'slinky figure of a Garbo' was *de rigueur*; but Mae had made 'men favourable to curves.'¹⁰²

Film reviews often included descriptions of the actresses' costumes, and indeed the outfits were themselves the frequent subject of newspaper and film magazine articles. A review in the Sunday Express of the film 'Lady of the Boulevards,' starring Anna Sten as a tragic courtesan, was captioned 'The Glamour Of Anna Sten' and, while the film itself was dismissed as second-rate by the reviewer, the 'gorgeous' manner in which Miss Sten was 'coiffeured and clothed' received hearty approval. Express readers were also

¹⁰¹ Picturegoer, 25 Mar. 1933, pp. 7 and 19; and 9 Jan. 1937, p. 6. The judge of the best-dressed competition was dancer Irene Castle.

¹⁰² News of the World, 21 Jan. 1934, p. 7. West's influence was also discussed in Picturegoer, 10 June 1933, p. 7, which breathlessly described her as a 'great, big, beautiful, bouncing, bundle of girl.'

treated to a description of the costumes for Jessie Matthews's film 'Evergreen', and the news that she had 36 costume changes, and underwent 215 fittings in total.¹⁰³

Even the costumes worn in period pieces were designed to reflect current ideals of stylishness, for film audiences were keen to reproduce the 'look' of their favourite stars.¹⁰⁴ When Norma Shearer began wearing her hair in a sleek pageboy, in preparation for her role in 'Romeo and Juliet', the new style became popular instantly.¹⁰⁵

Attention was also paid to the clothing worn off-screen by actresses, and interviews of starlets and leading ladies alike were studded with references to their personal tastes, favourite designers, and recent clothes purchases. In her column for the News of the World, Julia King advised readers to 'watch the clothes worn by notably well-dressed actresses such as Claudette Colbert and Kay Francis and Myrna Loy. They are nearly always practical, and always a pointer to the fashions which are new and coming.'¹⁰⁶ The celebrated designer Elsa Schiaparelli acknowledged 'what Hollywood designs today, you will be wearing tomorrow'; and the glamorous image of the movie star was copied by rich and poor alike. Wealthy women could

¹⁰³ Sunday Express, 1 Apr. 1934, p. 17; and 25 Feb. 1934, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ Hollander, pp. 304-307.

¹⁰⁵ News of the World, 20 Jan. 1936, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ *Op. cit.*, 12 Jan. 1936, p. 17.

afford exact duplicates of the styles worn by famous actresses, though they were cautioned against 'becoming a Hollywood clone' by Vogue.¹⁰⁷ They were influenced by the cinema not because of the desire to mimic an admired actress, but rather because the current fashions reflected Hollywood style; the woman who wished to be stylish had to follow suit.

For a poverty-stricken woman, in contrast, the cinema was a captivating diversion from her everyday woes, the pleasure of which could be prolonged, and even carried over into daily life, through the emulation of a favourite star.¹⁰⁸ George Orwell described Hollywood's appeal succinctly:

You may have three halfpence in your pocket and not a prospect in the world, and only the corner of a leaky bedroom to go home to; but in your new clothes you can stand on the street corner, indulging in a private daydream of yourself as Clark Gable or Greta Garbo, which compensates you for a great deal.¹⁰⁹

A woman could choose clothes that were similar, if only superficially, to the entrancing styles worn by a famous screen actress; or, if that proved too expensive, she could copy her hairstyle or makeup.¹¹⁰ In some small way,

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Mulvagh, p. 123.

¹⁰⁸ 'Girls copy the fashions of their favourite film star. At the time of writing, girls in all classes of society wear 'Garbo' coats and wave their hair *à la* Norma Shearer or Lilian Harvey. It is impossible to measure the effect the films must have on the outlook and habits of the people.' New Survey of London, vol. IX, p. 47.

¹⁰⁹ Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 82.

¹¹⁰ The 9 March 1935 issue of Picturegoer was entirely devoted to 'beauty', with pages of advice from the stars on how to cultivate good looks and glamour; Clark Gable even provided a list of the ten most beautiful women in Hollywood.

she could hope to capture a measure of Hollywood glamour for herself.

Middle-range women were influenced less by the cinema, at least in a direct sense. Though they attended the cinema frequently enough, it was not the focus of their leisure activities, and its influence was limited. Middle-range women were also less likely to feel the need to copy the clothing or general appearance of particular film actresses; indeed, the sensible and occasionally near-puritanical outlook which characterised their attitudes towards clothing militated against such behaviour. But they might be indirectly influenced by the cinema. Some styles of clothing were popularised by film stars: the trench coat by Greta Garbo; sleek, bias cut gowns by Jean Harlow; and masculine jackets and ties by Marlene Dietrich and Katharine Hepburn.¹¹¹ Many women wore clothing that was influenced by the on- and off-screen wardrobes of actresses; but not all were avid picturegoers. Cinematically-inspired fashions *were* widely available and commonly worn, but only those that were attractive and practical on their own merits – styles that were too extreme, or which smacked of Hollywood burlesque, failed to flourish.

The cinema's appeal was bolstered enormously by the coverage which it received in the popular press. The News of the World and the Sunday Express, for example, devoted two to four pages each week (out of approximately twenty pages in total) to reviews of films, their

¹¹¹ Mulvagh, p. 123.

advertisements, and lengthy profiles of the personal lives of stars; the outfits that stars wore, both on screen and at public appearances, were described in intricate detail.

For the cinema enthusiast, there was a large (and ever-changing) variety of movie magazines that were entirely devoted to films, their stars, and every aspect of life in Hollywood. Picturegoer, which became a weekly magazine in mid-1931, combined film news and reviews with Hollywood gossip, interviews and editorials. Numerous photographs of actors and actresses, in the form of motion-picture stills or publicity images of the stars at home and at public appearances, were central to the magazine's appeal. Articles discussing the clothes worn by stars appeared frequently in Picturegoer: the amount of money spent by actresses on their clothing was examined on one occasion (Joan Crawford and Constance Bennett were rumoured to spend the vast sum of \$20,000 a year); while in another issue Fay Wray, co-star of King Kong, helpfully told fans how she planned her wardrobe. She estimated that she spent around £1,000 a year on clothing, 'excluding jewellery and furs,' and included in her wardrobe inventory a total of 16 day dresses, eight or nine evening frocks, and three 'tea or rest' gowns.¹¹²

Less successful magazines abounded, among them Film Star Weekly, Film Pictorial, and Girls' Cinema; the majority ceased publication or were absorbed by a larger magazine when war was declared in September 1939. Of

¹¹² Picturegoer, 7 Jan. 1933, pp. 39-40; and 31 Aug. 1935, pp. 34-35.

particular note was Film Fashionland, which ran from March 1934 to January 1935, when it was amalgamated with a woman's weekly magazine. In the main, its contents consisted of page after page of actresses in publicity stills from recent films, but with a twist: the reader of Film Fashionland could order, through its 'Fashion Service', patterns of most of the outfits that were shown. So, when a picture of Mae West was featured, her dress – a 'lovely gown of leaf-printed satin, with chiffon neckline and sleeves' – could be ordered by post for five shillings. For women who were less keen seamstresses, ready-made copies of stars' frocks were available for four and a half guineas, post-free.¹¹³

An article that asked the reader 'Are you the Janet Gaynor Type?' was the first in a series which included Marlene Dietrich, Constance Bennett, Claudette Colbert and Norma Shearer as role models. Each actress's merits and individual points of style were assessed, with tips on the best way to model oneself after the star in question. The 'Constance Bennett Type', for instance, was advised to 'choose neat tailored clothes for daytime. But you can also, like Constance, blossom into lovely feminine sophisticated gowns for evenings.'¹¹⁴

The influence of the popular press in regard to clothing was not confined to discussions of fashion in the movies. Newspapers such as the

¹¹³ Film Fashionland, Apr. 1934, p. 7; and May 1934, p. 18.

¹¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, Oct. 1934, pp. 16-17. The articles first appeared in July 1934 and continued until the magazine ceased publication.

Sunday Express and the News of the World devoted a considerable amount of space to the seasonal Paris collections; in the latter, Parisian fashions were analysed by resident fashion expert and women's columnist, Julia King. Miss King also gave advice on the season's 'best buys' and 'must haves', and even helped readers to decide 'What to Wear on a Holiday Cruise.'¹¹⁵

To a certain extent, the News of the World was attempting to cater to the tastes of the upper classes – it was read by almost 20 per cent of women in households with incomes above £650 a year – with its coverage of *haute couture* fashion.¹¹⁶ The tone of its articles was to the taste of women from less affluent backgrounds as well, who enjoyed reading about the latest vogues to emerge from Paris. For young women, perhaps with a few shillings to spend on a frock for dancing, or who needed a smart outfit for work, it was a means of assessing recent developments in fashion. For older women, who might privately mull over its descriptions of current styles, the fashion page was a pleasant diversion, though for them its practical influence was limited; more useful were the tips for mending and renovating old clothes, and the information on sales bargains, that were also included in Julia King's columns.

¹¹⁵ News of the World, 7 July 1935, p. 15. The women's page also featured a 'Quick-Result Fashion Competition' each week, with readers invited to rate, in 'order of merit,' nine different articles of clothing (all available exclusively at Selfridge's). Winners would share in a cash prize of £500, and between three to ten people tended to split the winnings each week.

¹¹⁶ The Hulton Readership Survey (London, 1947), p. 17.

Women's weekly and monthly magazines, while less widely read than the Sunday newspapers, were another significant influence. Among the weeklies, Woman and Woman's Own were most popular, largely because of the patterns they offered. Knitting patterns were included in each issue, while sewing patterns were available by post for a shilling or less. The designs available, for staid skirts, blouses, frocks and jumpers, were aimed at the middle-aged, middle-range reader, and had little in common with high fashion. This was in keeping with the weeklies' readership, which was largely composed of middle-range housewives who appreciated its homely values and sensible approach.¹¹⁷ Help on wardrobe matters was available from the beauty editor at Woman's Own, Ursula Bloom, or its 'Editress', who encouragingly suggested ways to economise on clothing purchases:

Plain one-coloured evening frocks – worn with a long and brightly contrasting scarf – are being worn a great deal. It is a fashion which helps you out considerably when you have a hard-worked black evening frock that is still 'as good as ever', but you are oh, so tired of it – and mothers of families do find it specially difficult to budget for evening frocks.¹¹⁸

For women who were actively interested in current fashions, there was Vogue, which had a surprisingly large middle-range readership in spite of its upper-class aspirations. As was the case with the Paris fashions featured in the News of the World, Vogue had an imaginative and illustrative function

¹¹⁷ Mrs. E. H. recalled her mother's opinion of Woman's Own: 'She always said it was sensible – very sensible, that was the thing.'

¹¹⁸ Woman's Own, 4 Jan. 1935, p. 513.

for most of its readers: it opened doors into privileged worlds, it offered glimpses of luxury and ease, and it clearly showed which styles of clothing were currently fashionable. A woman might not be able to afford the actual clothes that appeared in Vogue editorials or advertisements, but it was possible to find similar styles in high street shops, in the catalogues, or in pattern books.

Vogue did, in fact, have a sister publication that consisted entirely of illustrations of patterns that were available by post.¹¹⁹ The styles that appeared in the Vogue Pattern Book were designed with young, fashion-conscious women in mind, and featured the work of prominent London and Paris designers. Other pattern books were available for examination in drapers' shops and department stores. Another source of visual inspiration was the mail-order catalogue: not only did its illustrations serve to inform prospective customers, but it could be browsed through like a magazine, and serve as an influence in that manner.¹²⁰

Though unrelated to the media in any direct sense, the displays in shop windows and in boutiques themselves were a source of inspiration for many

¹¹⁹ Mrs. E. H. and her sister, who were keen sewers, chose their patterns from the Vogue Pattern Book.

¹²⁰ Mrs. S. G. and Mrs. M. W. both remembered looking through catalogues with the intention of picking up ideas on clothes, rather than ordering anything. 'Looking in fashion books' was frequently cited as an influence by Bolton women interviewed by Mass-Observation, though whether they were reading fashion magazines, pattern books or catalogues is not apparent. M-O TC 18, Box 1, File C.

women. As was the case with magazines and other printed matter, their purpose was to attract people into buying the wares they showcased, but often they merely served as a visual cue. A woman saw, in a shop window or magazine, a garment that caught her eye; and even if she did not purchase it, the memory of it remained with her, and influenced her choice of clothing.¹²¹

One final external influence was provided by the example of people encountered on a day-to-day basis: strangers passed on the street; other women encountered on the tram to work. Although she was not acquainted with them personally, their clothing provided examples of what was currently being worn, and useful ideas on how to assemble garments into a pleasing outfit.¹²²

As with all the external influences discussed, the actual impact they had depended on one's personal context. A married woman from a poor neighbourhood in one of the depressed areas, though she might encounter images of fashionable clothes when she read the News of the World, was unlikely to be influenced by those images. Because of the context in which she lived, a context dominated by economic concerns, she thought about her own clothing in wholly practical terms; aesthetic considerations could not be

¹²¹ Mrs. M. B. and Mrs D. H. were keen window-shoppers. Mass-Observation interviews with young, working-class women in Bolton show that many were influenced by window displays. M-O TC 18, Box 1, File C.

¹²² Mrs. M. B., for example, got most of her ideas about clothing from strangers whose clothes she noticed and admired.

entertained. A young, middle-range working woman, with money of her own to spend, and comparatively few economic worries, read about current fashions in magazines and pattern books; she discussed them with her friends or was charmed by a window display. Her clothes might be attractive, but they also had to represent value for money, be hard-wearing and well-made. She was therefore only mildly interested in fashionable clothes, for they tended to be, to her mind, too volatile for a sensible woman's wardrobe – 'in' one day and then 'out' the next. Perhaps the only women who were truly at ease with decidedly fashionable clothes were those at the opposite ends of the economic spectrum: wealthy women who could afford the exclusive designs that were featured in *Vogue*, and young women from 'below-the-minimum' households, whose frocks were aggressively fashionable in silhouette, though poorly made in comparison to *haute couture* offerings.¹²³

* * *

It is clear, then, that the context in which a woman lived determined both the practical and aesthetic nature of her clothing; but why did the clothing she wore depend so much upon her personal background? It would appear that, in the inter-war period, few women sought individuality in their clothing, and that conformity in dress was highly valued. Conformity did not

¹²³ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge theorised that fashions spread in the following manner: 'From brothel to stage, then on to Bohemia, to Society, to Society's maids, to the mill-girl, and lastly to the suburban woman.' *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain* (London, 1940), p. 35.

mean that everyone dressed the same – there was never a British version of the Maoist jacket and trousers – but rather that people dressed in accordance with their individual background. A teenage, working girl from a poor background dressed in a specific way, as did a middle-aged, middle-range housewife; their mode of dress might change several times in their lives, but only because it had to reflect the context in which they lived.

It was widely believed, in the decades which followed the Great War, that class barriers were breaking down; and this collapse was most readily observed in changes in dress. In 1934, Thomas Burke described how

in the street it is difficult to guess at a glance, save from the quality of her clothes, where [a girl] belongs. In the past you could immediately recognise the social girl, the middle-class girl, the City girl and the factory-girl. Each had its own tone, its own dress, and its own bearing. [...] In these times, while the higher and lower ranks are still distinguishable, the intermediate rank, and all the little ranks within it, have fused, and only fine and closely-observed shades mark the difference between the shop-assistant and the actress [...] ¹²⁴

A comparison between actresses and the poorer strata of women was also made by J. B. Priestley. Describing the 'third England' that had emerged after 1918, and which he felt had been imported from 'America, he included 'factory girls looking like actresses' as one of its characteristics. The fact that he did not compare working girls to titled ladies, as did Robert Graves and Alan Hodge in The Long Weekend, is significant in several respects.¹²⁵ Most

¹²⁴ Thomas Burke, London in My Time (London, 1934), pp. 65-66.

¹²⁵ J. B. Priestley, English Journey, p. 401; Graves and Hodge, p. 174.

obviously, some women did deliberately dress in a similar fashion to actresses they admired, but there is little evidence that the modes and habits of the titled élite were slavishly copied in the same way. More importantly, an actress was someone whose profession required her to *act* as something she was not. Hence Priestley's comparison tacitly acknowledged not only that there was a limit in the transformative powers of dress, but also that there was little evidence of any desire to deceive. Young women from poor backgrounds did not dress fashionably because they wanted to appear to belong to a higher status group than their own; they were not attempting to fool anyone into believing that they were upper-class. Rather, they dressed fashionably because they wanted to be attractive in their own right – because they wanted to seem pretty and glamorous to the people with whom they lived and worked.

Indeed, dress alone was not sufficient to elevate the wearer's status, and commentators often applied lengthy caveats to their depictions of dress as a class leveller. A poor woman could afford only cheap copies of designer fashions which at a distance might pass for the real thing, but which upon closer inspection betrayed their origins via poor construction and tailoring, and inferior materials – rayon instead of silk, for example. Furthermore, the working-class accent with which she spoke immediately marked her out. And, while elocution lessons might smooth rough tones into the rounded vowels of a lady, poverty-stricken origins tended to reveal themselves in

ways which were far more difficult to mask. Malnutrition as a child led to stunted growth and bad teeth, while substandard living conditions bred poor standards of hygiene. T. H. Pear noted the ways in which appearance was likely to be affected by status:

Here the A class has distinct advantages. To say this implies in no way that the D class as a whole is not good-looking, [...] yet few members of the D class would object to greater height and weight in their children, and many would be delighted if they could only afford to make themselves better-looking along the lines laid down so sternly in the advertising columns of our magazines. The rich and the poor are so easily distinguishable, for example, by the state of their hair and teeth. And to achieve such excellence costs money paid to milkmen, dentists, hairdressers.¹²⁶

The distance at which one could tell people apart by their dress had indeed diminished – George Orwell felt it had previously been possible from two hundred yards – but it could not be eradicated without sweeping alterations to the fundamental structure of British society.¹²⁷

Differences in dress persisted not only because of economic factors, but also because people were comfortable with them. The clothes that a person wore acted as a visual signpost that was as welcome as it was restrictive: it heralded not only the wearer's class status, but also personal background, stage of life, and interests. For the minority who were trapped in miserable living conditions, and for whom every consideration of clothing carried with it unpleasant associations, the restrictions imposed by dress merely

¹²⁶ T. H. Pear, English Social Differences (London, 1955), p. 213.

¹²⁷ George Orwell, The English People (London, 1947), p. 30.

intensified the privations they experienced. For most people, however, the clothing that they wore was a comforting reminder of their place in the world: it offered them assurance, and conferred stability on their day-to-day lives.

Chapter Five:

Rationing and Other Features of Wartime Austerity

In previous chapters, the ways in which British women budgeted and saved for clothing in the 1920s and 1930s were examined. With the onset of war in September 1939, and continuing for the best part of a decade, these practices were altered to reflect the exigencies of life under a wartime economy that became progressively more austere.

As patterns of work and income changed, so too did the family budget; and an unprecedented internal migration, caused by war work, evacuation, and the consequences of air raids, had a profound effect on family life. Women at all levels of society experienced a remarkable change in their lives: many undertook paid work, either in the women's services or with a civilian concern; many had pressing volunteer duties; and all had to cope with the difficulties caused by shortages and rationing. In this chapter, the impact of the war on women's methods of budgeting and saving for clothing purchases will be examined. Household income and family life underwent dramatic changes, but any effect such changes had on the role of clothing in the family budget was influenced by the introduction of clothes rationing in June 1941, and by the Utility controls which followed later that year.

* * *

In 1938 1,710,000 men and women, or some 8.8 per cent of the adult working population, were registered as unemployed. By June 1940 this proportion had dropped to 3.1 per cent, and in 1944 had diminished to less

than one per cent.¹ These figures do not include the many thousands of workers who were languishing in long-term unemployment at the end of the 1930s, nor do they reflect regional variations in employment levels: chronically depressed areas recovered more slowly than industrial regions in the south of England. Only a small proportion of the new jobs, furthermore, were in occupations with no connection to the war, and so economic distress could return to many families as soon as hostilities ended.

Broadly speaking, the war did herald relief from unemployment for millions of workers; and equally welcome were rising wages. Average wage rates for men rose steadily, from an average of 69s a week in 1938 to 121s 4 *d* by July 1945, an increase of 76 per cent. Women's earnings rose even more markedly: from an average of 32s 6*d* in 1938, to 63s 2*d* in 1945, which represented a rise of 94 per cent.² The low wages of servicemen, however, were a notable exception: a private's wife with three children could expect only 34s a week.³

Much of these wage increases were absorbed by the growing cost of living. Between September 1939 and the end of 1945, the working-class cost of living index rose by 31 per cent: while rent and rates grew only slightly more

¹ Central Statistical Office, Statistical Digest of the War (London, 1951), p. 8. These figures exclude private domestic servants.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 204.

³ Angus Calder, The People's War: Britain 1939-1945. (London, 1969 and 1992), p. 53.

expensive, the cost of fuel and light was almost fifty per cent higher; food became 23 per cent more expensive; and the cost of clothing skyrocketed by some 67 per cent.⁴ In April 1941 the exemption rate for income tax was lowered to £110, while the standard rate of taxation rose to 10 shillings in the pound; overnight, four million more people were liable to income tax.⁵ A Purchase Tax had been implemented in April 1940; and while children's clothing, food and non-alcoholic drink were exempt (beer was already heavily taxed), all other purchases were taxed at 16-2/3 per cent for essential items and 33-1/3 per cent for luxuries. The tax on luxuries later rose to one hundred per cent.⁶

The impact of rising wages was, therefore, to a large extent offset by the rising cost of living. This arose from a combination of shortages of goods and the establishment of government controls – rationing in particular – upon those goods to mitigate the effect of shortages. This is borne out by statistics concerning personal expenditure, which diminished sharply during the war. Clothing was one of the items most affected, with expenditure falling from

⁴ Statistical Digest, pp. 204-5. Information on wages and cost of living was collated by the C. S. O. from the Ministry of Labour Gazette.

⁵ These followed earlier increases in income tax from the 1940 Budget. Calder, pp. 79 and 238.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 114 and 357.

£446m in 1938 to £279m in 1945 – a drop of 63 per cent.⁷ The constraining effects of the wartime economy upon consumer expenditure were reflected in the household budget: although many families enjoyed a growing level of income, one which in peacetime would have allowed them to increase their expenditure on both essential and luxury items, they were faced instead with shortages, rationing, and economic austerity. In the inter-war period the greatest difficulty for many families was to find enough money for their rent, food, fuel and clothing; goods were abundant. Wartime improvements in employment and wages did not magically erase financial difficulties for everyone – life above the ‘bare minimum’ remained elusive for many families – but for most people money was comparatively abundant during the war, while goods were scarce: a reverse of the pre-war situation.⁸

Family life was greatly dislocated by the war, with an extraordinarily high level of internal migration acting as a major source of upheaval. Nearly 35 million changes of address or removals took place, arising in the main from people moving for reasons of war work, homelessness through enemy action, and the three main waves of evacuation that took place between 1939 and 1944.⁹

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 203.

⁸ Many households ended up with one-quarter of their income or more in savings, as opposed to the national average of less than five per cent in the inter-war period. Calder, p. 357.

⁹ Richard Titmuss, Problems of Social Policy (London, 1950), p. 413.

In June 1939, 480,000 men were serving in HM Forces. Within a year, the number of men in the armed forces had risen to 2,273,000, while 55,000 women (whose presence in the military was statistically negligible before the war) had joined the auxiliary services. Membership in the armed forces and auxiliary services grew steadily to over five millions in 1945, 437,000 of which were women.¹⁰ Once part of the services, these people were mostly separated from their families, with home leave an infrequent possibility at the best of times. Many thousands of civilians whose work was essential to the war effort also found themselves displaced: factories and laboratories moved from London and the south coast to more secure locations inland, often taking with them their workers. Young people without family obligations, furthermore, were frequently compelled to take up war work far from home. By 1945 there were few families who had not lost one or two of their members 'for the duration.'

The destruction caused by enemy air-raids also contributed to the dislocation felt by many families, and not only because of the deaths and injuries they caused. By mid-October 1940, some 250,000 Londoners had been made at least temporarily homeless, as were thousands of people in the provincial cities that fell victim to the bombers.¹¹ Arrangements for the dispossessed were piecemeal and erratic, and while the war lasted little was

¹⁰ Statistical Digest, p. 8.

¹¹ Titmuss, p. 277.

done to re-house permanently those who had been bombed out.

The most well-known form that internal migration took during the war was the several waves of evacuation of children and mothers from 'at risk' areas. In September 1939, a total of 1,298,500 children, mothers, teachers and other helpers were evacuated to reception areas; a second wave of evacuations occurred in early 1941, in response to the Blitz; and a third wave took place in the autumn of 1944.¹² The first evacuation, though a triumph of logistics, had limited success in face of the 'Bore War', and many evacuees were home again in a matter of weeks. Later evacuations were successful in the short term, but once the perceived danger had passed a steady stream of evacuees drifted back to their homes. Returning home was not an option for the children who were sent abroad: an estimated 13,000 were sent privately to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, although government involvement in overseas evacuations had halted with the sinking of the *City of Benares*, which was carrying young evacuees, in September 1940.¹³

The evacuations had a profound effect for everyone concerned: the evacuees themselves, their families at home, and the foster families who

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 562. These statistics include only the 'official' evacuees, and exclude the approximately two million people who were privately evacuated: for example, children sent to relatives in the countryside, or elderly people who moved to seaside hotels. *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 247-48. For more information on the overseas evacuations carried out by the Children's Overseas Reception Boards, see Michael Fethney, *The Absurd and the Brave* (Lewes, Sussex, 1990).

received them. It was a proverbially eye-opening experience, one which threw together people from greatly differing backgrounds and economic classes. For many of its participants it opened a door into a hitherto unimagined Britain. Many of the evacuees came from impoverished, urban areas – in most respects they were the people under consideration in Chapter Two – and to them the reception areas, though in some cases only an hour or so away by train, appeared as a wholly foreign world. Many foster parents were working-class themselves, but lived in outward comfort and order; the poverty of a small town or country village was of a different context altogether from that suffered in an urban slum.

The behaviour and demeanour of the young evacuees were often shocking to their foster parents. Not only had many of the poorest children never seen a bath with taps, or sat down to dinner with their family, or worn undergarments or nightclothes, but their personal habits seemed scandalously different – particularly upsetting was the nervous bed-wetting which afflicted children as old as twelve. In spite of these difficulties, however, most of the evacuees appear to have been content, and reported cases of abuse and neglect were rare.¹⁴

¹⁴ Norah Baring, A Friendly Hearth (London, 1946), pp 17-18; and Joan Boyce, Pillowslips and Gasmasks: Liverpool's Wartime Evacuation (Birkenhead, 1989), p. 11. See also Susan Isaacs, ed., The Cambridge Evacuation Survey (London, 1941) and Richard Padley and Margaret Cole, eds., Evacuation Survey: A Report to the Fabian Society (London, 1940) for further descriptions of the evacuations.

A large number of women accompanied their babies or toddlers when evacuated, and for these mothers the experience of evacuation was particularly difficult. Differences were more keenly felt, and the stress of living in another woman's household, coping with her different expectations and standards, and all the while worrying about an absent husband, meant that few mothers from the initial evacuation were still living in the reception areas by the beginning of 1940. A high proportion of unaccompanied children were also summoned home; initially, much of the 'drift back' was attributed to the 'Bore War', though in later evacuations this was not a factor. Given the dislocating effects of evacuation, the return home of so many participants was almost inevitable. Emotional reasons were one cause: for some families danger was best faced together, as a unit; others simply could not bear the separation. Financial strains also contributed to the return home of many evacuees, for not only did an allowance have to be paid for their keep, but the higher standard of living in some foster households meant that parents were pressured to contribute to costs, in particular that of extra clothing.¹⁵

The internal migrations described above were not the only important cause of dislocation in family life; of great significance as well was the move

¹⁵ Liverpool University Settlement, Preliminary Report on the Problems of Evacuation (London, 1939), pp. 3-4, 11-13; and Baring, p. 62. Helen Forrester's younger siblings, evacuated to stay with relatives in the countryside, had to return home to Blitz-ravaged Liverpool when their mother refused to contribute to their keep. See Forrester, Lime Street at Two, p. 18.

into paid work of more than two million women. In 1938, just over four and a half million women were employed in the civilian workforce, but by 1944 this number had risen to over 6.6 millions. A further 467,000 women belonged to one of the auxiliary services by 1944.¹⁶ This move into paid employment was the result of a series of government directives and legislation, enacted to make the best use of millions of non-employed women, who were assumed to be otherwise unoccupied and a hitherto ignored 'asset.' In March 1941, all women between the ages of 19 and 40 were instructed to register at their local labour exchanges, where the necessity of their current employment was assessed. Many were directed to more essential war work, and most of the women who had been registered as unemployed before the war were found work in this way. An Essential Work Order, released at the same time, compelled recalcitrant employers to find positions for women in their businesses. While these measures erased much of the existing unemployment among women, they did not produce the millions of extra women workers that had been expected, and so the National Service Act Number Two was enacted in December 1941. In principle, it conscripted all women aged between 18 and 40 for military service; in practice married women and mothers were not compelled immediately to join up, though by mid-1943 thousands of housewives were directed into one form of

¹⁶ Statistical Digest, pp. 8-9.

service or another.¹⁷ Conscription meant work in one of the auxiliary services, in 'essential' industries such as munitions or aircraft building, or work in the Land Army or Civil Defence. By the end of the war, women were present in almost every industry; the only non-military occupation barred to women was work in the coal mines, though the work done by women in the Land Army or ARP could involve equally hard manual labour.¹⁸

War work did not include only those women in paid employment, for many women also spent countless hours in volunteer duties. Most notably, there were the nearly one million members of the Women's Voluntary Service, who appear to have turned their hands to any task which remained undone – providing clothing for the dispossessed; organising aluminium and scrap paper collections; even giving cups of tea to exhausted air raid wardens and rescue crews.¹⁹ In the countryside, members of village Women's Institutes filled a similar role. A large proportion, furthermore, of the women who worked in Civil Defence, ARP, the fire service, or as 'special'

¹⁷ Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars (London, 1987), pp. 158-59.

¹⁸ Calder, p. 334. An offshoot of the Land Army was the Women's Timber Corps, whose members were known as 'Lumber Jills.' See Mavis Williams, Lumber Jill: Her Story of Four Years in the Women's Timber Corps, 1942-45 (Bradford on Avon, Wilts, 1994).

¹⁹ Charles Graves, Women in Green: The Story of the WVS. (London, 1948), pp. 171, 231 and 261; and Women's Voluntary Service, Report of Ten Years' Work for the Nation, 1938-1948 (London, 1948), pp. 17-20; and Rosalind Chambers, 'A Study of Three Voluntary Organisations,' in Social Mobility in Britain, ed. D. V. Glass (London, 1954), p. 387.

constables, did so on a voluntary basis.²⁰

When their war work or voluntary duties were finished, most women returned home to begin their 'second shift': the domestic chores and obligations that had taken up much of their time before the war. Though the war had made paid work outside the home acceptable, at least temporarily, for women, attitudes in regard to domestic labour and men had not altered.²¹ The traditional division of labour persisted where house-cleaning, cooking and shopping were concerned; and so most women ended up with two jobs: their paid or voluntary work, plus the labour – made even more demanding by the rigours of a wartime economy – involved in running a home.²²

* * *

It is clear, then, that the war brought about remarkable alterations in most facets of family life, and that it had a significant effect on the lives of women. In particular, the ways in which women planned, saved and budgeted for the purchase of clothing were greatly affected by changes in family income, household composition, and patterns of war work. Women's practices regarding clothing were further altered by the implementation of

²⁰ Calder, p. 193.

²¹ Penny Summerfield, 'Women, Work and Welfare: A Study of Child Care and Shopping in Britain in the Second World War,' Journal of Social History, vol. XVII, no. 3 (1983), p. 260.

²² A welfare worker, describing women industrial workers, stated that she admired them because "so many of them really do double jobs." See Margaret Goldsmith, Women at War (London, c. 1943), p. 194.

clothes rationing in June 1941, which sharply limited the amount of clothing that could be purchased. Utility controls, introduced later that year, regulated prices and the manufacture of most clothing and footwear.

Between September 1939 and June 1940 the average cost of clothing rose by 37 per cent; and in the following year prices continued to escalate just as steeply.²³ Although a Limitation of Supplies Order was in force, and in theory should have controlled the manufacture and stocks of clothing through a system of quotas, it soon proved ineffective. With supplies of raw materials reduced to one-fifth of their pre-war level, many manufacturers neglected to produce less profitable lines of cheaper clothing, and instead concentrated on inessential, more expensive items such as highly-finished ladies' wear (a practice known as 'trading up').²⁴ Luxury goods therefore remained plentiful while supplies of affordable clothing and footwear were dwindling, and rumblings of public discontent, mixed with dire recollections of shortages in the previous war, spurred the government to consider ways of ensuring 'fair shares' for all. Just as pressing was the need to divert precious resources and manufacturing sites from relatively inessential tasks – such as

²³ Statistical Digest, p. 205.

²⁴ W. K. Hancock and M. M. Gowing, British War Economy (London, 1949), p. 332.

the supply of civilian clothing – to the vital production of war materiel.²⁵ A system of points rationing was decided upon; and in early 1941 preparations began in earnest at the Board of Trade.²⁶ Plans for the scheme were presented to the War Cabinet in the spring of 1941; initially, their reaction was hostile. Clothes rationing, they feared, would lead to unrest; surely there was some other way of preventing shortages? The Board of Trade countered that shortages were already widespread: rationing would not change that fact. Rationing was the only way of ensuring fair shares for everyone; only under such a scheme could general unrest over shortages be avoided. The War Cabinet approved the plans, but only after a reluctant Prime Minister was persuaded to agree to rationing whilst preoccupied by the search for the *Bismarck*. Churchill accused Oliver Lyttleton, the President of the Board of Trade, of trying to ‘strip the poor people to the buff,’ and suggested that everyone be outfitted with boiler suits. The Prime Minister’s preferred garment was, however, ‘made of the best vicuna wool, which would have taken up most of the Australian wool clip’; and his advice was disregarded.²⁷

²⁵ E. L. Hargreaves and M. M. Gowing, Civil Industry and Trade (London, 1952), pp. 121-25. Schemes for standardising clothing and footwear had been tried in 1918, but met with partial success, most probably because they were too limited. See British War Economy, pp. 20-21.

²⁶ In contemporary documents the Board of Trade was always referred to in the plural (e.g. the Board of Trade were...); that usage, though ungrammatical, has been retained.

²⁷ Civil Industry and Trade, pp. 312-13; and Oliver Lyttleton, The Memoirs of Lord Chandos (London, 1962), pp. 204-5.

