**Styling the suburbs: Irene Sherman’s dress shops and fashion networks in the twentieth century**

**Abstract**

### **Purpose**

### The article uses the history of Irene Sherman’s suburban fashion shops to explore the significance of fashion retail for broader suburban distinctiveness. Principally, this is an article about networks and connections between the suburb and the city, retail and manufacturing and finally, the importance of family networks for developing and sustaining a fashion business.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

Chiefly, this article uses original period newspapers, magazines and trade journal articles to reconstruct the story of Irene’s businesses. This approach is necessary as limited business records survive.

### **Findings**

This article demonstrates that Irene’s wider family network helped to inform many of her business decisions, particularly illustrating how important the clothes manufactured for her by her husband Sam were for her business. I also show how the experience of shopping for fashion changed in the suburbs over the twentieth century and that by the 1980s, independent fashion retailers were disappearing from high streets.

### **Originality/value**

The history of independent clothing retailers is hitherto under-researched, partly because of the lack of primary material that survives relating to these businesses. However, this article demonstrates via a systematic approach, that it is possible to uncover the history of such ventures.

Suburbs are typically not represented in fashion history although they are deserving of greater recognition. Studying the histories of independent retail in the suburbs can help us to break free from stereotyped tropes of the twentieth-century experience of the suburb.

**Keywords: fashion retail; high streets; suburban fashion; boutique; ready-to-wear; retail history**

**Introduction**

Irene Sherman (1910-2001) is not a name that is well-known among historians. However, the two suburban fashion retail businesses she ran were open between 1932 and 1988, covering a period of extensive changes to both the British high street[[1]](#footnote-1) and the ready-to-wear fashion industry. I begin by considering her first business, Ann Harley (1932-1941) with branches in Bromley and Orpington, Kent, before focusing in-depth on her second business, Renee Shaw (1941-1988), in Sutton, Surrey. All three shops were in prime locations on the town’s respective high streets. By the interwar period (1919-1939), Bromley, Orpington, and Sutton were all thriving middle-class suburbs, their growth facilitated by the Victorian introduction of the railways to the towns, which encouraged commuters to move there. I focus primarily on Renee Shaw here because of the longevity of the business. Using the marketing mix of place, promotion, product and price as a key framework, I consider the unique identity of the shop, its position within the high street, the primarily middle-class customer base, the types of clothes stocked and how these were advertised.

Principally, this is an article about networks and connections: between the suburb and the city, retail and manufacturing and finally, the importance of family networks for developing and sustaining a fashion business. In particular, I examine the cooperative relationship between Renee Shaw and Samuel Sherman Ltd., the ready-to-wear fashion business run by Irene’s second husband, Samuel (Sam) Sherman.

Suburban independent fashion retailers have received little academic attention and, owing to the independent nature of these businesses, their stories are often hard to trace. However, this article uses a combination of original period newspapers, magazines and trade journal articles to reconstruct the story of Irene’s businesses. As I will illustrate such shops can help to tell stories about the position of the suburb in wider fashion networks; from manufacturing to advertising, retailing and consumption.

Given the significance of networks within this paper, an approach informed by Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) is employed here. Although not typically used in fashion history, as it often necessitates an ethnographic approach, it has found some application (see: Rowland, 2021). Suzanne Rowland (2021, p.42) suggests that ‘for dress historians unable to make first-hand observations, an imagined social world created from fragments of primary research can function as a substitution, observations can be made, and connections drawn.’

In an ANT approach, actors can be human or non-human—‘anything with the ability to act or produce action’ (Entwistle 2015, p.270). Joanne Entwistle writes that ‘tools, instruments, devices, and technologies of calibration, observation, and measurement can all be said to be actors in that they are actively involved in the making up or assembly of the world and shape how that world comes together’. She goes on to suggest that ANT involves ‘following the actors’: observing what they do, where they go, and what objects they ‘enrol’ into particular ‘assemblages’ (Entwistle 2015, pp.272-3).

