

WARTIME FASHION

A woman with dark hair styled in a bun with a green bow, wearing a brown tweed suit, is riding a black bicycle. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a blue-tinted, slightly blurred street scene with buildings and a sandbag barrier.

From
Haute Couture
to Homemade,
1939-1945

GERALDINE HOWELL

Wartime Fashion

Wartime Fashion

From Haute Couture to Homemade, 1939–1945

Geraldine Howell



London · New York

English edition
First published in 2012 by

Berg

Editorial offices:
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

© Geraldine Howell 2012

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form
or by any means without the written permission of Berg.

Berg is an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Howell, Geraldine.

Wartime fashion : from haute couture to homemade,
1939-1945 / Geraldine Howell.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-85785-070-6 (alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-85785-071-3 (alk. paper) —
ISBN 978-0-85785-429-2 (alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-85785-428-5 (alk. paper)

1. Clothing and dress—Great Britain—History—20th century. 2. Women's
clothing—Great Britain—History—20th century. 3. Fashion—Great Britain—
History—20th century. 4. Fashion design—Great Britain—History—20th
century. 5. World War, 1939-1945—Great Britain. 6. Great Britain—
History—George VI, 1936-1952. 7. Great Britain—Social life and
customs—20th century. I. Title.

GT738.H69 2012

391'209410904—dc23 2012027467

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 0 85785 070 6 (Cloth)
978 0 85785 071 3 (Paper)
e-ISBN 978 0 85785 429 2 (epub)
978 0 85785 428 5 (ePDF)

www.bergpublishers.com

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	xi
1 Buying into Fashion: The Social Background	1
2 Shopping for Fashion in the Pre-War Years	7
3 Being Chic and Being British	23
4 The Healthy Body and the Politics of Fitness	31
5 Evacuation	41
6 Fashions for a Phoney War	55
7 Calls for Rationed Fashion	75
8 Setting the Ration	89
9 The Utility Clothing Scheme	99
10 Assessing the Impact of Clothes Rationing	109
11 Home Front Clothing Initiatives	123
12 Clothes for Coupons	141
13 Keep Smiling Through: Good Health and Natural Beauty	153
14 Utility and Austerity	165
Conclusion	183
Notes	187

vi CONTENTS

Bibliography	233
Index	247

List of Illustrations

1	Summer dresses	13
2	Evacuation	43
3	Evacuees Club	46
4	'A Pretty Girl Goes for a Walk'	61
5	'Waitresses Carry Gas Masks on Duty'	64
6	Women Shoppers in Bond Street with Their Gas Masks	65
7	Dressing Gowns	66
8	Siren Suit	67
9	Air Raid Shelter Fashion	68
10	The First Day of Clothes Rationing in Petticoat Lane Market	91
11	'Should Women Wear Trousers?'	120
12	Knitting Club Creating Garments for the Merchant Navy	125
13	Women Working for the Central Hospital Supply Service	128
14	'Lady Seamstress'	130
15	Gift Clothing from the United States	131
16	Childrens' Clothing Exchange	133
17	Norwood Clothing Exchange	134
18	'Mending While You Wait'	136
19	Make-Do and Mend Class	137
20	'Old Clothes Make News'	138

viii LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

21	'Clothes for a Coupon Summer'	145
22	'Clothes for a Coupon Summer'	146
23	New 'Service Girl' Hairstyle	156
24	Leg Make-up	159
25	Norman Hartnell Austerity Dress	171
26	Austerity Fashions	172
27	'Austerity Clothes for the Fourth Year of the War'	173
28	Utility Jacket and Skirt	174
29	Utility Rayon Shirt Dress	175
30	Atrima Utility Dress	176

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking Madeleine Ginsburg for her early interest in and ideas about writing on the dress history of the Second World War, which helped me to see my way ahead. PhD study took place in the History of Art and Architecture Department at the University of Reading under the rigorous supervision of Dr. Sue Malvern. Her careful guidance and tireless tracking of my work will always be hugely appreciated. She continued to offer support during the transition period from doctorate to book, and her understanding and thoughtfulness have been significant. I would also like to thank Professor Lou Taylor, whose meticulous review of both doctoral submission and subsequent book manuscript has been critically valuable in shaping the final versions of both. Her encouragement is deeply appreciated not least in helping me achieve the greater courage of my convictions. Grateful thanks also to Amy de la Haye for her work reviewing the final manuscript.