In order to avoid a rush on the shops, the introduction of clothes rationing was kept secret until 1st June, Whit Sunday. Oliver Lyttelton, the President of the Board of Trade, explained to the nation via wireless and newspaper announcements that rationing had been implemented 'so that everyone may have their fair share,' and that he was certain 'everyone in these islands is prepared to undergo inconvenience and hardship if they are convinced of two things; that it is necessary, and that it is fair.' Although the British public might feel shabby in its old clothes, Lyttelton reminded everyone that 'by making [...] do you are contributing some part of an aeroplane or a gun or a tank [...] If it means going without new clothes to beat the enemy – then who among us will not willingly deny themselves those new clothes?'²⁸

In theory, the new system of points rationing for clothing was a simple one; in practice, its myriad rules and regulations made budgeting and shopping for clothes a testing experience. Each item of clothing for men, women and children was given a points value. For example, men's trousers 'cost' eight coupons, although if made of corduroy only five coupons were needed; an overcoat cost 16 coupons, a shirt five coupons, and for a pair of handkerchieves two coupons had to be surrendered. A woman's overcoat required only 14 coupons, a frock 11 coupons if woollen (seven if made of

²⁸ Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), BT 131/39: Press and Broadcast Announcements on Rationing of Clothes, Cloth and Footwear, 1 June 1941-1943.

another material), and a skirt seven coupons. Children's garments generally required fewer coupons than adult versions. Dressmaking and tailoring materials were also rationed, with the number of coupons required per yard of cloth increasing according to width: one yard of 21-inch wide woollen material, for instance, required two coupons. Clothing for children under age four, black-out cloth, and 'trimmings' such as ribbon, lace or elastic were initially exempt from rationing.²⁹

For the first year of rationing, from June 1941 to May 1942, the allowance was a relatively generous 66 coupons per person. The following year, the number dropped to 60 per person, and then plummeted to 40 coupons in 1943-44, rising thereafter to 48 in 1944-45.³⁰ Coupon requirements for major items of clothing increased – a woman's overcoat that cost 14 coupons in 1941 required 18 coupons by 1944 – but garments that were less expensive to produce, such as trousers, skirts or frocks, did not increase significantly in coupon value.³¹

The first set of clothing coupons were margarine tokens in the back of

²⁹ PRO BT 131/39. From a notice to the public which appeared in national newspapers on 1 June 1941. See also News of the World, 1 June 1941, p. 3.

³⁰ Separate schemes were designed for members of HM Forces, and for evacuated children. PRO BT 131/39 and BT 64/1427: Clothing for Evacuees.

³¹ PRO BT 64/1440: Standard Wardrobe for 1944. See also the Geffrye Museum, Utility Fashion and Furniture 1941-1951 (London, 1974), p. 33.

existing food coupon books;³² separate clothing coupons were then printed, but within each book only a certain number of tokens could be used in a given period. Confusion over which coupons could be used, and when, was rife.³³ Just as perplexing were the regulations regarding the sharing of coupons (only between family members, but this was widely disregarded); extra coupon allowances for industrial workers, merchant seamen, discharged servicemen and women, expectant mothers, growing children, and victims of bomb damage; and whether secondhand and charity goods required coupons (all but the cheapest did). Even the removal of coupons from books was regulated: only a shop attendant could cut out coupons legally, except in the case of mail order goods, where customers cut out the coupons themselves and enclosed them with their order. A certain degree of confusion was inevitable, given the secrecy with which the scheme was planned; but the Board of Trade further hindered public understanding and acceptance of clothes rationing by continuing to tinker with the scheme, issuing directives and changes to regulations on a near-weekly basis.³⁴ The Board of Trade's

³² The Ministry of Food allowed the Board of Trade to use the margarine coupons, as it would have been impossible to keep clothes rationing a secret even as millions of clothes ration books were printed and distributed.

³³ Mass-Observation, Clothes Rationing Survey: An Interim Report Prepared for the Advertising Service Guild (London, 1941), p. vii.

³⁴ For example, see the hundreds of directives and memoranda in PRO BT 131/39.

'Clothing Quiz', distributed annually, answered questions and explained the rules of rationing in a straightforward enough manner; but it is doubtful that everyone with concerns about rationing was provided with a copy of the booklet.³⁵

The immediate effect of rationing was to reduce spending, and sales of clothing decreased by some 20 per cent in the period between 1 June and 30 September 1941. The amount of clothing 'in reserve', or held as stock, increased briefly once rationing took hold, but soon began to diminish again; and retail prices continued to climb by some one per cent a month.³⁶ It soon became apparent that there were two major defects in the rationing scheme: first, the initial quota of 66 coupons per person was, though modest, too generous in light of decreasing stocks and mounting demands on materials and labour; and second, that firms were continuing to neglect the manufacture of less expensive lines of clothing, which led to shortages of essential articles of clothing in the shops.³⁷ The Board of Trade had shied away from a scheme of cheap, standardised clothing in favour of a coupon

³⁵ PRO INF 13/153: Clothing Quiz for 1945. An entire page was devoted to the description of exactly which coupons could be used, and when: '(a) The yellow (series A) coupons; (b) The purple and black (Series B and C) coupons; (c) The tokens marked W, X, Y and Z on page V. The W and X tokens are worth 1 coupon each and the Y and Z tokens are worth 3 coupons each...'

³⁶ G. D. N. Worswick, 'Notes on Rationing,' Bulletin of the Institute of Statistics, vol. IV, no. 2 (31 Jan. 1942), pp. 44-45.

³⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 46; Civil Industry and Trade, pp. 314-15; and Calder, p. 279.

rationing system alone, but existing stocks of affordable clothing were nearing depletion; and any chronic shortage of basic items of clothing, they feared, would lead to widespread public dissatisfaction.

The Board of Trade's answer to these shortcomings was the Utility regulations, which began in late 1941 as a series of mild inducements to manufacturers: quotas for Utility cloth (hard-wearing and sturdy in the main) were more generous than for non-Utility materials, and although manufacturers could only use Utility cloth for certain essential garments, they were allowed considerable latitude in terms of design and finish. The distribution of Utility garments to the public was patchy at first: supplies of some garments abounded, while other items were rarely seen in the shops. In May 1942 the Apparel and Textiles Order was enacted, and allowed the Board of Trade to take production firmly in hand; eventually they controlled some 80 per cent of clothing manufacture in Britain.³⁸ Matching production to consumer demand, the Board of Trade succeeded in smoothing away some of the most contentious shortages, though certain classes of garment such as ladies' hosiery and corsetry remained scarce for the duration. Furthermore, while rationing alone had not resulted in the release of substantial numbers of workers and factory premises for the war effort, the Utility controls brought about an appreciable concentration in clothing production; approximately

³⁸ British War Economy, pp. 336-37; and BT 131/38: Directorate of Civilian Clothing; Minutes of Meetings in 1941. Includes discussions and planning of the Utility controls.

thirty thousand workers were directed into war production as a result.³⁹

Only the materials and general usage of Utility garments were specified: from a given amount of woollen cloth, for example, a manufacturer had to produce a set number of frocks, jackets or skirts. The actual design and trimmings of Utility garments were not regulated, though price controls over the end product dictated a certain degree of simplicity. Design regulations were only laid down later, in the summer of 1942, when the Austerity Directives were released.⁴⁰ The Austerity Directives are often confused with the Utility regulations, and indeed the two worked in tandem, but as policies they were quite distinct. Austerity restrictions were aimed at saving labour and materials on inessential details of design, and were not introduced with any view towards improving public morale; quite the contrary, for they were deplored by the public and manufacturers alike. The Utility controls also reduced inessential demands on labour and materials, but they were equally important as a means of ensuring a constant, and reasonable supply of good quality, affordable clothing to the working-class family. They were introduced as a less expensive source of new clothing – a woman's Utility coat cost about a pound less than a 'free range' coat – and

³⁹ P. Ady, 'Utility Goods,' Bulletin of the Institute of Statistics, vol. IV, no. 15 (31 Oct. 1942), p. 287.

⁴⁰ Clothing was never rationed in the United States, but its manufacture and design were subject to the 'L 85' restrictions; these were similar to the Austerity Directives. See Patricia Baker, Fashions of a Decade: The 1940s, first publ. 1991 (London, 1993), pp. 12 and 37.

they remained inexpensive. A man's tweed overcoat that cost £4 9s 5d in 1941 was the same price in 1945.⁴¹ Utility clothing and footwear became even more economical when purchase tax was removed from them in mid-1942.⁴²

* * *

As was noted above, the Board of Trade kept the rationing scheme a closely guarded secret until the day it was announced, fearing that any advance warning would lead to a rush on the shops by wealthier individuals, and thus undermine the principle of 'fair shares' which was so central to the propaganda that had been planned for the introduction of rationing. On 1 June 1941, the British public was greeted by a barrage of publicity that was designed to convince it not only of the necessity of clothes rationing, but also of its innate fairness. It was described as such by the President of the Board of Trade in his speech on the wireless; and these themes were reiterated in the official notices carried by most newspapers. The opening paragraphs of one such notice were stern in tone, stressing that it was illegal henceforth to purchase clothing without the requisite coupons. In capital letters, the notice exhorted 'DO NOT BUY MORE THAN YOU NEED, NOR BEFORE YOU MUST.' It then justified the scheme, on grounds of military necessity and of equity: 'The object of rationing is to secure a fair distribution of the available supplies, which have had to be reduced to make way for munitions of war [...]

⁴¹ Civil Industry and Trade, pp. 434 and 616.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 606.

Rationing [...] will also assist people to secure their essential needs by preventing others from buying too much.' The notice concluded with a lengthy table of coupon values for most types of men's, women's and children's clothing.⁴³

Another press release, which was carried in the News of the World, seems to have been crafted with the newspaper's largely working-class readership in mind:

There is enough for all, if we share and share alike. Rationing is the way to get fair shares. *Fair shares* – when workers are producing bombs and aeroplanes and guns instead of frocks, suits and shoes. *Fair shares* – when ships must run the gauntlet with munitions and food rather than with wool and cotton. *Fair shares* – when movements of population outrun local supplies. Rationing is not the same as shortage. Rationing, or *fair shares*, is the way to *prevent* a shortage without interfering with full war production.⁴⁴

Official Board of Trade notices were complemented by articles and editorials that glowingly extolled the virtues of the clothes rationing scheme.⁴⁵ The News of the World reassured readers (in bold-face type) that clothes rationing was 'manifestly fair to all classes of the community – to rich and poor and the "in-betweens" alike.' 'In a separate article, the

⁴³ PRO BT 131/39.

⁴⁴ News of the World, 1 June 1941, p. 3.

⁴⁵ The connection between a newspaper's positive editorial support of government policies and the large advertising revenues which were generated by large (and expensive) official notices should not be overlooked. See William A. Robson, 'Government Publicity,' Political Quarterly, vol. XI, no. 3 (July-Sept. 1940), p. 221.

impact on the family budget was assessed; its writer concluded that the introduction of coupons might even allow the poorest families to *increase* their expenditure on clothing.⁴⁶

Weekly and monthly magazines expressed their support for the scheme with alacrity: Picture Post asserted that rationing was ‘a wise measure. It is not only a national necessity [...] Rationing hasn’t been introduced to spite us. It’s one of the fairest and most useful measures of the war.’ As inspiration, it included a photographic illustration of how a plain, black frock could be made to look like five different garments with the judicious use of accessories such as a lace collar, contrasting cuffs, or a tie-on peplum.⁴⁷ The editor of Woman’s Own, writing in her weekly column, dismissed the complaints of an acquaintance who had trouble obtaining as many clothes as before.

The obvious fact hadn’t occurred to her – that, if we really mean what we say about victory, we’ve *got* to do with less. The Government devised the coupon scheme to help share out the ‘less’ as fairly as possible – not just as a tricky game to give us the fun of trying to get our pre-war supplies out of 66 coupons.⁴⁸

One publication whose support was lukewarm for the scheme, at least initially, was Vogue. It entirely glossed over the issue of military necessity

⁴⁶ News of the World, 1 June 1941, p. 1. See also the Sunday Express, 1 June 1941, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Picture Post, 21 June 1941, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁸ Woman’s Own, 26 July 1941, p. 3.



Utility clothing designed by London couturier Victor Steibel.

and 'fair shares', and presented rationing to its readers as a test of their taste and ingenuity. 'After all, Cinderella's ball-dress and equipage had origins just as uncompromising as our margarine coupons – and *she* lived happily ever after.' It did concede that women would have to make do with fewer garments; but it did not allow that restrictions should influence fashion or a sense of *chic*. In its September 1941 issue, a tweed suit that cost 17 guineas and 23 coupons – one-third of a year's ration – was featured in a fashion layout.⁴⁹

Vogue's tepid response was a reflection of the panic felt by the fashion industry as a whole. Even more horrifying than rationing, from its point of view, were the Austerity restrictions that followed: although fashion editors and dress manufacturers alike continued to proclaim 'You can't ration fashion,' this was, in effect, exactly what the Board of Trade hoped to achieve. Within a year the Board controlled virtually every aspect of the clothing industry; and the increasingly grim requirements of a wartime economy left little room for the caprices of fashion. Realising this, some designers even agreed to work with the Board of Trade: in 1942 a group of the most prominent London *couturiers* created versions of the four 'basic outfits' specified in the Utility regulations, with the most successful designs selected by the Board of Trade for wider distribution.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Vogue, July 1941, p. 17; and Aug. 1941, pp. 50-51.

⁵⁰ Vogue, October 1942, pp. 25-26. See also Mass- Observation (hereafter M-O) Topic Collection: Personal Appearance, Box 4, File E: Utility Clothes, 1942. Includes an interview with designer Digby Morton.

At first, public support for the clothes rationing scheme was high. Mass-Observation sampled public opinion on 2 June 1941, and found that 70 per cent of respondents thought it was right to begin clothes rationing, 11 per cent thought it was wrong, and 19 per cent were undecided.⁵¹ At that stage, one day after the announcement of rationing, an opinion poll could only sound out reactions to the scheme in principle: and certainly the *principle* of 'fair shares' for all, and the economic necessity of rationing clothing stocks, was never seriously questioned by the public. Clothes rationing as a bothersome reality of wartime life, in contrast, soon became unpopular: 45 per cent of respondents to a poll in early 1943 were critical of the clothes rationing scheme, while a further 38 per cent thought it merely 'alright.'⁵² As Ian McLaine has observed, however, the fact that people were complaining about particular government policies did not mean they were demoralised, or that they were intent on breaking the law; in fact the contrary was true. Complaints overheard in queues were, in the words of one Mass-Observation writer, a 'safety valve for spleen'. Such grumbling may have contributed to morale by allowing people to voice their worries and then get on with their

⁵¹ M-O FR 830: Clothes Rationing Report, August 1941. Similar reactions were recorded by the Home Intelligence Unit. See PRO INF 1/292: Home Intelligence Morale Reports, June 1941.

⁵² M-O FR 1628: News Quota Questionnaires. The survey, taken on 15 Feb. 1943, was a small one, with only 72 respondents, but the results are similar to opinions of rationing from Mass-Observation diaries for the period.

wartime duties.⁵³

In the first year of clothes rationing, when everyone could expect a minimum of 66 coupons, criticism of the scheme was largely confined to specific aspects or provisions that were felt to be unworkable or unfair;⁵⁴ many of these drawbacks were a result of the secretive planning process. People who worked in the 'heavy' industries such as mining and metalworking, and whose work clothes wore out quickly, were unhappy with the restrictions. The Board of Trade responded by issuing supplementary rations to workers who were most affected, and also provided 'hardship' pools of coupons to the joint works committees of most heavy industries, to be distributed according to need.⁵⁵ Growing children were another sore point: the initial ration of 66 coupons was insufficient, and so the Board of Trade eventually provided between ten and twenty extra coupons a year for growing children; these levels were maintained even as coupon allowances for the rest of the population were significantly reduced. Expectant mothers were provided with supplementary coupons, although babies' clothes, which at first had been 'off the ration', were included in the scheme by August 1941,

⁵³ Ian McLaine, Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War Two (London, 1979), p. 118; and M-O FR 1781: Public Feeling on the Black Market, May 1943, p. 3.

⁵⁴ PRO INF 1/292: Home Intelligence Reports, June 1941.

⁵⁵ Approximately 70 per cent of civilian men received supplemental coupons, but only 20 per cent of women were granted an extra ration. Civil Industry and Trade, pp. 317-21.

with babies and children under age four receiving their own ration book.⁵⁶

These were errors of degree, and easily enough resolved; more problematic for the Board of Trade were diminishing clothing stocks, resources, and workers, the last two the result of an over-enthusiastic application of the 'concentration' policy in 1941.⁵⁷ The coupon ration had to be reduced, and it was this limited (and decreasing) coupon allowance that became the focus of most people's grumbles. That there were too few coupons for individual needs was clear: the budget for a 'standard wardrobe', as drawn up by the Board of Trade in 1944, amounted to 244 coupons, or five years' worth (assuming that the ration did not drop below 48 coupons again).⁵⁸ In a 1942 survey of women workers in the heavy industries, estimated coupon requirements for a year's worth of clothing ranged from 91 among agriculturalists to 196 among women working in iron and steel manufacturing. 81 per cent of the approximately 1,600 women who were polled admitted they were unable to obtain the clothes they needed with their present coupon allowance.⁵⁹

The public remained loyal to clothes rationing in principle. If asked

⁵⁶ PRO BT 131/39; and Civil Industry and Trade, pp. 317-19.

⁵⁷ Calder, p. 279.

⁵⁸ PRO BT 64/1440.

⁵⁹ Wartime Social Survey, Report No. 14: Clothing Needs in Fifteen Occupational Groups (London, 1942), pp. 11 and 15.

directly, the average man or woman on the street usually agreed that the war effort was more important than an abundant supply of clothing for civilians. One Mass-Observation diarist even confronted two critics of the scheme in a shop queue: 'I said I couldn't understand people *wanting* more than their share when things were short.'⁶⁰

Behind much of the public criticism of coupon shortages lay the widespread belief that the monied classes were flouting the law and ignoring coupon restrictions.⁶¹ Ordinary people were expected to do without the coupons they needed, and therefore go short of clothes; but at the same time wealthy people continued to be well-dressed – often luxuriously so. To many people it seemed that luxury goods continued in plentiful supply, war or no war, for those with money. Overheard by one Mass-Observation diarist was the comment 'Take it from me, the well-to-do will manage to get nice things.' Such sentiments were frequently voiced, no doubt, in wartime queues throughout Britain.⁶²

⁶⁰ Clothes Rationing Survey, p. 83.

⁶¹ This was not an unreasonable assumption on the part of the public, given that the Board of Trade were moved to initiate rationing because of their fears that the rich would descend upon the shops and buy up remaining clothing stocks at the first sign of serious shortages. British War Economy, p. 168.

⁶² M-O FR 791: Clothes Rationing; Analysis from M-O Diaries, July 1941, p. 7. See also M-O FR 830, p. 5; and Zelma Katin, Clippie: The Autobiography of a War Time Conductress (London, 1944), p. 22, who was bitter in her contempt for the 'ladies of leisure' who shopped at 'posh emporia where they are "Yes madam'd" even in wartime and they pay for 20-guinea

Yet another unpopular aspect of the coupon system, one which again seemed to work to the benefit of the rich, was that luxury clothing was never given a significantly higher coupon value: a plain woollen coat, for example, required just as many coupons as a lush, fur garment.⁶³ Although the Utility controls sharply reduced the amount of luxury goods being produced, and price controls and purchase taxes greatly inflated their prices, such goods were none the less always available to the wealthy élite, who were never made to surrender extra coupons. In late 1943 certain inferior grades of material – essentially, those containing a low proportion of wool – were ‘down-pointed’ in an attempt to make them more affordable, but this was not the same as guaranteeing that inexpensive yet decent quality clothing was available to everyone in need.⁶⁴

It was difficult for the Board of Trade to combat these grievances. Although points rationing had been introduced for other ‘luxuries’ such as sweets, the Board had decided, in discussions held in late 1940, that it was impossible to combine such a system with the existing coupon scheme.

frocks by cheque.’

⁶³ From a Mass-Observation survey, taken on 2 June 1941, of working-class opinions about clothes rationing: ‘The main working-class comment of unfavourable sort was that the scheme was unfair to the poor and favoured people who could buy good quality or got a fur coat for the same number of coupons as an ordinary coat.’ M-O FR 830, p. 8. See also Peter McNeil, ‘“Put Your Best Face Forward”: The Impact of the Second World War on British Dress,’ *Journal of Design History*, vol. 6; no. 4 (1993), p. 287.

⁶⁴ *Civil Industry and Trade*, p. 317.

Furthermore, any supplementary coupon requirement would have killed off what remained of the higher end of the garment industry; and its services were desperately required for trade abroad, most particularly with the USA.⁶⁵ To a certain extent the well-to-do were living off their capacious stocks of pre-war clothing, and so were able to maintain a smart appearance for much longer than people with less extensive wardrobes. In a 1941 Mass-Observation survey of opinion regarding clothes rationing, 35% of respondents from upper- and middle-class households thought they had sufficient stocks of clothing to cushion them from the effects of rationing, while only 15% of lower-middle-class and working-class respondents felt they had sufficient clothing stocks.⁶⁶ Although the Board of Trade could work to control the black market and other illicit dealings – and in fact did so quite effectively – they could not counter the inequity that was at the heart of rationing's shortcomings. Not only did some people have more than their 'fair share' of coupons, but they also had much more than their 'fair share' of money as well.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ British War Economy, p. 332.

⁶⁶ Clothes Rationing Survey, Appendix I, p. 68. Mass-Observation also estimated that, at the beginning of the war, middle-class women possessed, on average, 12 dresses, suits and skirts, but that working-class women had only four such garments. *Op. cit.*, p. v.

⁶⁷ Charles Madge, writing in 1943, described the irony of the government concerning itself with the welfare and morale of the masses, whom hitherto it had been all too easy to ignore. He felt that a precedent was being set which would herald great change in the post-war period. Madge,

* * *

It remains to examine the effect of the wartime economy on typical methods of saving and budgeting for clothing purchases. Where saving strategies were concerned, many families found that such strategies were becoming redundant. Rising wage rates and a general scarcity of goods left them with *surplus* income, and even the continuing inflation of retail prices and heavy levels of taxation could not absorb all the excess. It is difficult to assess the proportion of families that found their fortunes substantially improved under the wartime economy, for wartime social surveys were concerned with patterns of consumer expenditure and issues of morale rather than with changes in economic status and the prosperity of the classes relative to one another. Standards of living did not improve greatly for the more than fifty thousand registered unemployed, or for those among the invisible ranks of the long-term unemployed who could not find work in the wartime industries.⁶⁸ The wages of men in the ranks were miserably low, furthermore, so many thousands of service wives (and, later, widows) were

War-time Patterns of Saving and Spending (Cambridge, 1943), pp. 6-7. No. 4 in the NIESR series of Occasional Papers.

⁶⁸ At its lowest level, unemployment fell to 54,000 persons in 1944, rising in 1945 to 103,000, mostly because of the effects of demobilisation and the winding-down of wartime industries. Statistical Digest, p. 8.

forced to take up paid work in order to make ends meet.⁶⁹

That the ill effects of poverty had not been eliminated by wartime improvements in levels of employment and wages was underscored by the contents of the Beveridge Report at the end of 1942, which cited 'want' as one of the evils obstructing post-war reconstruction. Unemployment appeared to have been eliminated as the chief cause of poverty; but the suffering of those living on fixed incomes (the elderly in particular), or whose income was inadequate because of low wages or a larger-than-average number of children, remained acute.⁷⁰

For those whose incomes did remain low throughout the war, changes in methods of saving were affected not only by rising prices, but also by alterations in traditional patterns of working-class life. Internal migrations, in the form of evacuations or air raids, broke apart close-knit neighbourhoods, and made it difficult for women to band together and save with each other's help. The formalised clothing clubs, considered a form of hire-purchase by the authorities, were a casualty of austerity. Hire-purchase was strictly regulated in 1943, and was allowed only for larger items such as

⁶⁹ A Leeds survey from July 1942 revealed that the average weekly income of a household whose only earner, male or female, was in the armed or auxiliary forces, was £3 7s 4d; this contrasted with a national average of £4 5s 2d. Madge, p. 39; and Statistical Digest, p. 204.

⁷⁰ William Beveridge, Social Insurance and Allied Services: A Report (London, 1942), pp. 6-7. See also José Harris, William Beveridge: A Biography (Oxford, 1977), p. 382.

furniture, bicycles, sewing machines and the like – but not for clothing and footwear. Given the Board of Trade's interest in maintaining the morale of the poorest segments of the population, it is surprising that such a popular method of clothing purchase was prohibited.⁷¹ Another refuge for the poorest families, the pawnbroker, declined in importance as a means of saving, for clothing was only pledgeable as long as it was in good condition and relatively new. By the end of the war such clothing was scarce even in fairly prosperous households, and entirely absent from the wardrobes of those living 'below the minimum.'

These families were, however, in the minority during the war, as many thousands of people who had been impoverished in the inter-war period experienced a remarkable improvement in their standard of living. For the first time, the bare essentials of existence did not gobble up their entire income; at last they could afford some of the superfluities of life. A generation of eager consumers had money to spend – but very little on which to spend it. Practically everything was in short supply: not only luxurious inessentials such as motorcars or smart furniture, but also more mundane items such as razor blades, rayon stockings, pots and pans – anything that might tempt a newly-solvent consumer could be obtained only with difficulty, if at all. Savings strategies became redundant, insofar as scraping

⁷¹ House of Commons Debates (Hansard), 11 March 1943. The legislation concerned was the Hire Purchase and Credit Sales Agreements (Control) Order (Statutory Rules and Orders no. 1651), 1943.

together enough ready cash for the purchase of clothing was no longer a problem; rather, it was obtaining the goods which one wanted that had become difficult.

For the middle-range family, saving up enough cash for the purchase of clothing had not been a pressing problem in the inter-war years, and indeed it never experienced much difficulty in this respect during the war.⁷² The dramatic rise in retail prices for clothing that occurred in the first eighteen months of the war did cause difficulties for some families, in that the money they were accustomed to spend on clothing bought them less and less in return. The response of most middle-range households was to decrease their spending on inessentials such as evening wear, 'Sunday best', and sporting clothes.⁷³

The introduction of clothes rationing further reduced the primacy of money where saving and budgeting strategies were concerned. The original ration of 66 coupons per person, which seemed impossibly small to many people in June 1941, was cut again and again as austerity gripped the nation; therefore, coupons had to be spent with extreme prudence. In an article written in 1943, when the ration was reduced to 40 coupons, an economist

⁷² None of the women interviewed for the oral history project recalled any difficulty in saving enough money for clothing purchases during the war – it was finding enough coupons that was the problem.

⁷³ M-O FR 1699R: *The Effect of Wartime Clothing Trends on Clothing Habits (1941 and 1943)*; and the Clothes Rationing Survey, p. vii.

calculated the minimum expenditure on clothing that was necessary for human needs; he had assumed, however, that the ration would be maintained at some 55 coupons a year. Only Utility clothing was considered in his budget, which for women included one skirt, one jumper, one pair of shoes, four pairs of stockings, and several sets of undergarments. He also provided for the purchase of only *one-fifth* of an overcoat, and *one-sixth* of a raincoat, since their purchase in entirety would have exhausted the ration.⁷⁴

Surveys of public opinion taken soon after the introduction of rationing revealed that most people had not made any appreciable effort to budget their clothes coupons. Clothes rationing, at first, did not seem very worrisome to the average person: when Mass-Observation enquired 'In what ways do you think clothes rationing will affect you personally?' over sixty per cent of respondents from all economic classes did not feel it would affect them at all.⁷⁵ Some assumed the war would be over within the year, and therefore spent their ration rapidly; others, though aware the war was likely to continue for much longer, seriously over-estimated the buying power of their 66 coupons. It was easy to fritter away the coupons on 'nothing solid at all,' noted one middle-class woman. 'It's surprising how it can all go on little

⁷⁴ T. Schulz, 'Human Needs' Cost of Living for a Single Person,' Bulletin of the Institute of Statistics, vol. V, no. 9 (26 June 1943), p. 145.

⁷⁵ Clothes Rationing Survey, p. 68.

things.⁷⁶ Women from the lowest income levels found it particularly hard to plan their clothing purchases. A Mass-Observation file report from 1944 stated that clothing purchases made by the poorest women were 'unplanned and unbudgeted,' largely because such women had no constant income on which to rely, and could only make tentative plans at the best of times.⁷⁷

The consensus among observers was that the public did not have a realistic understanding of the implications of clothes rationing; this was not surprising, given the relatively generous coupon ration in 1941-42. The Board of Trade tried to encourage people to spend their coupons sensibly, not only with notices in the newspapers and on the wireless, but also in the 'Clothing Quiz' booklets that appeared each year.⁷⁸ Advertisements appeared regularly in the national papers, encouraging the public to spend clothing coupons wisely. 'Count Your Coupons', warned one such notice. 'How many have already been used? Think of the winter and decide *now* to save coupons so that the cold weather will not find you short of really necessary

⁷⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁷⁷ M-O FR 2046: Women's Clothes in Chester II; Wardrobe Stocks and Postwar Buying, p. 13.

⁷⁸ Mass-Observation studies revealed, however, that few people actually read or paid attention to official government literature. War Begins at Home (London, 1940), pp. 76-78.



The Squander Bug

things, such as shoes and stockings, to keep you warm and dry.’⁷⁹ The Squander Bug – hairy, squinting and swastika-wearing – was a central character in National Savings Committee advertisements that encouraged people to save on coupons by ‘making-do.’⁸⁰ Far less intimidating was sensible, friendly Mrs Sew-and-Sew, a fixture of the ‘Make-do and Mend’ campaign, who promoted careful coupon-spending in magazine and newspaper advertisements as well as official pamphlets.⁸¹

Editorials and advice columns in newspapers and women’s magazines exhorted readers to budget their coupons wisely. News of the World women’s columnist Julia King told women to ‘plan your new coupon “buys” with pencil and paper’ before going to the shops; even Vogue, no admirer of austerity, devised a ‘Clothes Credo.’ Women ought to ‘resolve to spend [their] curtailed coupons with resolve,’ to make ‘quite certain that [their] clothes all pay their way,’ to ‘resolve finally to have the best wardrobe ever – best in the best way: most hard-working, most intelligent, most becoming.’⁸² Its coupon-budgeting plans were thoroughly impractical: in a January 1942

⁷⁹ News of the World, 6 Sept. 1942, p. 2. See also Woman’s Own, 25 Sept. 1942, p. 2, for a similar notice.

⁸⁰ News of the World, 1 Aug. 1943, p. 2.

⁸¹ PRO INF 13/145: Make-Do and Mend Pamphlets and Posters. See Appendix A, fig. 10, for a ‘Make-Do and Mend’ publicity poster; and fig. 11, for a picture of Mrs. Sew-and-Sew.

⁸² News of the World, 6 Feb. 1944, p. 6; and Vogue, May 1942, p. 53.

article, five well-to-do women demonstrated how they would spend their coupons. Each chose one outfit that, in total, required between 39 and 45 coupons – well over half a year's ration.⁸³

In practice, it is unlikely that the average person actually sat down, formulated a coupon budget, and then stuck to it, for it was simply too difficult to predict what one's needs would be from month to month. In most families, the mother was in charge of the food ration books, and so when clothes rationing began the responsibility for the clothes coupons naturally fell to her.⁸⁴ The tendency was to pool the coupons – a perfectly legal practice – and those family members with the most pressing need for clothes took precedence, as had been the case before the war where clothing was concerned. It was quite usual for parents to give most of their coupons to their children, or for elderly people to give over all their coupons to younger relatives. One woman, who gave her coupons to her daughters, explained 'They must come first; we old ones have had our day. I think my duty is to get them well married, so they must have the best of clothes.'⁸⁵ On the other hand, an unscrupulous person could easily take advantage of coupon-pooling within the family. Helen Forrester's mother pocketed the family's clothing

⁸³ *Vogue*, Jan. 1942, pp. 46-47.

⁸⁴ Mass-Observation estimated that women controlled three-quarters of all clothing coupons. *Clothes Rationing Survey*, p. vi.

⁸⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

coupons; her daughter

suspected I would be lucky if I ever saw one of them, and, indeed, this proved to be the case. No amount of cajoling would make her part with one. 'The children must come first,' she told me loftily. But she herself never went outside the door without stockings.⁸⁶

Mass-Observation surveyors were critical of the public's failure to budget coupons carefully, and declaimed against the 'fog of uncertainty and unplanning' that enveloped the clothes rationing scheme.⁸⁷ Such attitudes suggest a degree of unfamiliarity with pre-war saving and budgeting strategies, which were essentially short-term in nature; in contrast, the methodical budgeting of clothing coupons during the war could only be done from a long-term perspective. This was the case not only among the poorest households, but also among those of the middle range. The woman who bought clothing on credit did so with only the near future in mind: she needed the clothes immediately, and was willing to accept usurious rates of interest in return for the privilege of deferred payment. Unsurprisingly, the government did not allow the public to use clothing coupons and then 'pay' for them later; and so coupons had to be allocated for purchases over a period of many months. Even middle-range women – characteristically prudent and sensible where spending was concerned – were unused to budgeting for clothing purchases over the long term: in the inter-war years, they generally

⁸⁶ Forrester, p. 137.

⁸⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. vi.

had adequate funds for the purchase of clothing, and so bought garments as the need arose, without having to devise any special long-term plan for their purchase. With clothing coupons came the necessity to plan purchases months in advance, without forgetting even the smallest item that family members might need – socks, gloves, even handkerchieves – while accurately estimating how much children might grow and how quickly existing stocks of clothing would wear out. To plan an accurate budget of a family's clothing consumption for a year would have been a triumph of logistics at the best of times; but most women were occupied by many other wartime duties and chores. In the end, few people had enough time or energy to work out an intricate clothes coupon budget, and instead used their coupons when and where the need arose: if they exhausted their ration, they either did without or, in a minority of cases, resorted to the black market in clothing coupons.

* * *

Eric Hargreaves and Margaret Gowing, writing as official historians of the war, concluded that 'clothes rationing made a substantial contribution to the war effort by making it possible to reduce civilian production without impairing morale. At the same time although it caused inconvenience it did not cause serious hardship.'⁸⁸ By and large this assessment is an accurate one: although rationing could not guarantee 'fair shares' for all, it did reduce some of the inequities of distribution and supply of clothing that occurred in the

⁸⁸ Civil Industry and Trade, p 330.

early years of the war, and it was accepted by the public on that basis.

Rationing worked well as a scheme because people believed in it: the vast majority obeyed the law not because they were cowed by fears of reprisal or punishment, but because they were convinced that the rationing of clothes and footwear was necessary to the war effort. People may not have *liked* the fact that they had so few clothes, or that they had to 'make-do and mend', but that was beside the point. Their job was to get through the war as best they could, 'do their bit', and hope to be rewarded for their efforts when victory came.