An ANT approach encourages us to examine actors across the entire network, not just those situated at the production end and can easily be applied to fashionable garments. Their ‘fashionability’ is unstable, and they are symbolically ‘made and remade’ by a multitude of actors throughout the processes of production, distribution, retail, and consumption (Entwistle 2015, p.274). From a marketing perspective, the newspaper advertisements and editorials I will address here function as ‘actors’ within the network. Perhaps more significantly, so do the shops themselves- an important ‘actor’ in the value creation of the garments sold within them. For example, independent shops may sell the same garments, but each shop is an actor, creating different associations with the garment. Ultimately, these actors can transform the meaning of garments as they move through the network. It can also be seen that independent shops are ‘actors’ in the wider network of the high street, altering perceptions of the high street itself. As Matthew Carmona (2022, p.6) points out, shops can be important to ‘people’s sense of pride and community.’

**Understanding the suburb**

Focusing on two suburban fashion stores may seem an unusual choice. The suburbs have not typically been associated with their fashionable shops nor residents. As Dion Georgiou (2014, p.177) notes, historically, studies concentrating on the suburb have suggested the ‘mundanity’ of the suburban experience, inferring that it was ‘lacking in the vitality and communality found in the inner city.’ However, as Bethan Bide (2020, p.50) indicates, while suburbs are not typically recognised for their own ‘distinct forms of urban culture’, these areas possess a ‘dual identity as both part of the city but also distinct from it.’ High streets, and particularly independent shops, should be seen as central to how many suburban towns develop these ‘dual identities’ and are perceived by residents and visitors. Studying the histories of independent retail in the suburbs can consequently help us to break free from stereotyped tropes of the twentieth-century suburban experience.

Bide (2020, p.48), in her work on the suburban South-West London department store Bentalls in Kingston has argued that the relationship between urban and suburban fashion consumption and London’s fashionable identity merits further attention. She suggests that considering the changing shape of London’s suburbs and how ‘their inhabitants interacted with fashion throughout the twentieth century can help us understand London’s development as a fashion city with greater nuance’. Bide’s work holds particular significance due to the geographical proximity of Bentalls to Renee Shaw. It is entirely plausible (and indeed probable) that Renee Shaw’s customers also shopped at Bentalls. The two stores were situated less than seven miles apart and throughout the period that Renee Shaw was in business the 213 bus connected them (*213bus,* 2013).

Sutton is the principal town of the London borough of Sutton, located on the south-western edges of Greater London. Sutton became a Greater London borough in 1965 having previously been part of Surrey. Like many suburban London towns, Sutton’s development was greatly influenced by the railway, which opened in 1847. This made the area appealing to middle-class commuters, and throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was significant suburban development in the wider borough with many middle-class villas built on the southern fringes of the town (London Borough of Sutton, 2008). By the time that Renee Shaw opened, Sutton was well connected to other local suburban centres notable for their fashionable shopping including Wimbledon, Croydon and Kingston. It was also easy to reach central London from Sutton via trains to either London Victoria or London Bridge. While Renee Shaw would have appealed to a local clientele, the transport links encouraged visitors from the wider borough and beyond. This is evidenced through advertising, with Renee Shaw placing numerous advertisements in the *Croydon Times*. The shop was well-positioned for visitors arriving in Sutton by train. When walking from the station towards the centre of the town, throughout the period Renee Shaw existed, this was one of the first fashion shops that one would encounter. Choosing retail units at the southern end of the High Street was a deliberate choice: this was closer to the station and also the middle-class area of the town.