In terms of the help received and interest shown in the project by staff at various institutions, I would like to extend my warmest appreciation to: Daniel Milford-Cottam at the Victoria and Albert Museum, who facilitated my work with the Utility Prototype Collection with such enthusiasm and energy; to Sheila Shreeve MBE, Claire Dolman and Catherine Clarke at the Walsall Museum, who gave unstintingly of their time and resources while I worked with both the Hodson Shop Collection and the Museum's complimentary dress and paper archives; and to Kate Loubser of the Worthing Museum for making available her range of Utility and Second World War clothing and for her help and engagement with the study. Thanks must also be extended to all those individuals unknown to me who facilitated my use of archive material at the Imperial War Museum, the Public Records Office, the National Newspaper Library, the British Library and the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

Finally, I wish to thank Kathryn Earle for her enthusiasm from the beginning; Anna Wright for her advice, experience and lively, enthusiastic communications with me; and Emily Ardizzone, Sophie Hodgson, Laura Larsen and Emily Johnston for all their help in bringing the book to completion. A good team.

Introduction

The following work provides a comprehensive analysis of Second World War dress practice and appearance in context. It places dress at the forefront of a complex series of cultural chain reactions and uses new archival and primary source evidence to clarify how clothing was made and acquired across the class spectrum both immediately before and during the war, how and why clothing was rationed and the nature of the design philosophies that came to underpin wartime clothing and dress practice. A particular story emerges that reveals the social and economic significance of dress and the development of a clothing strategy that facilitated ways of creating social cohesion and consensus in a time of national crisis. Changing attitudes to dress reflected the changing framework of political and social life in wartime Britain. As different patterns of consumerism developed, so notions of fashion and the fashionable evolved in line with the stringencies of wartime living and design and manufacture reoriented towards the provision of quality clothing at an appropriate price for all. These changes were seen as being integral to the spirit of national unity fostered by the government and pivotal to the sustaining of patriotism and public morale.

From knitting comforts¹ to operating clothing exchanges, applying new grooming routines to putting on service uniform, the need to sustain the essentials of dress and appearance was a part of war intimately understood by all. The purpose and value of clothing as indicators of the quality and type of life experienced across the different sectors of society became increasingly appreciated by government, industry and the public in the context of the greater fairness and democracy demanded by a state of war. The way in which the clothing needs of the entire nation could be met, both through rationing and mechanisms of self-help, required a rethinking of dress philosophy for many and offered a change in terms of comfort and quality for more than a few. Traditional attitudes towards related practices of hygiene, grooming and personal appearance also underwent something of a transformation within some sectors of society, and this, together with changing approaches to the wearing and care of clothing, helped promote and apply new standards for dress and personal presentation.

The need for quality materials and appropriate design became central to clothing policy. Altered approaches to fabric production and the cut, make and

finish of garments resulted from a judicious change of emphasis regarding processes of manufacture and design to create quality clothing in sufficient quantity for all. Keynote styles such as the tailored British suit endorsed a sense of national identity and heritage whilst the well-cut and durable clothing required by the government contrived to maintain standards of dress despite the deprivations of wartime living.

While controlling the capacity to buy clothing through a comprehensive system of clothes rationing created unprecedented levels of intervention into the private lives of the public, so also controlling textile and garment production constructed a unique set of economic conditions under which the textile and clothing industries now had to operate. In consequence, the limited supplies and styles of civilian dress brought about a new emphasis on home craft skills and making-do in the name of patriotic thrift. Restricted choice and the need for practical, easy-care clothing encouraged the use of alternative types of dress, particularly for working clothes either in or beyond the home. As ever more women sought paid employment, the clothing and elements of personal appearance associated with the workplace became visual indicators of the evolving roles and responsibilities of women in society and their often more complicated and less predictable lifestyles. The new dress protocols reflected the gendered shifts in attitude by, and about, women, attitudes also seen to be emerging out of the new paradigms for fitness and health that significantly renegotiated existing prejudice against women in terms of their mental and physical capacities.

Wartime fabric and garment manufacture both built on pre-war models of production that had already been established by mass-production retailers on the pre-war high street. A tiered production of Utility cloth and clothing became the central element of the government's strategy for providing fit-for-purpose clothing across the price spectrum, and the Utility programme promoted quality control and the value for money consumers demanded in the context of their severely reduced purchasing power. The introduction of austerity restrictions on the design and construction of all garments manufactured from spring 1942 was the last phase of the government's policy for the economic enhancement and greater efficiency of the clothing industry and resulted in all the variations on chic simplicity that became the signature style for the rest of the war years. Ostentatious or opulent dressing continued to be inappropriate in the context of both the spare lines of wartime dress and the prevalence of the uniformed woman, but the social advantage it had represented in the past remained, if less visible, revealed through the fashion rhetoric and attitudes towards dress of the upper classes. Thus any apparent democratization of dress was always to some extent disingenuous despite the clear improvements experienced in the quality of clothing provision for the poorest sectors of society.