Chapter Six:

Obtaining Clothing in a Wartime Economy

With supplies of both new and used clothing at a fraction of pre-war levels, and burdened by the restrictions of austerity and increased levels of taxation, British women were compelled to alter and expand the ways in which they obtained supplies of clothing for themselves and their families. A degree of 'levelling up' can be detected in changing standards of living between the economic classes, although it would be more accurate to suggest that there was an overall movement towards the middle of the economic spectrum: even as many poor families experienced material improvements, the standard of living of middle-range families was in temporary decline.¹

To the extent, therefore, that economic divisions between the classes became less evident in wartime, so too did the ways in which women purchased and obtained clothing become more homogeneous. In the early years of the war, women from both the lower and middle range of incomes relied on their pre-war practices and strategies; but as Britain's economic situation became more grim, and clothing stocks grew scarce, women augmented these traditional methods by applying a creative, unorthodox, and occasionally illegal approach to the problem at hand: how to obtain sufficient garments and footwear for themselves and their families.

Clothing stocks, which diminished to dangerously low levels in the early years of the war, were rebuilt somewhat by the introduction of

¹ Sidney Pollard, The Development of the British Economy, 1914-1980, (3rd edition, London, 1983), p. 227; and Arthur Marwick, British Society Since 1945 (London, 1990), p. 38.

stabilizing austerity measures, although supplies of new clothing would not return to pre-war levels until well after 1945. This decline in the availability of new clothing stocks, furthermore, affected not only the purchase of new garments and footwear, but also contributed to shortages of second-hand goods: so not only was there more competition for decreased stocks of new clothing, but there was also a growing number of consumers who were eager for a share of whatever used clothing was available.

* * *

In the inter-war period, women from the middle range of incomes were most likely to obtain new clothing from a 'traditional' shop: that is, a storefront operation with goods available within (as opposed to, for example, from a catalogue or clothing club salesman). Given the near-full employment and attendant improvements in wages that occurred during the war, it might have been expected that an increased number of people made use of the 'traditional' shop for their new clothing needs. For the first time in their lives, many women from lower-income households had access to cash sums, and were no longer utterly dependent on credit. At last, the prospect of obtaining new clothing in a 'proper' shop – and paying a fair price – was a possibility. In thousands of households, a lack of money was no longer the barrier to new clothing purchases which it once had been; but in its place there appeared numerous obstacles.

Shortages of most goods resulted in increased competition among

consumers: shops were crowded and queues were lengthy. Shop opening hours rarely allowed for the increased hours of work and volunteer responsibilities of their customers. 'Unnecessary travel' was discouraged and shopping trips therefore had to take place close to home. Even the number of shops was decreasing, not only because of difficulties in maintaining stocks, but also because of labour shortages and even bomb damage.

Virtually every kind of consumable was limited in availability during the war; but only a modest proportion of items was genuinely unobtainable. True hardship, in the sense that people suffered from having to go without necessary garments or footwear, was rare, or at least no more common than in the inter-war period. People were, however, seriously inconvenienced and frustrated by the shortages, and most particularly by those items which were difficult to make or re-fashion at home. Silk stockings, for example, disappeared from the shops in 1941; and good-quality, fully-fashioned rayon stockings were only sporadically available thereafter. Anything that required elastic, such as ladies' corsets and some styles of knickers, was in similarly short supply, since most of the imported supply of rubber was diverted from civilian clothing manufacture to the war effort.²

Children's footwear was the source of much discontent. Although the

² The Austerity restrictions, known officially as the Making-Up of Civilian Clothing (Restrictions) Orders, specified economy in raw materials such as rubber. As a result, the use of elastic was banned in the manufacture of most clothing. Civil Industry and Trade, p. 437.

level of production was maintained, and in theory should have guaranteed sufficient stocks, the quality of children's shoes and boots was poor, and necessitated frequent (and expensive) repairs and replacements. A child with only one pair of shoes or boots was confined to home while they were repaired or a new pair was located.³

Occasionally, certain types of garments or footwear appeared in the shops in relative abundance, but this usually came about because of their unpopularity among the public at large. It was never very difficult to find a pair of clogs, for example, even when all-leather shoes were hardly to be found; and men's trousers without turn-ups were similarly disdained. Even after the Board of Trade 'down-pointed' their coupon requirements, such items failed to sell well.⁴

Where the majority of clothing was concerned, acute shortages were intermittent rather than sustained. From the autumn of 1945 until the spring of 1946, for example, a dearth of labour led to serious shortfalls in the clothing supply: the Board of Trade responded by slashing the coupon ration to ensure that remaining stocks were shared out more 'equitably, then increased the

³ Richard Titmuss blamed these shortages on a lack of materials for the most affordable types of shoes such as plimsolls. Problems of Social Policy, pp. 421-22. See also M-O FR 2046, p. 23.

⁴ Civil Industry and Trade, pp. 316-17. According to Mass-Observation, 'the majority of people prefer leather footwear [and] would be unlikely to buy clogs, however attractive, unless there was a definite price and coupon incentive.' M-O FR 1266: Note on Clogs (May 1942), p. 2.

ration once production levels had recovered.⁵ By the spring of 1942, the Utility regulations and clothes rationing had combined to smooth over earlier difficulties in supply and demand; and, broadly speaking, most essential items of clothing were available, at affordable prices, to consumers in most areas of the country. The Board of Trade took particular care to ensure that Utility goods were widely (and consistently) available, continually expanding the proportion of cloth and clothing that fell under the Utility umbrella. By the end of the war approximately four-fifths of all British-made cloth and clothing were stamped with the 'CC41' symbol.⁶

A series of inquiries into shortages of consumer goods, undertaken by the Wartime Social Survey between April 1943 and January 1945, revealed that most items of clothing *were* available in the shops. Success was gauged by calculating the number of respondents who bought a desired item as a percentage of those who had tried to buy it: there was a 75 per cent success rate for the purchase of men's work trousers, an 82 per cent success rate for women's overalls, and a 92 per cent success rate for men's boots or shoes.⁷ The key to success was to plan ahead. One woman recalled that she usually

⁵ Utility Fashion and Furniture, p. 33; and Civil Industry and Trade, pp. 472-73. Only 36 clothing coupons were issued between September 1945 and April 1946.

⁶ British War Economy, pp. 336-37; and Civil Industry and Trade, pp. 458-59.

⁷ Wartime Social Survey, Wartime Shortages of Consumer Goods, ed. Kathleen Box (London, 1945), p. 7.

managed to find what she wanted, but that 'it was important to start looking before you were likely to need [something] – you had to think in advance.'⁸

Just as important was the willingness to spend a considerable amount of time in search of particular items. People had to be prepared to spend long hours waiting in queues; to travel from shop to shop on crowded buses and trams; and to drop everything at a moment's notice if a shipment of something especially desirable went on sale. Margaret Goldsmith, writing in the early 1940s, went so far as to divide the British into two groups: 'defeatist shoppers' and 'victory shoppers.' Victory shoppers insisted on continuing their search from shop to shop, whenever they had the time; but defeatist shoppers gave up too easily. Goldsmith felt that most men were defeatist in this respect, while women – in particular, working-class women – tended to be much more tenacious and patient.⁹

People required a remarkable depth of stoicism in order to stand in queues, day after day, to obtain the most basic requirements of everyday life. Much has been made of the 'social life of the queue': that is, the jovial bantering and camaraderie which allegedly alleviated much of the boredom and inconvenience of standing in line. To a certain extent such an atmosphere existed – but it also could be found on crowded buses, in underground shelters, and in most other areas where people gathered

⁸ Interview with Mrs. E. H. [redacted].

⁹ Goldsmith, p. 25.

together during the war. It is incorrect to assume, however, that good-natured attempts to relieve the tedium of queuing were successful in making it anything less than a colossal waste of time and energy.¹⁰

The absence of a queue, furthermore, usually meant that a shop had little or nothing for sale. The window displays of London shops remained enticingly full, Naomi Mitchison noted, but the shelves and counters within were bare, or else occupied by expensive fripperies. In a similar vein, Clara Milburn observed in her diary that many shops 'space their goods out to look more than there really is.'¹¹

Contemporary observers remarked upon the development of 'queue mania': the irresistible compulsion to join every queue, often without knowing for what one was queuing. In the words of one woman, 'if you saw a queue during the war, no matter what it was for, you got in it!'¹² Particularly desirable items were liable to sell out within hours (or even minutes) after arrival in the shops. A woman who worked in central London during the

¹⁰ O. A. MacIvor, 'Family Life in Wartime,' Social Work, vol. 3, no. 10 (April 1946), p. 234. See also Calder, pp. 320-21.

¹¹ Naomi Mitchison, Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diaries of Naomi Mitchison, 1939-1945, ed. Dorothy Sheridan (London, 1985), p. 302; and Clara Milburn, Mrs. Milburn's Diaries: An Englishwoman's Day-to-Day Reflections, 1939-1945, ed. Peter Donnelly (London, 1979), pp. 153-54.

¹² Interview with Mrs. D. H. Mass-Observation surveys on wartime inconveniences nearly always included long queues at or near the top of the list. M-O FR 1103: Wartime Inconveniences, Feb. 1942. See also Calder, p. 321.

war recalls that

somebody would come in and say, 'Dickins and Jones have got stockings!' And the office *emptied*. And everyone – you *ran* [...] and there were girls running from every direction, and there was a queue *miles* long, and the girls in Dickins and Jones would be shelling out – you could only have two pairs – shelling out stockings like mad. I shouldn't think they'd got them in stock more than an hour – they'd all gone.'¹³

The fact that there was no guarantee of success at the end of a day of clothes shopping was especially galling. Although a registry system existed for food purchases – one signed up with a particular grocer and butcher, technically reserving a share of whatever goods were in the shop – no such registry existed among clothing shops. In some ways this was appreciated by consumers, many of whom chafed at the restrictions on food purchases; but, conversely, people could never be sure of receiving a minimum 'fair share' where clothing was concerned.¹⁴ Undoubtedly there were well-to-do customers who had private 'arrangements' with the exclusive boutiques they had patronised for years, but for the average person there was no recourse but to travel from shop to shop.

Ursula Bloom, who was a popular journalist and beauty editor at Women's Own, recorded in her journal just how bothersome clothes

¹³ Interview with Mrs. E. H. On the same topic, Mrs. M. W. observed 'if you heard they'd had a delivery [...] you just dropped everything and rushed to town, to get in the queue!'

¹⁴ Jennifer Davies, The Wartime Kitchen and Garden (London, 1993), pp. 21-23.

shopping could be.

When I could I went to London to shop – shoes were my main worry, and these I simply could not get because they appeared to be unobtainable [...] Wherever I went there were queues round the shoe shops and not so much as a smell of a pair of shoes [...] there was the greatest difficulty in even getting *into* shoe shops. One had a chair across the entrance announcing *Shop Full*. Another had a notice *No assistant will be free for fifteen minutes*. I had not the time to waste and turned away, lame and weary and very disheartened.¹⁵

The shortage of shop assistants was yet another inconvenience associated with wartime shopping. It was particularly acute in smaller shops, where goods were usually stored behind counters or in other areas which were inaccessible to customers; and even the large department stores, multiples and chain stores, where goods were displayed on racks in the open and could be examined without assistance, suffered from a dearth of staff. Those shop assistants who did remain – whose positions had not been deemed ‘inessential’ by the Ministry of Labour – were harried and overwhelmed as a result.¹⁶

In the early years of the war, a significant number of shops were forced out of business. Clothing retailers were badly affected, and among them the

¹⁵ Ursula Bloom, War Isn't Wonderful (London, 1961), pp. 171 and 173. From her diary for April 1944.

¹⁶ George Orwell, The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters, Vol. III: 1943-45, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London, 1968), pp. 276-78. An ‘As I Please’ column from the Tribune, 24 Nov. 1944. Approximately 1.5m fewer men and women were employed in the distributive trades and miscellaneous services in 1945 than in 1939. Statistical Digest, p. 8.

smallest shops were most likely to close. Between January 1940 and December 1941, 25 per cent of small clothing shops in Leeds, for example, went out of business, though only five per cent of large shops were forced to do so. Bad trade accounted for almost half the closures, but other factors such as labour difficulties, or damage caused by enemy action, were cited frequently.¹⁷ Shop closures appear to have abated once austerity measures had become fully effective; in any event those shopkeepers who were still open by 1942 found that their competition was much reduced.

* * *

Shopping for clothes, under such circumstances, was difficult in the extreme; but it was made even more troublesome by other characteristic aspects of daily life during the war.¹⁸ Women simply did not have the spare time to devote to long shopping expeditions: as was noted in Chapter Five, the average able-bodied woman spent her day engaged in war work, or was busy with unpaid work in the home or as a volunteer. If she worked outside the home, her day began early, often before shops were open; and it ended late – nine or ten hours later, with overtime common – when shops had shut for

¹⁷ Charles Madge, 'War and the Small Retail Shop,' Bulletin of the Institute of Statistics, vol. 4, suppl. 2 (4 Apr. 1942), pp. 3-4. Madge classified a small shop as having one window and one door, while a large shop had more than one door.

¹⁸ Laundering clothes became particularly tiresome during the war: soap was rationed from February 1942 onwards (sixteen ounces per person every four weeks), and fuel rationing ensured that supplies of hot water were minimal as well. Calder, p. 276; and Davies, p. 158.

the day. Her dinner hour might then have to be spent in queues at the butcher or grocer, though many shops were closed for an hour or two at midday. On Saturday, shop hours were even shorter; in any event, many war workers had a six-day week.

Little was done to ease the conflict between paid war work and shopping, which was viewed by many women as an immutable part of their household responsibilities. Indeed, among the various government ministries, it was never seriously proposed that women should abandon any of their traditional responsibilities in order to concentrate more fully on their war work. Representatives of industry and trade unions opposed any legislated change to hours of work; and shopkeepers opposed any extension of opening hours. The result was a substantial degree of absenteeism among women with household responsibilities: in some factories it was as high as ten per cent. The resulting drop in productive hours of work was grimly regarded by the authorities as evidence of 'slack' work attitudes among women workers, but this did not take into account the expectations of their families (and of those same authorities) that dinner would be on the table at the regular hour; and that home would remain a haven of peace and contentment for husbands and children.¹⁹

¹⁹ Penny Summerfield, Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict (London, 1984), pp. 99-103. The above percentages did include absenteeism for 'legitimate' reasons such as illness and bereavement.

Penny Summerfield has noted that the Ministry of Labour did consider several solutions to the problem of absenteeism caused by shopping, among them the establishment of 'neighbourhood shopping leagues.' There is evidence that some collectivisation of shopping took place: for example, members of a few branches of the WVS undertook some shopping for women war workers, though only for food and related items. No such scheme, however, was put into operation on a nationwide basis; and it should be noted that the proposed schemes were only for the collectivisation of food shopping, and did not include provisions for clothing purchases. Any such collectivisation of shopping, furthermore, would have been illegal: ration books could be borrowed only by immediate family members.²⁰

The principle of collectivisation assumed, also, that there was a pool of idle women who had ample amounts of time to undertake the chores of women war workers. While many women did remain at home throughout the war, carrying on the unpaid work of caring for their families and homes, it is inaccurate to assume that they were blessed with an abundance of free time. Activities such as shopping could be planned with more flexibility: shops could be visited during working hours, or when the children were at school. This did not mean, however, that these women had time to linger over their purchases, or that they were able to avoid queues, or that the burden of other chores was magically lessened.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

Both cooking and cleaning house were made particularly difficult by shortages of food and fuel. A remarkable amount of time was required merely to draw up a shopping list, as coupon values had to be carefully calculated and weighed against the amount of cash at hand. Volunteer duties also occupied many hours: Nella Last, for example, did not 'work' outside the home, but did spend a great deal of time volunteering for the WVS and Red Cross; even her evenings at home were frequently spent working on 'Make-do and Mend' projects for charities. Thousands of at-home mothers also worked as 'volunteer housewives', or child-minders, caring for the children of women war workers.²¹

A great many women would have been unable to continue in their essential war work without the assistance of female relatives, friends, and neighbours, but it does not appear that such assistance extended to regular shopping duties. From a practical point of view it was problematic: decisions about what to buy, and how to spend someone else's coupons, would have been extremely trying. There was also a reluctance among women to ask someone else to help with such a time-consuming chore. In the words of one woman war worker, 'you can't get anyone to do it, it's too big a thing to ask when it takes so long.'²²

²¹ Nella Last, Nella Last's War: A Mother's Diary 1939-1945, eds. Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (Bristol, 1981), pp. 75-76; and Summerfield, Women Workers, p. 93.

²² Summerfield, Women Workers, p. 117.

Another obstacle to shoppers during the war was the restrictions placed on travel. Not only did the cost of bus, tram and rail tickets increase markedly, but the frequency of service was also reduced – leading to transport vehicles that were invariably overcrowded. Petrol was so heavily rationed and taxed that few private automobiles remained on the road by 1945. Official policy was to discourage ‘unnecessary’ travel; and while local travel to nearby shops was perfectly legitimate (if nerve-wracking), travel over longer distances was acceptable only for the most pressing of reasons. The large London department stores were badly affected by these restrictions, since in the inter-war period they had derived a large proportion of their business from out-of-town visitors; during the war, these middle-range customers avoided travel and shopped locally.²³ An exception was the wealthy elite, whose journals and memoirs reveal that few felt any compunction about travelling the length and breadth of the country at a whim: trips to London for the express purpose of shopping, for example, are mentioned frequently.²⁴

Unprecedented levels of internal migration, as described in Chapter Five, only compounded the difficulties experienced by both consumers and

²³ James B. Jefferys, Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950 (Cambridge, 1954), p. 347.

²⁴ Harold Nicolson, Diaries and Letters 1939-1945, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London, 1967); Elizabeth Longford, The Pebbled Shore: The Memoirs of Elizabeth Longford (London, 1986); and Naomi Mitchison’s wartime diaries all contain frequent references to travel between London, the Home Counties, Scotland, and most points in between.

shopkeepers. Urban areas saw their populations reduced by evacuation and the destruction wrought by enemy action; while other areas, hitherto only sparsely populated, were flooded with newcomers. Pre-war patterns of distribution were, however, maintained: and so a shop that had lost much of its customers 'for the duration' was allocated a share of available goods according to an outdated quota system. Conversely, in some smaller centres the population might easily have doubled, but local shops were only allowed their pre-war quota of goods. Ministry of Food and Board of Trade officials, who oversaw the distribution of all controlled consumer goods, blamed these inequities on administrative difficulties.²⁵ In January 1943, a 'Fair Shares' scheme was established as an aid to small shopkeepers: it allowed them to claim a percentage of local supplies, and the amount to which they were entitled varied from region to region, according to estimates of current populations. This should have smoothed out some of the inequities in distribution, but in practice proved ineffective, as population patterns remained fluid throughout the war.²⁶

Not only did evacuees and war workers expect to receive their share of an inadequate local supply of goods, but their needs and tastes frequently diverged significantly from those of the local population: contemporary

²⁵ Civil Industry and Trade, pp 287-89. The Board of Trade did establish a market research organisation but never acted on any observations it may have made. *Op. cit.*, p. 332.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 274.

reports cite widespread dissatisfaction among the newcomers in regard to food (an absence of fish and chips was keenly felt), recreation (many small towns and villages had no cinema) and, of course, clothing. Margery Allingham, who lived in a small village in the south of England, was taken aback by the choice of clothes worn by London evacuees. 'To startled country eyes their inexpensive but very fashionable city clothes were grand if unsuitable.' She went on to describe the women in question as 'remarkably pretty, Jessie Matthews types,' who were 'very smart if in a rather dressed-up way for Auburn.'²⁷ Such contrasts not only served to heighten tension between 'town' and 'country', but they also made daily life more difficult for those who had to move because of the war: evacuees in search of clothing were bedeviled by shortages, hostile or uncomprehending local shopkeepers, and unfamiliar, 'old-fashioned', country tastes in clothing.

* * *

The traditional shop was not the only place where new clothing could be purchased. In the inter-war period, families from the lower income groups had relied upon retailers who readily extended the credit which was not offered by mainstream shops: chief among these were the clothing clubs and the less reputable catalogue and mail-order companies. Advertisements for these firms, so prominent in newspapers such as the News of the World in the 1930s, disappeared almost entirely after 1941; and while wartime

²⁷ Allingham, The Oaken Heart, pp. 92 and 97.

restrictions on publishing may account for the absence of some advertisements, it is necessary to note that, a decade later, only a handful of advertisements for clothing clubs and mail-order companies had reappeared in print. The figure of the clothing club salesman, so frequently mentioned in inter-war biographies and oral histories, is absent from wartime reminiscences: in his stead appeared the black marketeer, or 'spiv'.

Because the clothing clubs and fly-by-night mail-order firms had relied on garments and footwear of the lowest quality, they were badly handicapped by restrictions in clothing production. Understandably, the Board of Trade did not attempt to remedy shortfalls in the supply of shoddy goods, and in fact worked to eradicate the manufacture of such items, at least for the duration of the war. The Utility regulations were enacted as a means of ensuring well-made *and* affordably priced clothing to the public, in particular the working classes; and while Utility goods might not have been as inexpensive as clothing bought on the 'never-never' before the war, they were of higher quality and value.²⁸ Utility clothing, furthermore, was sold at controlled prices, and the sentences handed down by magistrates against retailers who inflated their prices were severe.²⁹

The Hire Purchase and Credit Sales Agreements (Control) Order,

²⁸ Civil Industry and Trade, p. 477.

²⁹ Edward Smithies, The Black Economy In England Since 1914 (Dublin, 1984), p. 71.

enacted in March 1943, further disabled opportunistic retailers. Hire purchase and credit sale agreements were prohibited for all price-controlled goods, with certain exceptions.³⁰ Because prices for most goods (and all Utility items) were fixed by the Board of Trade, retailers could no longer attract business by offering a low, initial down-payment on an item, and then make a sizeable profit with a long (and high-interest) repayment schedule. Clothing had to be purchased with cash, in one up-front payment: certainly it was less expensive this way, and hence more economical, but the effect on Britain's poorest families was hard. Improvements in wages had elevated many households out of 'below the bare minimum' status, but a core number of households did remain impoverished throughout the war years. That their numbers were fewer than in the 1930s did not diminish the suffering of those who languished in poverty; and for those families the disappearance of their only sources of new clothing was very troublesome.

Where the more mainstream and legitimate catalogue and mail-order companies were concerned, it is difficult to assess, independent of other clothing retailers, the effect of the wartime economy. Large firms such as Littlewood's continued to do business throughout the war years: even as late as 1945 their catalogue featured an attractive selection of Utility garments and footwear, although appreciably fewer styles, sizes and colours were on offer

³⁰ House of Commons Debates (Hansard), 11 Mar. 1943. Excepted were large items such as prams, bicycles and sewing machines, which would have been difficult for most people to purchase with one payment.

than in pre-war catalogues.³¹ The same problems which beset clothing shops of all sizes also afflicted the mail order and catalogue firms: they, too, had access to fewer stocks; their customers' spending was also restricted by coupon requirements; and they were subject to price controls, increased taxation, labour shortages – even bomb damage. In one respect, though, they did enjoy an advantage over other retailers: they were far more convenient, at least as far as avoiding queues and travel from shop to shop were concerned. There was, however, no guarantee that the goods described in the catalogue or in advertisements would actually be in stock once ordered.

Mail order from abroad, though illegal and punishable by fine or even imprisonment, was yet another source of new clothing. One woman remembers that her family frequently ordered goods from companies in Eire. Not only was there the risk of being caught by the authorities, but 'sometimes, of course, the parcels went down with the ships, in the Irish Sea – that was tough, and you lost your order.'³² Lady Astor was prosecuted in 1943 merely for *requesting* rationed goods from abroad; in her case it was silk stockings and dress goods from the United States. She was fined £50 (plus £10 costs) and excoriated by the magistrate, who was astonished that, as a veteran Member of Parliament, she was nonetheless ignorant of the provisions of the

³¹ Littlewood's Mail Order Stores, Autumn 1934 catalogue, pp. 24-27; Jan. 1935 catalogue, pp. 136-37; and Sept. 1945 catalogue, pp. 14-15 and 24-25.

³² Interview with Mrs. A. M.

Consumer Rationing Order of 1941.³³ It was perfectly legal to receive *unsolicited* parcels from abroad: in the United States, for example, the 'Bundles for Britain' programme allowed Americans to pay for parcels that would be sent to friends in Britain, but they were not responsible for choosing the contents of the parcel; and it was illegal for a British citizen even to ask for a 'bundle' from an American friend.³⁴

* * *

Austerity measures did not remain static; in fact, they grew progressively more uncompromising. The clothing ration became smaller – from 66 coupons in June 1941, it fell to 40 coupons in 1943 – and stocks of new clothing continued to diminish.³⁵ In seeking to keep their families clothed, women from all economic classes began to concentrate less on obtaining new clothing, and turned instead to sources of used clothing. A wardrobe of brand-new clothing, fresh from the factory, would demand the expenditure of hundreds of coupons; whereas second-hand clothes were accorded low

³³ The Times, 31 July 1943, p. 2.

³⁴ Colin and Eileen Townsend, War Wives: A Second World War Anthology (London, 1989), p. 59. From an interview with Cicely Bower. Nancy Holt's family found the American clothes they received so bizarre that they consigned them all to a jumble sale. See One Woman's War (Bognor Regis, 1983), p. 162.

³⁵ Utility Fashion and Furniture, p. 33. The ration climbed to 48 coupons in 1944 and hovered at that level thereafter.

coupon values, and in many cases were obtainable coupon-free.³⁶

Women from poverty-stricken households had long been accustomed to obtaining their clothing, new and used, from sources other than the traditional, shop-front retailer. Women from the middle range of incomes, in contrast, had never before needed to resort to such alternatives; but the situation regarding supplies of new clothing had become so grim that, in many cases, they were forced to alter drastically their methods of obtaining clothing. Such methods would have been unthinkable before the war – few would have considered purchasing anything at a jumble sale, or that clothing might be ‘swopped’ with someone outside the family circle. The fact that middle-range women were resourceful enough to adapt so markedly, and that they coped so well with the upheaval in their pre-war habits, is notable; but the historian should also acknowledge that, in venturing to try new methods of obtaining clothing, middle-range women often strayed into areas that had formerly been the province of the poorest families. In the face of such competition, impoverished families simply could not compete.

As a result, sources of second-hand clothing underwent a process of gentrification. Market stalls and old-clothes dealers were replaced by church

³⁶ The Board of Trade’s suggested ‘Standard Wardrobe,’ revised in 1944, required 244 coupons. PRO BT 64/1440. Coupons were not required if an item was sold at or below a predetermined price, reckoned according to the number of coupons that item required when new: a pair of ladies’ shoes, for example, that cost 7 coupons when new, could be sold coupon-free only if the secondhand price was below the equivalent of 1s 6d per coupon, or 10s 6d in total. PRO INF 13/153, pp. 33-34.

jumble sales and brisk WVS volunteers at Bring-and-Buy sales. Pawnbrokers, by and large, escaped the attention of middle-range households, probably because their wares were not (and had never been) particularly enticing. As was noted in Chapter Four, wartime restrictions had made clothing, in terms of its 'pledge-worthiness', less attractive to the pawnbroker: most were only prepared to accept clothing that was new and fashionable; and such garments were rare indeed by the end of the war.

With the supply of used clothing much reduced – people kept their old clothes for longer, and were less likely to sell them to a dealer, or give them to charity³⁷ – the competition for existing stocks increased dramatically. In the inter-war years, middle-range women had frequently organised sales of old clothing for the benefit of impoverished families: during the war, they tended to direct those supplies of second-hand clothing towards venues that favoured the middle-range customer. Middle-range women could afford to pay more, and so prices at jumble sales rose. At WVS Clothing Exchanges, poor women were at a similar disadvantage, for the clothing people offered for sale was assessed by the exchange organisers, and was accorded a points value. In return, one could 'buy' only clothing of equal or lesser value, and

³⁷ Mass-Observation described this as 'clothes hoarding.' M-O FR 1257: Changes in Clothing Habits 1941-42, May 1942. See also Maggie Wood, 'We Wore What We'd Got': Women's Clothes in World War II (Exeter, 1989), p. 9.

garments or footwear in poor condition were liable to be turned down.³⁸

The quality of goods that were available at such sales appears to have varied enormously. WVS Bring and Buy sales, no doubt because of the element of exchange, were known as a reliable source of used clothing; jumble sales, in contrast, were less dependable. In his novel The Ministry of Fear, Graham Greene described the difficulties faced by the stall-holders at a church fête. One stall

was sprinkled rather than filled with the strangest second-hand clothes – the cast-offs of old age – long petticoats with pockets, high lacy collars with bone supports, routed out of Edwardian drawers and discarded at last [...] and corsets that clanked. Baby clothes played only a very small part now that wool was rationed and the second-hand stall was so much in demand among friends.³⁹

The purchase of second-hand clothing was not the only source of used clothing. Clothing that was exchanged privately – between family members or friends – did not require coupons; and it appears that pre-war standards regarding the swopping of garments did relax significantly. It became perfectly respectable to exchange clothing with unrelated friends, neighbours, and even colleagues from work. Adults might even exchange clothing, although in the 1930s it was generally children who had been forced to wear

³⁸ There were 383 static clothing exchanges, and nine mobile ones which served remote villages. Charles Graves, Women in Green: The Story of the WVS (London, 1948), pp. 143-45.

³⁹ Graham Greene, Ministry of Fear (London, 1943), p. 5.

others' hand-me-downs.⁴⁰ Babies' clothes were passed from family to family, as an expectant mother's coupon ration was likely to be exhausted by the purchase of nappies alone. Thousands of women were married in borrowed wedding finery: it might be their mother's dress, re-made to suit current fashions; or it might be the dress of a friend or neighbour, recently married herself.⁴¹ Several of the women's services, as well as the costume department at Gainsborough film studios, allowed women to borrow or hire a wedding dress; while that most redoubtable of romantics, Barbara Cartland, personally amassed a collection of wedding dresses and lent them to brides, free of charge.⁴²

* * *

More familiar to middle-range women was Dame Austerity's credo: 'Make-do and Mend.' The prudent housewife of the 1930s would certainly have darned her family's socks, or carefully mended torn trousers and jumpers, before handing them over to the rag-and-bone man; and women from the poorest households made similar attempts to extend the life of even

⁴⁰ Most of the women who were interviewed remembered exchanging clothing with people outside the immediate family; it was more common to do so with children's wear, however, than with adults' clothing.

⁴¹ Wood, p. 53; and Townsend, p. 117.

⁴² Helga Hughes, Words On War: Memories of the 'Home Front' During the Second World War From the People of the Kirklees Area (Kendal, 1991), p. 84; and Picture Post, 5 Apr. 1947, pp. 10-13. Rationing regulations allowed the coupon-free hire of rationed goods for up to two weeks. PRO BT 131/39 (17 July 1941).

the shabbiest garments. In 1939, however, few among them could have guessed at the amount of time they would soon spend on the mending and re-making of clothing, nor indeed that new garments would be created out of such unorthodox materials as draughtsmen's linen, parachute silk, or even American army blankets.

Austerity measures had been introduced with the express aim of directing raw materials and labour to the war effort. They were remarkably successful – so successful, in fact, that both new and second-hand clothes were obtainable in steadily diminishing numbers; and the civilian who wanted to maintain any semblance of respectable dress had to make existing garments last as long as possible. By supplying his or her own materials and labour, 'new' garments could be fashioned out of existing clothing or materials.

A 'Make-do and Mend' campaign was launched by the Board of Trade, with the help of the Ministry of Information, in 1942. The public was encouraged to repair or renovate existing clothing in order to make it last longer; to construct new garments out of existing ones, either by picking apart an item and re-sewing it, or by incorporating portions of it into a new garment; and they were also invited to create clothing from whatever materials, no matter how unorthodox, that were readily available. 'Make-do and Mend' policy did not favour garments made from new materials, even if sewn at home; and handing the work over to a dressmaker was similarly frowned upon: the idea was to save on materials and labour as much as

possible. New dressmaking materials required just as many coupons (in some cases, more) than garments made from the equivalent amount of fabric, and in any event were just as scarce and expensive as ready-made clothing.⁴³ Dressmakers were few in number – most had been ‘called up’ – and consequently their fees were high, and their waiting lists lengthy.⁴⁴

If garments or footwear were still wearable, a woman’s first course of action was to mend or replace any worn areas. This could be as simple as a few darns across the toe of a sock, or a patch on a trouser knee.⁴⁵ It could also extend to quite complicated repairs: shoes were re-soled with bits of old tyre; the cuffs, collar and tails of a shirt might be un-picked, reversed to show the undamaged side, and then re-sewn.⁴⁶ Worn areas could be cut off and a ‘new’ garment produced: from trousers came short pants; from long coats came jaunty, short jackets.⁴⁷ With careful repairs and renovations, one could give a

⁴³ PRO BT 64/3023: ‘Make-do and Mend’ campaign, 1942-43.

⁴⁴ In one of its ‘Shophound’ columns, Vogue listed dressmakers who would repair and remodel clothing, but warned readers that they were all booked up for months ahead. Vogue, July 1944, p. 62.

⁴⁵ Pauline Forrest, Pauline: A Portrait of My Younger Self, 1939-1945 (Bath, 1992), p. 114. Mrs. G. M. also recalled, when interviewed, that her evenings were generally occupied with tedious darning of socks and stockings.

⁴⁶ Ted Walker, The High Path (London, 1982), p. 77; and Bloom, p. 122.

⁴⁷ Mrs. F. P. described how, when a long winter coat of hers became worn at the waist, she shortened it to jacket-length and continued to wear it for several years.

garment a 'new lease of life.'⁴⁸

Entirely new garments were fashioned out of old clothes. If a garment was very worn in several areas, its seams were unpicked and the pieces of fabric that it yielded were used for something new. An old dress that had 'gone' under the arms, for instance, could be transformed into a pinafore.⁴⁹ Helen Forrester's creations included several blouses that were culled from a neighbour's evening gown, and a blouse which began life as a man's frilled evening shirt.⁵⁰ The clothing of absent servicemen provided a rich source of materials: trousers were transformed into skirts, and children's clothes emerged from old shirts and jackets. One woman greeted her demobilised husband in the following outfit: 'I met him at the station in his pants (a bit of lace had made them into knickers), his shirt as a blouse, his pyjama jacket as a blazer [...] and he never even noticed.'⁵¹

Knitted garments were relatively easy to remake: once unravelled, the resulting wool could be knit into practically any sort of garment. From bits and pieces – old socks, moth-eaten cardigans, and the like – wool was

⁴⁸ Interview with Mrs. G. M.

⁴⁹ Woman's Own, 24 Oct. 1941, p. 10. Readers were offered a pattern for the pinafore frock, together with instructions on how to obtain the fabric they required by picking apart an old dress.

⁵⁰ Helen Forrester, Lime Street at Two, p. 154.