**Tracing the suburban shopping experience**

Shopping establishments, whether department stores, multiples or independents, have played a crucial role in shaping the British high street. In 1984 John Benson (p.59) suggested that over the preceding 100 years, there had been a ‘total transformation’ in the British shopping experience. Three major developments shaped this transformation: a ‘large increase in the amount of money spent, a major shift in the type of retailer patronised and a substantial change in the type of product purchased.’ Particularly evident was, he suggests, a shift that occurred between circa 1915-1980 whereby British shoppers transferred the majority of their custom from ‘small local retailers to larger more centralised and more impersonal outlets’ (Benson 1984, p.61). Whilst as Jon Stobart (2017, p.156) indicates, department stores and multiples in the twentieth century increasingly ‘swept away’ independent shops from town and city centres, until the last quarter of the twentieth century, independent fashion shops were, in many parts of Britain and particularly the suburbs, able to thrive. The interwar period witnessed significant growth in independent fashion retail across Britain. Three key factors prompted prospective proprietors, mainly women, to enter the fashion retail trade: the rise of branding, the increase in factory-produced women’s clothing, and the more frequent purchasing of ready-to-wear clothing by women (Jeffreys 1954, p.334).

As Andrew *et al.* (2003, p.129) indicate, a common problem when researching retail history is ‘the confusion that exists in the definition and classification of retail types.’ Due to the longstanding nature of Irene’s businesses, notably Renee Shaw, it is challenging to define the retail category they fell under. Jenny Gilbert (2020, p.260) shows that various terms can (and have) been used to describe the small independent fashion retailers that thrived in the twentieth century. These terms include ‘draper’, ‘independent dress shop’, ‘madam shop’ and ‘boutique’.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, Renee Shaw would have been described as a ‘madam shop’. Limited information exists regarding the development of madam shops and there was considerable variability in shops that were described as such; from chic boutiques selling high-class luxury ready-to-wear to those selling low-price garments and accessories. Also, some such shops were ultimately bespoke dressmakers, offering alterations too (See: Roberts 2022, pp.265-266; Boydell 2010, pp.144-145; Newby 1970, p.107). These shops could be found all over the country, with many located in suburban London towns. In her 1957 survey of the Women’s Outerwear Industry, Margaret Wray (p.38) suggested that the strength of the madam shop lay in the personal relationships between the proprietor and her regular customers. This ‘enabled the choice of stock to be closely related to the probable demand, so that the customer was attracted by garments which appealed to her particular taste’. The independent nature of these stores allowed them to be flexible and, as Amy De La Haye (1993, p.43) suggests, ‘an individual shop could create its own image and the limited quantities of designs on display, often made by a number of different manufacturers, gave an impression of fashion exclusivity’. However, madam shops faced serious competition from multiple shops due to economies of scale. Some manufacturers charged lower prices to multiples for their large orders and higher prices to the madam shops for their smaller orders of the same garments (Barham 1980, p.354).

By the 1960s Renee Shaw could be aptly described as a boutique. As Jade Halbert (2022, p.103) writes, the ‘boutique’ concept as it is now understood originated in London’s Carnaby Street in the 1950s, although dress shops did not widely adopt the term until the 1960s. Belinda Johnson (2022, p.332) suggests that ‘boutiques are small stores with niche, exclusive products and personal service constituting part of the “style” market’. Similarly, Sonia Ashmore (2006a, p.51) describes boutiques as ‘a more exclusive form of luxury shop’. Mark Pimlott (2007, p.1) states, ‘the boutique- that special enterprise, that little world onto itself, enticing customers to its interior, seducing them, offering them something exclusive and unique reflecting their proprietors and, by association, their own individuality.’ What becomes clear from Pimlott’s description is the magical and transportive qualities of the boutique. However, I argue that it is not the products themselves in the boutique that are typically either ‘exclusive’ or ‘unique’- many boutiques in the mid-twentieth century stocked ready-to-wear garments that could be purchased elsewhere- rather it was the experience of shopping in the boutique that was ‘unique.’ The combination of a particular kind of service suited to that style of shop, imaginative visual merchandising, window displays, clever advertising and then the stock formed the ‘boutique’ experience- this was certainly the case at Renee Shaw.