A dress history of this period, therefore, covers a good deal of ground in relation to both the material culture of the textiles and clothing produced and the broader elements of cultural change in Britain which they in turn reveal. Through the detailed narratives of dress and personal appearance, a highly visual story emerges of the relationship between classes, changing perspectives on femininity and altered priorities for living exemplified by thrift and making-do. Many different types of sources from examples of high street Utility wear to the government papers that brought them into being here combine to construct a vivid and comprehensive picture of the place and importance of clothing for women at war. Critical engagement with the dress practice of the period reveals something of the quality of the different lives experienced by ordinary women across the class spectrum and thereby provides a specific dress history discourse that cooperates with and extends received historical understanding of the period.

READERS' NOTE

Throughout the text, the terms *fashion history* and *dress history* have been applied with care. Popular clothing of often limited longevity, created by a range of both predictable and less predictable cultural forces, is regarded as fashion and gives rise to the fashionable. Dress encompasses a much-wider remit and includes all the clothing worn at a particular time. Fashion is part of dress history while dress history is not necessarily part of fashion. Fashion describes the types of clothing bought by those with some level of expendable income who can afford elements of decorative clothing worn out of choice and for pleasure. Dress refers to all clothing but specifically includes those garments worn both out of necessity, often as a consequence of limited income, and/or practicality.

Buying into Fashion: The Social Background

During the 1930s, the desire to possess beautiful clothes had, arguably, never been stronger for two reasons. The first was the expanding variety of retail outlets now providing greater choice in fashionable clothing and the second the arrival on the high street of cheaper clothing ranges catering for more modest incomes. The rich continued to patronize the couture or high-end dressmakers and along with the wealthier middle classes chose quality ready-made¹ clothes from the more exclusive department stores or independent women's fashion shops. Chain stores like Marks and Spencer and variety multiple shops such as Dorothy Perkins created ready-made fashion lines for the budget shopper and flourished on the high street by providing mass-produced versions of Paris fashions or cinema screen styles. For the very poor, the shopping experience was limited to clothing clubs or second-hand options, both of which could prove uneconomical and exploitative. There existed, therefore, a wide disparity between the richest and poorest in terms of clothing, a fact that was rendered less visible than it might otherwise have been by the growing consumerism on the high street. This chapter considers in brief, therefore, those class divisions endemic to 1930s society which created the parameters for commercial production of clothing at whatever level. It introduces some of the key lifestyle indicators that helped construct class identities at that time and which would be affected to a greater or lesser extent by the onset of war. A key concept here is the capacity to spend and to reflect class culture through dress and adornment practices.

The rich set the pace, establishing a dress practice and a way of life that the cinemas and popular magazines of the day promoted, and in this way those lower down the social scale participated, vicariously, in what was to many an otherwise closed world. Dress clearly bespoke class and was a powerful reflection of status. At the same time, ready-made dress increasingly began to operate as a mechanism that might to some degree facilitate the emulation of the upper classes by the lower.

The still-buoyant and influential lifestyle of the rich continued to be responsible for upholding many traditional attitudes to life that had become indelibly associated with being British. The country house milieu with its various sporting pursuits, the London season and presentations at court, Henley,

2 WARTIME FASHION

Ascot or the Varsity balls, all espoused a way of life essentially wealthy but also quintessentially British, and one central to the establishment not merely of fashion but of what could be construed as the fashionable. This lifestyle revealed itself through dress protocols that, while no longer embracing the five or six changes of outfit a day as in Edwardian times, still retained a rigorous devotion to the art of dressing correctly for every occasion. The minutia of this day-to-day application of an often-unwritten code of dress practice unobtrusively maintained class divisions and social hierarchies, even as it underpinned the notion of nationality, heritage and, to an extent, patriotism.

In Britain during the 1930s, the Prince of Wales and his set represented the most exclusive tier of society. Piers Brendon suggests that Edward had 'spent his whole life in the hectic pursuit of pleasure' and that 'his private universe . . . consisted of smart nightspots, louch weekends, high jinks, horseplay, jazz and jigsaw puzzles. It was embellished with gold lighters and jewelled cigarette cases, Art Deco cuff-links and Faberge boxes. Edward sympathised with the poor but associated with the rich.'² Images of opulence and wealth were also highly visible during the 'esoteric social ritual known as the Season'. Described as the 'few brief summer weeks when all Society threw itself into a frenzy of carefully organized gaiety',³ this part of the fashionable year for the wealthy upper classes focused on the debutantes—young seventeen- and eighteen-year-old girls—being presented at court for the first time in a social rite of passage that signified a coming of age and entry into adulthood. It also very much established readiness for the social networking leading to a suitable marriage, an institution still desired by most women.⁴ During the Season, the calendar of entertainments organized to follow court presentation brought out lavish displays of wealth through extravagant dress practice, encompassing adornment at the highest level short of state occasions.⁵ As De Courcy expressed it, 'snobbery was not so much a common fault as a wholesale acceptance of the idea that society was divided into classes, which might meet, mingle, respect, like and even love each other, but never blend.'⁶ Norman Hartnell, describing the early 1930s, affirmed that 'everything revolved around the Courts in summer'. Historical continuity was maintained through the 'presiding deities' of these events, who were the 'dowagers' with 'vivid memories of how things were done in the opulent, colourful reign of Edward the Seventh, but tinged with memories of the dignity and manners associated with his august mother'.⁷ The power of the past—in terms of the established traditions of fashionable display, its purposes and protocols—is clear.