⁵¹ Wood, p. 28.

reclaimed and soon incorporated into new clothes. One woman remembers that her sister knitted her a pretty dress from green wool, but because she was a teenager she soon outgrew it. It was then unravelled, and re-knitted into another dress, this time with different coloured sleeves and trim, to eke out the wool. When that dress grew shabby, the wool was unravelled for a second time, and used to make a cardigan. As she recalls, 'that [wool] did for three garments – [it] had to, because there weren't the materials.'⁵²

The resourcefulness and creativity of ordinary people was particularly evident in the uses which were accorded to the most improbable of materials. The use of parachute silk for ladies' knickers, slips, brassieres and even wedding dresses is well documented, as is the popularity of woollen blankets, which were made into coats. Apparently American army blankets – an attractive shade of dove grey – were much preferred to the khaki-coloured British army blankets.⁵³ Other unorthodox sources of material included surveyors' offices, where old linen maps yielded (after much boiling to remove the ink) soft, durable material for underwear and shirts; grocers' and agricultural stores, where flour and feed bags were used for similar ends; and even, bizarrely, an undertaker's, where bomb-damaged casket lining material, originally bright purple, was soaked in water by one resourceful family until

⁵² Interview with Mrs. A. M. See also Forrester, Lime Street at Two, p. 217.

⁵³ Madeline Ginsburg, Wedding Dress 1740-1970 (London, 1981), pp. 50-51; Townsend, p. 127; and Wood, p. 24.

it faded to an attractive shade of blue-grey, and was then used to make two long-sleeved winter dresses.⁵⁴

Advice on every aspect of 'Make-do and Mend' was plentiful: the women's page in newspapers, though preoccupied with discussions on the stretching of food rations, nonetheless often included tips on clothing repair and renovation.⁵⁵ A more fertile source of inspiration were the women's weeklies, which consistently offered sewing and knitting patterns, although the designs grew very economical and austere. Woman's Own, for example, was hesitant to advocate the purchase of new fabric or yarn, and instead showed readers how to pick apart old clothes, or unravel shrunken jumpers, to collect the materials they required.⁵⁶ Another source of advice was Picture Post, which introduced a 'Practical Living' feature in February 1941. In that issue, 'society' milliner Aage Thaarup showed readers how to create a hat out of three-eighths of a yard of felt and a fistful of assorted trimmings. Picture Post readers were also regaled with articles describing the conversion of an old bedspread into a winter coat, as well as knitting patterns for multi-

⁵⁴ Wood, pp. 24-25; and Norman Longmate, How We Lived Then: A History of Everyday Life During the Second World War (London, 1971), p. 251.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Julia King's column in the News of the World, found most weeks during the war on pages four or six.

⁵⁶ Woman's Own, 28 Sept. 1940, p. 22 (how to renovate worn-out coats); 27 Feb. 1942, pp. 12-13 (seven different ways to renovate worn clothing); and 4 Feb. 1944, p. 9 (reknit a shrunken jumper).

*Go through
your wardrobe*



A Board of Trade poster.



Make do and Mend:
model wears a black chiffon blouse made from an old dinner dress and
a lilac pink hat made out of material from an evening gown

coloured garments that were created from scraps of wool.⁵⁷ Even Vogue attempted to cultivate enthusiasm for 'Make-do and Mend.' In an April 1944 article entitled 'Private Practice', socialites shared their favourite tips for economising on clothes. One had remade her old, out-of-fashion evening gowns into blouses and lingerie; another was enamoured of jumble sales. Women were encouraged to raid their grandmothers' closets, and to fashion their own accessories out of such lowly materials as hessian and unbleached muslin.⁵⁸

The Board of Trade, in collaboration with the Ministry of Information, issued a series of 'Make-do and Mend' pamphlets, with the unrelentingly cheery cartoon figure 'Mrs Sew-and-Sew' as their star. She advised expectant mothers how to fashion a layette for their babies from a minimum of materials, as well as how to adapt their own garments for maternity wear. She demonstrated methods of reinforcing clothing to make them more durable. Mrs Sew-and-Sew warned women to 'think before you cut!' when renovating clothing, and advised them to become their family's 'Clothes Doctor.'⁵⁹ Mrs Sew-and-Sew also appeared in Board of Trade advertisements in newspapers and magazines, posters and banners; and she was featured in

⁵⁷ Picture Post, 15 Feb. 1941, pp. 30-31; 26 July 1941, pp. 26-27; and 27 Feb. 1943, p. 24.

⁵⁸ Vogue, Apr. 1944, pp. 39-41; June 1943, p. 42; and Jan. 1944, pp. 56-57.

⁵⁹ PRO INF 13/145.

'Make-do and Mend' talks on the BBC Home Service.⁶⁰ Both the WVS and Women's Institutes offered a helping hand to those who lacked even the most rudimentary of sewing skills: at clothing exchanges, the WVS gave advice on how to renovate clothing, while both organisations ran 'Make-do and Mend' classes on a regular basis.⁶¹ Perhaps the commonest source of help and advice was female relatives, friends and neighbours. Tips were exchanged, as were skills: a bit of embroidery work, for example, in return for a spot of knitting.⁶²

Judging from the ubiquity of 'Make-do and Mend' in contemporary accounts, almost everyone in Britain found themselves observing the dictates of austerity by following the spirit – if not always the letter – of Mrs. Sew and Sew's recommendations. Mass-Observation survey results from 1943, charting changes in clothing habits between 1941 and 1943, revealed that women were twice as likely to keep clothes for longer periods, and were almost four times as likely to do more repairs to those clothes.⁶³ Another

⁶⁰ PRO 13/144; and Asa Briggs, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume III: The War of Words (London, 1970), p. 41.

⁶¹ Graves, pp. 171 & 143-44; Cicely McCall, Women's Institutes (London, 1943), p. 47; and Piers Dudgeon, ed., Village Voices: A Portrait of Change in England's Green and Pleasant Land 1915-1990 (London, 1989), pp. 93-94.

⁶² Interviews with Mrs. A. M., Mrs. G. M., and Mrs. E. H.

⁶³ M-O FR 1699R, p. 1.

survey, undertaken in 1944, showed that the majority of women did some home clothes-making, although in many cases this consisted of knitting rather than sewing. Furthermore, women were more than twice as likely to do their own sewing as they were to hire a dressmaker.⁶⁴

On the other hand, because most women were so busy with the double burden of war work and keeping house, it is unlikely that they were left with much time, let alone energy, to devote to complicated renovations and repairs to clothing. A Home Intelligence report from late 1942 confirmed that women appreciated the advice provided by the 'Made Do and Mend' campaign, but also cautioned that 'women have little time nowadays for elaborate mending.'⁶⁵

Not everyone was completely faithful to the principles of austerity: some women (usually upper-class) continued to purchase new clothing each season and, if reduced to wearing last season's outfits, had them skilfully re-made by the couture house from which they originated. The Board of Trade was forced to ration upholstery material after existing stocks were snapped up by bargain-hunters and transformed into clothing; towels and knitting wool were rationed for the same reason.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ M-O FR 2045.

⁶⁵ PRO INF 1/293, Dec. 1942.

⁶⁶ PRO INF 13/153, p. 37. Some people had obtained wool on the pretext of knitting socks, scarves and gloves for servicemen, and then kept the wool for their own purposes. In August 1941, the Board of Trade required

* * *

The activities described above, while flouting the spirit of austerity and 'fair shares for all', were not, strictly speaking, illegal. Illegality remained the province of the black market which, though flourishing, was never as omnipresent as its counterparts in France or the United States. Certainly, it never gave the authorities cause for alarm: the Board of Trade, in internal discussions regarding the black market, accepted that 'black market activities have not been on such a scale as to call for propaganda [...] the proportion of goods escaping control is believed to be relatively small.'⁶⁷

Where clothing was concerned, there was a black market in coupons and in the goods themselves; and both involved many different levels of criminal activity. Least serious, in the eyes of the authorities, was the sale of coupons from one party to another: poor families, for example, frequently sold their coupons, as they had not enough cash to buy new clothes. Coupons fetched anywhere from 6d to one shilling each, and an entire book of coupons was worth £5 in 1944.⁶⁸ A social worker was moved to characterise this activity as belonging to the 'grey market', and the result of poverty rather than

anyone doing 'charitable' knitting to register with a knitting party. PRO BT 131/39 (26 Aug. 1941).

⁶⁷ BT 64/793: Black Market and Forged Coupons.

⁶⁸ Civil Industry and Trade, p. 328; Nancy Sharman, Nothing to Steal: The Story of a Southampton Childhood (London, 1977), p. 114; and White, p. 22.

greed.⁶⁹ The other source of coupons was forgery, which became quite a profitable industry in certain London neighbourhoods.⁷⁰ Forgers concentrated on clothing coupons, rather than those for food, because unlike food coupons they did not have to be used in specified shops, and also because they were valid for longer periods.⁷¹

The other arm of the black market was concerned with actual garments and footwear. These were obtained either from manufacturers operating illicitly, or as a result of wholesale theft, or through the more random activities of pilferers.⁷² Again, there were judged to have been varying levels of criminality: the worker at a hosiery factory who pocketed a pair of stockings was not criminal to the same degree as the organised gangs of 'spivs' in London or Leeds. It is unlikely that the ordinary citizen who bought a rationed item and did not use any coupons, or who accepted something 'with no questions asked' from a shopkeeper or acquaintance, considered himself or herself a criminal. No matter how innocent the transaction in which he or

⁶⁹ MacIvor, p. 235.

⁷⁰ Samuel, pp. 259-260. Arthur Harding recalls 'there were people who were making fortunes for themselves out of rationing. Vast quantities of forged coupons were put on the market [...] The forging was done in the West End – all round Shaftesbury Avenue but they were sold in the East End. I knew some bleeding villains that was at it.'

⁷¹ 'The Black Market,' Bulletin of the Institute of Statistics, vol. 4, no. 4 (14 Mar. 1942), p. 99; and Civil Industry and Trade, p. 327.

⁷² Smithies, The Black Economy, p. 75.

she had taken part, however, at some level criminal activity *had* been involved: warehouses were robbed for their rationed contents, and counterfeiters were responsible for bogus coupons, which were, in any event, almost as valuable as money.⁷³

The authorities paid little attention to the ordinary person's forays into the black market, but they were active in their pursuit of organised criminal gangs. In 1942 the Board of Trade appointed George Yendell, formerly a Superintendent at Scotland Yard, to the position of Chief Enforcement Officer. In charge of a staff of some 200 inspectors (who did not, it should be noted, have police powers), his brief was to stamp out organized criminal activity where clothing and clothes coupons were concerned. Yendall was paraphrased by The Times as saying that his inspectors were not interested in 'the little girl in the factory or the poor woman in the street who bought a pair of stockings,' but rather the 'people behind the scenes who were operating illegal deals in clothes.' He described the black market as a 'traitor's market,' adding, 'we are after the big fish, not the little fish.'⁷⁴ Punishments for what the authorities considered to be organised black market activity were severe: penalties handed down to the members of one Manchester coupon-forging

⁷³ Edward Smithies, Crime in Wartime: A Social History of Crime in World War Two (London, 1982), pp. 79-80.

⁷⁴ The Times, 2 June 1942, p. 2. See also Roy Ingleton, The Gentlemen at War: Policing Britain 1939-45 (Maidstone, 1994), pp. 283-84.

ring ranged from four months to four years penal servitude.⁷⁵

It appears to have been accepted, by the Board of Trade in particular, and the government in general, that a certain level of black market activity was inevitable, and was even to be welcomed. It acted as a 'safety valve' for discontent, allowing people the opportunity to obtain 'that little bit extra' which they considered to be no more than their fair share.⁷⁶ If black market activity had been pervasive, the entire system of rationing and controls would have collapsed; as it was, most people's involvement in illicit activities was occasional and limited. Such involvement also appears to have been marked by feelings of guilt, as in the case of one woman who decided not to buy any more black market goods: 'I felt dreadful, my husband was fighting and his wife was acting against the war effort.'⁷⁷ There were some cases of truly staggering theft, such as the Brighton woman who was convicted of stealing 80,000 clothes coupons from a local Food Office where they had been stored, or the worker from a hosiery factory who was caught when she attempted to leave the premises whilst wearing more than fifty

⁷⁵ The Times, 16 May 1942, p. 2.

⁷⁶ M-O FR 1781, p. 3: 'belief in the existence of an extensive black market acts as an emotional outlet for difficulties in obtaining goods.' See also Smithies, The Black Economy, p. 65.

⁷⁷ Dorothy Scannell, Dolly's War (London, 1975), pp. 105-6; and Civil Industry and Trade, p. 424. Black market activities resulted in approximately 2,000 prosecutions a year, a relatively small number. PRO BT 64/793.

separate undergarments.⁷⁸

Rising wages, when combined with a strictly controlled wartime economy, meant that many people were left with a frustrating excess of money, and few goods on which to spend it. Among some, particularly those whose finances had only recently improved, the urge to spend money was very powerful; and it was combined with a conviction among many people (often those who had only recently become eligible for income tax) that the government would take away their money if they did not spend it quickly.⁷⁹ If they could not spend their wages legally, within the constraints of rationing, then they were likely to do so illicitly, via the black market.

* * *

Women's methods of obtaining clothing, so diverse in the decades before 1939, became steadily more homogeneous as Dame Austerity tightened her grip around Britain. The issue of how and where to obtain clothing became a worrisome problem for the majority of women, who encountered increasing competition as they tried to secure, both for themselves and for their families, a share of the dwindling supply of both new and used clothing. And although the number of families living in poverty had decreased as a result of rising levels of employment and higher wages, none the less there

⁷⁸ House of Commons Debates (Hansard), 18 Mar. 1943; and The Black Economy, p. 80.

⁷⁹ Last, p. 93.

remained a substantial number of households who could not obtain a fair share of clothing in the face of competition from those who were more affluent.

It should be noted that economic hardships suffered in Britain, though admittedly severe among the poorest families, were as nothing compared to the realities of daily life in occupied countries on the Continent. Utter privation prevailed in many regions, and the issue of whether or not one could find an adequate supply of clothing was unimportant when measured against the battle for survival that faced so many millions of people.⁸⁰ Had Britain been invaded, as many expected in the summer of 1940; or had economic and military aid not been forthcoming from the Commonwealth and, crucially, the United States, then conditions in Britain would have become unimaginably more austere.

⁸⁰ See C. G. Cruikshank, The German Occupation of the Channel Islands (Oxford, 1975); Peter Slowe, Battlefield Berlin: Siege, Surrender and Occupation, 1945 (London, 1988); and John F. Sweets, Choices in Vichy France: The French Under Occupation (Oxford, 1986).

Chapter Seven:

Dame Austerity and Fashion

The British government's economic policies concerning clothing – rationing, the Utility regulations, and the Austerity directives – are often assumed to have been the source of the increasingly utilitarian styles in clothing which predominated in women's dress throughout much of the 1940s. Although frequently dismissed as an aberration by fashion and dress historians,¹ the prevailing silhouette of the 1940s – squared-off, slim, and streamlined – was remarkably similar to that of a decade earlier. Popular dress in this period was not the result of government initiatives that had been imposed from above upon an unwilling public. Though sober and dull in the eyes of fashion enthusiasts, wartime styles were a product of the tastes and prevailing mood of the British public. People did grow bored with the same clothes year after year, and frequently became disenchanted with the frugal styles, but anything else – lightning changes in fashion, or elaborate, fussy clothing – would have made daily life during the war more difficult. It was understood that the war effort necessitated a temporary lapse in many peacetime conventions: one of these was fashionable change.

The styles of the period also suited the changing context of women's lives. During the war, women undertook paid work outside the home in unprecedented numbers – work that frequently entailed arduous labour in

¹ See, for example, the discussion of wartime clothing and fashion in the following: Cecil Beaton, The Glass of Fashion (London, 1954), pp. 255-57; Black and Garland, A History of Fashion, pp. 331-32; and Alan Mansfield and Phillis Cunnington, Handbook of English Costume in the Twentieth Century, 1900-1950 (London, 1973), pp. 192-95.

one of the heavy industries. Women joined the auxiliary services by the thousands, spending most of their waking lives in uniform. Women travelled as never before, uprooted by evacuations, bomb damage, and the duties of their war work. These, together with many other transformations wrought by the war, resulted in remarkable changes to the context of daily life for women. Even if, outwardly, a woman's life appeared unaltered – perhaps she was a young mother, and so stayed at home and did not take up paid work – the context of her life changed, for she was living in a culture and an economy that were dominated by conditions of austerity. Naturally, the clothes that she – and all women – wore reflected the alterations in everyday life that resulted from inter-war Britain's rebirth as a home front.

Styles remained virtually unchanged for the best part of the 1940s, and pre-war fashions ossified into patterns of dress that were uniform and standardised. This does not mean, however, that fashion and clothing were considered unimportant, or that people were not interested in how they looked. Even as the clothes ration was cut to the bone, and civilians 'made do' with ever more meagre wardrobes, their personal appearance (particularly that of young women) was considered vital to the war effort. Clothing, as well as associated aspects of personal appearance such as cosmetics and hairstyles, were important morale-boosters, and were presented as such by the government to the public.

Wartime fashions were characterised by slim, knee-length skirts, crisp tailoring, squared-off shoulders, and the frugal use of trimmings and decoration. The general silhouette of women's clothing echoed that of the late 1930s, when notably well-dressed women such as Marlene Dietrich and the Duchess of Windsor favoured streamlined gowns and spare, impeccably tailored suits. High Street styles mirrored those of the *haute couture*, although the Edwardian-inspired fashions of the last season or two before the outbreak of war – elaborate, frou-frou precursors of the 'New Look' – were not taken up enthusiastically by a public that was girding itself for war.²

The general silhouette of the 1930s was preserved, then, but most constituent details changed in response to the wartime economy and cultural climate. Skirt lengths shortened until they barely grazed the knee, and features of clothing design that were perceived as a waste of fabric – pleats, full gathers, cutting on the bias – were eliminated. Women's blouses and dresses were similarly shorn of embellishments: lapels narrowed, sleeves shortened and became tighter, and trimmings such as buttons and pockets were added sparingly.³

The introduction of the Utility regulations, as discussed in Chapter

² Mulvagh, pp. 126-29.

³ Penelope Byrde, *A Visual History of Costume: The Twentieth Century* (London, 1986), pp. 73-76; Jane Dorner, *Fashion in the Forties and Fifties* (New York, 1975), pp. 7-9; and Ewing, pp. 143-44.

Five,⁴ affected clothing styles only indirectly. Manufacturers of yard goods and clothing were required to economise on materials and labour, and to devote the bulk of their output to Utility goods. Simplicity, both in construction and in general style, was the result, in part because manufacturers were obliged to produce a minimum amount of fabric or garments from the supplies with which they were furnished. An extravagant use of materials would seriously diminish their profits, and likely incur the displeasure of the Board of Trade (who then might transfer production of their Utility quota to a competitor). Utility cloths and clothing only were required only to be produced under conditions of economic austerity: their appearance and design were not regulated, nor were details regarding trim and embellishments.⁵

In contrast, the Austerity directives, introduced as the 'Making-Up of Civilian Clothing (Restrictions) Orders' in 1942 and 1943, while also enacted as a means of saving on materials and labour, were directly concerned with the construction, contents, and design of yard goods and fabrics. The restrictions can be broadly divided into five categories.⁶ First, there were controls over trimmings: manufacturers were forbidden to add fur or leather trim, embroidery, appliqués, or any ornamental stitchery to their products.

⁴ See pp. 181-83.

⁵ Civil Industry and Trade, p. 433.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 437-39.

The savings in material were minimal, but the speed and efficiency of production were increased. Second, economy in raw materials was dictated. Rubber, steel and silk were scarce in a Britain under blockade, and all were vital to the production of war materiel. Once they were banned (or severely rationed) for use in civilian clothing, items such as steel-shanked buttons and buckles, and anything containing elastic, disappeared from shops 'for the duration'.⁷ Another regulation compelled manufacturers to adopt long production runs by limiting the number of designs they could produce in a given year. For example, a women's dress manufacturer, which before the war might have produced several hundred different designs, was restricted to only fifty designs a year; as a result, the same garments were produced for longer periods, and less time, labour and material were wasted in changing over from one production run to the next. A fourth regulation laid down minimum standards of production. The ways in which seams were finished were regulated; and the amount of material used in the construction of certain garments, as well as their sizing, was specified. Interestingly, this meant that manufacturers were prevented from using *too little* material: it was tempting for them to maximise profits by drawing up patterns that skimped on material for sleeves and trousers, but ill-fitting, uncomfortable, and ultimately uneconomic clothing would have been the result.

⁷ Silk stockings had been banned for civilian consumption in December 1940. By March 1941 they had vanished from the shops, although they were still produced for export purposes. Civil Industry and Trade, p. 106.

Fifth, and most notorious, were the restrictions on design. Pleats, seams, buttons and buttonholes were rationed; maximum widths were fixed for collars, hems, belts and sleeves. Double cuffs on shirts and turn-ups on trousers were banned. The design restrictions on men's clothing remained in place until early 1944, when they were removed in consideration of the tastes and morale of demobilised soldiers; women's clothing designs remained regulated until the spring of 1946.

The Austerity regulations were, on the whole, a successful adjunct to clothes rationing and the Utility regulations: precious materials were saved, workers were diverted to more pressing tasks, and production of clothing was further streamlined. They were, however, extremely unpopular; and evasion, whether of a minor or a more flagrant nature, was widespread. When ornamental stitchery was banned, manufacturers simply stencilled on designs. Turn-ups on men's trousers were never successfully eradicated: many men simply purchased their trousers an inch or two too long and then added the turn-ups later.⁸

The Austerity directives were despised by the public for the same reason that clothes rationing and the Utility regulations were tolerated and even appreciated: while the latter two were perceived as fair and just, the

⁸ *Ibid.*, George Orwell was glad to see the end of turn-ups, declaring 'if we were really fighting for turned-up trouser ends, I should be inclined to be pro-Axis. Turn-ups have no function except to collect dust, and no virtue except that when you clean them out you occasionally find a sixpence there.' *Collected Essays*, vol. III, p. 89.

restrictions imposed under Austerity were dismissed as petty and nit-picking by disgruntled civilians. People were already making great sacrifices for the war effort, and had adjusted with minimal complaint to a much-reduced supply of clothing. Clothing was plain, serviceable and, frankly, dull; but the Board of Trade then added insult to injury by depriving people of what were regarded as civilising – and therefore *necessary* – elements of everyday dress. Having to do with far fewer clothes was bad enough: that any new clothes one could acquire did not have enough pockets, or were devoid of any stylistic detail, was galling indeed.⁹

The Austerity restrictions also meant that the quality of some items was compromised. A ban on elastic in the manufacture of most garments meant that underwear and socks were in need of constant (and embarrassing) adjustment,¹⁰ while the quality of women's corsets was such that one respondent to Mass-Observation described them as 'a disgrace', asserting that they were 'money thrown away.' It should be noted that corsets, by the early 1940s, bore little resemblance to the whaleboned contraptions of the Victorian era. Instead, they were worn as a supportive undergarment; and women who

⁹ When the Austerity regulations were lifted from men's clothing in 1944, Hugh Dalton – the minister responsible for introducing them – commented, 'we have done something to lift the morale of the country – particularly the morale of the men. The morale of women has always been high, but that of the men has been depressed by not having enough pockets.' Cited by Calder, p. 280.

¹⁰ Safety pins – so useful for keeping knickers safely in place – were treasured during the war. See White, p. 64.

were accustomed to the support of a corset suffered unpleasant back pain as a result of going without.¹¹

While public response to the 'obnoxious' restrictions on clothing design was one of chagrin and distaste,¹² members of the fashion industry were utterly horrified. Well before the imposition of government regulations, designers and the fashion press had been distressed by what they perceived as the abandonment of fashion by British women. Victor Stiebel, a prominent London *couturier*, clearly disapproved of the way that women seemed to forget about their appearance in the early months of the war. 'It was frightful – women seemed to feel that now at last they could forget all about fashion and go about as they liked. The way they walked about Bond Street and Piccadilly with no hats and those disgusting slacks! Horrible!'¹³ In a similar vein, Vogue editorialised that fashion was 'no surface frivolity but a profound instinct,' and was part of 'an irresistible Life Force' which was crucial to the maintenance of civilised society.¹⁴ A representative of the Wool Secretariat, speaking at a fashion industry gala in December 1939, proclaimed

¹¹ M-O FR 2046, p. 18. See also C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington, The History of Underclothes, first publ. 1951 (London, 1992), pp. 244-45 and 250.

¹² Calder, p. 280.

¹³ M-O FR 28: Preliminary Report on Fashion, Feb. 1940, p. 1.

¹⁴ Vogue, Jan. 1940, p. 11.

You can't ration fashion! Whether you like it or whether you don't, fashion is going on. The last war didn't stop it. The French Revolution didn't stop it. This war certainly won't stop it! [...]

You must continue to buy the best to look your best. It means you daren't ration fashion (which is part of the heritage for which we are fighting). It means you must continue to [...] dress elegantly, and shop cheerfully.¹⁵

Brave words indeed; but by June 1941, when it was starkly evident that fashion could and *would* be rationed, the tone of such commentary had changed. 'Fashion', so far as the pre-war, accepted notion of the word was concerned, was set aside 'for the duration': no longer did 'fashion' involve or even require frequent, abrupt, and noticeable changes in style. In Britain at least, during the Second World War, 'fashion' became little more than a byword for attractive, presentable clothing in the one style – simple, spare, and practical – that predominated. Fashionable change virtually ceased to exist, though designers and the fashion press continued to present and write about 'new' vogues that were, in fact, merely variations on an established theme. Vogue admitted as much in early 1941:

There will be no breathtaking changes this season. No headline innovations [...] What was right and reasonable last year will be right and reasonable this [year]. The fun will lie in subtle amendments, prophetic tendencies that will be flattering to your fashion sense to find.¹⁶

In retrospect such admissions – which were echoed by most journalists of

¹⁵ M-O TC 18, Box 5, File A.

¹⁶ Vogue, Feb. 1941, p. 35.

fashion as well as the designers themselves – seem admirably broad-minded. Anyone with an interest in the fashion industry must have been gripped by a sense of panic when, by 1943, the extent of the limitations upon clothing and design had become evident. Control of nearly every aspect of the creative and manufacturing process was ceded to the Board of Trade; and those designers and manufacturers who wished to remain in business had no choice but to comply. Failure to do so could result in permits for goods and labour being revoked, or even fines and imprisonment if controlled goods were used in the manufacture of unregulated clothing.¹⁷

Vogue did its best to appear cheerful under the circumstances, maintaining that despite all the regulations the government had ‘no desire or intention to regiment fashion.’ Austerity meant ‘not a fashion revolution but a narrowing of the fashion field – well suited to these restricted times.’¹⁸ Fashion, an editorial asserted, would persist, though ‘shorn of its trimmings. The paring down of details and decoration heightens the stark excellence of inspired cut, the dramatic flare of brilliant colour.’¹⁹

The fashion industry had no alternative but to follow government policy, and in fact appears to have done so willingly. Certainly the opinions

¹⁷ Civil Industry and Trade, pp. 111-12; and Smithies, The Black Economy, pp. 68-71.

¹⁸ Vogue, June 1942, p. 29.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

voiced by Vogue were affected by the possibility of censorship – at times, Vogue editorials are infused with a rather hollow enthusiasm that seems contrived – but it is also true that the fashion industry as a whole accepted the need for economy in design and production. A belief in ‘fair shares’ did not lie behind the fashion industry’s support for austerity; in any event, such support had not been granted with alacrity. They were, rather, thinking of the future interests of the British fashion industry: with Paris isolated behind Axis lines, London was poised to take centre stage in the fashion world – or so Vogue theorised. It, and other fashion pundits, hoped that Britain might take the place of France in the export trade to the United States and South America – and such trade did become vital to the war effort, as well as post-war reconstruction.²⁰ According to Vogue, the London fashion industry played a vital role in the war effort. ‘We extol the excellence of the London Collections, with their achievements for home and export [...] Trade brings wealth. Wealth brings power. Power brings victory.’²¹

The Board of Trade were quick to turn to the fashion community for help in making Utility clothing more palatable, and invited the members of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers to create Utility fashions. Each designer – among them Hardy Amies, Digby Morton and

²⁰ Vogue, Sept. 1940, p. 27; and Paul Addison, Now the War is Over: A Social History of Britain 1945-51, first publ. 1985 (London, 1995), p. 187.

²¹ Vogue, Mar. 1941, p. 33.

Victor Steibel – submitted a version of the four ‘basic’ Utility outfits (a coat, suit, afternoon dress, and cotton ‘overall’ dress). The results were pooled anonymously and a selection was chosen by the Board of Trade for mass production the following spring.²²

Fashion designers appear to have accepted the limitations that a wartime economy imposed on their creative efforts. When Mass-Observation interviewed Aage Thaarup, a well-known milliner, in the spring of 1940, he was unruffled by the restrictions he faced. ‘It’s no good thinking of something you want to make when you can’t get the materials [...] so you look and the materials you have got, [you] get ideas from them. So now ideas are affected by the war and conditions.’ Similar comments were made by designer Digby Morton in an interview with Mass-Observation two years later.²³

Fashion, then, no longer demanded change, and instead required only that women take care with their appearance and make the best of what they had. In the early years of the war, when wardrobe contents had not diminished excessively, it was easier to cultivate a tone of enthusiasm when discussing issues of clothing and style. By 1944, however, when clothing stocks were at their lowest, and the ration amounted to virtually nothing, it

²² Vogue, Oct. 1942, pp. 25-26; and Utility Fashion and Furniture, p. 33. One of Victor Steibel’s designs is shown in Appendix A, Fig. 7.

²³ M-O TC 18, Box 2, File B; and Box 4, File E.

was much harder to speak of clothing in anything but the most utilitarian terms. Vogue was undaunted, and in an article that profiled exceedingly stark, spare designs – the result of acute shortages of both materials and labour – it declared that ‘smooth fit is beauty at work in 1944.’²⁴ According to Vogue, it was fashionable to have slim-fitting clothing that year (never mind that there was no alternative); and its willingness to turn dire necessity into a virtue was echoed by other magazines such as Woman’s Own and Picture Post.

Historians of dress have tended to condemn wartime fashions for their dreary, unchanging ‘sameness’. In doing so, they fail to realise that the prevailing styles of the 1940s, though boring to the fashion enthusiast, were none the less accepted by most people with little dissent. The styles of clothing being worn were in accord with both the practical needs of the British people, as well as with the wartime *zeitgeist*, which not only dictated, but preferred, the tempering influence of austerity. The fact that austerity in all forms became deeply unpopular after 1945 is beside the point: during the war moderation and restraint in all things were expected of, and by, the British people.

That austere styles in clothing were not only accepted, but in fact were preferred, is clear from the appearance of non-Utility clothing designs in the period before the Austerity directives had taken effect. Even though

²⁴ Vogue, Feb. 1944, p. 29.

designers could, in theory, create clothing that was as opulent and extravagant as they wished, they instead confined themselves to designs that were remarkably similar to those being produced under the Utility label.²⁵ Utility clothes, no matter how severe, always sold well in the shops, and not merely because stocks were scarce and the public starved for choice. Utility clothes were well-made and reasonably priced: altogether, with a few exceptions, they were considered good value for money.²⁶ Elaborate, impractical clothing was *unfashionable* because it did not suit the context of everyday life. People required their clothes to be practical, simple, and hard-wearing, and so those attributes became, for a time, positively fashionable.

A desire for, and love of, beautiful and luxurious clothes did not evaporate entirely. High fashion may have been banished from its usual habitats – Paris was behind enemy lines, and the pages of *Vogue* were awash in Utility designs and society matrons demonstrating ‘make-do and mend’ – but it continued to find expression in the realm of the imagination. With the help of popular fiction, cinema and the theatre, the dreariness of home-front life might, for a time, be banished.

Classic works of fiction were enormously popular – the novels of Jane Austen were in great demand, not only for their intrinsic value but also, one

²⁵ Ewing, p. 143; and an article on non-Utility clothing in *Vogue*, Sept. 1942, pp. 50-51.

²⁶ M-O FR 1143: Report on Utility Clothing Schemes, Mar. 1942. Ladies’ Utility corsets, as described earlier (see p. 248), were generally of poor quality.

suspects, for her appealing portrait of late-Georgian Britain. Although written during the Napoleonic Wars, Austen's stories were almost devoid of reference to them – apart from the occasional description of the uniforms worn by naval officers or Guards captains. The public's thirst for reading material was such that lesser works also sold out rapidly. Georgette Heyer's Regency romances were stuffed with descriptions of intricately-tied cravats, delicate lace fichus, sumptuous silken ballgowns and riding habits of immaculate cut: altogether an absorbing, if slight, diversion from present-day austerity.²⁷

Those who were starved for pretty clothes might also enjoy, however vicariously, the costumes worn by actresses of both the stage and screen. Apart from a few weeks in September 1939, when the authorities misguidedly ordered the closure of all public entertainment venues, cinemas and theatres in London and the provincial cities remained open, only closing their doors when the Blitz was at its worst. Attendance remained high in spite of the additional work and household duties that consumed most people's spare time.²⁸ Productions with an obviously propagandistic slant, or which concentrated on harrowing aspects of the war, were generally unpopular;

²⁷ Calder, pp. 511-12.

²⁸ The Cinema Audience, tables 3, 6 and 12.

more than anything else, people wanted to be entertained.²⁹

The same sort of films that had been popular in the inter-war period remained so: love stories, escapist musicals, and historical romps – all as far removed as possible from life on the home front.³⁰ Even in films such as ‘Mrs Miniver’, set in wartime Britain (though filmed in Hollywood) the heroine was never a Utility-wearing drudge. The popular wartime comedies starring Gracie Fields and George Formby took place in a similarly unrecognisable Britain.

Historical films were a particularly effective source of escapist entertainment. The costumes from ‘That Hamilton Woman’, ‘Henry V’, and ‘Meet Me in Saint Louis’, in particular those of the female stars, were extremely lavish and opulent. Another advantage of historical costumes was their complete lack of resemblance to current styles: the frothy crinolines worn by Vivien Leigh in ‘Gone with the Wind’, for example, were poles apart from wartime fashions.³¹ Films that were set in a period of relative restraint in dress – the early Regency period, for example – might even have their costumes redesigned in a more sumptuous fashion to satisfy current desires

²⁹ Peter Stead, ‘The People as Stars: Feature Films as National Expression,’ in Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War, ed. Philip Taylor (London, 1988), p. 70.

³⁰ M-O FR 57: Report on Audience Preference in Film Themes.

³¹ The dresses worn by Leigh and Olivia de Havilland were featured in a full-colour, two-page article in Woman’s Own, 11 May 1940, pp. 26-27.

for fancy dress. 'Pride and Prejudice', filmed in Hollywood in 1940, ought to have featured clothes from the end of the eighteenth century, but its costumes corresponded instead with the more elaborate and extreme styles of the mid-1830s.³²

* * *

Austerity, with its emphasis on rigid economy in materials and restraint in design, may have been predominant; but it was not the case that no one was interested in looking smart and attractive. Women continued to invest their time and energy, however scarce, in cultivating a pleasing appearance. Given their limited resources, what sort of creative efforts did women make to ensure that their clothing, as well as their general appearance, remained attractive?

