

Apparence(s)

7 | 2017

Femmes, mode et industrie de la mode dans l'entre-deux guerres (France, Grande-Bretagne, Belgique)

A Price for Fashion: A Young Working-Class Woman's Wardrobe in 1930s London

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<https://doi.org/10.4000/apparences.1359>

Résumés

Français English

Cette analyse interdisciplinaire de la culture matérielle étudiera la conception, la fabrication, la vente au détail et la consommation de mode pour une jeune femme ouvrière en Angleterre dans les années 1930. Les jeunes femmes dont cet article discutera sont âgées entre quatorze et vingt-cinq ans, habituellement l'âge entre la sortie de l'école, le travail et le mariage dans l'East End de Londres, la période 1930-1938. L'exploration des intérêts et du pouvoir d'achat de la jeune femme de la classe ouvrière explorera l'influence de questions telles que la modernité, la cohésion des groupes de pairs, les loisirs et les habillements connexes, ainsi que les réactions des parents et des pairs. Comme l'a dit l'historienne Selina Todd, "comme le nombre croissant de jeunes femmes travaillaient dans les grandes usines, les magasins et les bureaux, les lieux de travail devenaient de plus en plus un lieu d'amitié et de diffusion d'informations sur la mode et l'apparence". Dans le contexte du travail, du revenu, de la famille et Les attentes de genre, cet article explorera ainsi la vie, le travail et les aspirations d'une jeune femme ouvrière dans les années 1930 à travers le contenu de sa garde-robe.

This interdisciplinary material culture analysis, will investigate the design, manufacture, retailing and consumption of fashion for a young working-class woman in England in the 1930s. The young women this article will discuss are aged between fourteen and twenty-five, usually the age between leaving school, working and getting married in London's working-class East End the period 1930-1938. Exploration a young working-class woman's fashion interests and purchasing power will probe the influence of issues such as modernity, peer group cohesion, leisure and related dress, along with the reactions of parents and peers. As historian Selina Todd notes, 'as rising numbers of young women worked in larger factories, shops and offices, so workplaces increasingly became a venue for friendship and for disseminating information on fashion and appearance.'¹ In the context of work,



income, family and gender expectations, this article will thus explore the life, work and aspirations of a young working-class woman in the 1930s through the contents of her wardrobe.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : 1930's, accessibilité, abordabilité, acceptabilité, histoires orales, Angleterre

Keywords: 1930s, fashion, accessibility, affordability, acceptability, oral histories, England

Texte intégral

- 1 For the majority of conventional young women across class in 1930s England it was crucial to be accepted into her society, to live within the boundaries of respectability and acceptability. Society was rapidly shifting for these young women through technological, political, and economic developments. Young, employed, working-class women, however, embraced these vicissitudes and displayed them through their self –presentation.

Fig. 1. The children's and boy's shoe departments of Lewis's Limited, department store, 1931. On a visit to Shepherd's shoe and slipper factory.



Manchester Reference Library, accession number, m59300

- 2 Young working-class women spent much of their time in the workplace; however, they were increasingly prominent consumers of new forms of leisure such as dancehalls, cinemas and magazines. Social histories have highlighted that much of the expanding commercial leisure provision of the interwar years was aimed at fourteen to twenty-five year olds and regional case studies by Elizabeth Roberts and Sally Alexander support Claire Langhamer's conclusion that young working-class women were prominent consumers of such new forms of leisure such as dancehalls, cinemas and magazines.²
- 3 These forms of leisure alongside changes in retailing gave women unprecedented levels of fashion knowledge and choice. Academics Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett note; 'this

was particularly the case for young, single women for whom fashion provided an arena in which they could in effect re-imagine themselves.³

4 They continue, 'This re-imagining might have been limited to a new hairstyle or a way of putting on make-up, or it might have extended to a whole new outfit, either shop bought or home-made'.⁴

5 Sheila Rowbotham suggests the emancipated young woman of the interwar years was 'a half truth' at best, and probably experienced as a lifestyle by only a tiny minority of the middle-class young women in London. She states 'The 'new freedom' belonged to the middle class young. It never included older, married women, and barely affected working-class girls.'⁵ This article will attempt to both support and question Rowbotham's statements by revealing that 'half truth' signs of emancipation for women were evident through their accessibility, affordability and acceptability to fashion and their clothing choices, yet this suggested emancipation was not only 'experienced by a tiny minority of middle -class women', as noted by Rowbotham, but also a majority of employed, young, working-class women in London. These young women were engaging with popular fashions and leisure activities, and were using innovative ways to do so.