The wealthy elite's strict cognizance of wardrobe etiquette and interest in and attention to the fine details of personal appearance promoted a rhetoric of fashion connoisseurship that accompanied the images of clothing and accessories in the glossy magazines. Examples of this type of language describing the exclusive products of the couture and high-end designer houses are

readily found in British *Vogue*. In spring 1934, Elsa Schiaparelli designed a short-waisted jacket with small peplum in a highly ruched black taffeta to be worn over a directoire-style dress in 'treebark crepe' with accessorizing 'cellophane scarf'.⁸ This description connotes a number of things. The reader had to be familiar with historic lines of dress—in this case the directoire line, long skirted and with a high waist, low décolleté and often puffed sleeves—and have an in-depth knowledge of quality fabrics, here some of the newest fabrics on the market. While most people would probably have heard of taffeta, even if they had never owned anything in it, the concepts of tree bark crepe⁹ and cellophane¹⁰ might well have been novel. In similar vein, in 1936 *Vogue* carried an image of another Schiaparelli ensemble created in black bengaline with 'gold and coloured paillettes which arabesque down the front of its short fitted jacket, and black, glycerised ostrich feathers on the Mongolian tribesman's hat'.¹¹ Bengaline, a light fabric of silk and cotton or silk and wool, inferred some association with Indian silk from Bengal, which in turn could carry overtones of Empire, while the use of African ostrich feathers¹² maintained an air of the exotic and distant. To what extent even the moneyed shopper would have known the precise features of dress of the Mongolian tribesman, history does not relate. In all, the outfit, in rather exaggerated form, alluded to India, Africa and central Asia. Such could be the hyperbole of fashion.

Readers of *Vogue* also included the wealthier members of the middle and upper middle classes, who in their own way, and with some subtlety, played out imitations of the still-fashionable and traditional country house parties and seasonal events adhered to by the wealthy and royal sets. The domestic and perhaps more provincial ideal here can be seen in contrast to the relatively distant, if fascinating, world of the titled and really rich whose way of life was essentially cosmopolitan. Through seasonal travel to the stylish resorts of Europe and farther afield, fashion for the wealthy became more of a global phenomenon, wherein the secret of success lay in the perfect synthesis of the international and, specifically, French, with a certain bespoke Britishness. But for those tethered by working commitments, however professional, to a less leisured way of living, fashion reflected a more consistently British lifestyle, recognizable by and nearer to those lower down the social hierarchy. Here, also, the imagery was attractive and desirable, creating possibilities for emulation by those less well off. The social seasons of the rich and cultured were just as capable of being played out, if less grandly, among the wealthier middle classes from professional, well-educated backgrounds. Economic success predetermined a specific way of life that included a range of sophisticated social and sporting events also requiring knowledge of the dress codes and protocols associated with them.

This lifestyle is well illustrated in Jan Struther's book of short tales entitled *Mrs Miniver*,¹³ published in late 1939. The fictional character of Caroline

4 WARTIME FASHION

Miniver represented an upper-middle-class woman¹⁴ whose exploits were designed to 'brighten up the Court Pages of The Times' with stories about 'an ordinary sort of woman who leads an ordinary sort of life'.¹⁵ Struther's readership still comprised the more affluent classes, but the stories were instructive paradigms for codes and patterns of behaviour that identified what it was to be 'ordinary' middle class as opposed to wealthy at that time. The everyday life, cares and concerns of this wife and mother established the priorities as well as the privileges of this lifestyle, indirectly revealing the good taste and style of what E. M. Forster had called the 'top drawer but one'.¹⁶