The severe styles of wartime clothing, which appear especially dour if viewed, years later, only as a series of black-and-white photographs, were leavened in the first instance by a fondness for bright, even garish colours. Dark colours such as black and brown were popular in the early years of the war, mostly because of their ability to conceal wear and grime. In August 1940, Mass-Observation conducted a country-wide survey on clothing colours; and while 45 per cent of people were found to be wearing dark colours, it is likely they would have done so before the war as well.³³ Bright colours

³² Hollander, p. 427.

³³ M-O FR 326: Clothes Report, 1940.

became popular later on, partly as an antidote to home-front life that was often quite boring, and partly because they were useful as a means of renovating, or 'sprucing up', clothes that had grown dull because of long and frequent wear.³⁴ Even Utility clothing was available in bright colours, which journalist Julia King confessed was rather unexpected.³⁵ Existing clothing could be dyed to make it more colourful: one woman, for example, dyed a pair of corduroy trousers and a faded old coat bright red, and as a result felt very 'flamboyant' in her 'new' outfit.³⁶ The results of dyeing were unpredictable, particularly if home-made dyes – employing various tinctures and infusions such as onion skins that had been left to soak – were used.³⁷

Such creative efforts were distinct from more mundane repairs, for even if a garment were perfectly sound it might need some attention to make it appear more stylish and wearable. Apart from a wholesale change of colour, women employed any number of methods to improve the appearance of their clothing. A woman could add a small splash of colour: a bright scarf, new buttons, or a shiny buckle. The editor of Woman's Own, for example,

³⁴ M-O FR 18, Box 5, File H: Clothes Count, 1944. Colour plates – a rarity in wartime – were used to illustrate a fashion layout in Woman's Own, 6 Apr. 1945, pp. 12-13.

³⁵ News of the World, 5 Apr. 1942, p. 6.

³⁶ White, p. 19.

³⁷ Interview with Mrs. M. R.; and Wood, p. 8.

claimed that the acquisition of a pair of brightly-coloured *shoelaces* made her feel 'quite fresh and sprightly'.³⁸ 'Propaganda Print' scarves, emblazoned with slogans such as 'Dig For Victory' and '66 Coupons', added patriotic dash to women's wardrobes.³⁹ A woman could tie a peplum around her waist and make her dress look like a suit; or she could add a lacy collar or contrasting cuffs to a plain frock. For 1s 6d, Woman's Own readers might purchase a set of buttons and buckles to add to an existing frock.⁴⁰ A length of lace (never rationed) or ribbon could be affixed to the neckline or hem of a dress, making it look just a little bit different. In her memoirs, Pauline Forrest recounts how she improved the plain, brown dress she wore to her October 1942 wedding: she sewed a broad strip of orange velvet that she had been saving around the hem of her skirt.⁴¹

It was more economical to cull the materials for such flourishes from elsewhere in one's wardrobe. Trims could be removed from one garment and added to another: several evenings were spent by Mrs. A. M., painstakingly stitching silver sequins that she had gathered from a worn-out evening frock, onto a plain black frock; the result was a 'new' frock to wear to

³⁸ Woman's Own, 1 Mar. 1942, p. 3.

³⁹ Vogue, Apr. 1942, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁰ Vogue, Nov. 1941, p. 64; Woman's Own, 12 Apr. 1941, p. 21 and 28 Nov. 1941, pp. 12-13.

⁴¹ Forrest, p. 235.

a much-anticipated village hop. Old stockings were cut up and, with the aid of thin wire, fashioned into flowers; squares of felt might also be transformed into posies, and then adorn the bodice or waist of a frock.⁴²

Last, although under the Austerity directives it was forbidden for manufacturers to embroider or add appliqué designs on the clothing they produced, civilians were not prohibited from doing so. From time to time, Woman's Own offered its readers iron-on transfers of designs (some were regimental crests) to embroider.⁴³ There was even a brief fad for brightly-coloured, appliquéd patches: some to hide worn spots and holes in garments; others just for show.⁴⁴

Women were cautioned to exercise restraint when adding such cosmetic enhancements to their clothes, for it was easy to go too far and end up looking unfashionably fussy and exuberant. Ursula Bloom, the beauty editor at Woman's Own, was stern in this regard. 'You get a new frock and what do you do? You trim it up with bits and pieces. Please don't. This is wartime, so rely on plain things.'⁴⁵

* * *

⁴² Woman's Own, 14 Sept. 1940, pp. 16-17; also described by Mrs. A. M.

⁴³ Woman's Own, 25 May 1940, pp. 16-17 and 31 Aug. 1940, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Vogue, Jan. 1943, p. 54.

⁴⁵ Woman's Own, 2 June 1944, p. 9.

As the war dragged on, new clothes became rare, old clothes grew tattered, and the most ingenious embellishments were only mildly successful in brightening worn-out garments. Focus then shifted to other aspects of personal appearance such as hats, cosmetics, and elaborate hairstyles; all served as effective diversions from dull and careworn clothing.

Hats, as well as many of their constituent elements such as felt, buckram, feathers, and ribbons, were never rationed; in theory, women were free to buy as many hats as they wished, and spend as much money as they liked. Hats had been left deliberately outside the rationing restrictions because there were insufficient supplies to guarantee a 'fair share' for all.⁴⁶ With the prices of unrationed goods subject only to the patchy control of the Prices of Goods Act,⁴⁷ dwindling stocks and scarce supplies led to ever-inflating prices where ready-made hats, as well as conventional milliner's materials, were concerned. Mass-Observation discovered that women with a household income of approximately £5 a week were paying as much as £1 10s for plain felt hats; a 'designer' hat, featured in the pages of Vogue, was likely to cost £5 or more.⁴⁸

In part as a result of the scarcity and high cost of hats, the frequency of

⁴⁶ Civil Industry and Trade, p. 307.

⁴⁷ Price control over Utility goods was, in contrast, far more comprehensive. *Op. cit.*, p. 589.

⁴⁸ M-O FR 2045, p. 18; and Vogue, Sept. 1942, p. 23.

hat-wearing declined noticeably in this period. Before the war, hats were a required element of outside dress; and women were expected to wear hats on certain occasions where men might doff theirs – at church, for example. By early 1940, Mass-Observation found that approximately 40 per cent of women were not wearing hats at all; such hats as were worn were described as ‘simple felts’ for the most part.⁴⁹ In 1942 the Archbishops of Canterbury and York were moved to reassure women that they might freely enter churches bare-headed. Saint Paul’s admonition that women must be veiled could, the episcopate agreed, be disregarded in light of current events and shortages. They stressed that ‘no woman or girl should hesitate to enter a church uncovered, nor should any objection to their doing so be raised.’⁵⁰

Hats were worn less often, then, on a routine basis; but during the war they were an indispensable, and versatile, way for women to make their appearance more appealing on special occasions. Hats could divert interest from a shabby old frock, and were easier to renovate than most clothing. It did not require any special sewing skills to remove last year’s trimmings from a straw or felt hat base, and then quickly tack on new embellishments. Advice for the home milliner was plentiful, with how-to articles appearing

⁴⁹ M-O FR 28, p. 17.

⁵⁰ The Times, 7 Nov. 1942, p. 4.

frequently in magazines and newspapers.⁵¹

Although clothing styles had never been plainer and more utilitarian, the most popular styles of hat were unabashedly frivolous. The scarcity of materials for really practical headgear was partly responsible: there were so few supplies of felt and hat straw that women were forced to create hats out of comparatively insubstantial materials. A wisp of tulle, a cluster of artificial flowers, and a feather or two were all that were needed to create a fetching hat, albeit an impractical one. Women in search of more sensible head coverings – Mrs. A. M. was one – merely wrapped a scarf, turban-style, over their hair.

During the war, hats became one of the few ways in which a sense of ‘fashion’ could be expressed, and they were profiled as such in the media. The styles of hat that appeared became more and more bizarre, however – Picture Post was notorious in this respect – and appear to have been published more for their novelty value than anything else.⁵² One such Picture Post article was entitled ‘Crazy Easter Bonnets’; in another issue, a hat was pictured that consisted of a tangle of raffia ‘plaits’ cascading over a straw crown.⁵³

Such extreme fashions in hats were never widely popular, and in fact

⁵¹ See, for example, News of the World, 2 Apr. 1944, p. 6 ; Picture Post, 8 Jan. 1944, p. 16; and Woman’s Own, 6 July 1945, p. 9.

⁵² M-O FR 28, p. 17, mentions the ‘freak fashions’ in hats that were appearing in the popular press.

⁵³ Picture Post, 24 May 1943, p 29 and 24 Apr. 1943, p. 24.

there was some support for the introduction of Utility hats, which would have benefited from price controls, no purchase tax and, inevitably, a degree of restraint in their design.⁵⁴ It would have been impractical, however, for the Board of Trade to produce a line of Utility hats, except perhaps as a series of plain, foundation pieces that could be further decorated by the purchaser. Hats, when worn as a decorative accessory rather than as a practical defence against the elements, were meant to be unique: an expression of the wearer's own sense of style. As such, they defied regimentation, and were an invaluable way for women to inject a note of gaiety into otherwise dull and uniform outfits.

As with hats, cosmetics remained unrationed throughout the war years, though the manufacture of all non-medicinal toilet preparations was severely limited. Rationing was never seriously considered, not only because of the impossibility of guaranteeing 'fair shares' for all, but also because cosmetics were not in universal use. Everyone in Britain needed sufficient food and clothing, but quite obviously not everyone wore lipstick and powder. A survey taken in 1943 revealed that, while 90 per cent of women aged thirty and under wore make-up, only 37 per cent of women aged forty-five and above used cosmetics.⁵⁵ The wearing of lipstick and powder, no

⁵⁴ M-O FR 2046, p. 22.

⁵⁵ Wartime Social Survey, Retail Services and Shortages: Hairdressing and Cosmetics, Jan-Feb 1943.

matter how lightly and discreetly applied, was greeted with disapproval in many homes. Mrs. A. M., a teenager during the war, made only sparing use of cosmetics, mostly because

it was frowned upon by my father, and so if you did want to use lipstick you waited until you'd gone out, and you made jolly sure you took it off before you got in! Otherwise, you'd be in trouble – you'd be a painted lady. You didn't do things like that – nice girls didn't!

The amount of cosmetics that women wore also varied: while some women were accustomed to using a range of products that rivalled any film star, the majority appear to have relied on a dab or two of face powder or vanishing cream, and of course their lipstick.⁵⁶

The possibility that the manufacture of cosmetics might be banned altogether was never seriously entertained by the Board of Trade, who feared the uproar such a ban might cause, and were apprehensive of the potential damage to morale.⁵⁷ The only type of cosmetic preparations to suffer a total ban, in the end, were nail varnishes and remover – the solvent they contained was in short supply.

With the legal production of cosmetics cut to a feeble fraction of its pre-

⁵⁶ Younger women were much more likely to use a wide variety of cosmetics and beauty preparations than older women, although there were only minor differences in the use of cosmetics between income classes. See the Hulton Readership Survey, p. 43.

⁵⁷ PRO BT 64/845: Control of Toilet Preparations.

war level,⁵⁸ some manufacturers resorted to illicit, if not overtly illegal, methods of skirting their limited production quotas. When nail varnish was banned, bottles of stocking-ladder inhibitor – sold in containers reminiscent of nail varnish bottles, and whose contents were indistinguishable from most brands of clear nail varnish – appeared in the shops until they, too, were banned by the Ministry of Supply. Many types of creams and lotions were simply repackaged and labelled as ‘medicinal’, which exempted them from quota restrictions. Certain brands of face powder could be purchased as a series of pre-packaged raw materials which, when blended together, yielded the required shade and consistency of powder.⁵⁹

Needless to say, there was a flourishing black market as well – flourishing because of the mass of ineffectual and frequently contradictory Orders governing the production, distribution and pricing of toilet preparations. Government scrutiny of the toiletries industry was never as unblinking and thorough as its control over the manufacture of cloth and clothing, and abuses of the system were more likely to remain unchecked. Black-market cosmetics and toiletries, though eagerly sought after, were not only injurious to the war effort – they could be dangerous to people’s health as well. The standard of hygiene that went into the preparation and storage of

⁵⁸ For a detailed account of wartime controls over the production of toilet preparations, see Civil Industry and Trade, pp. 531-36.

⁵⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 533-34.

black-market cosmetics was low, as was the quality of their constituent ingredients, some of which had certainly never been intended for use in toiletries.⁶⁰

In spite of shortages and high prices, women – young women in particular – relied on cosmetics to enhance their appearance.⁶¹ Most sought after was the dash of colour that lipstick provided: one woman cited lipstick as one of her two defences against Hitler (the other was her engagement ring).⁶² Given the scarcity of supplies, women could not afford to be too choosy about the colour of lipstick they wore – one accepted whatever was available at the chemists.⁶³ And, as with most other kinds of unrationed goods, cosmetics were extremely expensive. In January 1942, women munitions workers were estimated to be spending 3s to 4s 6d a month on cosmetics, a figure that was roughly equal to one-tenth of their monthly expenditure on clothing.⁶⁴

Yet another way that women added interest to their appearance was

⁶⁰ PRO BT 64/1827: The Black Market in Toilet Preparations.

⁶¹ Longmate, pp. 276-78.

⁶² Wood, p. 62.

⁶³ Interview with Mrs. M. W. It should be noted that lipstick was only available in a handful of colours before the war, so choice had been limited then as well.

⁶⁴ PRO BT 64/845: Expenditure on Cosmetics; and M-O FR 2046, p. 13.

with their hairstyles. The sort of styles that predominated in this period were relatively elaborate, particularly if one considers that they were achieved with little in the way of setting lotions or sprays. Many women, having separated their hair into sections, formed neat rolls or curls in front, and gathered their back hair into a bun, french pleat, or let it fall free. Helen Forrester, for example, wore her hair in 'sweeps combed upwards from my face, with an arrangement of soft waves and curls on top, all secured with hair grips.' To Forrester and her contemporaries, whose clothing had become shabby in the extreme, 'beautiful hair was of prime importance.'⁶⁵

Permanent waves might still be had, although they were extremely expensive⁶⁶ – and, occasionally, dangerous. A woman undergoing this procedure had to spend a long period, after her hair was set in rollers and moistened with permanent wave lotion, attached to a ceiling-mounted apparatus that heated the rollers. If an air raid siren sounded at any time before the permanent wave was complete, she had to face the difficult choice of detaching herself from the machine and taking cover – thereby ruining her new hair-do – or of taking her chances with the bombers.⁶⁷ A long, elaborate hairstyle could also be dangerous to the woman war worker. Stories abound

⁶⁵ Forrester, Lime Street at Two, p. 232.

⁶⁶ Mrs. M. W. was lucky – she had a friend who was a hairdresser; otherwise, it was very difficult to find someone to style hair, since most hairdressers had been directed into war work.

⁶⁷ Longmate, pp. 274-75.

of women who were 'scalped' when their hair was pulled into machines; in this respect, the hairstyle popularised by film star Veronica Lake – a sleek fall of hair that draped over one eye – was considered particularly unsafe.⁶⁸

Given the amount of time it took to affix hair into the curls, rolls and waves that were *de rigueur*, many women chose to save their most elaborate hairstyles for special occasions. Doris White, who worked as an aircraft fitter, wore her hair in curlers, with a scarf over top, during the day; but when it was time to go out on Friday night she needed only to remove the curlers, fluff her hair, and perhaps add a 'flower or diamante clip'.⁶⁹ The necessary underpinnings for such hairstyles – kirby grips, hairslides and so forth – were, unsurprisingly, very scarce; Helen Forrester regarded her one hairslide as her 'most prized possession.'⁷⁰ In reaction against the difficulty of maintaining an elaborate hairstyle during the war, some women had their hair cut short in as simple a style as possible. One popular style was known as the 'Liberty Cut', and featured back hair that was shingled close to the head.⁷¹

For women in uniform, a neat and simple hairstyle was mandatory: according to Diana Lindo, a former WAAF, there were 'no Veronica Lake

⁶⁸ White, p. 11; and Wood, p. 44.

⁶⁹ White, p. 14.

⁷⁰ Forrester, Lime Street at Two, p. 232.

⁷¹ Wood, p. 63.



Many women considered the uniforms of the ATS less attractive than those of the other women's services; it attempted to combat these perceptions with a glamorous recruiting poster.

styles for us.' Apart from having the hair cut short, the easiest way of achieving 'regulation hair', Lindo recalls, was to tie a shoelace round the head and then roll the hair around it.⁷² On no account was hair to be seen touching the collar; nor could it be worn in the fanciful swoops and waves favoured by Helen Forrester.

* * *

In placing such emphasis on issues of style and appearance, women were not only seeking to strengthen their morale, but they were also asserting their individuality in an increasingly militarised and be-uniformed society. Tens of thousands of British women spent their working hours in uniform, but this did not preclude all expression of individuality or attention to feminine beauty. Although their individuality was muted when in uniform, it was by no means stifled.

The uniforms worn by women in the auxiliary services had, in most cases, not benefited from an overhaul in design since the end of the Great War. As a result, some of the women's services discovered that prospective recruits were deterred by the prospect of bulky, unattractive uniforms that appeared to have been created with Queen Mary's tastes in mind.⁷³ The Women's Royal Navy Service was the first to realise the appeal of a smart,

⁷² Diana Lindo, A WAAF at War: Wartime Jottings of a WAAF Driver 1941-46 (Fontwell, Sussex, 1992), p. 15.

⁷³ Audrey Fairweather, Gran's War (Bognor Regis, W. Sussex, 1980), p. 47.



A recruiting poster for the Wrens:
it makes a feature of their attractive uniform.

well-tailored uniform. According to one Wren,

of the three women's services, the WRNS uniform was the most attractive. Its unbelted, double-breasted navy jacket and straight skirt were more flattering to most girls' figures than the more bulky uniforms of the ATS and WAAF and the little round-style hat was considered rather cute. The tricorn hats of the Wren officers were even more dashing.⁷⁴

Helen Forrester longed to become a Wren, in part because it would take her away from life in the slums of Liverpool, but also because of the alluring uniform. She saw herself 'trim and smart in the navy blue uniform and tricorn hat of an officer,' but did not have the necessary qualifications to join the WRNS, which considered itself superior to the other auxiliary services. The most she could hope for, given her limited schooling, was a place in the ranks of the ATS, which was considered 'a fate worse than death' by her friends and family.⁷⁵

Some of the other women's services, who commissioned entirely new uniforms; London designer Norman Hartnell was responsible for several, including that of the Women's Royal Army Corps.⁷⁶ An attractive design was of only limited help, however, if the uniform itself was ill-fitting. The Wrens were thought to have pretty uniforms, but they were poorly made up

⁷⁴ Gwen Page, Growing Pains: A Teenager's War (Lewes, Sussex, 1994), p. 86.

⁷⁵ Forrester, Lime Street at Two, pp. 14-15.

⁷⁶ Norman Hartnell, Silver and Gold (London, 1954), pp. 107-8; and Vogue, Feb. 1944, pp. 48-49.

and sized. Audrey Fairweather, who described herself as 'unstock size', had a terrible time getting a uniform to fit properly.

A teamed up odd jacket and skirt was the only way the frustrated storekeeper Wren could get me clad decently. The jackets that would do up in front had shoulders hanging half way to my elbows and the sleeves reached way over my wrists and hung limply [...] Eventually she found a jacket that was only a couple of inches out in the shoulders and would do up at the front as well – with a struggle. The label inside bore the maker's name of "Beau Brummel", belying my appearance.⁷⁷

Among wealthier recruits, it was customary to have one's uniform unpicked and completely re sewn (Lillywhite's charged seven and a half guineas for this service), or it could be custom-made. The resultant uniforms actually looked better, not only because they fit so well, but also because they were made out of finer fabric.⁷⁸

Most women in the auxiliary services could not afford the services of a Savile Row tailor, and instead resorted to more subtle methods of investing their uniforms with a degree of originality. There were ways of wearing a uniform that were thought to make it especially dashing and attractive: women might wear their cap or hat at a slightly un-regulation tilt, or tie their tie in an unusual manner. Collectively, these practices were described as 'tiddly'. The trick, of course, was in making the 'tiddly' flourishes obvious to other rankings and junior officers, while escaping the attention of senior

⁷⁷ Fairweather, p. 127.

⁷⁸ Vogue, Oct. 1940, p. 31; and Fairweather, pp. 128-29.

officers.⁷⁹

It is incorrect to assume that women were excessively preoccupied with the appearance and relative attractiveness of their own uniform. No matter what a uniform looked like, or how poorly it fit, it accorded to the wearer a sense of purpose and pride, and was coveted in part for that reason. Gwen Page recalls that 'with all my friends going I was [...] keen to get into uniform and be seen to be playing a part in winning this war.'⁸⁰ A uniform was an obvious way – perhaps the most obvious – for a woman to demonstrate that she was, indeed, 'doing her bit'. A woman in uniform did not run the risk, as did some women who were also performing war work in reserved occupations, of being handed a white feather by misguided patriots.⁸¹

Recognising this, the News of the World advocated the universal adoption of 'battle-dress' for women war workers, claiming that its proposed uniform would indicate 'to every onlooker that the wearer, no matter in what company she may be, is not merely an attractive "play-girl" but one who is doing her job in the war and victory effort.'⁸² Although little more than a publicity stunt on the part of the newspaper, the 'battle-dress' proposal was an

⁷⁹ Page, p. 87.

⁸⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁸¹ Goldsmith, p. 32.

⁸² News of the World, 4 Dec 1941, p. 5.

accurate response to the frustration felt by many, male and female alike, who were active in the war effort but who had no visible proof of their efforts. In this respect, uniforms fulfilled a more than strictly functional purpose: they were also a way of preserving, and even elevating, a person's morale.

Outside the women's services, uniforms were frequently adopted on an informal basis. The WVS may have been known as the 'Women in Green', but there was never an official uniform for the service; members were encouraged, rather, to wear green clothing to make themselves more visible.⁸³ Fire wardens and some branches of the ARP were not given uniforms to wear – uniforms that would have helped to protect them from inclement weather as well as the hazards of their work – until well after the end of the Blitz.⁸⁴ Interestingly, one woman recalls that she and the others who worked in a branch of the Red Cross decided *not* to adopt uniforms when presented with a choice; they worried that uniforms might lead to increasingly strict, almost military standards in their office.⁸⁵ Women who took over jobs that had been vacated by men – tram conductors and police officers, for example – wore uniforms as a matter of course. Zelma Katin, conscripted as a tram 'clippie', appreciated her uniform because she felt it gave

⁸³ Russell Birdwell, Women in Battle Dress (New York, 1942), p. 80.

⁸⁴ Barbara Nixon, Raiders Overhead: A Diary of the London Blitz, first publ. 1943 (London, 1980), p. 95.

⁸⁵ Interview with Mrs. E. H.

her added authority over the passengers.⁸⁶

The reaction to women in uniform was mixed. A sense of patriotism compelled some people to accept female uniform-wearing, and thereby support women in their war work. The *couturier* Norman Hartnell was appropriately supportive: 'most people expect me to say I deplore this new, be-uniformed woman. They are wrong [...] if uniform is the most practical, if not the most beautiful, thing for [women] to wear, then I think they look fine in it.'⁸⁷ Of course it was difficult for many people to reconcile accepted notions of femininity with uniform-wearing. Contemporary observer Russell Birdwell was struck by the incongruity of women who wore 'battle dress' and who none the less retained a feminine appearance. He had thought that a woman soldier would look like 'a husky Amazon, hard-fisted, masculine [...] filled with the lust to kill', and was surprised when all the women soldiers he met were attractive and well-groomed: 'a soldier – and, still – a girl.'⁸⁸

Many men, in particular boyfriends and husbands, were not as supportive of women in uniform. One woman, an officer in the WRNS, told an observer that 'my husband's always said he wouldn't be seen dead with me

⁸⁶ Katin, pp. 14-15.

⁸⁷ Picture Post, 16 Mar. 1940, p. 13.

⁸⁸ Birdwell, pp. 13-14 and 19.

in uniform.’⁸⁹ In part these attitudes were the understandable response of a society that was – and remains – distressed by the image of a woman in uniform. As Dorothy Sheridan has observed, although there are many archetypal images of women in the Second World War – Rosie the Riveter, or the ‘long-suffering housewife’, or the defiant *maquis* fighter – the Woman Soldier is rarely remembered.⁹⁰ It was no accident that the Queen was rarely seen in any of the three uniforms to which she was entitled during the war, and although it is tempting to ascribe this to her well-known love of crinolines and pastels, it is equally likely that she avoided uniforms because she realised that people truly did not want to see her wearing severe, standardised garments. Instead, she was almost always seen wearing softly flowing, pastel-coloured frocks that brought to mind memories of happier times.⁹¹

Women war workers with civilian firms may not have been issued with a military-style uniform, but many had to wear a prescribed set of clothing for their work, particularly if it was in one of the heavy industries. As a teenager, Nancy Sharman was a junior mechanic in an ATS workshop, and was required to wear a voluminous boiler suit that sported a flap at the

⁸⁹ Phyllis Pearsall, Women at War (Aldershot, Hants., 1990), p. 35.

⁹⁰ Dorothy Sheridan, ‘Ambivalent Memories: Women and the 1939-45 War in Britain,’ Oral History, vol. XVIII, no. 1, p. 32.

⁹¹ Hartnell, pp. 101-2.



Land Girls in uniform

rear, rather like old-fashioned combinations. Even more upsetting to her was the fact that she had to give up some of her precious clothing coupons in exchange for the hideous garment.⁹² Pauline Forrest's work clothes – she too was a mechanic – consisted of an ugly black boiler suit and, to cover her hair, an old scarf she had pinched from the scarecrow in her parents' garden.⁹³

One advantage of uniforms was their practicality, at least in theory. In the early years of the war, however, uniforms had not been designed for comfort or ease of movement. Women drivers and mechanics were only belatedly issued with bloomers instead of skirts, which were not only uncomfortable but potentially dangerous when working with large vehicles.⁹⁴ The uniforms worn by women in the Land Army were, fortunately, well thought-out, and included 'corduroy jodhpur-like trousers, knee-length woollen stockings [with] a garter to hold them up,' as well as sturdy leather shoes, a long-sleeved shirt and a vee-necked jersey. The uniforms were unabashedly plain and practical, but were appreciated by the Land Girls; one recalls that 'we needed to dress like that. Couldn't go out in dresses, could you, doing the jobs we did on the land. I didn't mind at all.'⁹⁵

⁹² Sharman, p. 124.

⁹³ Forrest, p. 106.

⁹⁴ Lindo, p. 28.

⁹⁵ Wood, p. 36. Similar uniforms were worn by members of the Women's Timber Corps. See Williams, p. 30.

British women, both those in the auxiliary services and those who undertook civilian or volunteer war work, needed practical clothing that would not hinder their activities; they desperately required comfort in *all* their clothes and not just in uniforms. Simple styles were not the only result of the acute need for practical, useful and comfortable clothing: the *sort* of clothing women wore also changed. Most noticeably, women began to wear trousers, although the frequency of female trouser-wearing should not be overstated. Mass-Observation estimated, in mid-1941, that only 38 per cent of women under 30 wore trousers even occasionally, diminishing to only 18 per cent of women over 30. Trouser-wearing among women was more common in the higher income classes, and more frequent in London than outside the capital, where it was 'still considered peculiar.'⁹⁶ Peculiar they may have been, but trousers were very practical. One London woman, though sceptical, admitted as much: 'I don't think they suit the female figure, but I've just been out to buy a pair, all the same [...] I came to the conclusion, reluctantly, after the first night's air raid warning, that trousers were essential. Ordinary female clothing takes too long to put on.'⁹⁷ J: B. Priestley jestingly

⁹⁶ Clothes Rationing Survey, pp. vi and 52. The editors of Picture Post agreed that women might wear trousers for work purposes, or while in the country, but that they remained inappropriate for everyday wear in town. See 1 Nov. 1941, pp. 22-23.

⁹⁷ Cited in Richard Lambert, Home Front: Intimate Letters, both grave and gay, telling how Britain faces the war; from the CBC Broadcasts 'Old Country Mail' (Toronto, 1940), p. 76.

complained that 'these air raids are simply being used as an excuse by Englishwomen to put on trousers.'⁹⁸

Many women simply did not feel comfortable wearing trousers. Naomi Mitchison's Land Girl refused to wear dungarees, which Mitchison uncharitably attributed to her being Irish and a Roman Catholic.⁹⁹ Most of the women interviewed in the oral history project did not make trouser-wearing a habit, in part because of personal inhibitions, but also because of the objections of husbands or fathers. Mrs. D. H. did purchase a pair of corduroy trousers, but her husband would not go out with her when she was wearing them. Mrs. M. W., who volunteered as a fire-watcher at the engineering factory where she worked, did wear trousers for her duties, but only because they were practical; and she never felt at ease in them.

* * *

Women, then, were encouraged to maintain an attractive appearance even as austerity was demanded in every aspect of life on the home front; to endure severe limitations in the amount of clothing and related articles such as cosmetics, but at the same time to give every appearance that they were *not* suffering from these shortages.¹⁰⁰ Clothing, as well as most other elements of

⁹⁸ J. B. Priestley, Britain Speaks (New York, 1940), p. 220.

⁹⁹ Mitchison, p. 252, from her diary entry for 2 Aug. 1943.

¹⁰⁰ Pat Kirkham, 'Beauty and Duty: Keeping Up the (Home) Front,' in War Cultures: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two Britain, eds. Pat Kirkham and David Thoms (London, 1995), p. 13.

a woman's appearance, was treated as an issue of the most critical importance to the war effort; and this was true not only in an economic sense, but also in terms of the effect these things had on morale. In Germany, women were told it was their patriotic duty to forget about their appearance and concentrate only on victory; and it was considered traitorous for the average woman to wear even a touch of lipstick, excepting of course the mistresses of Nazi officials.¹⁰¹ In contrast, seemingly frivolous items such as face powder and kirby grips were never banned in Britain, not even during the darkest days of 1940 and 1941 when the country was experiencing slow strangulation by naval blockade.

At some level both the government and the civilian populace appear to have realised that unending sacrifice and self-abnegation would not help to win a war that promised to be very long and, for much of the time, very boring. To this end, a woman's appearance was regarded as an important means of maintaining morale; and it should be noted that emphasis was almost always placed on the appearance of young women. Men could safely walk about looking as shabby as they wished; and to a lesser degree so could older women. Young women, however, were expected to shore up not only the morale of their loved ones, but also the morale of everyone they

¹⁰¹ For further information, see Claudia Koonz, Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics (New York, 1987); and Renate Bridenthal, When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany (New York, 1984).

encountered during the day. According to Vogue, it was their responsibility 'to dress decoratively, to be groomed immaculately – in short, to be a sight for sore eyes.'¹⁰²

In part, women maintained an interest in their appearance because they wished to demonstrate to the enemy, if only indirectly, that their own morale remained high. In the words of Mrs. G. M., 'we had to keep our end up. This was part of the process of winning the war. We *hadn't* to be put down. I think we felt [...] that we had to be as *normal* as possible. Not to let these people push us down.' Such sentiments were echoed by Mrs. A. M., who believed that 'pride of appearance [...] kept you going. Jerry wasn't going to come and see you cold.'

Officially, the government had little to say about the importance of keeping up appearances: most of the propaganda regarding clothing and personal appearance that emerged from the Ministry of Information was concerned with the austerity drive and ways of 'making do'. It was left to the media, whose parroting of government doctrine was an instrument of their continuing survival, to preach the morale-boosting effects of good grooming and a smart appearance.¹⁰³

The women's magazines were particularly zealous when linking attention to appearance with morale. Early in the war, Woman's Own issued

¹⁰² Vogue, 20 Sept. 1939, p. 44.

¹⁰³ Calder, p. 508.

a warning to readers: 'Don't get slack. A woman who is unkempt and ill-dressed soon loses her *morale*. [...] It is our job to bring colour and cheerfulness to the grim business of war.'¹⁰⁴ A later editorial asked

where are those feminine charms and womanly ways of yesterday? [...] Just because our country is at war, there is no reason why we should be ashamed of wanting to look as attractive as possible. On the contrary, it is far pleasanter for everyone to see charming and well-turned-out girls.¹⁰⁵

Vogue was even more uncompromising, asserting that a shabby appearance was nothing more than an 'admission of defeat.'¹⁰⁶

Advertisers were quick to use the link between an attractive personal appearance and the maintenance of morale for their own ends. An advertisement for Berlei corsets was relatively restrained, telling women that 'it's bad for morale to let figures go'.¹⁰⁷ Advertisements for cosmetics were more blunt, even intimating that husbands and boyfriends might stray if a woman neglected her appearance.¹⁰⁸

Despite the contradictory messages that were directed towards women in regard to standards of dress and personal appearance, most appear to have

¹⁰⁴ Woman's Own, 4 Nov. 1939, p. 13.

¹⁰⁵ *Op. cit.*, 13 Apr. 1940, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Vogue, Apr. 1943, p. 29.

¹⁰⁷ Vogue, Oct. 1941, p. 95.

¹⁰⁸ Calder, p. 377.

had little difficulty in rationalising and making sense of them. A lingering feeling of embarrassment was felt by some women who were interested in looking smart – as if smartness was in some way unpatriotic.¹⁰⁹ Others could not see the sense in paying attention to such superficialities in the midst of total war. Mass-Observation encountered one woman – aged 45, from Stepney – who was especially outspoken in this respect. When told that the observer had, indeed, encountered women who were maintaining an interest in their clothing, she exclaimed that they ‘ought to be shot. Really [...] spending money on clothes, [in] these times [...] it’s a crying shame.’¹¹⁰ Not all women, furthermore, maintained an interest in their appearance solely for reasons of morale. Pat Kirkham has noted that young, working-class women were motivated not only by patriotism, but also by a fierce desire to hold on to what they had earned. It was not merely Hitler they were defying, but anyone who sought to deprive them of what they regarded as rightfully theirs.¹¹¹

The distinction between legitimate interest in issues of appearance for reasons of morale, and what was considered a self-serving display of ostentation and ‘luxury spending’, was a murky one. Unsurprisingly, public opinion often differed sharply on this subject. An example of this can be

¹⁰⁹ Clothes Rationing Survey, p. 45.

¹¹⁰ M-O TC 18, Box 1, File E: Observations and Overheards Outside London Shops, 1940.

¹¹¹ Kirkham, p. 16.

found in the reaction to a 1943 Picture Post article about film star Carole Landis's wedding, which was a lavishly catered, 'society' affair. One letter to the editor was supportive: 'it did my heart good to see the beauty and happiness of Miss Landis's wedding. We have almost forgotten what a real wedding is like, so trained are we now to a utility way of life.' Another reader, however, was horrified. 'It is a disgrace in wartime to indulge in an orgy of satin, orchids and wine as these people are doing.'¹¹²

Women were liable to criticism if they did not pay enough attention to standards of dress, and they were also criticised if they were too preoccupied by details of their personal appearance. A woman had to look pretty, be well-groomed, and be neatly dressed; but too much makeup, or too-elaborate clothes, invited unwelcome attention. Madeline Henrey, who lived in London during the war, noticed that prostitutes were the only women who remained really well-dressed.