Fig. 2. Emily Lee seated on her father's motorbike and friends, 1933



Manchester Reference Library, accession number, 48488

1. Level and Availability of Work and Employment Opportunities for Young Working Class Women in London in the 1930s

6 Between 1920-1939, the vast majority of working-class young people left school at aged fourteen and would be married by the time they were twenty-five years old. By 1938, seven out of ten entered the adult work sphere at this age.⁶ As their wage was depended on to contribute to the family income, people from working-class backgrounds rarely entered further education. The jobs chosen by these young people would have been influenced by their parents who would pull strings, meaning young workers often found themselves working beneath relatives or close family. This was more apparent in smaller towns, but parents still imposed their influence in the cities.⁷

7 Joyce Storey recalls in 1931 :

my mother informed me that Lottie Collins, who kept a drapery store next door to Williams vegetable shop, wanted to see me. She had told my mother when she had popped in for half a yard of reversible cretonne at sixpence three farthings a yard that she knew of a job that would be 'just right for your Joyce.'⁸

1.1 Access to Factory Work: Working hours and wages

8 Inter-war researcher Sarah Norris notes, 'The post war expansion of the new light industries, shops and offices saw an increase of women's work opportunities, with ever-growing numbers of [young] working-class women taking up factory, clerical and retail work.'⁹ Joyce Storey continues....'My first real job was at a local corset factory, called Langridge's [...] I would be starting on one penny three farthings an hour for a forty-eight hour week, with a rise of one farthing an hour every six months.'¹⁰ Factory work became popular with workers of school-leaver age after the Factories Act of 1937 and 1938 limited juvenile¹¹ hours to nine per day and reduced weekly hours to forty-four.¹² There was a marked expansion in factory production lines as new technology was developed increasing the production of mass-manufactured consumer goods, such as electrical, clothing and toys.

1.2 Access to Retail Work: Working hours and wages

9 The growth of department and multiple stores and the mass manufacture of ready-made clothing saw a rise in the number of young working-class women undertaking retail work. Prior to the 1934 Shops Act, the average earnings of a young female drapery assistant, in 1925, were eleven shillings for a fifty-hour week,¹³ with employers shockingly permitted to employ juveniles up to seventy-four hours per week.¹⁴ After the Shops Act in 1934 weekly hours were reduced and pay limits rose. Department stores were noted to offer higher wages than smaller shops,¹⁵ particularly John Lewis and the Co-operative society, who

were reportedly good employers and gave relatively high wages.¹⁶ Department store work became attractive to the young working-class woman, and by the mid 1930s ten percent of young wage earners were shop assistants.¹⁷

1.3 Access to Clerical Work

- 10 Clerical and administration work was heavily encouraged by parents who saw it as a respectable profession with its traditional middle class connotations. However, from a middle-class point of view the increase of the aspiring working-classes to the profession saw it become associated as a more working-class occupation.¹⁸ As opposed to the traditional work found in domestic service, employment in retailing, clerical and factory work were more appealing due to the higher wages and more sociable hours.¹⁹

2. Level of Wages and Disposable Income for the Young Working-class Woman in London in the 1930s

- 11 According to Wilson and Taylor, the cost of living in 1939 was eleven percent lower than in 1924, and wages were on average three and a half percent higher.²⁰
- 12 The 1929 New Survey of London, with a sample of four thousand people, reported average wage earners as follows; those aged fourteen to sixteen years earned an average ten to fifteen shillings a week; those aged seventeen and nineteen years earned an average of twenty-five to thirty shillings a week and those aged between twenty to twenty-four years were earning weekly approximately thirty-five to forty shillings.²¹ It must be noted that these figures reveal earnings in London and regional variations would have occurred across England. The average wage for young earners under twenty years of age in Merseyside in the north of England was fifteen shillings and six pence.²² There would not only be regional fluctuation in wage levels but also young women were usually paid a lesser rate than young men.
- 13 Fowler, however, highlights with reference to Llewellyn Smith et al, that female office workers earned more than boys at certain ages. 'For example, 14-16 year old girl clerks earned 17s 6d-20s whereas boys of the same age earned only 15s-17s 6d.'²³ Selina Todd writes that 'the economic pressure on working-class families, and young wage earners, meant that the position of a daughter in the family shaped her available employment choices as well as the amount of spending money and leisure time she received.'²⁴
- 14 The amount of disposable income a young wage earner had, however, was dependent upon their contribution to the family income. Much of the money earned by these young women would be used to maintain their younger siblings. Young wage earners contributed in two ways; first was known as 'tipping up' this meant that the whole wage was handed over to the parents who would then return a proportion back as 'spend', and their clothes would be bought by their parents. Buckley and Fawcett note that tipping-up was usually done by younger members of the family, aged fourteen to fifteen.²⁵
- 15 Interviewed in old age, Muriel recalled her life as a young female factory worker in Hackney, east London. She worked from eight in the morning until six in the evening, making the hour's journey to the factory on foot to save the penny that could have been spent on the tram fare. Muriel earned five shillings six pence a week. She recalled how

after a week's labour, she kept one shilling for herself and handed over the remaining four shillings six pence to her mother for "housekeeping".²⁶

16 Four years later, in 1932, Muriel Hughes secured employment with the large tailoring firm of Horne Brothers, again in the east of London. Muriel's starting wage was six shillings six pence a week, but when she was promoted to the position of "Examiner and Finisher", her weekly wage was raised to seven shillings six pence. Even when her wages were increased to eight shillings six pence a week, Muriel would still only keep a shilling to spend on herself.²⁷

17 The second way of contributing was to pay board. This was usually adhered to by the twenty to twenty-five year olds and was a sign of maturity. These young people were expected to buy their own clothes. This greater economic independence will be reflected on further in this article.