The short, meditative stories spanned a period of just over a year from October 1938 to December 1939, placing the tensions of approaching hostilities alongside the changing seasons and seasonal interests of Mrs. Miniver and her family. The titles are a good indication of the social preoccupations of this class and range from 'The New Car' and 'The Eve of the Shoot' through 'The New Engagement Book' and 'In Search of a Charwoman' to 'The Twelfth of August' and 'The Autumn Flit'. Each skilfully delineated particular events that represented a status and class, sustained through particular patterns of consumption and leisure. The stories did not directly set out to highlight issues of fashion. Rather, they revealed benchmarks for a middle-class way of life with its own daily and seasonal rituals such as the correct moment to store summer clothes, the uplifting qualities of fresh-cut flowers, the right type of stationery or the morale-boosting effects of a new dressing gown. Near enough to the lower middle classes to be recognized as representing a secure set of lifestyle values that were often considered attractive if not always possible to emulate, and at the margins of the class above from whom the way of life had originally been derived, what emerges from Struther's work is a sense of a privileged middle-class identity as it was understood from within its own ranks at the time.

The issue of class was, and remains, complex. Stevenson describes it as 'an elusive concept' where 'the boundaries . . . are at best blurred and usually quite difficult to establish definitively'.¹⁷ Any reading of class and the social culture it reflected tended to rely to some degree on 'clothes and speech . . . the obvious badges . . . difficult to gauge accurately at the margins, but clear enough for the great majority of people to be able to assign themselves to "upper", "middle" or "working" class'.¹⁸ Where the middle middle classes ended and the lower middle classes began was therefore not always easy to determine. Certainly the new homeowners who flocked to purchase modest semi-detached housing on the new suburban developments of the 1930s were less well off than their more affluent middle-class counterparts. Yet the choice to move from renting to buying reflected the rise in wages through the decade that facilitated the repayment of mortgages, especially in tandem with tax relief incentives.¹⁹ While there is some evidence

to suggest that the new purchasers often lived rather straightened lives—Wilson and Taylor refer to women ‘struggling to create a genteel lifestyle’²⁰—for those who chose not to spend the additional money in this way, life did become financially more secure. The high street was the beneficiary and responded by producing a much larger range of middle- and lower-priced goods commensurate with the pockets of this more secure upper-working-class and lower-middle-class tier of consumers. The following chapter on the development and rise of volume production clothing will look in more detail at the way in which the needs of these lower-income groups were addressed by particular types of shops and stores and with what success.

With the advent of evacuation in September 1939, the government and public at large would be forced to confront a quite different element of class consciousness and a level of social inequality that had received no constructive acknowledgement for too long. While the wage-earning working class and lower middle classes had a limited degree of economic stability,²¹ and might now have access to the better lifestyle represented by cheaper mass-produced goods on the high street, for those on the lowest tier of the social ladder, a world away from the well-appointed lives of the middle and upper classes and without any financial security, life was hard indeed. Lack of decent housing, food and clothing—whether through long-term unemployment, oversized families or sickness—would become, in the early months of war, cause for serious political concern. John Hilton, in his series of Sir Halley Stewart lectures given in 1938, had guessed the existence of four million people ‘either just square with nothing in hand or . . . in debt for a larger or smaller amount’²² and had surveyed three hundred families ‘in poverty and distress’ who had sought help from charitable organizations and who ‘at any given time do not know how to make ends meet and who are, for long spells or for the time being, on the brink or in the abyss of under-nourishment and penury and debt’.²³ While a level of public social assistance was in place, Hilton had called into question whether it was adequate,²⁴ and he was clearly vindicated in this concern as those teetering on destitution became evident in the first major wave of evacuation during the autumn. A lack of suitable clothing, in particular, began to signal an entrenched level of economic disadvantage that spoke volumes for the type of life experienced in the poorest homes. This level of want and neglect could not be allowed to continue in the face of war. Need must be prioritized over want²⁵ and better mechanisms put in place to support those wholly untouched by the growing commercial prosperity experienced by other sectors of the working class. As an understanding of demarcation within class thus became clearer, it was essential to ameliorate the greatest gulfs between people if national unity in war was to be achieved. While supplying financial and gift aid was the first line of support and one which continued throughout the war, there was a clear requirement to know

6 WARTIME FASHION

more about how people survived at this level of need and how they could be best supported. Gradual reduction in unemployment as the war industries gathered momentum would be key to creating better standards of living while, with regard to clothing, one component of the cost-of-living index—providing better quality textiles and clothing at the lowest price points—became an essential longer-term step necessary for underpinning the fair shares ideology of clothes rationing. While this would clearly benefit the population as a whole, it would prove of especial value to those struggling against exploitation and poor quality at the most needy end of the market. Thus the prospect of shopping for durable fit-for-purpose clothing, which had been a virtual impossibility for the poorest families prior to war, would become increasingly manageable.²⁶

This sector of the population would be the only one to have their capacity to buy *improved* rather than curtailed. For most other consumers, wartime economies in textile and clothing manufacture would play a significant part in reorientating lifestyle away from the spend culture that had resulted from the growing prosperity of the pre-war years. This had the effect of curbing the more obvious signs of class division reflected in capacity to buy. Exactly how the needs of the poorest were addressed will be returned to in greater detail in Chapter 5, which assesses the social impact of evacuation.