Historians have addressed the story of a small number of boutiques established in the 1950s and 1960s (see: Lister, 2019 on Mary Quant and Hulanicki and Pel, 2014 on Biba), alongside the wider history of London boutiques (see: Bide, 2022; Fogg, 2003; Blackman 2005, pp. 201-222; Ashmore 2006b, pp. 58-79; Lester, 2010). However, these accounts often concentrate on shops situated in the fashionable enclaves of central London, typically Kensington, Chelsea, or Soho. In contrast, the histories of independent fashion retail establishments from the twentieth century outside of central London have largely been neglected (Alexander *et al.* 2003, p.5). Nevertheless, there are exceptions. Carrie Henderson has conducted extensive research into The House of Mirelle in Hull, Yorkshire, published via her website [https://houseofmirelle.uk/.](https://houseofmirelle.uk/) Halbert (2022) has examined Scottish fashion boutiques from the 1960s, and De La Haye (1993), Gilbert (2020), and Sheila Shreeve (2014) have all published research on the Hodson Shop in Willenhall, West Midlands.

This paper builds upon this research into independent fashion retailing. Focusing on Irene’s businesses allows for a comprehensive consideration of two enterprises primarily targeting a middle-class clientele. Defining the middle classes falls outside the scope of this article; as Simon Gunn and Rachel Bell (2002, p.13) suggest, ‘almost everyone who has studied the middle classes has acknowledged the difficulty in defining them’, due to the term carrying different meanings depending on context. Nevertheless, drawing from the work of Gunn and Bell (2002, p.15), the ‘middle-class’ consumers I refer to were broadly the spouses of homeowners and working professionals not engaged in manual labour. The middle classes were, during the period covered, synonymous with the suburbs, making it unsurprising that this was Irene’s target market.

**In the margins of history**

One of the key reasons why the histories of independent fashion retailers have largely not been recorded is precisely because of the independent nature of these businesses. This meant that once they were wound up, documentation and records were typically destroyed (De la Haye 1993, p.43). There are no known surviving business records for Renee Shaw, and the only surviving records for Ann Harley pertain to the bankruptcy of the business in 1941 (*Ann Harley Ltd.,* 1941). Furthermore, while records for Irene’s second husband Sam’s business survive, they only briefly reference Renee Shaw. Searching for garments purchased from either business is further complicated because neither stitched their own retailers’ labels in garments.

Irene is mentioned in sources related to several ready-to-wear fashion manufacturing companies. For example, Raymond Zelker, the founder of the ready-to-wear brand Polly Peck, references Irene and her businesses in his autobiography, *The Polly Peck Story* (Zelker 2001, pp. 92-93). Irene’s name also appears in the archive of wholesale couturier Frederick Starke. This archive consists mainly of books of press cuttings. One of these books is a recycled showroom diary from Starke’s business. The diary, dating to 1948, provides a tantalising glimpse of the fashion figures who visited Starke’s showroom; fashion buyers for leading department stores and independent shops, fashion journalists and, on rarer occasions, private customers too. The diary indicates that Irene visited the showroom on the 16th September 1948 although no stock was purchased on this occasion. While these sources provide evidence of the businesses existence, they provided limited tangible evidence about how it operated. Consequently, this article draws on a range of sources to build a picture of suburban independent fashion retailing in the twentieth century. Crucial sources were fashion magazines, trade journals, local newspapers, situations vacant advertisements, street directories, telephone directories, electoral rolls, census records from 1911 and 1921, the 1939 register, photographs of the local area, and email conversations.

The key newspapers used to trace Renee Shaw were the *Croydon Times, Sutton Times* and *Sutton Advertiser.* Both the *Croydon Times* and *Sutton Advertiser* were digitized by the British Newspaper Archive whilst I was completing this research. This meant I viewed physical, microfiche and digital copies of these newspapers*.*  It is necessary to make this distinction because, had I not physically searched these newspapers, I would not have found many of the Renee Shaw advertisements. The British Newspaper Archive transcription rarely picks up the handwriting style of Renee Shaw advertisements. I make this point as it shows the validity of the painstaking scan of thousands of pages of newsprint, even in our time of digital access, and illustrates the fallibility of transcription, particularly for stylised pictorial features and advertisements.