Fig. 3. 'Crises forgotten. Private worries left at the top of the incline.' Young women enjoying a rare day out at the fun-fair, Southend Fair, Essex.1938. *Picture Post* newspaper, 'Month of Fairs' October 8th 1938



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3. Leisure: Cinemas, dancehalls. Provider of glamour and escapism for the young

working-class woman

18 Young women's attitudes and values began to be noticed as their importance as consumers of clothes and popular forms of entertainment such as dancing and cinema began to be recognized. With the decrease in working hours in the 1930s and with the extension of paid holidays, culminating in the 1928 Holidays with Pay Act, young wage earners found themselves with more leisure time than their parents generation had experienced.²⁸ This investigation will not go into any depth on the leisure pursuits of young working-class woman as this is another study. It will however, consider the extent of her engagement with such consumption and recreation, to discover the level of influence these pursuits had on clothing choices and the cost.

19 With the extra free-time and disposable income young wage earners possessed, they were able to become consumers of leisure and fashion. Historian David Fowler found that the average weekday leisure time of young wage earners was spent, 'fifty per-cent 'talking'; thirty percent at the cinema; twenty percent attending dance halls and clubs, reading and listening to the radio.'²⁹ The experience of paid labour structured around the industrial working day became, as Todd notes, central to young women's lifestyles.³⁰ As previously discussed, the workplace itself became a central figure in shaping young women's social patterns. Joyce Storey recalls :

I went to work at seven-thirty each morning and worked until six to six-thirty each evening. By the time I had rushed home and had my tea there wasn't much of the day to relax in. Yet we found time to go to the pictures, to visit friends and go dancing. On Saturdays we caught the train and went to old Market Street, and for one and thrupence you could have your photograph taken by a photographer called Jerome, or we could call in at the Lyons Cornershop in Castle Street.³¹

20 Social Historian Claire Langhamer is mindful in her reflections, 'However, independence in leisure had its limits. The available resources of time and money provided a framework within which the leisure experiences of young women should be understood.'³²

3.1 Cinema and its impact on the clothing choices of young working-class women in the 1930s.

21 Cinema, reported as a major influence on popular culture in the inter-war years in Britain, was reflected in the lives of young working-class women. By 1937, twenty million people were reported to have attended cinemas each week.³³ The average price of a seat was just over ten pence. The most frequent prices being six pence and seven pence. Cinema statistician S. Rowson wrote in 1934 wrote; 'It is thus essentially an industry dependent on people who do not spend at any one time a large sum in entertainment.'³⁴ Sociologist Henry Durant believed in 1938, that the film storyline would be constructed around a situation in which the audience could identify themselves, but in terms of their dreams rather than the reality.³⁵ The most popular films amongst working class women were those with strong female heroines and Cinderella storylines, featuring working class girls who had exceeded their class expectations. In the fictional world of narrative film, shop girls or clerks suddenly found fame, fortune or romance.³⁶ Film stars were not only presented as models of desirable beauty they were also presented as being authorities on the subject.

- 22 The stars of the movies brought an escapism for women and an opportunity to gaze at their clothing. It can be argued that some British women adopted aspects of the glamour they saw on the screen in order to take some of the 'magic' of the celebrity into their own lives. Joyce Storey recalls :

One day I took a walk down Castle Street and then I saw it; a coat with a great fur collar that would make me look like a film star. The more I looked at it, the more convinced I became that I must have it.

Every Thursday after that I went to the shop and paid my five shillings off the two pounds-ten shilling coat...this Thursday I would be collecting it in my best black stockings and grey jersey coat.³⁷

- 23 However, not all women wanted to push their social boundaries. Joyce continues the story of her fur coat :

Elsie came to my rescue and took the coat and completely renovated it. She told me I must never buy a coat with a big fur collar because only tall girls with long elegant necks could wear them effectively.

Little shorties like me had to be content with a tiny band of fur for a collar, and wear boxy jackets. I received news with downcast heart, for I had dreamed of this great fur collar ever since I had seen the huge fur collars of my heroines on the screen.³⁸

- 24 Fig. 4 is taken from the *Littlewoods* mail order catalogue. The national catalogue provided an affordable source of fashionable clothing styles for young working-class women through a credit 'club' system.³⁹ The fur-collared coats on sale replicate the more acceptable style of coat that Joyce Storey's friend, Elsie, provided with her home dressmaking skills.

Fig. 4. *Littlewoods* mail order catalogue. Autumn 1936. Where a 'respectable' version of Joyce's coat could be purchased

A Good Winter Coat is True Economy
You'll be Proud to wear any of these

Start with your Winter Coat
 ... and plan your month around it.

● ... That's my advice to all of you. Your winter coat is the most important garment in the whole wardrobe. You'll almost look well-dressed if that is right, so get the very best you can afford.

● Fur-trimmed or a plain, tailored style? For a soft and flaring and gives a lovely feminine feeling, but a plain model is very smart with wear and suitable for work and practical too.

● Embroid? Sub-trim will look smart and Navy or grey tones, too, all the "Wool" colors - Navy, Green, etc. are very becoming and fashion favoured.

20/- EACH **30/- EACH** **40/- EACH**

MPY 490 Like Blue **MTY 483 Like Blue** **MYV 524 Like Blue**
MEY 481 Navy **MTY 484 Green** **MYV 525 Navy**
MPY 482 Brown **MTY 485 Brown** **MYV 526 Brown**

A Fur-trimmed Coat feels so luxurious
 This fur is naturally soft, too. Only the best quality fur is used for the collar and cuffs. The coat is trimmed with very soft fur... and the slightly heavier fabric is the way to wear it. The fur is also trimmed by the "Wool" which is made at last... The fur is also trimmed by the "Wool" which is made at last... The fur is also trimmed by the "Wool" which is made at last...