The way in which clothes were made and purchased was about to undergo, therefore, notable changes during the war years, and certainly the consumer trends of the 1930s would, for most, be reversed. During the years immediately before the war, the high street continued to offer an increasing variety of fashion options, from couture to chain store, and it is to these different components of the high street and their clientele that we now turn to investigate how pockets were matched to products to provide fashion for almost all.

Shopping for Fashion in the Pre-War Years

Much has been written about the glamorous dress choices available to the wealthy during the 1930s. Examples of clothes representing the more opulent end of the market are easy to find in the glossy magazines of the time and in museums featuring dress, where they are considered collectable in much the same way as other works of art of the period. Less is generally written about the fashions produced for more limited incomes, and examples of these clothes are also far less evident in public collections. Yet during the 1930s, the British high street was offering a much broader range of fashion clothing for middle-, lower-middle- and working-class buyers, providing choice and variety at more modest prices. The main focus of this chapter, therefore, is less on how and where the rich and privileged acquired their clothes and more on the types of clothing now available for less affluent consumers, the shops where these could be bought and the prices paid. In this way, a more accurate picture of the shopping experiences of consumers across the class spectrum can be achieved.

Any review of the clothing industry in Britain during the 1930s has to begin, however, by acknowledging the continuing currency and vibrancy of Parisian couture, which designed clothes and accessories for the wealthiest sector of society dressing for the seasonal and royal events to which they had privileged access. Taylor and Wilson state that Norman Hartnell was charging 'approximately 45 guineas' for dresses in 1939, which gives some idea of the prices couture clothing could command.¹ Given that the repayments on a spacious semi-detached house could come to about twenty-five pounds a year, as revealed by an advertisement for housing in the Barnhurst Park Estate in 1933 where homes were being offered for £395 freehold in weekly payments of 9 shillings (s) 6 pence (d),² the relative spending capacity of different elements of the population can be gauged. It is also instructive to compare the prices of these dresses with those from other sectors of the fashion industry quoted later in this chapter. London couture houses also sought to provide classic country clothes redolent of a particularly British way of life that recognized the importance of signature traditional British fabrics. Immediately before the war, the 'good tweed suit' was popular 'for both sexes'³ and would remain a staple of the British woman's wardrobe throughout the war years. By

1943, Digby Morton was quoting at least twenty-five pounds for this type of suit made bespoke so that at the couture end, prices remained high as well as being subject to purchase tax.⁴ While these tailored clothes in quality wools maintained a distinctly British sense of style, in general at this time fashion-orientated clothing was presumed to emerge, in however diluted a form, from the trends inspired by the Parisian designers who revealed their new silhouettes in twice-yearly shows. Their ideas were then interpreted by retailers and manufacturers providing more affordable ready-to wear options, whether from exclusive high-end department stores or the cheaper chain stores and variety multiples. The high street endeavoured to offer Parisian style, no matter how impressionistic, reflecting the power to control and influence dress practice that Paris continued to wield throughout the 1930s.⁵

For the majority of the British public, shopping for clothing on their local high streets meant either buying fabric to make their own clothes or buying ready-made. The making of fashionable clothing without commissioning a designer or independent dressmaker had emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century in the burgeoning department store. Selling a variety of practical and decorative domestic commodities, these stores also offered quality bespoke fashions that required staffed workrooms employing needlewomen and tailoresses. At quiet times when orders were thin, these workrooms began to design and make clothes in line with current fashions. *The Working Party Report on Light Clothing* of 1947, a report focussed exclusively on the developments in production of children and women's wear, saw this retailing move as the probable 'commencement of the trade in ready-made clothing'⁶ and established the important paradigm that, as these clothes might have to remain stock items if they did not sell from the shop floor immediately, their design was to be relatively simple in make and inexpensive. As a result, whether foreseen or not, 'they began to attract custom from the less wealthy classes'.⁷ Thus the problem of holding stock that might go out of fashion was addressed partly by recognizing that different sectors of society would be happy with less sophisticated interpretations of fashion lines. Here was the beginning of the acceptance of ready-made fashion garments, bought from shops of repute yet not bespoke.