An independent shop like Renee Shaw would have had only a limited advertising budget and the shop’s advertisements appear somewhat sporadically in local newspapers. However, these newspapers are peppered with other fashion advertisements, which provide useful context. In the 1940s and 1950s, the two primary fashion advertisers in Sutton were the department store Shinners (71 High Street) and the chain store Leon’s (136 High Street). Advertisements indicate some overlap with Renee Shaw’s stock but, generally, the garments offered by Shinners and Leon’s were cheaper. Studying the newspapers as a whole, rather than simply searching for individual advertisements for Renee Shaw, provided a more holistic picture of the shopping experience on Sutton High Street.

Street and telephone directories were also key sources for this research. Stobart (2017, p.157) indicates that ‘trade directories are the most widely available and reliable source for the study of retail geography’ but typically need to be cross-referenced against secondary data sources such as newspaper advertisements. Tracing Renee Shaw was complicated by a lack of surviving Sutton historical street directories. For example, William Pile published Sutton street directories until 1938, but not after this date. It was impossible to find any later street directories covering the borough and telephone directories (which Renee Shaw does appear in) were only available from the 1960s onwards. Whilst there were extremely limited directories available for the period I was concentrating on here, looking to those available from the 1930s helped build a picture of the High Street prior to the arrival of Renee Shaw. Studying the telephone directories available for the 1980s helped me understand how Sutton High Street was changing in the late twentieth century, particularly after the arrival of an American-style shopping mall, Times Square, in 1985.

These sources alone present a relatively one-dimensional view of Renee Shaw. Whilst newspapers and magazines clarify the types of garments sold and how they were marketed, they provide limited tangible evidence of the shopping experience. Additional information about the shopping experience at Renee Shaw can be found through a local history Facebook group, ‘Sutton and Cheam History.’ Using Facebook as a historical resource presents specific challenges. Various scholars have highlighted the potential ethical concerns associated with such groups and questioned the credibility of the memories shared within them (see: Gregory, 2014; Stock, 2016; Schutt *et al.,* 2014; Gibbons, 2019). Nevertheless, these groups, which can be seen as emergent online ‘community archives’ (Gibbons, 2019), offer a valuable ‘bottom-up representation of cultural heritage’ (Gregory 2014, p.26). Often such local history groups provide ‘first-hand impressions and images that cannot be found elsewhere’ (Schutt *et al.,* 2014). When thorough archival research has also been conducted, these sources can enhance historical research.

From a methodological perspective, the ‘comments’ function facilitates a fluid exchange among group participants that might not occur in a more formal setting if say, for example, local residents and former customers were interviewed. Facebook posts share many characteristics with traditional oral history sources. Andrea Hajek (2012 quoted in Stock 2016, p.217). suggests that ‘Facebook reproduces orality in a very similar way as when you’re going through a photo album. The tags and comments, which read very much like spontaneous, real-life or telephone conversations, substitute the pointing out of people or places in an album’. Indeed, the challenges of Facebook are comparable to those encountered when conducting oral history interviews. Memory is central to oral history, yet as Robert Perks (1995, p.7). suggests, ‘people forget things; their memories play tricks by ‘telescoping’ events together or altering their order’. Bearing in mind this fallibility of memory, group comments have been used sparingly in this article; nonetheless, they provide a valuable impression of the shopping experience at Renee Shaw and how garments were marketed.

**Tracing the Nathan family**

Irene Nathan was born in 1910 in Stepney, East London. Her name appeared as ‘Rachel’ on both the 1911 and 1921 census; however, by the time she married in 1933, she was using the name Irene (‘Household of Simon Nathan’, 1911 and 1921, ‘Irene R Nathan’, 1933). Later, she used the name Renee interchangeably with Irene. As one of her shops was called Renee Shaw, I will refer to her as Irene; although in business and private life, she used both names (Nathan Family email correspondence, 2019).