A Beautiful Coat for Better Wear
 Look at the beautiful offering for ladies which is made with the very best quality fur... The coat is in a long, womanly, rounded-line, though with soft, soft. It is made with the better fur and a smart which is shown by the smart, smart design from top to toe. The high quality of the material and the attention of the style make this coat truly a beautiful, useful and practical one.

A Large Collar of Real MoleSkin in the collar makes of this beautiful Coat
 This is essential! A "best" coat... With its heavy, reliable collar of soft MoleSkin, the coat will give you the best of all possible comfort. The material is a sturdy quality... The coat is made with the best of all possible comfort. The material is a sturdy quality... The coat is made with the best of all possible comfort.

MARY KAUF

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3.2 Dancehalls and its role on the clothing choices of young working-class women in the 1930s.

- 25 Dancing was a commercial form integral to Britain's leisure economy, in the 1930s.
- 26 For many young women, the dance hall was equally, if not more important as a social space than as a place for music and dancing. People were more likely to visit a hall at which they had friends and acquaintances. Buckley and Fawcett note :

Through getting ready for 'the dance' and going out...the young woman found the opportunity to be independent. Away from the pressures of work and the watchful gaze of family this brief interlude in her day opened up a space in which, potentially, she could re-invent herself.⁴⁰

Fig. 5. 1931 dancehall crowd. New Year's eve dance. Postcard backed photograph from Lytham St. Anne's, Blackpool



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/trevira/1617291364>

27 Given the glamour and the luxury of many of these dancehalls, the performativity aspect of the dance, and the potential for romantic encounters, it was imperative to look your best.⁴¹ In image 5 women across age and generation are seen in their very best dresses. Such a plethora of styles confirms that not all women would be wearing the latest styles, confined in their clothing choices either by accessibility, affordability or acceptability.

28 Young women relished the opportunity to show off their new clothes and spent considerable time and effort in their preparations. Respondents interviewed by Mass Observation insisted that 'for dancing nearly everybody has a new frock'.⁴² Where as 'for seeing a picture they do not put on their best frock,' claimed a 1939 Mass Observation respondent.⁴³

Fig. 6. "Dance Your Way to Happiness". *Littlewoods* catalogue, Autumn 1936



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29 Image 6 is from Littlewoods mail order catalogue, autumn 1936. It is advertising two dresses aimed at young women and presumably intended for wearing to the dancehall as is referenced in the page heading. One dress costs ten shillings and the other twenty shillings, with glamour being sold in the form of a crepe rayon frock. Both dresses offer something for women with differing levels of disposable income.

30 The entrance price to the dancehall was relatively cheap. The more prestigious Palais de Danse in Wimbledon, Finsbury Park and the Regent Dancehall in Brighton would cost three shillings and six pence on a Friday and Saturday evening. These national dancehalls would have been open every evening and afternoon when entry prices would range from one shilling six pence to two shillings six pence.⁴⁴ There were also various church halls and

local restaurants that would hold weekly dances at a lower cost. It is reported that young women would visit on average twice a week.

31 However, Sarah Norris notes that while entry into the dancehall may have been affordable, the cost of clothing that was required may have been more out of reach, especially for young wage earners who were 'tipping up', thus restricting their access to more aspirational places of leisure. Young, employed working-class women between the ages of twenty to twenty-five years old who could afford the glamorous evening dresses due to their higher disposable income tended to visit the Hammersmith Palais, where as the younger, less well off woman might only expect to be able to attend the local church hall dance.⁴⁵

3.3 Cost of acceptable dress for young working-class women in the 1930s.

32 A Mass Observation survey from 1939, targeted at women from London's east end aged twenty to twenty-five, concluded that, on average, young working class women bought or made five dresses a year and spent a maximum of fifteen shillings on each one.⁴⁶ The 1929 New Survey of London reporting an average wage of thirty-five to forty shillings for twenty to twenty-four year olds and assuming they paid board and retained fifty percent of their wages as spends,⁴⁷ fifteen shillings every two months sounds a realistic amount to spend on clothing. For women such as Muriel Hughes who were allowed to keep one shilling a week there were the rising mail order catalogues from which she may have purchased her clothing, as previously discussed in image 6. Additional forms of access to affordable fashion will be discussed further. While the quality of experience may have been unequal between those wage earners with differing disposable income it is true to say that across age, class and economic solvency, women were interested in and attending modern dances and were aware of the fashion requirements for such occasions.

4. Fashion influences and aspirations. Accessibility to style influences for fashionable dress of young working-class women

4.1 Magazines and newspapers as a Source of Fashion Inspiration

Image 7. *Mabs* fashion magazine, August 1932, priced at six pence. *Mabs* magazine's target audience was the young working-class woman



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33 A wide selection of women's magazines appeared during the inter war years, notably *Moderna*, *Woman*, *Woman and Beauty*, *Britannia and Eve*, and *Mabs*, a fashion magazine, which offered readers free paper patterns with each issue. The magazine included advice on home sewing, money saving techniques, fashion for all occasions. Image 7 is the front cover of *Mabs* magazine headlining the free pattern to be discovered inside.