In the early years of the twentieth century, however, there was still little real business in this area.⁸ Middle- and upper-class homes generally had clothes made up by others, although many middle-class women, dependent on income, would still have considered some level of home sewing a prerequisite of their social role. Working-class women made all their family's clothing needs. Manufacturers trading in piece goods ordered suitable fabrics from textile firms that could then be cut into appropriate blocked shapes using modern bandsaw technology. That this was the way clothing was still largely obtained by the less affluent was confirmed by a cost-of-living index of 1904

that revealed 'working class family budgets . . . included a very small allowance for expenditure on women's under-clothing [and] nothing at all for such items as dresses, blouses and pinafores, nothing for children's wear, but a comparatively large amount for piece goods'.⁹ In contrast, an index of 1937–1938 would show money spent on piece goods had been reduced by 'nearly 70 per cent [while] that for women and children's clothing had increased by nearly 1000 per cent'.¹⁰ Clearly the industry was about to undergo a dramatic change that would account for this shift.

The triggers that caused the move from handcrafted garments to the products of industrial manufacture were largely connected in the first instance with innovations in the mechanized output of both cloth and clothing. Powered sewing machines, bandsaw cutting and industrial steam irons all contrived in the later years of the nineteenth century to offer opportunities for speedier and more plentiful provision of clothing. These developments all took place in the arena of men's wear, where the need for simple suits, trousers and jackets in limited designs, relatively unaffected by fashion, could be achieved with economy and efficiency using the new technologies.¹¹ Catering for a working- and lower-middle-class customer with limited means, these first forays into mechanized and increasingly factory-based production offered a cheap alternative to either hand-made or second-hand and therefore prospered.¹² At the same time as there were innovations effecting change at the cheaper and cheap end of the men's wear market, the department stores and other high street drapery retailers, particularly in London, were making their own ways into obtaining ready-made clothing direct from manufacturers. As Chapman records, 'towards the end of the century [nineteenth] the traditional piece goods trade with the drapers declined in favour of the ready-made garment trade, where the great retailers had the advantage of the wholesalers.'¹³ Instead of operating via wholesalers in the purchase of cloth, stores such as Harrods and Liberty were instead placing contracts with manufacturers for specific types of quality clothing lines. In initiating a relationship direct with production, the retailer cut out the role and expense of the wholesaler acting as middleman. This provided one of several possible models of business practice for the merchandising of apparel.¹⁴

As men's wear developed into a growing and profitable ready-made industry, it contrived a further move into the new area of wholesale bespoke—whereby the customer was individually measured for a suit that was then factory made. At the same time, the higher end of the high street began successfully selling elements of women's and children's ready-made clothing to enhance their bespoke provision, opening up the possibility of expansion in ready-to-wear. As Wray points out, however, whereas factory production had triggered the creation of ready-made in men's wear, the same was not true of the industrial production of women's clothing of the type already providing the

garments and accessories for high street drapers and department stores.¹⁵ She states that 'much of this early development of ready-made clothing production was based on the employment of home workers, operating treadle machines and making-up garments, cut in central warehouses by wholesale clothiers, on the contract, or "sweating", system. This method of production was facilitated by the ample supply of cheap labour in the form of women working for low piece rates in their own homes on machines hired from their employers.'¹⁶ Only when this system was rendered economically unviable via a combination of minimum wages and working hours and the demise of cheap labour sources¹⁷ was there a 'quicken rate of changeover to factory production'.¹⁸ The greater use of mechanization and factory output of this sector of the clothing industry did not then begin to take shape until the 1920s. By this time, the industrial output of inexpensive and low-cost men's wear was clearly reflecting the success of what Godley calls 'large scale retailers'.¹⁹

By a comparable stage, women's wear had moved more securely into the factory arena but would not find itself suited to long runs of similar lines—a first premise of mass output—as the market was much more fashion led. On this basis, and with a variety of different markets to fulfil arguably reflecting a broader range of the social scale than mass-produced men's wear was catering for, women's wear continued to be produced in smaller units. These could respond to the demand for fashion-distinct garments that often required greater skill at the individual operator level than did the staple products of the large men's wear organizations. Thus the two industries were established on quite different lines, and they would continue to reflect these fundamental differences until after the Second World War.²⁰

This was the way the clothing industry was operating at the beginning of the 1920s. While Leeds dominated the men's wear market, employing largely unskilled female labour in increasingly large mass-production factories,²¹ London, and in particular the East End, was established as the centre for the women's wear industries. Manufacturers and workshops here were conveniently placed to take advantage of the many retailing outlets across London, both price conscious and prestigious, while improved motor transport meant that frequent deliveries of smaller fashion ranges could be undertaken quickly and efficiently. The women's light clothing industry continued to operate on this basis for most of the 1920s.