Irene was the fourth child of Rebecca (nee Bernstein) and Simon Nathan, Jewish immigrants from Wilno.[[2]](#footnote-2) Today, the city is located in Lithuania although their birthplace is listed as Poland/Russia in the 1911 census, indicative of the annexations that took place in the early years of their lives (‘Household of Simon Nathan’, 1911). Census records suggest that Simon was a woollen merchant, consequently broadly associated with the textile trade (‘Household of Simon Nathan’, 1921). It is perhaps unsurprising therefore, that most of his children pursued professions linked to fashion and its ancillary trades.

Jewish immigrant families played a vital role in transforming and securing the success of the twentieth-century London fashion industry. Irene’s family history, outlined here, mirrors that of many other significant figures who were active in the mid-century British ready-to-wear trade. Various scholars have highlighted the significance of Jewish immigrants to British fashion as part of a wider re-positioning of London immigrant histories (see: Godley, 2001; Kershen, 1988 and 1997; Nyburg, 2020; Bide and Whitmore, 2023; Tregenza, 2023). Building on this work, I demonstrate how Irene’s businesses shaped women’s suburban London shopping experiences during the twentieth century.

**Ann Harley**

# Ann Harley opened at 98 High Street, Bromley, Kent, in July 1932 (subsequent advertisements and articles provide the address 272 High Street; the shop did not relocate – rather the street was renumbered). The business expanded in May 1934 with a second store at 208 High Street, Orpington (Figure 1) (*Bromley & West Kent Mercury,* 1934, p. 5). Ann Harley was owned by Harold Harley, Irene’s first husband, whom she married in 1933. While the business was under Harold's ownership, Irene managed it and was also a named director after it became a limited company in 1937 (*Ann Harley Ltd*.*,* 1941). Harold’s birth name was Isidore Noah Leavey. Like Irene, he came from a Jewish immigrant family. In 1938, he changed his name to the more British-sounding Harold Harley (*The London Gazette*, p.6316). Name-changing was a common practice among Jewish people in the early twentieth century. Various reasons motivated individuals to change their names and particularly during the 1930s, this was typically due to anti-Semitism. However, accounts from the families of other Jewish fashion professionals living in Greater London also suggest that they changed their names because of both anti-German and anti-Russian sentiment (See: Tregenza 2023, pp.20-24).

# It is partially due to name-changing that tracing the full significance of the Jewish contribution to the twentieth-century fashion industry is challenging. In the context of Jewish name-changing it is appropriate to reflect on the choice of the business name ‘Ann Harley’. This was a clear marketing ploy- the very British-sounding name, a conscious choice to dissociate the business from its Jewish proprietors at a time of widespread anti-Semitism. The choice of a feminine name too was intentional. This reflected retail trends of the period where women’s names were chosen as fashion retail business names. In this case it implied that the person running the shop was actually ‘Ann Harley’.

# The first advertisement for the Bromley store, announcing its ‘grand opening’, suggested that it specialised in sportswear and gowns (*Bromley & West Kent Mercury,* 1932, p.4). Throughout the 1930s, Ann Harley regularly advertised in the *Bromley & West Kent Mercury*. These advertisements indicate the wide range of ready-to-wear clothes sold in the shops. For example, in 1933, they were selling ‘ladies sportswear, 2 or 3 piece suits, cardigans and jumpers’, operating as a ‘sportswear specialist’ (*Bromley & West Kent Mercury*, 1933, p.6), and in 1934 their stock was described as ‘town and country wear’(*Bromley & West Kent Mercury,* 1934, p.7). While primarily a retail business, Ann Harley also manufactured garments. This is highlighted in the business's winding up papers and the 1939 register, where Harold’s profession is listed as a production and sales manager for a gown manufacturer. In the register, Irene is listed as the managing director of a ladies’ and children’s clothier (see: ‘Household of Harold Leavey’, 1939 and *Ann Harley Ltd.,* 1941). Although not widely advertised, this clearly indicates that Ann Harley stocked children’s clothing as well as adults.