Image 8. *Britannia and Eve* magazine, June 1935. An editorial promoting the celebrity influence on choosing beauty products and lifestyle

If you Became a STAR...

By MADGE EVANS

...inside the Chinese Theatre their reception from such "personal" beyond any doubt

MADGE EVANS, whose latest film is "Paris Extravaganza"

know that the girl who hopes to become a star, being fully prepared for the cruelly hard work that must be done, stands a far better chance of winning through to-day than she would have done eighteen months ago.

Equally, I know that the girl who thinks of bursting her way into Hollywood, with no more ambition than to be an extra, and take the casual, uncertain jobs that may come her way, stands a far worse chance to-day of earning even a starvation wage than she would have done eighteen months ago.

Let me explain the position, and the radical change that has come over the surface of Hollywood within the last few months. This change is due, fact and foremost, to the new National Recovery Act—N.R.A. in the way it is written—which is affecting every industry in America. The N.R.A. has given Extra Players a better chance with one hand, while taking it away with the other. But it is offering the kind of opportunity that did not exist previously.

We are working, to-day, under a new Film Industry Code; and one point of vital importance to those who want to get anywhere is found in a clause in this code which stipulates that any extra who is called upon to speak either one line or half a dozen in a film (having been engaged as an extra) shall be paid not less than \$5 for one day's work. This has brought about a new point of view in the minds of studio executives which is giving splendid chances to many young girls and men who are generally held to succeed as film players.

For the executives have realized that it is less expensive to get newcomers under contract at, approximately, \$20 to \$25 a week, and give them a complete grooming for possible stardom, than to pay an inexperienced extra quite as much, or more, for doing two or three days' work. This giving of contracts at small salaries, with plenty of opportunity for testing the ability of such contract players, is a very shrewd move.

It means that if one of these "bit-contract" players manages to make a hit with a vivid little character sketch, that player will (Continued on page 10)

An example of a Gay Picture. It seems to be something about Fanny (Lila) working, the people concerned are Jeanette MacDonald, Maurice Chevalier and Eric Lubow—this famous trio

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34 They contained celebrity style interviews, hair and beauty advice, as seen in image 8, along with countless adverts for dress-makers, clothing stores and cosmetic products making fashion affordable and accessible to all.

Image 9. *Mabs* magazine promotes 'Secrets from the fashion Houses of the Gay City' and the influence of Paris on a working-class young woman's wardrobe choices. August 1932



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35

Image 9 and image 10 reveal the popularity of French designs and that the most notable fashion influences came from Paris, and surprisingly closer to home in the West End of London as described in an article 'London as a Fashion Centre', in *Moderna* magazine, April 1934. For a minority, Hollywood movie glamour was a style of interest.

Image 10. *Moderna* magazine, April 1934 promotes 'London as a Fashion Centre' with 'Englishwomen Now as Smart as Parisiennes'



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Image 11. Window gazers at the summer sales, July 1939



Manchester Reference Library, Manchester. Accession number m59367

4.2 The Importance of Window Shopping

- 36 Women would spend a lot of time, when making their clothing choices, just looking. Looking in magazines, watching movies and cine-magazines at the cinema, viewing the forever changing department store window. All sites of both exchange and observation. As John Berger believes; 'the spectator is the buyer, the buyer is the spectator.'⁴⁸ A Mass Observation report reveals an insightful statement from a young assistant manager of an east London clothing shop in 1938, 'I look in shop windows and discuss my choice with the family before making the purchase. I am not influenced by the fashion pages, advertisements or women's papers.'⁴⁹ Another response to the Mass Observation report on 'Shopping' states, 'I discuss the purchase of clothes with a particular friend. I ignore advertisements and women's papers and do a little shop gazing', reported a schoolmistress, aged twenty-five in 1937.⁵⁰

5. Availability of Fashionable clothing: Affordability and accessibility

- 37 Buckley and Fawcett claim fashion in the interwar years provided women with an 'accessible cultural language to [...] begin to construct new versions of their identities.'⁵¹ A shopkeeper from East London noted, 'Nowadays the girls from the mill are coming out with gloves, shoes and stockings, that you are not able to distinguish them from other girls.'⁵² The high standard of dress displayed by young women who worked in mills, shops, offices or factories, presents a useful case study for examining one of the most enduring discourses of the interwar period and since; the belief that the growing availability of good quality cheap ready made clothing and rayon, the new synthetic substitute for silk had all but erased the visible class differences in dress.
- 38 Antonia White reminisces in the *Picture Post* in 1939, 'it was so easy to look smart when everyone from a Duchess to Mill girl wore exactly the same type of clothes.'⁵³ Even more recent authors addressing the interwar period have continued this claim with little evidence. For example, Jerry White claims that, 'clothes were beginning to make women look classless'⁵⁴ and Catherine Horwood suggests in her book 'Keeping Up Appearances: Fashion and Class Between the Wars' that 'mass production techniques were helping to level class barriers in Britain.'⁵⁵ What has been totally absent from these and other accounts is any close study of the actuality of garments, the quality of these clothes is key. Yet, where were young working class women able to access affordable fashion?