What distinguished them in wartime London was the fact that they were so smartly dressed and wore hats, sometimes even a little perky veil to add brilliance to their dark eyes. Most of us, though we might not have ceased thinking secretly about lovely things, would not have dared, even though we might have had coupons and money to buy new clothes.¹¹³

It was difficult to justify too pronounced an interest in clothing, cosmetics and hairstyles when the nation was struggling for survival; to do so would

¹¹² Picture Post, 6 Feb. 1943, p. 3.

¹¹³ Madeleine Henrey, London Under Fire: 1940-45. London, 1969, p. 200.

threaten the 'moral code', as Paul Addison has termed it, of a society which recognised that many people must die before victory was achieved.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, if a woman appeared uninterested in matters of dress and appearance, she was assumed to lack faith in the war effort. Required of women, then, was a highly developed sense of when and where it was appropriate to display interest in their appearance: when they ought to dress sensibly; and when they might 'go glamorous'.

¹¹⁴ Paul Addison, The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War (London, 1975), p. 131.

Chapter Eight:

The 'New Look'

By 1945 the contents of the nation's wardrobes had grown so shabby as to be almost unrecognisable; the changes inflicted by year after year of shortages and austerity crept up stealthily, and came as a surprise to anyone suddenly confronted with pre-war standards of dress. Near the end of the war, a colleague of Helen Forrester's was demobilised and returned to his office job for the first time in over five years.

I shall never forget my dumb amazement when I saw him seated at his desk on the first morning of his return. He wore a beautifully cut beige suit, perfectly pressed, with a blue tie and blue socks, and from his jacket pocket peeped a pale blue silk handkerchief [...]

We had totally forgotten the high standards of dress required by employers before the war. This man had got ready for work with the same care that he must have exercised in 1939, before he was called up [...]

We looked at the other men in their shabby sports jackets, frayed collars, crumpled, mended trousers, and shrunken pullovers. We girls suddenly saw ourselves through his eyes – our shiny skirts, yellowed blouses, and our truly awful collection of cardigans, mostly a musty grey. We were neat [...] but this vision of sartorial perfection left us low and dispirited. We realised how far we had slipped.¹

Many people appreciated these relaxed standards of dress, for austerity had relieved them of much of the pressure to dress well for social reasons.²

People from the poorest economic classes may have had as few clothes as ever, but at least they did not have to feel so ashamed of their shabby garments. One Mass-Observation observer, a middle-aged woman in

¹ Forrester, Lime Street at Two, p. 229.

² Clothes Rationing Survey, pp. vii and 10.

domestic service, wrote that

when war broke out I hated to feel shabby. It made me feel inferior. Now I (almost) cheerfully wear stockings that reveal darns, shoes with cracks that have been stitched, a coat, threadbare in places, a faded straw hat (no renovating dye to be had), clothes rarely sent to the cleaners, ill-fitting garments and so on. Without knowing quite how it has come about I find myself breaking more of the old rules of personal tidiness, 'because there's a war on', and scarcely noticing it.³

Conventions once cast in stone – prohibiting women from wearing trousers, or requiring that men wear stiffly starched collars and women wear stockings – crumbled under the weight of wartime shortages and practical necessity.

The way that people dressed in different parts of Britain, furthermore, had never been more homogeneous, partly because of the unifying effects of austerity, but also because of an unusually mobile populace. Millions of people spent the war years criss-crossing the country, and were exposed to different regional customs and economic backgrounds.⁴ This affected not only the way that people themselves dressed, but also how they perceived others. Doris White and her fellow aircraft fitters, most of whom were from London, brought glamorous attitudes about fashion to the small town of Wolverton where they worked, attitudes that rubbed off on the local women.⁵ At the same time, archaic notions about different parts of the

³ M-O FR 2502: Clothes Buying and Wearing, July 1947.

⁴ As discussed in Chapter Five, p. 180.

⁵ White, p. 19.

country were dispelled, as with the London war workers who were surprised to find, when sent to work in a Lancashire ordnance factory, that the local women no longer wore clogs and shawls.⁶

Whether or not the war had a levelling effect on dress – whether it helped to erase standards between rich and poor – was a divisive issue, and remains so. At the time, some of the most egregious differences between the economic classes appeared to have been smoothed over by clothes rationing and other aspects of austerity. George Orwell was convinced that clothes rationing had a democratising effect on society, and expressed the wish that it might continue.⁷

The levelling effects of austerity should not, however, be overstated. The wealthy elite always had access to new clothing and, while their clothing stocks might diminish relative to pre-war levels, they were never in danger of utter depletion. This is confirmed by inquiries made, several times during the war, by the Board of Trade in respect to the coupon value of civilian wardrobes. In April 1944, they estimated that well-to-do women from class 'A-B' had wardrobes worth approximately 320 coupons; women from class 'C' – the middle class – owned clothing worth 269 coupons; and women from the industrial working class, roughly 65 per cent of the population, had 211 coupons worth of clothing in their wardrobes. Women from class 'E', the

⁶ Pearsall, p. 60.

⁷ Orwell, Collected Essays, vol. III, p. 89.

poorest of all, were estimated to possess only 170 coupons worth of clothing – slightly less than half the value of a class ‘A-B’ wardrobe. Furthermore, the clothing stocks held by the poorest classes diminished anywhere from three to eight per cent between April 1942 and April 1944, while people from the wealthiest classes experienced an increase of one to six per cent in their clothing stocks.⁸ From these figures it is clear that the effects of austerity were felt more acutely by the lowest income classes – the people whom the government had sought to protect, as well as placate, with its principle of ‘fair shares’. A privileged minority was, furthermore, always able to afford clothing that was visibly of higher quality, both in terms of materials and in construction, and this applied not only to civilian dress but also to military uniforms. In matters of dress, as with most everything else, some people were clearly more equal than others.

Inequities such as these were the focus of discussion throughout the war years. The Beveridge Report, published as Cmd 6404 on 1 December 1942, quickly sold over six hundred thousand copies. Nineteen out of every twenty people polled by Gallup two weeks later claimed to have heard of it and ninety per cent approved of its proposals.⁹ To a public that was conditioned to expect, from all branches of officialdom, indifference to their poverty, unemployment and ill-health, it was a revelation – a plan that

⁸ Civil Industry and Trade, p. 331:

⁹ Calder, pp. 527-28.

promised to sweep aside the last vestiges of Poor Law principles of 'less eligibility' and ensure a decent standard of living for everyone. The debate over Britain's post-war future that it had unleashed continued unabated for the next three years, culminating in the general election of 1945. A bitterly contested race, reaching a regrettable nadir when the Prime Minister suggested that a socialist government would only be able to carry out its policies with the help of 'some form of Gestapo' police force, ended in victory for the Labour party. On the heels of that victory, it was hoped, would follow a genuine period of post-war reconstruction.¹⁰ At all costs the scandalous failures that followed the Great War must be avoided. This time, so the consensus appears to have been, Britain must and *would* build a society that was fit for its heroes.

With the transformation of existing (and wholly inadequate) social assistance schemes into those of National Assistance and Assurance in 1948, the birth of the National Health Service that same year, and the reforms made to state housing and education, the promises made by Labour politicians in the waning months of the war were, in most respects, fulfilled.¹¹ There was, however, the difficulty of how all these schemes were to be afforded, for Britain had been left with war debts amounting some

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 577.

¹¹ See Peter Hennessy, Never Again: Britain 1945-51 (London, 1992), pp 119-182; Kenneth O. Morgan, The People's Peace: British History 1945-1990, first. publ. 1990 (Oxford, 1992), pp. 36-41; and Marwick, pp. 45-59.

£3,000 million. And, although interim loans from the United States helped avert disaster when the Lend-Lease program was suspended in 1945, in the long term Britain could expect little foreign help with its reconstruction. Adding to the misery of the country's foreign debt was a dangerously unbalanced trade deficit, since the cost of much-needed imports was significantly higher than the profits from Britain's export trade. In order to pay for essential imports alone, the volume of exports would have to be increased by more than 75 per cent above pre-war levels.¹²

Though hostilities had ended, the British people were told they needed to work as hard as they had ever done, even in the darkest days of the war, in order to avert fiscal disaster. As one propaganda poster from 1947 warned, 'We're up against it! We WORK or WANT!'¹³ The resulting export drive did not lead to any revolutionary overhaul of British industry, instead retaining the *status quo* – the high production levels and long working hours that had, by necessity, prevailed during the war. Hard work was not all that the government expected; nearly as important was the public's continuing toleration of wartime economic controls. In order for the export

¹² Marwick, p. 19; Morgan, pp. 65-66; and David Marquand, 'Sir Stafford Cripps: The Dollar Crises and Devaluation,' in Age of Austerity, eds. Michael Sissons and Philip French (London, 1963), pp. 179-80.

¹³ See Paul Addison, Now the War is Over, fig. 82 (located between pp. 178-9. For more information on the 'We Work or Want' propaganda campaign, see William Crofts, Coercion or Persuasion? Propaganda in Britain after 1945 (London, 1989), pp. 41-47.

drive to succeed, the consumer goods that Britain produced, desirable as they were, must be sent abroad – and often to countries, such as the United States, whose consumers did not have to endure any continuation of austerity. With consumer goods in such short supply, ‘fair shares’ could only be guaranteed if rationing was maintained and, in some cases, even expanded. Bread (never on the ration during the war) was, beginning in July 1946, limited to nine ounces a week for most adults. The meat, cheese and tea rations were all reduced and supplies of snoek, a particularly unappetizing sort of tinned fish, first appeared in shops in late 1947.¹⁴

The clothes ration was markedly affected, with coupon levels at their lowest level ever; in early 1946 people could expect only four coupons a month. Austerity regulations were, however, lifted from men’s clothing in February 1944, in consideration of the tastes of demobilised male soldiers, each of whom were provided with a ‘demob’ suit and other essential civilian garments. Demobilised members of the women’s services were given a coupon allowance rather than ready-made garments, since it was felt that women would prefer a wider choice of clothing than the services could offer them.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 35-39. See also Susan Cooper, ‘Snoek Piquante,’ in Age of Austerity, pp. 37-42.

¹⁵ Civil Industry and Trade, p. 439; and the Wartime Social Survey, Demobilisation Coupons: An Enquiry made for the Board of Trade, ed. Katharine Fremantle (Dec., 1945), p 3. 245 women were interviewed for the survey, and were found to have received an average of 172 coupons each.

That the continuation and expansion of wartime economic controls did not lead to serious unrest can be attributed to an admirably phlegmatic attitude on the part of most people, who understood that they were working to pay for not only Britain's war debts, but also the nascent welfare state. The people had been prepared to 'go without' for year after year to ensure the nebulous goal of 'victory' – why should they now balk when faced with these tangible rewards? Years of strict economic controls had left the British people with low expectations and restrained attitudes in regard to consumer goods and personal spending; the nation had been well taught to 'do without' and such conditioning did not evaporate immediately.

Most of the opposition to austerity arose from the middle classes, who found that pre-war standards of living remained elusive in Attlee's Britain. The British Housewives' League, founded in July 1945 by Irene Lovelock, and whose membership consisted largely of middle-class women, was typical; its members chafed at the expansion of state controls, and the erosion of traditional, 'middle-class' values by socialist policies.¹⁶ From the majority of people – the lower income groups of predominately manual workers – there was little dissent. Only nine million working days were lost, in the five years following the war, to labour stoppages or unrest; by way of contrast, in the period between 1918 and 1923 almost 180 million working days were

¹⁶ Addison, *Now the War is Over*, pp. 41-43; and Crofts, pp. 100-109.

sacrificed.¹⁷

The fact that people complained about the continuing controls should not be confused with actual unrest: as was the case during the war, people voiced their irritation, whether in a shop queue or a letter to The Times, and then resolutely got on with the job of reconstruction.¹⁸ The continuing restrictions, though disagreeable, were understood to be necessary. As long as Britain's economy appeared to be in peril, the restrictions were obeyed – and the black market acted as a further safety valve against any explosion of built-up yearnings for scarce consumer goods.¹⁹ Complaints, furthermore, were tempered with humour, as when the 'Britain Can Make It' exhibition, a display of thousands of consumer goods for the export drive that was unveiled in September 1946, was promptly nicknamed 'Britain Can't Have It.'²⁰

* * *

Wartime restraint, then, continued well into the post-war period, with moderation in all things expected of, and by, the British people. In no sense was this more evident than in the popular response to the 'New Look' in

¹⁷ Morgan, p. 79.

¹⁸ As was discussed in Chapter Five, p. 199.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 78.

²⁰ Marwick, p. 89.

women's clothing. The 'New Look' was born in the spring of 1947, when Paris *couturier* Christian Dior unveiled his 'Corolle' collection, although the main elements of 'New Look' fashions had been appearing in *couture* collections for several years. The long, extremely full (or, occasionally, swathed and bustled) skirts of the 'New Look' were combined with aggressively feminine tailoring – rounded shoulders, tightly-corseted waists, and a greatly increased emphasis on the bust and hips.²¹ The 'New Look' was enthusiastically adopted by women in France and, to a lesser extent, in America,²² but it was only rarely seen or worn in Britain until several years had passed. Even then, it was a much-diluted 'New Look' that prevailed – one of 'Crippsian Utility' rather than Parisian extravagance.²³

After the liberation of Paris in 1944, news of Paris fashions had begun to reappear in the popular press, although coverage was, at first, patriotically disapproving.²⁴ The Paris-based *haute couture* industry had continued to flourish during the German occupation, and in fact was heavily patronised by

²¹ Byrde, pp. 86-89; Dorner, pp. 27-31.

²² The 'New Look' was the focus of criticism and angry protests when it first appeared in the United States, but after the initially negative reaction had died away it was adopted readily by women across the country. See Ewing, p. 157.

²³ Harry Hopkins, The New Look: A Social History of the Forties and Fifties in Britain (London, 1963), p. 96.

²⁴ See Vogue, Sept. 1944, pp. 30-33; and Picture Post, 7 Oct. 1944, p. 19.

Nazi officials and collaborationists;²⁵ to what degree the industry itself was an active collaborator with the enemy was, and continues to be, a matter for some debate. One wartime letter to Picture Post – written, interestingly, by social activist Marie Stopes – condemned the magazine for being so ‘unpatriotic [...] as to give publicity to [...] vulgar’ Paris fashions, and questioned its motives for foisting ‘Paris corruption on to our country’.²⁶

Though the propriety of adopting or even describing the Parisian fashions was debatable, one fact was certain: they were *different*. Having cast aside the boxy, severe silhouette of wartime clothing, the French designers created styles that were extremely feminine and, as if unaware of the impoverishment afflicting the Continent, were unabashedly lavish in their use of materials. Photojournalist Lee Miller, on assignment for Vogue, was struck by the new designs when she visited Paris soon after it was liberated. ‘Everywhere in the streets were the dazzling girls, cycling, crawling up tank turrets. Their silhouette was very queer and fascinating to me after utility and austerity England. Full floating skirts, tiny waist-lines.’²⁷ At first there was some uncertainty as to whether these designs would persist much beyond the immediate post-occupation period – whether they would have any lasting impact on the sort of clothes ordinary women wore. Picture Post commented

²⁵ Mulvagh, p. 129.

²⁶ Picture Post, 4 Nov. 1944, p. 3.

²⁷ Vogue, Oct. 1944, p. 27.

that the new styles were 'simply a fashionable stunt [...] such garments are completely out of touch with modern life, and so are their designers.' Vogue adopted a more philosophical tone. 'Is this merely a reflection of an out-of-the-war mood of defiance to the enemy? [Or] does it hold the seeds of something to which women will turn after the general drabness of wartime life?'²⁸

On one level, these new styles in women's clothing reflected nothing more than the understandable desire to set aside wartime modes of dress, which had remained static and under 'artificial' control for so long. Such change, furthermore, had long been anticipated by the fashion industry. When Vogue asked a panel of experts, late in 1944, 'where is fashion going?' the answers it received were remarkably prescient. C. Willett Cunnington, a well-known fashion historian, felt that it would 'get as far as possible from the war and all its works, when peace comes. This means it will abhor anything reminiscent of uniforms, their monotones and hard business lines.' He was careful to add that such change would inevitably 'be hampered by a dearth of good materials.'²⁹

In Britain, there was no sign of the new styles from Paris in the shops, not least because of the austerity regulations still in force. Though it was illegal to produce such clothes for home consumption, British designers were

²⁸ Picture Post, 15 Sept. 1945, pp. 22-23; and Vogue, Sept. 1944, pp. 30-33.

²⁹ Vogue, Sept. 1944, p. 32.

allowed to include similar designs in their 'export only' collections. The public could read about the new designs during the London fashion shows, or even see them in the window of a department store, but they could not buy the designs. The proviso 'export only' was always attached.³⁰

Unsurprisingly, the fashion world chafed at the restrictions on home consumption; and nowhere is this more evident than in the editorials which appeared in Vogue near the end of the war. In a November 1944 article it complained that British designers were unfairly restricted by the continuation of austerity, and asserted that while Paris might be poorer in materials than London, at least the designers there had the 'freedom' to design what they wanted, and the privilege to see their clothes being worn rather than shipped to anonymous buyers overseas.³¹

With the emphasis on exports that began at the end of 1945, the tone of Vogue's commentary changed. An October 1945 article cautioned readers that 'peace is here, not not yet plenty.' It continued,

When you hear or read of beautiful fabrics and models being made 'for export only', you would hardly be human if you did not feel a pang that they should be going out of reach – and probably to women with fuller wardrobes than your own. But if your second thought can be, 'There goes the means of bringing in food and raw material and the thousand things that England

³⁰ See Picture Post, 21 July, 1945, p. 16; and News of the World, 1 July 1944, p. 4. Advertisements in Vogue at this time usually mentioned that the clothes featured were 'models' only and were available exclusively for export. See the October 1946 issue for numerous examples.

³¹ Vogue, Nov. 1944, pp. 25-26.

needs to live' – perhaps you won't feel so badly about it.³²

Publications such as Woman's Own, which placed less emphasis on high fashion, tended to downplay the significance of the emerging trends in women's clothing. Practical as always, the women's weeklies continued to concentrate on designs that were available to the average woman. Even as Vogue was featuring the new styles in its fashion layouts, Woman's Own visited a Utility fashion show and labelled its wares 'The Shape of Clothes to Come'. Its editors were favourably impressed by the new crop of Utility clothes, noting that 'their keynote is simplicity' and that there was 'no hint of exaggeration.'³³ The clothing that was featured in Woman's Own continued to be austere in style throughout 1945, though colours did brighten to indicate a 'Victory Mood.'³⁴

Even after the Austerity directives controlling the manufacture of women's clothing were lifted in early 1946, making it legal for the new designs to be sold domestically,³⁵ the styles emerging from Paris had only a limited effect on the sort of clothes worn by British women. As long as rationing endured, few women could afford to take up the new fashions, nor

³² *Op. cit.*, Oct. 1945, p. 31.

³³ Woman's Own, 6 Oct. 1944, p. 8.

³⁴ *Op., cit.*, 6 Apr. 1945, pp. 12-13; and 1 June 1945, p. 6.

³⁵ Civil Industry and Trade, p. 439.

would they wish to do so. Any widespread adoption of a noticeably different style of clothing would outdate existing garments; and the ration was so limited that one outfit alone would exhaust a year's supply of coupons. Furthermore, the new designs were shockingly expensive, not least because they were liable to Purchase Tax. According to Mass-Observation, much of the early opposition to the new styles arose from their expense: because the new styles were so inaccessible to ordinary people, it was easier to disapprove of them, rather than wish for a style of clothing that was out of reach.³⁶

Christian Dior's '*Corolle*' collection, conventionally accepted as the origin of the 'New Look' proper, was presented in Paris on 12 February 1947. Though extreme, his designs were regarded as the truest expression yet of the post-war shift in fashion. According to *Vogue*,

Dior...is the new name in Paris. [...] His [...] ideas were fresh and put over with great authority, his clothes were beautifully made, essentially Parisian, deeply feminine [...]

Dior uses fabrics lavishly in skirts – fifteen yards in a woollen day dress, twenty-five yards in a short taffeta evening dress. He pads these pleated skirts with stiff cambric; builds corsets and busts into the dresses so they practically stand alone.³⁷

The designation 'New Look', first used by American journalists, was a misnomer of sorts. There was little about Dior's designs that was entirely 'new', for they were an extension of the trend toward greater femininity in

³⁶ M-O FR 3095: A Report on the New Look, March 1949, p. 10.

³⁷ *Op. cit.*, Apr. 1947, p. 47.



Christian Dior's New Look, early 1947

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women's clothing fashion that had been developing since 1945, and which was in fact a continuation of the styles which had been emerging at the end of the 1930s, before the *haute couture* industry in Paris was disrupted by war.³⁸

Such was the effect of Dior's collection that, when the next round of Paris and London collections were reported in the September 1947 issue of Vogue, almost every designer was following along the guidelines established by Dior. Skirts had lengthened dramatically, waists were tiny and corseted, and hips were padded or accented with flared jackets. The world of fashion was captivated; dress manufacturers, women's activists, and Board of Trade economists were horrified – but the public remained, for the most part, unmoved. Few women were motivated to take up the new style, and those who did might well find themselves the object of ridicule. In October 1947, Picture Post decided to test the waters of public opinion: in 'A Long Skirt Goes Walking in the Park,' it described the reaction of Londoners to a model's 'New Look' outfit. Responses ranged from curious stares to outright bafflement and hostility.³⁹ Only when clothes rationing came to an end in March 1949 was the 'New Look' commonly worn.

The 'New Look' that did appear, finally, in the wardrobes of British

³⁸ See, for example, a May 1939 advertisement for an evening gown: 'A dress of mystic magic, of gentle romanticism in night black net and narrow valenciennes. Fitted uplift bodice line, hand-span waist and a skirt of many yards to float and flatter.' Vogue, May 1939, p. 9.

³⁹ Picture Post, Oct. 18, 1947, p. 24.

women was a much-modified version of the styles that had emerged from the salons of Paris in early 1947. A diluted 'New Look' consisted of a longer skirt – fuller than during the war, but rarely requiring the enormous yardage of Paris designs – and a silhouette that, in general, was more feminine and rounded. The extremes of the original Paris designs were ignored. Mass-Observation, in a report on the 'New Look' from March 1949, confirmed that 'it is the New Look *silhouette* that is accepted, the long skirt, the rounded, feminine contours, while elaborations such as bustles, padded hips, even panniers, continue to draw heavy fire.'⁴⁰ One historian has characterised the diluted style that prevailed as

a New Look shorn of its *Rue de la Paix* extravagances, a New Look severely modified for Liverpool Street in the rush hour [...] which would allow its wearer to hop on a bus or travel home from the office in a jam-packed Tube train.⁴¹

This simplified version of the 'New Look' made it easy for British women, already conditioned by years of 'Make-do and Mend', to approximate a credible version of the new silhouette. Skirts could be lengthened with the addition of material round the bottom, and made more full with the insertion of extra panels of material. Jackets could have their shoulder pads removed, and then could be re-sewn in a more feminine line. Advice was plentiful for those women who sought to convert their shorter skirts to the

⁴⁰ M-O FR 3095, p. 3.

⁴¹ Hopkins, p. 96. See also Sladen, p. 108.

longer, more modish lengths. Vogue, in a September 1947 article, showed readers how to lengthen skirts by adding a wider waistband, or by inserting contrasting materials at the hem.⁴² It was also possible, as Mrs. G. M. recalled, to wear a slightly longer underskirt to give an impression of 'New Look' abundance: she deliberately wore a lace-trimmed petticoat with an old, shorter skirt, and happily described her resulting outfit as 'the cat's whiskers.' The eagle eyes of one Mass-Observation contributor detected some 'letting down' of skirts among Harrods customers, and even Princess Margaret was seen in a coat that had been visibly altered by the insertion of an extra band of velvet in the skirt.⁴³

Other prominent Parisian designers – most notably Pierre Balmain, Jacques Fath, Lucien Lelong, and Elsa Schiaparelli – followed in Dior's wake, and were almost universal in their adoption of a *Belle Epoque* silhouette.⁴⁴ By the autumn of 1947, the new direction in women's dress – by now apparent even to those with a limited interest in the fashion industry – had become a frequent topic of debate in newspaper editorials, the letters page of The Times, and was even the subject of questions in the House of

⁴² Vogue, Sept. 1947, p. 78. A similar article appeared in Picture Post, 14 Feb. 1948, p. 24.

⁴³ M-O TC 18, Box 5, File 1: Skirts 1947-48 – observers' comments.

⁴⁴ Ewing, pp. 161-62; and Mulvagh, pp. 194-99.

Commons.⁴⁵

'New Look' designs were the focus of criticism from several determined fronts. Dress manufacturers, unsurprisingly, were horrified by the move toward longer skirts, since a 'New Look' skirt or dress required significantly more material than its wartime equivalent. Furthermore, any extreme change in fashion would leave manufacturers and retailers alike with stocks of unsaleable clothing. The Board of Trade, frequently at odds with these groups during the war, was in this respect their ally: the tempest surrounding the 'New Look' was not simply a threat to morale but also to the all-important export drive. By the end of 1947 the public's support for the continuation of austerity in all its forms was becoming fragile, and growing interest in the new fashions threatened to churn up latent feelings of dissatisfaction. People were sick to death of 'making-do', and the government knew it. Its response was to attack the 'New Look' by discouraging manufacturers from adopting the new styles in the garments they produced for both domestic and export use. The President of the Board of Trade in the fall of 1947 was Sir Stafford Cripps, whose relish of austerity in all its incarnations was well known. Speaking to clothing manufacturers that September, he asserted that any change in ladies' fashions – particularly that

⁴⁵ A letter to the News of the World complained: 'They are trying to force us to wear the most hideous garments imaginable [...] I PROTEST!' (5 Oct. 1947, p. 2). See also The Times, 1 Oct 1947, p. 5, for similarly disgruntled commentary.

sort of change which led to an increased need for materials – ‘did not seem to him very desirable.’ According to Sir Stafford, the British people

could not afford great changes while we were so desperately short of material and no sensible manufacturer would want to see material wasted at the present time. If we wasted any of our efforts, either by home production which we could not afford or by the misdirection of our exports, we should be unable to effect the balance of imports against exports which was fundamental to the future possibility of our work and life.⁴⁶

A similar line of argument was used by the Board of Trade’s administrator in charge of clothing coupons, Miss A. Kilroy, who spoke to fashion writers in October 1947. The equation was simple: ‘if longer frocks were adopted on the home market it would mean fewer of them.’ She asked the writers to encourage ‘moderate’ fashions, adding that any obvious change in fashion would make most British women ‘look dowdy’; though the current ration of four coupons a month ‘provided for essential needs, it would not provide enough for major fashion changes.’⁴⁷

The most vociferous attacks on the ‘New Look’ came from women’s activists, who feared that the new styles would prevent women from taking an active role in the post-war workplace and society. After all, had not most of the gains made by women in the twentieth century coincided with their adoption of more ‘rational’ forms of dress? Mabel Ridealgh, a Labour MP

⁴⁶ The Times, 25 Sept. 1947, p. 4. Cripps’s remarks, it should be noted, had evidently been paraphrased by The Times in its own inimitable style.

⁴⁷ The Times, 1 Oct. 1947, p. 4.

from the north of England, was quick to take up the anti-‘New Look’ cause. In an article she wrote on the subject for Reynold’s News, she maintained that the British woman was

ready for a slightly longer skirt, one designed with a nice swing, but certainly not what the fashion experts would like to impose on her.

Can anyone imagine the average housewife and businesswoman dressed in bustles and long skirts carrying on their varied jobs, running for buses and crowding into tubes and trains? The idea is ludicrous. Women today are taking a larger part in the happenings of the world and the New Look is too reminiscent of a caged bird’s attitude. I hope our fashion dictators will realise the new *outlook* of women and will give the death blow to any attempt at curtailing women’s freedom.⁴⁸

These criticisms of the ‘New Look’s suitability for modern life tended to focus on the original *couture* designs, which boasted features such as heavily-boned interior corsetry, padding at the hips and bustline, and an extravagant use of material that made for heavy, and cumbersome, garments. The skirt from one of Dior’s most popular designs, which incorporated twenty-five yards of knife-pleated silk, weighed over eight pounds alone.⁴⁹ Just as objectionable were the panniers, bustles, and giant, protruding collars that appeared in other designers’ collections in 1948.⁵⁰

These, however, were *couture* garments; then, as now, they were created as part of an artistic display on the part of the designer, and were not

⁴⁸ Cited by Addison, Now the War is Over, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Mulvagh, p. 194.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 200-203.

intended for mass consumption. Their production was very limited, not least because of the extraordinary amount of labour required to produce each and every garment: hundreds of hours of sewing and embroidery – all by hand and *never* by machine. Such designs could not be faithfully reproduced for the general public, nor was the average woman interested in wearing them. The ‘New Look’ that eventually appeared in the department stores and shops of Britain was significantly more simple and restrained than in its original incarnation, and as a result was considerably more practical and comfortable to wear. Once this was apparent – that British women would not be encased in whalebone corsets and ankle-length skirts – opposition to the ‘New Look’, on grounds of its practicality, died away.

At the time, though, the ‘New Look’ seemed to represent more than a simple change in women’s clothing. People really did wonder if the new styles were a subconscious rejection, by both women and men, of the ‘capable, efficient, strong-willed female’.⁵¹ There was a sense that women were turning a collective back on the gains they were felt to have made during the war. Although women had proved themselves the equal of men in whatever task, however disagreeable, they had been called upon to perform, they now appeared to be signalling, with their adoption of the regressive ‘New Look’ styles, that they were discontented with public life, and longed instead for a return to domesticity.

⁵¹ M-O FR 3095, p. 11.

The debate over women's status in the post-war era, and the question of whether they lost or gained status relative to their position during the war, is a serious one, and the controversy surrounding the 'New Look' was a mirror of the confusion felt by many people in Britain, women and men alike, over the roles that women would, and should, play in post-war society. If British women, *en masse*, had actually begun to wear corsets and skirts made from twenty-five yards of fabric, then the effect of the 'New Look' truly would have been revolutionary, and it would not be inconceivable that the popularity of such fashions was in some way indicative of women's discontent with 'emancipated' life. This, however, was not the case. Hemlines did drop by a matter of inches, and the general way in which clothing was tailored did soften perceptibly. Women continued, however, to wear the same *sort* of clothing: the average woman still wore, in her daily life, a simple frock, or a skirt and blouse or, occasionally, trousers. The *way* women dressed had not changed in any fundamental sense.

Furthermore, it was young, unmarried, working women who adopted the 'New Look' most enthusiastically – and they were not over-enamoured by the prospect of home-based domesticity.⁵² They had the money to pay for the new fashions, which remained expensive; and they were keen to make up for

⁵² Young women remained in the workplace in large numbers after the war, and in fact were encouraged by the government to remain in paid work, as a way of lending support to the export drive. See Crofts, pp. 96-97; and Addison, *Now the War is Over*, pp. 186-87.

the long, lost years of austerity. Mrs A. M., who was twenty-one in 1947, had spent her teenage years feeling starved for pretty things; so when the 'New Look' came in she instinctively felt that 'it was wonderful!' She bought herself a coat – *very* expensive at £6 15s – which was very full with a nipped-in waist, in a soft, heathery mauve colour. 'It was a *dream!* I can see it – I can still *feel* that coat.' She also recalled buying a powder-blue linen suit, with a long, pleated skirt and shaped jacket, that made her feel 'absolutely like a million dollars'. There was also a ballgown made out of pale pink satin – 'I spent a whole *nine* guineas on that dress' – but the pleasure of wearing it outweighed, for her, any scruples over its cost.

Those women whose lives did conform to more traditional ideals – married, at-home mothers – may have worn clothing that conformed to the general 'New Look' silhouette, but on the whole they were uninterested in, and untouched by, the vagaries of fashion. As in the inter-war period, 'fashion' had little effect on the average housewife; this certainly was the case with Mrs. E. H. who, though very interested in matters of dress while working in London, was married and the mother of two small children when the 'New Look' came in. Preoccupied with life at home, she did not take 'much notice at all' of the new fashions. 'I think there's a long spell between your first child, and when the last one goes to school, when the focus is entirely on home', she observed.

In the end, the 'New Look' did triumph, exerting its influence over the

shape of women's clothing for much of the following decade. But it was a 'New Look' imbued with a combination of wartime restraint and post-war visions of equality that prevailed: it was a far cry from the sumptuous, frivolous, and fundamentally elitist 'New Look' of the *couturiers*.

* * *

The post-war period, though coloured by restraint in the face of economic crisis, was by no means a uniformly dour and gray time. In November 1947 – in many respects the high noon of austerity – Britain united to celebrate a royal wedding. For months beforehand, the popular press bristled with stories of Princess Elizabeth's romance with the dashing Lt. Mountbatten RN, the wedding arrangements and, of course, descriptions of the design and creation of her wedding dress. The princess, whose parents were known and admired for their scrupulous observance of all forms of wartime austerity,⁵³ was allocated 100 clothing coupons for her gown and trousseau. The wedding dress, made of yards and yards of silk satin encrusted with white crystal, seed pearls and silver thread, was priceless by coupon standards: what other bride of that grim, post-war autumn could have

⁵³ Eleanor Roosevelt was fond in her recollections of a wartime stay at Buckingham Palace. Everyone ate wartime rations (albeit off gold plates), the Palace was freezing cold, with bomb damage everywhere; and the King not only showed Mrs. Roosevelt how to prepare for blackout each evening, but also cautioned her not to exceed her ration of hot water (a black line had been painted in all the bathtubs as a guide). See The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt (New York, 1962), pp. 185-86.

aspired to such a dress?⁵⁴ But criticisms were hardly to be heard; rather, there were acclamations for the young couple, many similar to this News of the World editorial:

We are indeed an odd people. In the past few days the country has been staggered by grave events. Our economic situation is said to be as serious, if not more so, than in the darkest days of the war; on all hands there are sharp differences of public opinion.

But on the fifth day of this week all of these will be subordinated to our unity and rejoicing. Let it be so. All the world loves a bride, and all Britain must be weary of drabness and austerity. This is a good opportunity to forget for the moment the cares of the morrow, and enjoy the pageantry and colour which are our tradition and heritage.⁵⁵

That 'drabness and austerity' was soon to be a memory, cast into shadow by a buoyant economy. The export drive proved to be a resounding success, industry thrived, and in the post-war period unemployment was virtually non-existent. In 1949 began a 'bonfire of controls', which included the end of clothes rationing in March. In part this was reflective of an improving domestic economy, but it was also a calculated response to the growing public distaste for austerity which, as Ken Morgan has commented, had 'taken hold

⁵⁴ Much publicity was accorded to the fact that no 'enemy' materials were used in the construction of Princess Elizabeth's wedding dress. The ten thousand seed pearls in its intricate embroidered panels were from America (rather than Japan), and the silk from which its satin had been woven was produced by 'Nationalist Chinese' silkworms, instead of Italian or Japanese ones. See Hartnell, p. 113.