# It is significant that Ann Harley opened in the 1930s for several reasons. The decade witnessed the ‘unparalleled’ growth of the high street and saw a wide variety of new retail establishments opening (Roberts 2022, p.245). Of particular significance was the growth, especially in the suburbs, of chain stores (Edwards 2006, p.91). Despite the rise in fashion chains, the independent fashion store remained one of the key outlets where middle-class suburban women could purchase high-fashion clothes during the 1930s.

# Changes in manufacturing also impacted 1930s fashion retail. Ann Harley opened during a time of considerable expansion for the British ‘popular price’ clothing trade. So increasingly, in the 1930s, well-priced, fashionable ready-to-wear became accessible to a broader range of women across the class spectrum, particularly in London (See: Horwood 2005, p.161; Howell 2013, p.1; Worth 2020, pp.114-5). Analysing the advertisements for Ann Harley it appears that the stores primarily targeted a middle-class clientele. Indeed, Bromley and Orpington, like Sutton, were London commuter suburbs, attractive to the middle classes.

To appeal to customers and highlight the garments for sale, regular fashion parades were held at Ann Harley. An article in the *Bromley & West Kent Mercury* (1934, p.11) following one of these parades noted that ‘a large number of ladies attended the parades and were pleased to find that the goods offered were equal to those in the West End shops, although the prices were considerably lower’. The assertion that the garments matched those found in the West End was striking, indicating that by the 1930s, many independent fashion shops outside of London, thanks in part to the expansion of the ready-to-wear trade, were able to stock the same fashionable garments as key West End stores. The choice of terminology here also indicates the symbolic meaning of the ‘West End’ to consumers- a place synonymous with high fashion. The ‘West End’ as Bronwen Edwards (2006, p.93) has suggested, conferred ‘value, status, and meaning on both the activity and items bought.’ It can also be conjectured that stores such as Ann Harley, with their ‘West End’ merchandise, helped to bring a touch of London glamour to the suburbs.

# Ann Harley remained in business until 1941 when it was liquidated. An article reporting on the liquidation of the business indicated several reasons for its failure. Harold posited that a slump in trade following the outbreak of World War II, combined with damage to stock and premises caused by a flood, had led to the businesses’ demise. Irene indicated that ‘domestic trouble’ between herself and Harold, culminating in divorce proceedings, had contributed to the failure of Ann Harley (*Bromley and West Kent Mercury,* 1941, p.4). In the individual situation of Harold and Irene, the breakdown of their marriage undoubtedly rendered the business untenable. However, the fact that Irene chose to open Renee Shaw in the same year indicates that it was still possible to run a successful suburban fashion retail business despite the challenging conditions of World War II.

**Sutton and the Nathan family**

Irene was one of seven children, and her siblings were also entrepreneurial figures who worked broadly in fashion and retail. The choices made by Irene’s siblings regarding where they lived and worked provide valuable contextual information to explain some of Irene’s later decisions. During the 1920s and 1930s Irene’s sister, Elizabeth Bierman (née Nathan)[[3]](#footnote-3) also ran a fashion retail business, Beth Richards, at 229 Brompton Road, London. While details about this shop are challenging to trace, it appears that it stocked similar garments to Ann Harley. The stock available in 1928, for instance, focused on sportswear, featuring three-piece suits, sweaters, cardigans, and jumper suits for sale (*The Tatler and Bystander* 1928, p.Y). Elizabeth was involved in the retail trade until at least 1939, as she is listed in the 1939 register as the manageress of a gown shop *(*‘Bromley Court Hotel’*,* 1939). However, by around 1950, Elizabeth had joined Sam Sherman’s business as an export executive. She was not the only sibling working for Sam; Irene’s youngest brother, Lawrence, also worked for him. He was a production manager, director and a major shareholder in the business (*Samuel Sherman PLC.,* 1947-1991).