5.1 Average wage earnings of a Young working-Class woman and her Disposable Income. Availability of Home-dressmaking and its Fashion Status

- 39 As previously discussed there were the mail order catalogues with their weekly credit buying systems. The majority of young working class women would have picked up basic

sewing skills in school.⁵⁶ And with most department stores and markets and madam shops offering large haberdashery sections, a simple dress with a customized trimming and decoration would have been an achievable task. Also, affordable women's magazine's offered free paper patterns. 'But' as Buckley and Fawcett go on to explain, 'for a young woman, a machine made garment, complete with a manufacturer's or retailers label was highly prized as a symbol of fashionability and modernity.'⁵⁷

5.2 Ready-made Retailers and the Provision of Affordable, Fashionable Light weight dresses

40 The prejudice of traditional, ill-fitting ready-to-wear garments was subsiding. According to Rachel Worth, in her comprehensive investigation into the multiple mass-manufacture retailer 'Marks and Spencer', the latest styles were easy to cut and size, lending themselves, more easily to mass production⁵⁸. Synthetic fibres such as rayon meant fashionable styles could be created at a fraction of the previous cost.⁵⁹

41 Wage earners from the East End of London looking for ready-made garments at an affordable price were reported to have travelled to the West end department stores such as Derry and Toms, Whiteley's or Selfridges, who, in the 1920s opened a bargain basement (as did others such as Barkers and Pointings, both to be found on on Kensington High Street, west London)⁶⁰ offering modest dresses at ten shillings,⁶¹ thus attracting a lower middle and upper working class clientele. However, the more accessible shops for working class wage earners were the expanding and newly established ready-made clothing stores. British Home Stores (BHS), founded in 1928, F.W. Woolworth founded in 1909 and C&A, founded in 1922 were represented in most major towns.⁶² But it was Marks and Spencer, who would dominate the high street throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Outside one store in Manchester, Mass Observation reporters overheard a woman say, 'I've got a headache going in there. This is a terribly congested place.'⁶³

42 In 1928 Marks and Spencer set their prices at a maximum of five shillings per garment, which was one third of the price of a dress from C&A costing an average of fifteen shillings.⁶⁴ Littlewoods and the Co-op so often associated to the working-class consumer was somewhat expensive in comparison to Marks and Spencer who were by far the cheapest and most popular. Marks and Spencer light weight rayon dresses sold for two shillings and eleven pence.⁶⁵

5.3 Mail Order as an accessible Source of Affordable Fashion

43 Mail order providers offered ready-made garments popular among working-class communities, particularly as payment was not required up front. Companies such as Littlewoods, with national presence, and Great Universal Stores based in the north of England and Kays catalogue in the south were popular during the interwar years. The prices of the garments sold in these catalogues was considerably higher than shop retailers as they reflected the credit based terms of purchase.

5.4 Fashionable clothing Acquired in Markets

- 44 Markets were another main source of clothing. Goods in the market would usually be at a new price, so for most women on a low income it would be a place to buy something 'special', a dance frock or a winter coat.⁶⁶ However, sometimes dealers would obtain stock from dress agencies and sell nearly new clothes on a commission at half price.⁶⁷

5.5 Hire Purchase as a Provider of affordable Fashionable Clothing

- 45 For the young wage earners of the lower working class who had less disposable income than their upper working class counterparts, but who wished to be as fashionable as them, other sources of credit were readily available to fund their fashion requirements. However, both the pawnshop and the tallyman held a stigma that many 'respectable' working class women did not want to associate themselves with. Melanie Tebutt noted in her book on records of women's daily street conversations; 'Respectability implied a distinct set of values which were impressed upon children from an early age. Mrs Hopwood's parents emphasized the virtues of hard work, and "never to borrow, never to borrow or gossip."⁶⁸

6. The Influence and Impact of Family and Peer Group on Clothing Choices and Acceptability

Image 12. Working-class young woman with her mother and brother, 1931



Manchester Reference Library, accession number m48489

- 46 It can be argued that young wage earning women across England were aware of and had the means to afford fashionable dress and leisure pursuits, but the extent of their engagement and their economic and social independence was dictated by the three key themes of this paper, accessibility; affordability and acceptability. The price of fashion for a young working-class woman in 1930 went beyond the cost of garments. Young women

wage earners were not automatically independent on starting work, but were required to hand over their earnings to their parents who would exercise their control to decide how much their children could have back as spends, and their fashion choices. Todd accurately points out that work dictated earnings and non-work time, but it was parents who dictated disposable income and leisure time.⁶⁹

47 My intentions were to both support and question Rowbotham's suggestion that young working-class women in the interwar years earning their own money and gaining access to leisure and fashion, was a 'half truth' or an emancipation 'an image concocted by the press.'

48 The expanding employment opportunities available, lower working hours, and increased wages, particularly in the retail and clerical sectors, meant young women experienced more disposable income and leisure time enabling them to attend the growing numbers of dance halls and cinemas. They were able to draw inspiration from a selection of the newly available magazines and engage with popular fashions through both home dressmaking with the aid of readily supplied paper patterns, and through the expansion of low-cost synthetic fabrics and the ready-to-wear clothing market, particularly Marks and Spencer.