⁵⁵ News of the World, 16 Nov. 1947, p. 2.

of the public consciousness like a malignant disease.⁵⁶ The irritations caused by austerity never did flare into outright discontent, for people seemed to accept that their continuing forbearance was critical to the survival of the nascent welfare state. Social surveys of the period – most notable was B. Seebom Rowntree's third survey of the working-class population of York – confirmed the very real effects of the post-war social reforms: an astonishing improvement, in virtually every respect, to standards of living. Where the provision of clothing was concerned, rising standards of living meant that expenditure, overall, was very much higher than before the war – a manual worker's household might typically spend 11s 4d was spent on women's clothing, 9s 11d on men's clothing and 9s 6d on children's clothing each week: nearly a ten-fold increase over the average amount spent by such households in the late 1930s. The poorest families, however, were only able to spend 5s 2d, 6s 1d and 5s 2d respectively for women's, men's and children's clothing – even in the welfare state there remained a core number of households that remained persistently impoverished.⁵⁷

High levels of employment, combined with a 'safety net' of benefits that protected most families if and when disaster struck, made a rarity of the inconstant household incomes with which so many women had to grapple in

⁵⁶ Morgan, p. 76. See also Crofts, pp. 95-98; and Hennessy, p. 339.

⁵⁷ B. Seebom Rowntree and G. R. Lavers. Poverty and the Welfare State: A Third Social Survey of York (London, 1951), pp. 14-15.

the inter-war period. By 1951, at least half of all pawnbrokers had gone out of business; some vanished, no doubt, during the upheaval of the war years, but most disappeared because they were no longer needed as an avenue of short-term (but usurious) credit for the household in desperate straits.⁵⁸ Hire-purchase remained a favoured means of obtaining fashionable garments, particularly by young people. Reliance appears to have shifted from the old, neighbourhood 'diddlums' – left behind with the old neighbourhoods – to the cheque systems proffered by an ever-obliging brigade of 'tally men'.⁵⁹

Decline, both economic and social, lay unseen as the 1940s drew to a close; the British people were as yet unaffected by the spectre of runaway inflation, a spiralling debt, and resurgent unemployment. Any flaws in the welfare state seemed, at mid-century, laughably minor in comparison to the poverty of the inter-war period, for this was the 'Age of Affluence,' of 'Festival Days' and, as the sun rose on Coronation Day, 2 June 1953, it seemed that a 'New Elizabethan' era might be arriving as well. Harold Macmillan was probably right when, in 1957, he famously observed that 'most of our people have never had it so good.'⁶⁰

⁵⁸ In 1931 there were approximately 3,000 pawnbrokers in operation in Britain; by 1951 only 1,500 remained. See Hopkins, p. 345; and A. L. Minkes, 'The Decline of Pawnbroking,' *Economica*, vol. 20 (Feb. 1953), p. 21.

⁵⁹ Madeline Kerr, *The People of Ship Street* (London, 1958), pp. 90-93.

⁶⁰ Marwick, pp. 106 & 111.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis, simply stated, was to examine the role of clothing in the household budget and in popular culture in Britain between 1919 and 1949, and in the course of so doing also shed some light on the lives of women of that era. Although the subject of clothing has frequently been dismissed or ignored by historians, it was of profound importance to women in the inter-war and wartime periods. The ways in which clothing issues were handled during the economic depression of the 1930s, followed by the austere years of the war, offers a fascinating insight into women's perspectives and practices in this period. Most apparent is a remarkable depth of pragmatism in their attitudes towards clothing, and a willingness to seek enterprising solutions to the difficulties occasioned by economic distress and the rigours of a wartime economy.

The practical role of clothing in women's lives has rarely been assessed to the same degree as other essentials of life such as food and housing, yet obtaining, maintaining, and renewing clothing stocks were issues of the utmost importance to women in the inter-war period and the Second World War. This was particularly true for women from the poorest households, whose struggle to keep their families fed and clean was compounded by the difficulties of obtaining decent clothing and footwear for everyone. The inconstancy of their family's income meant that it was very difficult to save sufficient funds for the purchase of clothing, and so women had to resort to unconventional means of saving: they might organise savings schemes with friends and neighbours; or they might seek credit – however usurious the

rates – in order to buy clothing immediately. The clothing they could afford with such limited funds was inevitably of low quality, which meant that it had to be replaced frequently; and it was also the case that high rates of interest inflated the price of clothing well above the amount that it would cost if purchased with cash. Often it was impossible for the lower-income housewife to obtain new clothing for her family, in which case she had to resort to the second-hand market and its dubious wares.

Even once such clothing was obtained, it required a great deal of effort merely to maintain it in wearable condition. Many hours were spent by women in mending and laundering their family's garments; and these chores were made more difficult by a lack of materials. It cost money to launder clothes efficiently and thoroughly; sufficient supplies of hot water and soap, as well as equipment such as a mangle to wring out wet and heavy laundry, were often inaccessible to the poorest households.

Inevitably, the worry and labour involved in the provision and maintenance of clothing stocks meant that, for the woman from a low-income household, keeping her family clothed was nothing more than a nightmarish responsibility. In households where the income was more constant – where, even if funds were not abundant, at least they did not fluctuate wildly from week to week, and where the housewife could organise her spending without the worry of a week without money – the provision and maintenance of clothing was incomparably transformed for the better.

Women from this 'middle range of incomes' had access to cash sums,

or were able to save money with relative ease; and this allowed them access to shops which stocked good-quality garments that were fairly priced. Clothes could be purchased for reasons other than cheapness: quality of construction, and attraction of appearance, became important considerations as well. Even the way that clothing was cared for became less troublesome. The labour of wash-day was made easier by better equipment and more abundant supplies of soap and hot water; or it might be avoided altogether, and transferred to another woman – usually one from a low-income household – in the person of a washerwoman.

The effect of clothing on women's lives was not a purely practical one, furthermore, for clothing – its appearance, quality of construction, and relative abundance – affected the way that people perceived both themselves and those around them. The sort of clothing a woman wore depended not only on her personal background, but also upon society in general. Both internal influences (such as a woman's age, income, or occupation) and external influences (for example, the cinema or periodic press) determined what kind of clothing she wore; and they also affected how women thought about their, and others', clothing.

With the outbreak of World War Two in 1939, and continuing for the next decade, the practices and attitudes women had in regard to clothing were altered to reflect the requirements of life on the home front. In the early years of the war, the price of clothing rose sharply, and available stocks plummeted. Fearing that morale would be affected by such shortages, the government

implemented a series of measures intended to guarantee 'fair shares' where clothing was concerned. The introduction of clothes rationing in 1941 meant that methods of budgeting and saving had to be altered, for the amount of clothing – both new and used – one could legally purchase was strictly controlled. Utility controls, introduced later that year, regulated the price and manufacture of both cloth and made-up garments, and were intended to reduce inessential demands on materials and labour. They were complemented by the Austerity directives, released in 1942, which governed the design and manufacture of most types of clothing. The appearance of clothing during the war reflected such economic austerity: styles were plain, even severe; and changes in fashion stalled. 'Fashion', during the Second World War, meant little more than attractive clothing that was well-maintained.

The austerity measures were successful, in that they led to a decrease in consumer spending, as well as a more equitable system of distribution of existing clothing stocks; but it was also the case that the British people were confronted with wardrobes whose contents were steadily diminishing. Never the less, women from all economic backgrounds coped with such shortages in a resourceful manner, despite the many responsibilities of daily life in wartime Britain. Although many women had been directed into paid work outside the home, or had joined one of the auxiliary services, they were also required to cope with rationing and shortages of most other essentials, food in particular, as if they had no other duties to occupy them.

Women responded to economic controls by obtaining their clothing from alternate venues – for example, ‘Bring and Buy’ sales – or by swapping with other women. Most importantly, they learned how to extend the life of the clothing they already had. ‘Make-do and Mend’ – the slogan which the government used to encourage economy where clothing was concerned – involved not only the careful repair of existing garments, but might also entail the creation of new garments from materials at hand which hitherto had not been employed in the construction of clothing.

Merely because clothing stocks were so sharply reduced did not mean that women were encouraged to be lax in their personal appearance. Women – particularly young women – were expected to maintain an attractive, well-groomed appearance. It was considered by the government, as well as by the British people, that high standards of appearance contributed to high levels of morale, and at the same time demonstrated to the enemy that it had not adversely affected daily life. Their efforts were, of course, made easier by a freeze in fashionable change; women could be confident that prevailing styles in clothing would not alter abruptly, rendering their existing stocks of clothing unfashionable.

Women accomplished this not only by keeping their existing garments in as good a condition as possible, but also by rejuvenating the appearance of those garments by creatively adding new details – bright buttons or a scrap of trim – or by remaking their garments entirely. An old dress might be turned into a blouse; old scraps of cloth could be sewn together into a patchwork

skirt. Women also managed to cultivate a pleasing appearance by concentrating on related aspects of their appearance such as their hats, hairstyles, and cosmetics.

The *sort* of clothing women wore was changing as well. Many women spent their working lives in uniform; and even civilian clothes were so similar as to give the appearance of uniform. Clothing had to be simple and relatively comfortable so that women might undertake their war work with minimal distraction and inconvenience.

In 1947, all this was shaken by the appearance of the 'New Look' in women's fashionable clothing, which had been looming for some time, but which was brought to exuberant life by designer Christian Dior. The original *couture* designs were extremely lavish and feminine; their wearer's bust and hips were padded, while her waist was whittled by built-in corsetry. Most astonishing were the skirts of these dresses: long – sometimes only inches from the floor – and *very* full. The 'New Look' designs – in appearance, the polar opposite of modest, utilitarian wartime fashions – were flamboyantly and flagrantly defiant of economic austerity and the restraint it required.

Despite all the attention accorded to the new designs, they were not particularly popular in Britain at first, largely because the continuation of wartime economic controls meant that personal spending remained limited well into the post-war period. Clothes rationing had *not* ended in 1945, but instead continued, along with other economic controls, as part of the Labour government's plan for the post-war resuscitation of the shattered British

economy. The clothes ration hovered at a handful of coupons per month – enough for one or two garments a year – and Utility restrictions on clothing production meant that ‘New Look’ designs, even if produced by British manufacturers, could not legally be sold in the UK. Instead, they were sold abroad as part of the export drive to rebuild Britain’s economy.

The ‘New Look’ only became popular after clothes rationing was abolished in March 1949. Even then, it was a very different sort of ‘New Look’ from the one first envisioned by Christian Dior and his fellow *couturiers*. It did retain a longer skirt, but none of the Parisian excesses were seen in the ready-to-wear versions of the ‘New Look’ that were sold in High Streets across Britain from 1949 onwards.

In the end, it was an egalitarian, accessible ‘New Look’ that prevailed, reflecting the temper of British society in the immediate post-war period. Restraint in most things was necessary if a truly just society were to be attained. The vision of that better world had been described by William Beveridge, but it was given credence by the wartime government itself, however unwittingly, with its emphasis on ‘fair shares’ for all. If a world of ‘fair shares’ were to become reality, then certain sacrifices would have to be made; and when compared to the benefits of National Health, for example, the opulent excesses of the ‘New Look’ might be foregone with ease.

* * *

Two significant conclusions can be drawn from this thesis in regard to the social history of women in Britain in the years between 1919 and 1949.

First, the ability to 'make do' and to manage on a limited income, particularly where clothing was concerned, and also to value sensible, hard-wearing styles of dress, was not something that women suddenly learned during the war years, but rather was a well-developed skill born out of the economic distress of much of the inter-war period. This also explains the predilection for conspicuous under-consumption which characterised attitudes toward clothing in this period, particularly among women from the middle range of incomes. These tendencies of under-consumption directly contradict the theories of Thorstein Veblen in regard to dress and consumption. They were, it should be emphasised, common to the inter-war and wartime periods only. The remarkable period of prosperity that characterised the post-war period did much to collapse habits of under-consumption, a consequence that has been remarked upon by Elizabeth Roberts: "Within the home, women's traditional skills of managing, making something out of nothing and budgeting all gradually became less valued, as a consequence of the ending of war-time rationing, the availability of more and more consumer items, and above all the increased ability of families to afford such items."¹

Second, while fashionable change in clothing can rightly be characterised as largely irrational, women's decisions and actions regarding clothing were fundamentally **rational**. By comprehensively surveying the role of clothing in daily life, this thesis aims to override any lingering

¹ Elizabeth Roberts, Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970 (Oxford, 1995), p. 233.

prejudice that clothing, like fashion, is irrational and therefore unworthy of serious academic attention. However, as this thesis has demonstrated, the relationship between women and clothing in the period under study was a thoroughly rational one. The strategies women employed to save, budget, purchase and care for clothing were as well thought-out, prudent and sensible as those they employed when considering issues such as food and housing, and are equally deserving of scholarly attention.

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Appendix A

Oral History Project: Methodology and Approach

In the course of my research it became evident that primary source material on women from the middle range of incomes was very scant; and this was particularly true of the inter-war period. The solution to this deficiency seemed obvious: oral history evidence.

There existed already a large volume of oral history material, in the form of transcribed interviews in archival collections across the country, and I began by investigating these as a potential source of the information I required. Chief among these collections are the National Life Story Collection at the British Sound Archive and the oral history collection at the Imperial War Museum. Both of these collections is an invaluable, and indeed quite priceless, source of information in its own right. While I suspect that I would have eventually found a great deal of useful material in these collections, I was hampered by the fact that, while the interviews they contain are, in most cases, transcribed and catalogued, the contents of the interviews are rarely indexed. Since a project that concentrated on clothing in the mid-20th century was absent from these holdings, it would have required many months of sifting through transcripts and tapes in order to obtain the information I required.

It became clear that I would have to undertake a project of my own in order to uncover the information that was absent from published and

archival sources. In a way, I would bypass intermediaries and act, as Paul Thompson has observed, as if I were the publisher: I would “imagine what evidence is needed, seek it out, and capture it.”¹

I was acquainted with a woman at a senior citizens’ residence in North Oxford; she, and many of her friends at the residence, were from the right age group – most were young women during the 1930s and 1940s – and most grew up in, then married into, households from the middle range of incomes. Mrs. M. W. introduced me to her friends and acted as a sort of intermediary, helping to plan interviews and meeting me in advance to explain any potential problems that might occur (such as one woman being extremely deaf but loathe to admit it). I also did an initial interview with her as a sort of ‘test run,’ and on the basis of her answers went back and rephrased several of my questions. For example, when I asked her if she exchanged or shared clothing with other women outside the family, I used the word ‘trade,’ and was surprised when her answer was a vehement ‘no.’ I later found that ‘trade’ is not a synonym for ‘exchange’ in Britain (as it is in Canada) and replaced it with ‘swop,’ which was more readily understood by the women I interviewed.

The project in its final form includes the transcripts of ten interviews; two other interviews were done but I chose not to include them. One was with an extremely elderly lady whose memories of the period were sketchy and who answered “I don’t remember” to most of the questions; another was

¹ Thompson, The Voice of the Past, p. 5.

with a woman, American by birth, who did not emigrate to Britain until the early 1940s and whose recollections, though interesting, fell outside the scope of the project as it was conceived. Ideally I would have liked to interview more women, but my resources were limited and I felt that a larger project would require at least another six months or more of work. While the results of my project are not statistically representative (and were never intended as such), once I had transcribed and organised the results it was clear that a reasonably representative cross-section of respondents had been found. The women came from diverse parts of England and Wales; from a variety of income levels within the middle range of households; and they all led quite different lives as adults. Despite these differences, their practices and attitudes regarding clothing were remarkably homogenous.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion. Generally I began by describing my work and why I was interested in talking to the woman being interviewed; I answered any questions she might have about the results of the interview and how her words would be used. I also advised each woman that I would only use her initials (which could be altered if she wished), as I felt that this would make her more comfortable about revealing more personal details. None of the women seemed particularly concerned about issues of anonymity.

I had, as mentioned earlier, a prepared list of questions, which I did not follow slavishly. Occasionally the women would begin to talk about details of their lives which were quite unrelated to the interview at hand, but I felt that

it would be detrimental to the interview to cut them short (and these segues were often quite as interesting as the rest of the interview). Any questions that were skipped over could always be returned to later. The questions asked in the interview with Mrs. E.H. (see Appendix C) were typical and followed the prepared list quite closely.

Most of the women warmed quickly to the topic at hand and seemed pleased to have a chance to discuss their lives, for few, if any, had been asked about their past. Most expressed surprise that anyone, particularly a woman in her early twenties, would be interested in details of their daily lives from a half century ago.

The majority were candid regarding their personal lives, apart from one respondent who was very talkative and informative about her life in the 1930s, but became uncomfortable and terse when discussing the war years. Looking back on the transcripts of the interview it seems possible, reading between the lines, that something traumatic happened to her during this period.

Each of the women was interviewed once. Some of the interviews were relatively short, lasting an hour or so, while others were comparatively lengthy (three to four hours). At the end of all the interviews I was offered a cup of tea and I chatted with each woman more informally. Most brought out photographs to illustrate some of the points they had made during their interview; one woman showed me baby clothes she had made during the war, while another showed me the lace sleeves from her wedding gown,

which she had saved for over sixty years.

I was keen to remain as neutral as possible during the interviews, and to that end I tried to keep my questions as brief and direct as possible. I avoided leading questions and only interjected or added to my original question if no response was forthcoming after a few minutes.

My role as a neutral 'outsider'² was considerably bolstered by my Canadian accent. As it was not class specific in any way, it was harder for the women to anticipate what my own interpretation of their answers would be. As a result, they were less inclined to pigeonhole me in advance of the interview and then tailor their responses accordingly. I suspect that some of the women may have been anxious, before their interviews, at the prospect of being questioned by an 'academic,' particularly those from more modest backgrounds with little connection to university life; and I tried to remain sensitive to this and make my presence as unthreatening as possible.

All the interviews were transcribed and all quotations that appear in the text of this thesis do so verbatim. Particularly great care was taken to transcribe accurately the cadence of each woman's speech, including any emphasis on certain words (indicated by italics in the text), any hesitations or pauses, or moments of laughter. In total the project took place over the course of three months in the autumn of 1994: one month for the interviews, and the remainder for transcription.

² Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 117.

Appendix B

Information About the Oral History Participants

Mrs. M. B. – born in London in 1906. One of three children. Father was a master brewer. Worked as a PE instructor before the war; lived alone in a flat and owned her own car. Married a research chemist in 1939 and spent most of the war abroad.

Mrs. K. C. – born in Southampton in 1914. One of six children. Father a printer. Mother had trained as a court dressmaker. Went to university and trained as a teacher. Married a fellow teacher in 1934. Had two children.

Mrs. S. G. – born in Kent in 1912. Father was a wine merchant. One of two children. Worked as a nurse during WWII. Married a clergyman in 1950.

Mrs. D. H. – born in Cheshire in 1917. One of two children. Father (regular army) died in 1920; mother went to work as a housekeeper. Worked as an accounts clerk after leaving school. Married a petroleum engineer in 1941. Had two children.

Mrs. E. H. – born in 1915 in Cardiff; one of two children. Father owned several shops. Worked as a secretary in London after finishing school; shared a flat with her sister. Married a research chemist in 1944. Had three children.

Mrs. A. M. – born in 1926 in Kent. Father was a retired violinist. Youngest of six children. Schooling was disrupted by the war, but eventually trained as a children's nurse. Did not marry until 1954.

Mrs G. M. – born in 1910 in Cumbria. Had one sister. Father owned a local building firm. Family were staunch Quakers; she was educated at a private school. Became an art teacher after finishing her schooling. Was married in 1934 to a clergyman and academic; had three children.

Mrs. F. P. – born in 1914 in Hampshire. One of four children. Father was a master carpenter. Worked as a shop assistant after leaving school. Married an RAF officer in 1933. Had two children.

Mrs. M. R. – born in West Yorkshire in 1912. One of five children. Father was a builder and stonemason. Worked as a secretary after leaving

school. Was married in 1944; husband was a gentleman's outfitter. Had two children.

Mrs M. W. – born in 1916 in Rochdale; had one brother. Father was an engineer. She worked as a secretary after leaving school. Married in 1940; husband was a sales director at an engineering firm. Had two children.

Appendix C

Interview with Mrs E. H.

17 October 1994

[Mrs. E. H. was born in Cardiff in 1915.]

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Yes, I was the youngest of four: two brothers, then a sister, then me.

Did you live in Cardiff throughout your childhood?

Yes, until I left – I was nearly twenty-one when I left. My sister and I – she was a year older – we both came to London.

Could you describe the house in which you grew up?

Well, I started, until I was about ten I should think – ten or eleven – we lived above the stationer's and tobacconist's shop my father owned, and he had two other lock-up shops in various places across Cardiff, and then when I was ten we moved a bit up-market, to another part of Cardiff, across the other side. Pentwyn the district was called, and we rented that house, and it was a typical terraced, late Victorian, brick-built terrace with rather nice marble pillars in the porch, and tiles inside, pretty tiles inside the porch... a four-bedroomed house. We were there four years, I would think – it's hard to remember the exact dates. And then we moved a bit up-market again, across – back across Cardiff, to Llandaff, which was almost an independent village then [...], that was near Llandaff Cathedral – that was a very nice house. That was a semi-detached, not a terrace – we were one 'up'. There was a garage there, and most of the houses in Cardiff had a lane at the back so you always had a back entrance into your back garden; [with] the terraces, you had to come through the house to get to the garden. Palace Road had a lane at the back, which also had a garage – the lane was wider, and the garden was wide enough to have a garage. And it was quite a ... a desirable part of Cardiff. We weren't in the – the road was called Palace Road, and part of it was made up of houses about our size, with four bedrooms – but they were nice large room, lofty rooms. But the other half of Palace Road was of the five- and six-bedroom houses – they were bigger, and had bigger gardens and so on [...]

And so your father was an... an owner of shops?

He owned the one, and more or less as he expanded his business, he took two other lock-up shops, where he had a manageress, who was in charge, and he'd just go round each day to make sure they were all right. But we left the shop because he was offered a job as a representative – a commercial traveller, it was called then – but representative was what was said *later*; a commercial traveller, you know, was someone you thought of who sold shoelaces at the door... so he was a representative, for Johnny Walker whisky. And he was

offered that job because his father had represented them all during and before the First World War, then he retired and Dad was offered this – they said to Dad, would he like to take his father's place, and he did. And he was with Johnny Walker, then, until he retired; he retired, eventually, during the war – the Second World War. I think he should possibly have retired a bit earlier than that, but with all the young men called up [...] they brought the older men into the office work [...]

I'm assuming, then, from the period, that your mother didn't work.

Never. Nor did I – you see, in my day, and right up until, I suppose, until after the war, there were certain jobs that women couldn't do. Teachers couldn't work after they were married; bank clerks couldn't; insurance clerks couldn't. Once a girl married, she was out.

It was just understood?

It was just understood – as soon as you married, that was it – your husband kept you.

Apart from housework, then, did your mother have any outside interests – belong to church associations?

No... looking back on it, I'm surprised. I hadn't realised how few her interests were, really, outside. I mean, she had one or two good friends... perhaps I wasn't interested in what she did while I was at school? I don't know. I know she used to go occasionally to play bridge. There were three maiden ladies living next door to us in Palace Road – they were retired, all of them, retired teachers – two of them had been headmistresses at schools. And Mother used to go in and play bridge with them, maybe once a week – probably every other week – and they used to come to the house. And we were very amused, because the first time Mother went, she put a hat on to go next door, and we laughed at this – 'what are you doing, putting a hat on?' And she said 'but they do,' and they *did*. They were the three Miss Lewises, in their own home, and they'd got their hats on, for entertaining. Really, it was strange... I presume this was common. I don't know how Mother knew she had to put a hat on... I have a feeling when we moved there, the Miss Lewises, as we always called them – it was easier – I think they must have left their card, welcoming Mother – it was customary... this would be 1930, '31. And I think it still applied. This hadn't happened [at our old house] – I think it was Llandaff, you see – it was a slightly exclusive little village – probably changed when Cardiff took it over.

What newspapers or magazines would your mother have read?

She used to – you see, living in a stationer's, we used to read them all, and then put them back – but I don't honestly remember seeing Mother read. She always took, what was it, Woman's Weekly? Woman's Own? Just a small one, not a big one [gestures as to the page size] – she always used to take that, even up to the time she died, and I sometimes see that at the newsagents, and

think 'Oh, there's that old magazine.' She always said it was sensible – very sensible, that was the thing.

What was the family newspaper?

Well, we would have had – there again, I don't remember what Mum and Dad... We moved, when I was nine or ten, from the shop – up 'til then, my sister and I used to have papers out of the shop, children's papers, children's newspapers – but the daily paper, I think probably was the Western Mail, which was the local paper, and there was an evening paper too... I suppose it was the Evening News or something. But they were local papers – I don't remember them having national dailies. But of course they were in the shop, and might have read them, and I might never have seen them in the house [...]

Did your mother have any domestic help?

Yes. She always had a maid, who came at half past seven, and got up the breakfast and things. And she went, I think, about half past twelve, or one perhaps, because of course in those days everyone came home from school for dinner – I mean, when you worked in an office – my brothers came home for dinner, at midday, and I think Janet and Kitty were there then, when we got home, and they probably went soon, straight afterwards.

Were they local women?

Yes... quite young girls, you know... The first one I ever remember, when I was small, she was perhaps in her late twenties, mid-thirties – she seemed old to me. But after that, I think in their late teens, early twenties, perhaps. But they lasted; they were with us for years, you know, they never went. Janet – she died. This is awful – pre-National Health, and she was developing a goitre, and Mother could see this coming, and said 'Why don't you go to the doctor?' but it was 1930, and her father and three brothers were all out of work – she was the only one working, coming to work for Mother, and there was no dole then. I think the father got some dole, but the boys hadn't worked long enough to be eligible for it, and there were no extra allowances. And Mother, in the end, paid for Janet to see our doctor, for an examination, and he said she must go to hospital, and she actually died under the anaesthetic. And Mother always felt very, very guilty. But by the time she had the operation, she was beginning to choke, and her eyes were beginning to bulge out – it would have killed her. Whether if she'd gone earlier it wouldn't have, I wouldn't know.

Did your parents have a car?

The firm provided one, a car for Dad, because he drove all over West Wales. We didn't have one of our own. My eldest brother, and two friends of his, clubbed together to buy an old Morris Tourer for five pounds, which they ran between them for a few years. But I know very few people who had a car. Next door had a car, they'd got three girls [...] and they had a car, which I think

they only used to go on holiday, really, that sort of thing. There weren't the cars as there are now.

Did you go away on holidays?

Yes, always [...] First of all, when we were in the shop, Mother and Dad couldn't go away both, together, at the same time. You see, somebody had to be on the premises, so my Dad used to take the two boys, and Mother used to take my sister and me, and we used to cross half-way. We always went to Ilfracombe or Minehead, somewhere where we could go by paddlesteamer from the Cardiff Docks, you see, just across the town. And we used to – as they came off the boat, we were getting on! We'd say 'Hello! Did you have a good holiday?' and off we'd go [...] so that was when we were at the shop.

By the time we moved, the boys were going off on their own, I think – I don't remember ever being on holiday with them, because of this early exchange business, and then after that I think... I have a feeling they went camping [...]

Was your family a church-going family?

No. Nominally Dad was a Baptist, and Mother was an Anglican, but they never went to church. They used to send us to Sunday school, because it gave them one half day! Sunday afternoon, the four of us – my eldest brother used to shepherd us along to Sunday school. We'd go to the first one we came to – an Anglican, very Temperance sort of place. We used to go along there every Sunday afternoon, and then Laurie would organize us into a sort of walk, in the local park. And then we'd come home, and Mother and Dad would have had at least two hours quiet.

As we got older, [my sister] Noel and I carried on with Sunday school, and when we moved over to Pentwyn, we went to an Anglican, which was the nearest, because we knew one or two people there from school [...]

Then when we moved back to Llandaff, we didn't go to Sunday school at Llandaff, because our local church was the cathedral, you see, and was really rather different. We were confirmed at the cathedral – we'd been christened in the cathedral [...]

Where did you go to school?

I went to what we now call a state school. We went to an ordinary council school, a junior school. Then we'd got a scholarship exam, which later became an eleven-plus sort of thing, and if you passed this exam you went to a high school, a secondary school, and if you didn't you carried on at the council school until you were fourteen. Well, we both got through the exam, and we went to Howard Gardens Secondary School [...]

I left – well, we both left when we were sixteen, and then we went to a secretarial college, which was paid for. Neither of us wanted to [go to university] – we weren't particularly academic, and we didn't want to go on to university, and then, in those days [...] unless you were going to do your A-levels with a view to going to university, you didn't bother with A-levels,

you left at sixteen. I remember a very small sixth form at the school [...]

We both went to Cleves College, which was a privately run – and very well run – secretarial college, and that was shorthand, typing, bookkeeping, office management... Very well run, anyway, and it included some physical education – tennis, hockey, you know – so it wasn't all [work].

I was wondering about what you would have worn as a school uniform.

Well, nearly all the schools in Cardiff wore gym tunics, you know, with the yoke and flat pleats. In Howard Gardens the tunics were dark green, as the school colours were dark green and a dark red, and we wore green tunics, with white blouses, and we had, instead of a school hat, which most people had, for some incomprehensible reason we wore school caps, which were made rather like jockey caps – they came well down on your head with a rather straight peak – and of course everywhere we went outside South Wales [...] Mother used to insist on our wearing our school uniforms – I don't know why, perhaps it was the easiest thing for us to travel in – and of course [...] there were all sorts of shouts about our wearing our brothers' caps and so on – terrible.

When you were out of school, were you allowed to choose your own clothes, or was that something your parents decided?

Oh, I think we were allowed to choose – up to a point. Because for economic reasons, Mother made nearly all our clothes; she was very good at it. And what she couldn't do – if it were a suit or anything – there was a dressmaker's, and it was very easy to get there, you know, and they used to make things very well, when they got to know you – your shape, and so on – but most everyday things Mother would make, and she had us making our own clothes, in our early teens. Materials were so cheap. Even after Noel and I came to London we made our own clothes. Because you could get a Vogue pattern, and you got so used to your own [shape] that you learned exactly how to take lumps out of the tissue [...]

In 1940, '41, we moved across to Hampstead – we had lived in Fulham. And when we were in Fulham we did ARP duties every night, but when we got to Hampstead they didn't have any bombing to speak of, to compare with Fulham anyway [...] But I remember when we were in the basement flat that they'd converted into a shelter, Noel and I were both sewing coats, and I remember sewing the lining into a tweed coat by hand, as we were in the shelter. People did make a lot – we weren't alone in this. Most middle-class girls, you see – wages were very low, and you could have twice as many clothes if you made them as if you bought them.

I get the impression that, if you were handy with a needle, you could turn out something that would cost a great deal more if you were to buy it in a shop.

Oh yes – it would be double [the cost], easily double.

How often would you have received new clothes? Was that year-round, as

the need arose, or perhaps at set times of the year?

Well, a bit of both really. You always had new things – or we always had new things – for Whitsun, because there was a big Whit in Cardiff – there was a big Roman Catholic population, Irish probably. And the Marquess of Butte, who still lived in Cardiff Castle [...], they were a big Roman Catholic family. And on Whit Sunday, the Castle used to entertain all the Roman Catholic children who processed through the streets to the castle, for a service on Whit Sunday, and then tea – you know, a picnic tea, hundreds of them – and we used to watch these marvellous processions, because a lot of the children at the school were Roman Catholic. They were little horrors during the week, but that day butter wouldn't melt in their mouth – they'd all got new clothes! And that, almost, was the start of the summer for us. For the Roman Catholics it wasn't, because they used to have new clothes for Easter. And Mother used to say, "We're not having new clothes for Easter, they'll think we're Roman Catholic! We'll have them for Whitsun." So we always had new clothes for Whitsun, always a tussore silk dress, usually with a tan sort of belt on it, and either a cream-coloured coat or a tan-coloured coat, you know. I don't know why these, but they seem to have suited us and we had – oh, I can remember having that three years running, the same outfit, and I remember saying, 'Why can't we have something different?' and Mother saying, 'Be quiet; you'll have what you're given.'

Very soon after that – we were coming up to 1930, and I was fifteen – we were given an allowance, a dress allowance, which was all of a pound a week, out of which we were supposed to buy our stockings, petticoats, underclothes maybe... And then, if we wanted to make a dress, Mother would pay for the material. But we could choose what we liked.

What about Christmas – would you have anything for Christmas? Or was there more of an emphasis on Whitsun?

Whitsun, yes. We must have had party dresses, because we went to parties at Christmas. I really don't remember them that much. I think that perhaps we had something new in the way of a wool dress ... Viyella you see, you could get that, and it was quite reasonable – Viyella now is quite an expensive material.

Would your mother have saved up for the clothing, or would she receive money from your father at set intervals?

I honestly don't know what arrangement they had, possibly it was a bit of both, in that if she found she'd got some left from the housekeeping she'd use it, but otherwise she'd just say she needed money. She had an account at one of the shops in Cardiff, in James Powell's – still there, a very nice shop – to what extent she... I think perhaps we used to get our materials from them, from the shop, and they'd put it on the account and she'd pay it [...]

It wasn't very common, you know, for a woman to have an allowance. I never had one, in my marriage, all [those years] later.

So how would it work – if you didn't have an income of your own? Would

your husband give you-

Yes. I mean, probably Dad [did so], the same as Frank for me – I was married in '44, which was considerably later than we're speaking of – Frank would give me so much a month for housekeeping, and if I saved out of that, well that was all right, I saved. But if I couldn't save anything extra as I needed, I would just say, you know, 'I have extras this month – could you give me another ten pounds?' and there would be no question, and he would, and I suspect that's what Mother did.

Could you describe going shopping for clothes, or for the materials?

I can remember now, the prices – you could get quite nice materials for about one-and-eleven a yard, not much less than a metre, and if you paid ten shillings a yard [...] you got *very* nice material. I mean, you could get *beautiful* materials for evening dresses, you know, we used to make ourselves evening dresses, for all these dinners and dances. In a town like Cardiff, all the clubs had their annual dinner and dance, and everybody knew everybody else, and we went to a sort of succession of these things. And for about – everything was four-and-eleven, not five shillings – for five shillings you could get beautiful satin-backed crepes, and these were silk crepes, they weren't the synthetic. If you wanted something very cheap you could get a rayon material, but it wasn't very nice. It wasn't nice to sew – it slipped – and it was slightly shiny, and there was a lot of static in it, which of course there wasn't in silk. Silk, I mean pure silk, was so cheap. The Macclesfield silks, for instance, I mean that was very reasonable – and that's gone right out [...] very expensive now.

What sort of shops would you go to – were there any big department stores in Cardiff?