While firms like Burton's, Hepworth's and the Fifty Shilling Tailor (the firm of Henry Price) created large vertical business structures producing garments from their own factories and distributing them through their own shops, the women's wear sector benefited from remaining small and diverse. Output was made more efficient with the advent of further new technologies such as attachments for lockstitch machines that enabled 'frilling, pleating and ruching' to be completed automatically,²² and the most important element in any

business's success was the strength of their network of trading links. Regular and repeat orders through the chain from manufacturer to wholesaler or distributor created some security, particularly where a manufacturer was producing ranges of less fashionable and year-round clothing such as women's underwear lines, classic clothes or children's wear.

To a limited extent, this type of production offset the serious problem that confronted the light clothing women's wear sector, one not applicable to men's wear, which was the seasonal nature of fashion clothing. Autumn and winter orders began to be placed by retailers in May and spring and summer orders in October. These orders were never especially large as neither wholesalers nor retailers wanted to hold on to potentially unsaleable stock. Fashion buyers needed to maintain a shop floor that reflected the latest fashion stories through a variety of garments that were regularly updated. This clearly mitigated against long production runs of similar garments across the seasons, which would have contributed greater security to the industry as a whole. Instead, once the initial lines had been ordered, firms hoped for repeat business and were flexible enough to create variations on styles current for the season. They were likely to experience capacity working periods at the onset of the season but a downturn as the season tailed off. This often resulted in periods of both 'short time working and unemployment'.²³

The position of women's ready-made factory clothing further consolidated during the 1930s, as we shall see below. The problem of short- or part-time working remained, however, particularly for those firms reliant on smaller fashion orders. Speculative production, often by new producers tempted into the industry at times of seasonal glut, could result in unsold stock and slump, which tended to be offset by fierce price cutting. This in turn led to poorer quality production—in terms of both material and making standards—that did nothing to enhance the reputation of the industry and was further responsible for allowing cheap but very poor quality lines of clothing to filter through to the public marketplace.²⁴ This was one explanation for some of the poorest quality merchandise available. As Wray points out, 'Shoddy production was particularly prevalent in dressmaking (although it was also found in tailored garments) and the desire to remedy this unsatisfactory state of affairs probably accounts for the very willing co-operation of the light clothing industry with the Board of Trade in connection with the improvement in making and sizing standards for light clothing which resulted from war-time Making of Civilian Clothing (Restrictions) Orders.'²⁵

A brief resume of current business practice during the 1920s reveals that there were three common operational models for women's wear production. Small manufactures producing ranges for wholesale to store and sell on were the smallest of the types as wholesalers could not risk stock falling out of style during the process of storage and marketing. By far the more popular

method of business was the second practice of individual manufacturers selling direct to distributors. There were two approaches here; either the manufacturers' travellers initiated business links with various high street drapers or stores or the retailers themselves placed orders with manufacturers for specific commodities. All the main high street providers of apparel, from exclusive department stores down to small independent drapers, could operate in this way, and goods were made for all price points. Wray suggests that 'by the 1930s the bulk of the output of fashion outerwear was being distributed direct from manufacturer to retailer'.²⁶ This model was the most successful despite remaining the victim of seasonal slump unless orders became either regular, sizeable or preferably both. While the gradual demise of home working and smaller sweated outworking units had shifted garment production into the manufacturing factory space, in general the size of these businesses remained small for the reasons we have seen. Factory production was clearly not synonymous with mass production, and by 1939, this was still largely the case. By this time, 86 per cent of the clothing industry as a whole operated in units of up to one hundred people with only the remaining 14 per cent employing over one hundred and only 6 per cent over two hundred.²⁷

The last figure is representative of the third model of business practice, which only began during the 1920s but became increasingly important into the 1930s. This was the expansion of large-scale factory production in men's wear *into* women's wear and the development of larger production units from already existing smaller factories. From the outset, there was no necessary correlation between poor or poorer quality and larger-scale production. Longer runs simply favoured less fashion-focussed lines that did not date as quickly, and the choice of cheaper fabrics reflected the developing market for lower-priced clothing that would sell in larger numbers more quickly.²⁸ John Barran, an established manufacturer of mass-produced men's wear, spurred on by a post-First World War slump, began to use his mass-manufacturing techniques for women's wear in 1927 as other smaller factory units began to extend in the same direction. Across the two decades, a number of household names came into being as named brands emerging from this type of manufacturing; Marlbeck of Leeds and the Co-Operative Wholesale Society in Manchester opened new factories during the 1920s followed by Tootals producing Chesro dresses from Bolton in 1930, Berketex with tailored dresses from London in 1937 and Harella and Windsmoor with their women's wear factories in London during 1939.²⁹ The tailored suits and smarter lines of dress that 1930s factory production began to provide created increasingly better-quality garments that sold to middle- and upper-middle-class customers, and a good reputation was established particularly for the country-style tweeds and classic clothes that emphasized a distinctively British design signature.³⁰