49 However, this engagement of young women wage earners with modernity was not accessible at the same level to all. The inequalities in the distribution of disposable income impacted on the quality of the young woman's fashion and leisure experience, but did not inhibit it altogether. So perhaps in fact Rowbotham's 'half truth' is correct in that although young working class women of the 1930s had a modest income, she had board or rent to pay and lived under the constraints of her parents within the boundaries of respectability and acceptability.

Conclusion

50 The young, earning working-class woman was positively adapting to the vicissitudes of 1930s "new woman". She had access to alternative forms of employment that provided higher-wages and better working conditions that allowed more time for leisure sought in the dancehall and frequenting the cinema. Her small disposable income when grouped with the changes in consumption and manufacture that were taking place meant that she had considerable power as a consumer. She was a new kind of shopper and the subject of interest to writers and social commentators. Contemporary writer JB Priestly notes, "The fashion hungry modern woman working girl-unsettled middleclass contemporaries who were compelled by her energy, but disconcerted with her social aspirations, her "cosmopolitan appearance" and her 'synthetic Hollywood dreams'."⁷⁰ It could be easily agreed that her fashion desires, as Priestley surmises, were fulfilled by new production technologies, retail systems and an increase in disposable income that made mass light-weight clothing affordable. Yet, the life-style of conventional young working-class woman of 1930s London dictated that she was to always be acceptable, constrained by her family peers and the necessity to remain respectable. Thus Rowbotham's statement about 'half truths' when supported by Zdatny's observation that emancipation for women in the interwar years was 'suggested'⁷¹ reveals her fashion desires were often to remain as escapist dreams and this was reflected in her sartorial choices.

Notes

- 1 Selina Todd, *Young Women Work and Family in England, 1918-1950*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.199.
- 2 See Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940*, London, Wiley-Blackwell, 1995; Sally Alexander (ed.), *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*, London, Virago, 1976; Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England, 1920-60*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, for further exploration of young working-class women's consumption of available leisure activities in inter-war Britain.
- 3 Hilary Fawcett and Cheryl Buckley, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women's Fashion from the Fin de Siele to the Present*, London, I.B.Tauris, 2002, p.114.
- 4 Fawcett and Buckley, *Fashioning the Feminine ...*, op.cit., p.114.
- 5 Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*, London, Pluto Press, 1973, p.124.
- 6 David Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain, c.1920-c.1970*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p.7.
- 7 Fowler, *Youth Culture...*, op.cit., p. 25.
- 8 Joyce Storey, *The House on South Road*, London, Virago, 2004, p. 85.
- 9 Sarah Norris, "Mass Observation at the Dance Hall: A Democracy of Fashion? In R. Snape and H.Pussard (eds.) *Recording Leisure Lives: Histories, Archives and Memories of Leisure in Britain*, Eastbourne, Leisure Studies Association, 2009, p.2.
- 10 Storey, *The House on South Road*, op. cit., p. 93-95.
- 11 'Juvenile' refers to those aged between fourteen years and sixteen years of age.
- 12 Todd, *Young Women Work and Family in England...*op. cit., p.29.
- 13 Calculated from the Ministry of Labour Report *Upon the Results of an Investigation into the Rates of Wages, the Hours of Employment and the Degree of Industrial Organisation in the Drapery and Allied Trades*, London, HMSO, 1926, p. 8-12.
- 14 Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family...*, op. cit., p. 40.
- 15 Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family...*, op. cit., p. 38.
- 16 Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family...*, op. cit., p. 41. The Co-op were offering training, education, subsidized health-care etc, qtd in A.M Carr-Saunders et al., *Consumers' Co-operation in Great Britain*, London, Allen Unwin, 1938, p. 334-44.
- 17 Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family...*, op.cit., p. 38.
- 18 Teresa Davy, "A Cissy job for Men: a Nice Job for Girls": *Women Shorthand Typists in London, 1900-1939*. In L. Davidoff and B. Westover (eds.), *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: Women's History and Women's Work*, London, Macmillan, 1986, p. 131.
- 19 Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family...*, op. cit., p.793.
- 20 Rachel Worth, *Fashion for the People*, London, Berg, 2007, p. 31.
- 21 H. Llewellyn Smith, *New Survey of London Life and Labour* 9 vols, 1930-5, II.
- 22 D. Caradog Jones, *Social Survey of Merseyside*, 3 vols, 1934, II.
- 23 D. Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain, c.1920-c.1970*, Hampshire, Palgrave McMillan, 2008, p. 69. Statistics taken from H. Llewellyn Smith et al. (eds.), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour*, London. 1934, p. 302-3
- 24 S. Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration: Young Women's Entry to Employment in Inter-War England'. *Journal of Twentieth Century British History*. 15:2, 2004, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p.130
- 25 Buckley and Fawcett, *Fashioning the Feminine...*, op. cit., p. 95.
- 26 Interview with Muriel Hughes (nee Simkin), <http://www.photohistory-sussex.co.uk/SimkinMuriel.htm>, accessed April 2012.
- 27 Interview with Muriel Hughes (nee Simkin).
- 28 Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family...*, op. cit., p. 795.
- 29 Fowler, *Youth Culture...*, op. cit., p. 109.
- 30 Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family...*, op. cit., p. 52.