Yes. There were about three or four. There was James Howard's, somebody Morgan – well they're still there, because when Noel comes over from New Zealand, we go on a nostalgia trip to Cardiff – and the shops are still there, around the market square. And we used to go to these shops, rather like you would go to Selfridge's or John Lewis or somebody now. I mean, you got your gloves, your shoes, your materials, and your underclothes – Mark's and Spencer's hadn't got going, really, then, and Woolworth's was still, really, a ten-cent store [...] Woolworth's was nothing over sixpence, and Mark's and Spencer's was nothing over five shillings, that was the difference between them. But Mark's and Spencer's hadn't got nearly as much of their quality stuff as they do now [...]

What about the Co-op? Would your family ever have shopped there?

No... I don't think so. It was very much a working-class... you know, because of the membership thing, the divvie.

Were the shops nearby, or did you have to travel a fair distance? Would you ever go to neighbourhood drapers'?

No. A place the size of Cardiff, as it was then – it's spread now, and quite a lot of shops have moved out – you went into the middle of Cardiff [...] You'd get on a bus – the buses were very frequent, the trams ran all the time [...] so I think everybody used to go into town.

And on Saturdays Mother always went into Cardiff with a friend of hers, and on great occasions they let us go with them, to the *market*, which was a covered market, and is still there, and *no* different – hasn't changed a scrap, as far as I can see [...]

Were there any clothing stalls there? I've heard that they were popular with working-class families for cheap clothes, or even second-hand ones.

Probably, yes. Though I shouldn't think they'd buy second-hand clothes at the market, no. They'd buy cheap clothes...

And shoes?

Shoes, yes. But I don't – people must have bought second-hand stuff, but I can't remember ever seeing a second-hand shop [...]

I think there was much more passing on of things, in that the churches were much stronger than they are now, I was thinking really of Janet's [family maid] family – her mother was a tall woman, so my Mother's clothes were no good to Janet's mother, but Mother always used to give her things to Janet, to take home, because her mother could probably swop it for something else. There was probably much more exchange, through the churches and chapels, in particular, in Cardiff [...] Mother – and she wouldn't be alone in this, I'm sure – she always, if she had anything that she needed to mend, she always mended – and she was a very good needlewoman – and then gave it away, because she could afford new, and somebody else couldn't. They could have what she mended – there was no *reason* for her to wear it once it was mended – so always, all her life she did that. But it was always done *personally*, you know.

When you went to Sunday school, what would you wear? Would you have had a 'Sunday best' outfit?

Oh yes, yes. And that was – I mean, it was kept for Sundays; it was our 'Sunday Go To Meeting' clothes – we never went to Meeting, Meeting is Quaker – and that was always put on one side. You had new each year, usually dressmaker-made, for the Sundays, and you wore it all through the winter, we'll say, and then the second winter you could wear it on Saturdays or during the week after school – but you had a new thing to wear just on Sundays. So you had a school uniform, you had things that you'd had a year or more, and then you had the things just exclusively for Sundays.

I was wondering about holiday clothes – any sort of special clothes you might have, like bathing costumes or romper suits?

Yes, I suppose when we were little we had these sort of romper things [...]

They were usually wool, bathing things – one piece, wool bathing suits, which were just very simple, you know, low neck, came up to the top of your

thighs [...] Usually, for some reason or other, you always had a belt on it [...] But it was a nuisance, because if you ... I remember going on a holiday to Minehead once, and when we took off our bathing costumes to get dressed, we'd got a line of coal dust where the belt had held the coal dust in, because Minehead was still far enough up the Bristol Channel to get the benefit of the coal from Newport! I can remember seeing this line, and thinking 'Oh what's this - it's coal dust!' When it dried, we just brushed it off!

Would you ever have worn shorts?

Not until I was about fourteen or fifteen. I seem to remember that towards the end of school I wore shorts for tennis, but usually it was, at a club, tennis garments - nobody wore shorts that I can remember - but after I left school, which was 1931, everybody was wearing shorts for tennis. For hockey we always wore skirts; we never wore shorts for hockey [...]

In terms of sewing, would you have learned mostly at home, or did you learn at school?

Well, we had some, but we used to make the most improbable garments. I remember having to make a pair of knickers or something out of flannel, which nobody wore, and it had no gusset in the crotch, you know - you couldn't have got it on! Mother was very disgusted, you know - 'Waste of material!' - she didn't want to take any interest in it at all.

The high school I went to wasn't very good at things like cooking or sewing or anything - you were there to learn Latin, put your head down, and do very academic things. I think maybe the tuition at the council schools, [where students] left at fourteen, probably dealt with those subjects better than the high schools.

So I assume there was a sewing machine at home for you to use?
Oh yes.

What type was it?

A hand machine; a hand Singer [...] Mother gave us, when Noel and I left home and moved up to London, we'd got jobs there and so on - Mother gave us her sewing machine [...] and then a friend of Noel's, the husband died, and so she [Noel] got the machine, and we had one each [...] They were both hand sewing machines.

In terms of the washing, would the girls who came in do that?

I should think they probably did. When I was very young - 1920s - a woman used to come in once a week to Cowbridge Road and do the washing in this great big copper, in the kitchen you know, and she'd boil the water - she used to come in and do the washing, and hang it out - I don't know whether she came back when it was dry... I can't remember. I just vaguely remember seeing this person with steam all round her, but she only came as far as I know, to do the washing on a Monday morning, and Mother would take it in

and iron it, I presume – or the daily maid would iron it. But you'd have somebody to come in and do the washing, really because I suppose it was such a slow process. If your daily – your maid – did that, she wouldn't have time to do anything else.

Then mother had an extraordinarily archaic, prehistoric-looking washing machine, which was three tubs. The first was for washing, with an agitator in it; the second for rinse; and I think there was some sort of rollers to put it through; and then I think there was some sort of secondary rinse, and that was put through rollers and hung out to dry. But we only had that when we moved to Palace Road, because [...] there was a cellar, and plenty of room for this equipment [...] It was terribly clumsy – I don't think they were terribly big tubs, but they were all along one wall, in the cellar, so I suspect it was space that made it possible as much as anything.

Now, getting into when you had left school and were at college, what sort of clothes would you be wearing – a jumper and skirt, maybe?

Yes... not jumpers, I always hated jumpers – I'd got an enormous bust, and I didn't like myself in knitted things at all. Usually I liked to wear frocks [...] Because we made our own things, I could always make things that I preferred to wear. I used to have perhaps a suit, in the autumn time, before it was cold enough to wear a coat. That I would buy, if I possibly could, but it needed saving up for, because I suppose a suit would cost a month of my allowance – because I was still getting an allowance, you see, while I was at college. I might have bought, if I could afford it, a suit, or a coat, if I had to wear a coat. But mostly making my own: I could make dresses, which I preferred.

Where would you have purchased a suit – at a department store?

Yes, at a department store ... or for instance, there was a Jaeger shop in Cardiff, and one or two shops like that, that were ... there was a shop called Secombe – Harry Secombe's family – and they used to have some nice suits and things, and coats there. They weren't quite a department store, in that they were mostly a dress place, you know, rather than with all the different things that department stores do have.

When you were working in London, was it in an office?

When I came up to London, yes, I started in an office at the bottom of Longacre, near St Martin's Lane [...] it was a motor showroom [...] But yes, Noel and I came up to London to dig up the gold out of the pavements, and she got a job [...] in a solicitor's who worked in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and I got this job at the bottom of Longacre, which was the good old nine til six, you know – if you were lucky you left at six – and always started at nine, and worked Saturday mornings. I think I started at two pounds fifty a week, and she had much the same, and with that we rented a flat, kept ourselves, went home at least once a month, went to the theatre at *least* once a month and the cinema at *least* once a week. We felt it was no point in being in London at all unless you used it, so we enjoyed ourselves.

Would you have gone to any of the dance palaces?

No. We never did, anyway. We knew various people, and we belonged to a tennis club and I belonged to a hockey club, right from the beginning, and they had dances which we used to go to, particularly the tennis club, because it was open all year round, and they used to have various, well once a month there was a hop, you know, and then twice a year they'd have more formal dances. We used to go to those, but we went skating, probably, more than dancing, because we'd not had that opportunity, you see. I mean, really, when we first came to London, if there was anything big on at Cardiff we'd go home for the weekend and join in there, but when we were in London, we were near Streatham ice rink first of all, and then when we moved across we were near Earl's Court [...] and of course we were delighted to find you could skate outdoors in London – you never could in Cardiff, there was never any snow [...]

When you went out to the pictures, would you have worn anything different?

No, you'd wear just your office clothes; often, you went straight from the office, you know. Or go to the theatre: the theatres, as long as you didn't go in the stalls, you didn't have to dress – the stalls were always evening dress and dinner jackets or tails for the men, but in the rest of the theatre you could wear anything. And so often... we'd meet after work, have a meal, and then go to the theatre you see. The theatres didn't start as early as they do now; I think they used to start around eight o'clock, which gave you a fair time to have a meal at your leisure [...]

The sort of clothes you were expected to wear to work – I suppose they had to be fairly conservative and neat?

Well, the main thing you had to remember was that things were not washable, so therefore you wore dark colours that wouldn't show the dirt so much, but that was where you always had something that detached, like a white collar and cuffs, or I remember making myself a Viyella, a light grey Viyella dress, which had panels down here [indicates her front]. They narrowed and went into a pleat at the bottom, with the top of the panels turned down, almost like it had a little pocket, and it had a vee-neck. Now I'd gotten lengths, four or five different colours, of chiffon, and just hemmed it, whipped the edges, and I used to put that round my neck, tie it in a reef knot, and put one end there and one end there [indicated where flaps at top of panels were]. So you always had something around your neck which you could wash, which protected the dress, and gave more colour to it.

Was it difficult to obtain these fairly smart clothes on your salary?

No, no. You see, it cost so little. Particularly being short like me, I never used as much material as they reckoned on the pattern, so a couple of yards of material, or perhaps two and a half if it was Viyella, because that was narrow

[...] I could make a dress out of three pounds, easily. And then the chiffon, you see, it would only be... well, as little as five shillings a yard.

But a girl who wasn't good with at sewing, on the other hand, would she have found it difficult-

Oh yes. I vaguely remember buying a suit once, which was a very cheap suit – I wore it very little, it was just the colour that attracted me – and I bought it, and it was about two pounds fifty, which was not very good.

Oh and I bought a suit, which was at Galeries Lafayette on Regent Street, which was a *beautiful* shop, absolutely beautiful, and we were going – this was as late as 1939, and Noel and I had decided we would go on a winter sports holiday to Switzerland, and we went with the W. E. A. – the Women's Educational Association – and we paid ten guineas for ten days in Switzerland, going by train of course [...] and I bought a suit from Galeries Lafayette, and I wondered whether I ought to pay that much, but I *fell* for this suit, and it was something ridiculous like four pounds... five pounds ten or something! I mean, to think of it now is absolutely absurd. It was a lovely chocolatey brown, and it had a chocolate-brown Persian lamb collar to it [...] and little cuffs the same, and that cost five pounds...

I mean shoes, if you paid twelve and ninepence for shoes, that was ridiculous, because you could get – shillings I'm talking about, not [pounds] – it's absolutely ridiculous when you think of what prices are now.

I've seen advertisements for Selfridge's shoe sales, with all-leather, fashionable shoes for ten shillings a pair-

Yes, yes, that's right. It really is unbelievable. This'll give you an idea of prices, and this was nineteen [...] I came to London in 1936, so it must have been 1938, probably. The January sales; there was a Jaeger shop at the bottom of the Strand. And they'd got a coat in the window, and it was a sort of burnt-orange colour, and I thought, 'I love that colour, but I wonder if I'd have the nerve to wear it.' And I passed it for a day or two, and then I thought, 'Go in and try it on, you can't tell.' So I went in to Jaeger, and it was in their sale for two pounds fifty, and it was a *beautiful* coat. It was a sort of summerweight, flannelly finish, and it was single breasted; there were three buttons; no collar at the back, the revers came out at the front and were quite sharp. And like this dress I'd made, it had got panels down, going into pleats at the bottom, and there was one at the back. It was very flattering [...] Anyhow, I bought it. I wore it *all* during the war. I was married in 1944, and I decided that I couldn't possibly wear this colour anymore, so I had it dyed black. I wore it for several years as a black coat, and finally I made a skirt out of the skirt of the coat, because it had got too shabby at the top – I couldn't wear it any longer – but I thought, 'what nice material there,' so I just made a skirt out of it [...]

Would you ever had bought clothing from catalogues, or mail order companies?

No, no. As a matter of fact, funnily enough, I have just bought the first thing ever from mail order, a coat, and that's because they said it was 'extra short'.

My difficulty now is that the average height has gone up, and mine has gone down; I've lost about three inches [...] and I'm shorter than I've ever been [...]

Where would you have picked up ideas about fashion and style?

Well, as Noel and I got older, after we left home, we used to often take Vogue magazine, for instance [...] and they had some sort of pattern issue. We used to... in any case, if you're working every day, as you were during the war, you saw what was in the shops, and you knew enough to see whether *that* would suit you – that colour or that shape, and you could always adapt a pattern. I mean, we used to take the sleeves of one and the skirt of another, and change it round. As long as you could get the materials [...] Things were a bit difficult, but you could manage.

I'm wondering what sort of influence clothes would have on the way people classed themselves and each other – dressing appropriately not just for an occasion, but also for your 'station' in life. If a person were dressed inappropriately, would others have commented?

I'm not sure... there was much more, before the war – I know it was only six years and it's ridiculous to take six years as a sort of stopping-place – before the war there was much less mixing of people, therefore you were unlikely to do the wrong thing. You knew *your* place, and *your* lot, and what you required for that life, and it wouldn't occur to you to try and dress differently. You could tell, even in an office, you could very quickly tell which strata you belonged to. And you didn't try – not that I ever knew anybody – to be better or worse...

And the thing that has done away with that feeling, as much as anything, has been Mark's and Spencer's, who give value for money, and you don't have to belong to a certain status in society to recognise value for money [...] and it's gradually blurred the differences [...]

The thing which always distinguished people, and still does, is the voice, and the grammar, particularly [...]

I was wondering about hats–

You always wore a hat to the office, and you certainly would never go into church without a hat, and some people still don't. My generation of Methodist lady always wears a hat, and my sister-in-law still – in Finchley, where I've moved from, there's a big, inter-church, women's luncheon club, that meets every other month, about a hundred and twenty women, and you can look around and the one in the hat is my sister-in-law!

You wore a hat to the office, always. I'm not sure that they were always big. I never wore a big hat, as they were ridiculous on me – I'd look like a mushroom if I wore a big hat [...]

Where would you have purchased your hats?

Oh, there were milliners then, millinery shops, dotted all over the place, that sold nothing but hats, which you don't see now, except around Knightsbridge,

and places like that. Or, of course, the department stores – they always had hats.

Would you ever have trimmed your own?

Yes. Oh, I went to millinery classes for a term. Yes, we used to do all sorts of things. Then you could buy the shapes, or whatever you called them – buckram – very stiff buckram, you know, get the shape that suits you and then cover it with fabric.

What about things like handbags and shoes?

There again, the shoes came from a shoe shop – very seldom did I buy shoes, or knew anyone who bought shoes, from a department store. Maybe they didn't have the big shoe departments that they have now, but the shoe shops had their own shops, the various makes, you know – Dolcis was always a shop on its own, or Saxone was always a shop on its own. Clarks, and Kays, and so on. Whereas today they mix together [...] at that time they were independent.

Handbags I think I would have got from a department store, mainly because the hats would have come from a department store, and the two went together [...]

Was the stylishness of these things important to you, or was it more important that they be practical and of good quality?

Oh, stylishness. But I don't think... most things were better quality than they are now – they were leather, you see – so you always got a good shoe, or a good handbag [...]

So would you have been happy to sacrifice the comfort of your feet – maybe by wearing high heels, or shoes with pointed toes – in order to be stylish?

Oh yes, very happy. You never bothered about how you felt. Yes, it was all-important to have the stylish shoe. I mean, you got used to them. I mean, the stiletto heel, during the war, was a very good defence. Especially in the tube trains, all crowded... if you felt hands going where they shouldn't, you went back with your heel! It was really useful! I knew several girls who took up smoking, because it could control a wandering hand...!

You mentioned you were married in 1944. Had you met your husband through work?

No, I met him... I joined a squash club. He played squash for some years, played for London University. [...] A friend [...] and I went to this squash club in Hampstead [describes meeting husband there]. Frank [...] was a research chemist with ICI; he lived in Finchley with his parents; they'd been bombed out of Tufnell Park [...]

What was your wedding ensemble like?

Because he was reserved occupation – so was I, because I was in the office of

the Red Cross Appeal all during the war – we were not entitled to any coupons, we just had the ordinary, basic things, so it was out of the question to waste coupons on a white dress or anything like that; it'd have been inappropriate. So I got it at Galeries Lafayette, I got my wedding dress in a pretty sort of crepe, in what was called then "London Tan" – I don't know what that meant, really – it was a tan, but a much darker, pinkier colour than that. It just had three-quarter sleeves, a cowl neck, and the waistband was pointed, getting narrower, and tied at the back; the skirt was just a sort of four-gore skirt. And I had a hat – there was a milliner's at Leicester Square [...] and I had some fur, don't know what it would be, can't remember what it was – I had a couple of fur cuffs, my grandmother Abbott had a great big plush coat with fur cuffs on, and my mother hadn't done anything with it, and I took it in to this milliner's, and she made me this hat [of one cuff; describes it] and of the other cuff I made a muff, for myself; put a zip in the back so I could use it as a handbag, and then just pinned a little corsage on the fur. And everybody else – I didn't have bridesmaids, there was no need anyway as I didn't have a bouquet or anything to pass to anybody – Noel was a sort of maid of honour, and she had a dress, in crepe, which she'd bought from D. H. Evans, in a pale blue, which was almost a shirtwaister – a pale blue crepe with a rather pretty pleated yoke on it. But, you know, people didn't – it was October, late October, anyways, so people were mostly in [...] nobody was in anything very, you know, we'd been a long time in war. Five years since rationing had started [...]

Did you stay on with the Red Cross after you were married?

I carried on until September, October, '45, so I carried on for about a year – but by then I was pregnant, you see; my eldest daughter was born in '46. And after that I never went back to work. I mean, quite apart from the fact that, to an extent, the married women's embargo came back for a little while after the war, but apart from that I had three children within five years, so I didn't go back to work at all after that.

At the beginning of the war, before rationing came in, was it increasingly difficult to find clothes?

No, really. It wasn't difficult to obtain clothes at all, to an extent. The difficulty was the coupon effect – that you had to give up these coupons. And the same, really, as far as I was concerned, with household linen, as I wasn't entitled to any... Frank and I didn't have any coupons to buy furniture, Utility furniture was all on coupons, so we couldn't get any of that. Mind you, it wasn't a bad thing in the end, because we bought antique furniture, which has increased in value. I mean, some of it I sold – when I moved here, you see, I put into the salerooms, and what we paid twenty pounds for I was getting twenty thousand – it was ridiculous really [...]

So during the war, you would have kept on purchasing materials–

Yes, yes – when you could. Sometimes you could find materials in furnishing shops, which were off-ration. I used to pass a shop called

Hamptons, which was an extremely good fabrics and antique furniture shop [...] and occasionally they would have furnishing materials, curtain materials, off-coupon. So if ever I saw that – twice, particularly – I went in and bought the whole roll, because the windows I had were big old bay windows, and they would take eighteen yards of fabric, and I couldn't possibly have found coupons for those, so I had about three complete rolls of materials for when I needed them, and I did need them, you know. Well, it was very useful to have paid for them.

Did you have to save up for purchases, or did you find they were generally speaking not so expensive that you had to save up?

They weren't as expensive. Prices didn't go up very much, immediately, after the war [...] even later, I wouldn't say that prices in the fifties were so bad [...]

When rationing was introduced, what did you think of it?

Oh yes, I think it was – it made things a bit awkward, but it was more fair. You knew that if you were sensible, you could manage on the coupons and things you'd got. I think it probably made people think a bit before they bought things, and of course with the rationing on there was all this make-do and mend. There were *all sorts* of articles in newspapers on how to make a skirt out of that coat, that sort of thing, that everybody was doing [...] you did all sorts of things. I made the girls' – even after the war – if I had a frock that I'd liked very much, I could make a little baby's frock out of the skirt. I made the girls' things, you know, when they were little.

Did you ever go to any of the jumble sales?

I never did – I never would have thought there was anything against it. I did know a friend of mine who always dressed out of jumble sales; jumble sales that she usually *helped* with, so she didn't go to any odd place. But she and her husband had three little boys that they were determined would go to Christ's Hospital, and to do that they reckoned they'd got to pay for private prep schools, and so every penny went on school fees, and their uniforms. I wouldn't have been prepared to make the sacrifice, to be honest – I don't think it's fair on children, anyway.

Now, would you ever have shared or exchanged clothing with family or friends: perhaps your sister?

[laughing] I had the disadvantage that, as my sister was a bit smaller than me, she could wear my clothes but I couldn't wear her clothes. And I – it used to infuriate me – she worked with the BBC, and she worked shifts, she worked from twelve midday to twelve midnight, two days, and two days off. Whereas I worked nine til six. So when she was on she was in bed, asleep, when I left in the morning, and she was working when I came home. And the number of times I used to come home, and if I was meeting Frank for a game and a meal, I'd had a shower, and I'd come in and think, 'Now where's my black frock?' And I used to be so mad! I'd ring her up at the office and say,

'What have you got on?' and she'd say, 'Oh, oh – did you want to *wear* it?' And I'd explode! So she was wonderful at borrowing my things, but I could never borrow hers, because of course they were a bit too small; tight. But I think if I'd been able to do it I would have borrowed them easily enough.

And in terms of children's clothing, was it difficult to find them things like nappies?

I don't think so. People gave you a lot [...] various people I'd got to know by then, locally, that had children that had grown out of their nappies – people would say 'well, look, I've got half a dozen you can have,' or somebody would say, 'are two nappies any good to you?' and they were glad to get things they weren't using anymore, to get them out of the cupboards, you know. So you were given a tremendous lot, you know, for babies.

So there's the sharing and exchanging.

Oh yes. And there I must say that I have, and did occasionally get things from the jumble sale – it was the church jumble sale, and I had this friend and I used to help her. So we used to see the things coming in, and if it was good quality I'd have it. But I stopped that, finally, because I'd bought from a jumble sale a beautiful little Harris tweed [coat], double-breasted, with a Melville collar and a half-belt, for a child of about three or four, and Caroline was about that age. I thought, 'my goodness,' and I gave them more than they'd have got if it had gone on the stall, and it had obviously been just cleaned, and it was a beautiful little coat. Caroline wore it, and a little *wretch* of a child next door whom I'd *never* liked – and liked even less after this incident – said, 'Ooh, Caroline's wearing my coat!' So I never did that again; I never bought anything from another jumble sale [...]

In terms of laundering clothing – did you find that was more difficult during the war?

Well, no, because I – well, I hadn't got a washing machine; I didn't get one, believe it or not, until Barbara, my youngest child, was two and a half – Caroline would have been seven and a half by then. I had a wringer that fitted onto the sink, that's all; I used to wash things in the sink, or leave them to soak. Things weren't *too* bad, because by then I seem to think some of the synthetics were coming in... and children's things are so small, and they don't get them dirty, not very dirty when they're very small – it's when they start school that they get them dirty, and by then they're in school uniforms, which saves a bit of washing, really.

The family washing must have been difficult – what with sheets and all.

Well, there I used to have a laundry. I used to send everything like that to the laundry. Sheets, and towels, things like that I always used to send to the laundry – and pillowcases. They used to call, you see – they used to pick things up one week, and bring them back the next, and the next week pick up again. It meant you had a fortnight between.

Did that seem expensive at the time?

No... not at first. It did get quite expensive afterwards, but by the time it got expensive I'd got much less anyway, because the children were in their teens [...]

And I suppose as laundering became more automated it became less of a chore—

Yes, as by this time I'd got a washing machine with a power wringer. I never had a tumble dryer, although I had a spin dryer.

Did any of your friends wear uniforms during the war? Did you ever wear one, working for the Red Cross?

No – they wanted, the Red Cross wanted us to wear uniforms, we were really appealed upon, and so it was sort of put to the staff whether we wanted to wear the Red Cross uniforms. The Red Cross headquarters wanted us to wear Red Cross uniforms because it meant, if you were in any sort of uniform during the war, you [could be] dismissed at a moment's notice. The head of the appeal's department asked everybody what they wanted to do, and the majority said no, they didn't want a uniform, thank you very much. So he said they only had to wear a uniform if they wanted to; it wasn't compulsory while he was in charge. One or two people did – I don't quite know why. They might have found it was a good thing to be in a uniform, dealing with outside people – the sort of people who went into uniform had more to do with the general public [...]

Would you still have maintained an interest in being stylish, or was it a case—
Oh, yes. I think it was almost more important [...] I think people did that a lot during the war. It was a very challenging situation for *everybody*, so everybody made the best of it, and they *did* make the best of it, and that's why everybody was so cheerful, everybody helped everybody else, you talked to everybody else – that you'd never done before [...] The war sort of broke down all sorts of barriers, with benefit to everybody I think, because it did carry on a bit – it has still carried on a bit, you know. We're much easier-going...

So in terms of standards of dress, were they maintained?

Oh yes, I think so. Again, with the coupon system, you made very sure that things – that you weren't going to buy a one-off that you couldn't wear with anything else, so that everybody looked as if they'd really sort of matched or mixed their colours [...] Very well put-together.

What about trousers – did you ever wear trousers at all?

No. But not – I mean, that's a personal thing. People did wear trousers, though not all that many. The girls in the Forces got used to wearing trousers, and were issued with trousers; but when they were on leave they didn't wear them, they wore skirts.

Didn't you need them for ARP duty?

But there again, some full-time ARP people used to wear them, and very useful they must have been in that sort of job, because you're lying on the floorboards... But we didn't, because we were shelter marshals in a surface shelter at Fulham, which was quite hairy at times – we were there all the Blitz – so we used to go over to Hampstead one day a, one night a week, to stay with friends, to get a night's sleep. Warnings used to start as we left the office; as we came out of the Tube – they used to start at half past six. Well, you were lucky if you were home before that. And as soon as the warning went we were supposed to go to be on duty at the shelter, and then the all-clear used to go about half past seven in the morning, so we'd come back, have a wash, and go to the office. We used to get *some* sleep – it was on a concrete floor...

I never possessed trousers at all.

It sounds so exhausting.

You got used to it. I can't remember being worn out, and yet looking back on it, it really was quite – some of Fulham, where these shelters were, was the Hammersmith bit of Fulham, and Fulham was the most heavily bombed borough in London. There was the river for a start; Fulham power station to give them a good fix; and there was a big railway-Tube thing, Hammersmith you see, that gave them another fix. And the first night of the Blitz, when it was the Docks, we'd got a flat just behind Queen's Club, you know, the tennis club. And I walked up the steps at the front of the flat and I could *read* the evening paper by the light of the City fires. It had been blackout for so long, and the sight of the City fires was enough, and they must have been, what – five miles away?

But this was – I can't tell you what the spirit was like in those shelters. One night there was this old woman there – there were these two young boys that used to carry this eighty-year-old woman, in her chair, from her house, and put her in the shelter every evening, and take her back in the morning. And they'd brought her, and things were falling all around – you could walk across the shelter and it was rocking like a boat – and there was a terrible crash, and you knew perfectly well that all the windows were out of everywhere around, and this old woman said, 'What was that?' and one of the boys said – she was very deaf – said, 'Orr right Ma, cat's just knocked over the milk bottles!' [laughs]. 'Oh,' she said [...] And every night somebody had been to the street market in Lilley Road, Fulham, and came in with great big paper sacks of fruit, and handed them all around [...]

Although the war was terrible for a lot of people, it really showed what people could be to each other [...]

I was wondering about Utility styles of clothing. Would you ever have purchased any of the Utility clothes?

I can't think that I ever did, although I might have bought the odd thing like a petticoat. And I think there were Utility stockings – terrible! Now that gives you an idea of how scarce things were. When I was working in Carlton

House, somebody would come in and say, 'Dickins and Jones have got stockings!' And the office *emptied*. And everyone – you *ran* [...] and there were girls running from every direction, and there was a queue *miles* long, and the girls in Dickins and Jones would be shelling out – you could only have two pairs – shelling out stockings like mad. I shouldn't think they'd got them in stock more than an hour... they'd all gone [...] We never bothered to wear stockings in the summer. I mean, as long as it wasn't actually freezing your feet, you painted your legs; you did without.

And that wouldn't have been commented upon?

No – no. Everybody would have been the same.

Were hairstyles and cosmetics – would those have remained important?

Yes. There were a lot of – that was one of the ways, incidentally, that you could tell the social strata of somebody, because the society-type girls always had Helena Rubenstein, you know, the makeup that they had was *visibly* of better quality, and better applied, because they'd been taught how to use it at finishing schools and so on. And the ordinary girls, who had Pond's creams, cleansing creams and vanishing creams, and that's all there were – they were white; the tinted ones you get later. Leichner, they were quite popular; Rimmel, that was another one. Outdoor Girl? But the Leichner ones were mainly theatrical, and there were a lot of amateur dramatic societies in lots of places [...] so that a lot of people had been introduced to Leichner through that.

Was it hard to get perms?

I wouldn't know, as my hair's natural [naturally curly], and I've always wanted it to be straighter. I don't honestly know about that.

In terms of shoes, was it hard to find shoes?

No, you could get – I mean, it would depend really – it was important to start looking before you were likely to need them, you know – you had to think in advance. But I don't remember having any *real* problem, because of course there were only two styles in each shape heel – it was a question of this or this, so you didn't have that much choice, and therefore could get some [...]

I'm just wondering about the 'New Look'.

I have a feeling that when it first came in, it needed a lot of material – the long skirt, and quite full skirts, and [...] I don't think the manufacturers here would have *dared*.... but certainly they would wait to see whether it was likely to catch on, before they would change their styles and use so much material.

Did you make any of your clothes in the style?

No, I didn't. For one thing, by that time Caroline was born [...] I don't know that I was very bothered about style, because she was born in '46, Geoffrey in '48 and Barbara in '51, and during that time my figure was doing this [mimes

increasing and decreasing of figure]. So I don't know that I took much notice at all, and any sewing that I did was mostly for them [...] probably made myself the odd summer dress, but I really wasn't getting much new [...] I think there's a long spell between your first child, and when the last one goes to school, when the focus is entirely on home.

Appendix D

The Hulton Readership Survey

A sample of 10,000 people was used; the surveyors aimed to be representative throughout the five 'classifications' of people (A-E; see below), so the proportion of people who were interviewed in each classification matched their estimated proportion of the general population.

Field work took place in early 1947, stopping from mid-February to mid-March because the fuel crisis shut down many papers and magazines.

Readership Among Class AB Women

	all ages	housewives only
	%	%
Radio Times	63.8	63.9
Picture Post	33.3	31.3
Sunday Express	33.0	35.3
Daily Express	21.7	21.3
<u>News of the World</u>	19.9	19.7
Good Housekeeping	18.6	19.9
<u>Vogue</u>	16.7	13.6
The People	16.0	15.7
Woman	13.6	12.8
Housewife	11.9	13.6
Daily Mirror	11.6	10.0
<u>Woman's Own</u>	10.1	8.2

(682 informants from an estimated population of 2.4 million aged 16+)

Readership Among Class C Women

	all ages	housewives only
	%	%
Radio Times	53.4	52.0
<u>News of the World</u>	34.4	36.2
Picture Post	29.3	27.2
Sunday Express	27.5	28.0
The People	26.0	26.0
Daily Express	25.7	27.9
Daily Mirror	19.5	20.1
Woman	17.1	17.4
Good Housekeeping	12.3	12.5
<u>Woman's Own</u>	11.8	11.4
<u>Vogue</u>	9.0	7.6
Housewife	6.7	6.7

(1,117 informants from an estimated population of 3.9 million aged 16+)

Class DE Women

	all ages %	housewives only %
<u>News of the World</u>	50.4	53.6
Radio Times	39.4	37.3
The People	32.0	32.6
Daily Mirror	26.3	26.1
Daily Express	22.2	23.3
Picture Post	21.5	18.4
<u>Woman's Own</u>	15.1	13.0
Woman	14.3	12.8
Sunday Express	13.1	12.8
Good Housekeeping	5.3	4.3
<u>Vogue</u>	4.4	3.1
Housewife	4.2	3.8

(3,748 informants, from an estimated population of 13.15 million aged 16+)

Extent to which different types of periodicals are read by women

	Class AB %	Class C %	Class DE %	Total %
Type of Periodical				
national morning papers	82.3	76.3	73.5	75.3
Sunday papers	89.1	87.6	87.7	87.6
women's weeklies	35.5	49.3	51.1	48.8
women's monthly magazines	54.9	44.8	33.2	38.3

Those who never read a particular type of periodical

	Class AB %	Class C %	Class DE %	Total %
Type of Periodical				
national morning papers	6.9	12.5	18.3	15.7
Sunday papers	10.4	10.5	9.0	9.4
women's weeklies	64.5	50.7	48.9	51.2
women's monthly magazines	45.1	55.2	66.8	61.7

Extent to which different types of periodicals are read by women

	Age 16-24	Age 25-34	Age 35-44	Age
45+				
(est. population:	3.2m	3.9m	4m	8.35m)
	%	%	%	%
Type of Periodical				
national morning papers	71.3	77.1	74.5	76.3
Sunday papers	89.1	90.9	87.0	85.8
women's weeklies	67.3	52.4	45.5	41.4
women's monthly magazines	47.7	43.4	38.6	31.9

Estimated actual number of women readers

	Class AB	Class C	Class DE	All
Classes				
# of informants	682	1,117	3,748	5,547
est. pop'n age 16+	2.4m	3.9m	13.15m	19.45m
Periodical	(000's)	(000's)	(000's)	(000's)
Radio Times	1,530	2,090	5,180	8,800
<u>News of the World</u>	480	1,350	6,630	8,460
The People	380	1,020	4,220	5,620
Daily Express	520	1,010	2,910	4,440
Picture Post	800	1,150	2,820	4,770
Daily Mirror	280	770	3,460	4,510
Sunday Express	790	1,080	1,730	3,600
Woman	330	670	1,920	2,920
<u>Woman's Own</u>	240	460	1,990	2,690
<u>Vogue</u>	400	350	580	1,330
Housewife	290	260	550	1,100

How people were divided into different social classes

Class	% of families in that class	approx. income of head of household	brief description of situation
A	5	£1000+	well-to-do; successful businessman; senior civil servant; private income
B	10	£650-£1000	middle classes; may graduate to 'A when older; less senior versions of above
C	20	£350-£650	lower-middle classes; highly-skilled workers; small tradespeople; higher clerical grades
D	55	£225-£350	working classes; great bulk of manual workers and lower clerical workers
E	10	under £225	the poor; pensioners, widows with families; chronically ill and unemployed