- 31 Storey, *The House in South Road*, op. cit., p. 95.
- 32 C. Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England, 1920-1960*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, p.103-104
- 33 Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann, *Britain in the 1930s*, London, Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, Ltd, 1971, p. 275.
- 34 S. Rowson, 'A Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry in Britain, 1934', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. xcix.
- 35 H. Durant, *The Problem of Leisure*, London, Routledge, 1938.
- 36 Mike Hammond is a lecturer in the English department at the University of Southampton. His unpublished thesis, 'The Big Show: British Cinema and Reception During the Great War'. Nottingham Trent University, 2001, discusses working class women and their cinema participation.
- 37 Storey, *The House in South Road*, op. cit., p.89.
- 38 Storey, *The House in South Road*, 92
- 39 Littlewoods and Great Universal Stores both had a 'shilling club' system in the inter-war years. Littlewoods, in addition, had a 'two' and 'three shilling club'. Customers would join in groups of twenty, each contributing a shilling weekly. This would amount to a £1 that would be sent weekly to the company in return for merchandise requested by the individual member. Each member would have the opportunity to spend a £1 with the mail order company once every 20 weeks. For more on 'draw' or 'club' systems see Richard Coopey et al. (eds.), *Mail Order Retailing in Britain: A Business and Social History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- 40 Buckley and Fawcett, *Fashioning the Feminine...*, op. cit., p. 101.
- 41 Norris, "Mass Observation at the Dance Hall"..., op. cit., p. 3. Mass Observation is a social research archive held at the University of Sussex. Mass Observation was founded in 1937 and continues today. There was a short period between the mid- 1960s and 1981 when the work ended. The intention of Mass Observation is to record everyday lives of the people of Britain through a series of questionnaires (known as directives) and also through recorded observations by paid investigators who would anonymously record overheard conversations and behaviour in places of employment, on the street and at public gatherings such as religious or sporting events.
- 42 Norris, "Mass Observation at the Dance Hall"..., op. cit., p. 3.
- 43 Norris, "Mass Observation at the Dance Hall"..., op. cit., p. 3.
- 44 Prices taken from original poster advertising times, dates and cost of three dancehall venues in the south of England. Wimbledon and Finsbury Park dancehalls along with the Regent Dancehall in Brighton. http://farm1.static.flickr.com/230/486357045_b75f14fd94.jpg. Accessed January 1st 2016.
- 45 Norris, "Mass Observation at the Dance Hall"..., op. cit., p. 4.
- 46 Mass Observation Archive. MOA: TC Clothing and Personal Appearance, 18/1/C.
- 47 See Fowler, *Youth Culture...*, op. cit., p. 94-98 for in depth investigation of the inter-war teenage consumer and their disposable income.
- 48 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Londo, Penguin, 1992.
- 49 The Mass Observation Archive. MOA: TC Clothing and Personal Appearance, 18/1/C.
With permission of the Mass Observation Trustees.
- 50 The Mass Observation Archive. MOA: TC Clothing and Personal Appearance, 18/1/C. With permission of the Mass Observation Trustees.
- 51 Buckley and Fawcett, *Fashioning the Feminine...*, op. cit., p.85.
- 52 The Mass Observation Archive. MOA: TC Clothing and Personal Appearance, 18/1/C. With permission of the Mass Observation Trustees.
- 53 A. White, *Picture Post Newspaper, mid1930's* in A.Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality*, London, Batsford, 1986, p. 159.
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- 55 C. Horwood, *Keeping Up Appearances*, Stroud, Sutton Publishing, 2006, p.8.
- 56 Norris, "Mass Observation at the Dance Hall"..., op. cit., p. 16.

- 57 Buckley and Fawcett, Fashioning the Feminine..., op. cit., p. 102.
- 58 Worth, Fashion for the People, op. cit., p. 26.
- 59 Worth, Fashion for the People, op. cit., p. 31.
- 60 Norris, "Mass Observation at the Dance Hall"..., op. cit., p. 6-7.
- 61 Fowler, Youth Culture..., op. cit., p. 70.
- 62 Worth, Fashion for the People..., op. cit., p. 1.
- 63 MOA: TC Worktown Shopping Habits, sxMOA1/2/4/1/E/1. With permission of the Mass Observation Trustees.
- 64 Worth, Fashion for the People..., op. cit., p. 32.
- 65 The Marks and Spencer Archive, Leeds.
- 66 Maggie Wood, 'We Wore What We Go', Warwickshire, Warwickshire Books, 1989, p. 2.
- 67 Wood, 'We Wore What We Got', p. 2.
- 68 Melanie Tebbutt, Women's Talk: A Social History of 'Gossip' in Working-class Neighbourhoods, 1880-1960, Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1997, p.94
- 69 Todd, Young Women, Work and Family Lives..., op. cit., p. 195.
- 70 J.B. Priestley, English Journey, London, Harper & Brothers, 1934.
- 71 Steven Zdatny, 'The Boyish Look and the Liberated Woman: The Politics and Aesthetics of Women's Hairstyles', Fashion Theory, Vol. 1, Issue 4, 1997, p. 367-398.

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Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Cheryl Roberts, « A Price for Fashion: A Young Working-Class Woman's Wardrobe in 1930s London », *Apparence(s)* [En ligne], 7 | 2017, mis en ligne le 01 juin 2017, consulté le 16 novembre 2023. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/apparences/1359> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/apparences.1359>

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