Upon researching Irene’s wider family, it became clear why she chose Sutton as the location for Renee Shaw. Through electoral rolls from the 1930s and 1940s and the 1939 register, it has been possible to trace the family to various addresses in Sutton. Irene’s elder brother Bernard was already living in Sutton by 1935, and Lawrence had joined him, the pair living together alongside Bernard’s wife by 1939. By 1945, Irene’s siblings Elizabeth, Gertrude (Gertie), and Ruth (Ricky) also lived in Sutton (London Borough of Sutton, 1935 and 1945;‘Household of Bernard Nathan’*,* 1939). All of Irene’s siblings lived in South Sutton, a predominantly middle-class area (London Borough of Sutton, 2008). Although some of the houses they lived in are no longer standing, tracing surviving buildings on the same roads alongside historic photographs reveals that they were all living in sizeable houses by the 1940s, indicative of the prosperity of the various businesses that they ran and worked for.

Irene’s siblings, Bernard and Gertie, both ran long-running businesses on Sutton High Street. It has not been possible to determine precisely when either business opened and neither appears in the 1932 *Pile's directory of Sutton, Carshalton, Wallington & District*. However, the 1938 directory indicates that ‘Bernard’s’, the ‘toilet specialist’ (a drugstore similar to Superdrug), was already established at 99 High Street. Furthermore, Maison Aimee, the hairdresser run by Irene’s sister Gertie, was already established at 183 High Street (*Pile’s*, 1938). Family members have indicated that Gertie and her husband Leonard Lennard did not establish the Maison Aimee business, but they later owned it (Nathan family email correspondence, 2019).

In 1947, Renee’s brother-in-law Ralph King (née Rubinstein, husband of Irene’s eldest sister Ruth) also opened a retail business on the high street. His shop, located at 271 High Street, initially specialised in handbags, watches, and jewellery (*Sutton Advertiser* 1947, p. 4) before exclusively specialising in bags. While still broadly associated with the fashion trade, this was a vastly different shop to Renee Shaw, with bags, shopping carts, and suitcases displayed outside the front of the shop. Bobbie Nichol (email correspondence, 2018), who worked at both Renee Shaw and Ralph King, suggested:

He and I would stand outside and talk to every single person that went by- He was like the salesmen at Petticoat Lane, trying to get them to come into the store. It was incredible how many did. But many people got wise to him and crossed the street […] We would talk about […] how much more comfortable he felt there and not at the top of the High Street with the 'snobs'.

Bobbie’s recollections point to the multifaceted identities that suburban high streets could have in the twentieth century, shaped through their independent retail outlets. Indeed, as a network, the High Street can be seen as a microcosm of wider English class negotiations—each shop a valuable actor, shaping how the High Street was perceived. In Bobbie’s description the significance of specific addresses, and their class connotations, is clear. Ralph King, supposedly resembling an East End street trader, ran a shop principally targeting the working~~-~~classes at the bottom of the High Street. Conversely, Renee Shaw, located at the very top of the High Street, as I will illustrate, was a ‘posh’ shop targeting a more middle-class clientele.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Nathan family played a crucial role in shaping the unique character of Sutton High Street in the mid~~-~~twentieth century. The significance of two siblings working with Sam is emphasised as Sam’s products were heavily retailed at Renee Shaw. Irene, despite not living in the area, chose Sutton as the location for her shop because her family was already embedded locally, living nearby and running shops on the High Street. Furthermore, the types of businesses they operated provided shared marketing opportunities; for instance, a customer buying a dress for a special occasion at Renee Shaw might be referred for a styling appointment at Maison Aimee or a matching lipstick from Bernard’s the drugstore. Overall, this illustrates the importance of familial networks in the fashion and retail trades.

**Founding Renee Shaw**

In 1941 Renee Shaw opened at 51 High Street, Sutton. It is perhaps surprising that Irene established a new fashion business that year, despite the failure of Ann Harley and the onset of clothes rationing in June 1941. However, there are some advertisements seeking staff in May 1941 (See: *Croydon Times,* 1941, p.6), suggesting that the business was founded before the introduction of clothes rationing when circumstances were arguably easier for retailers and consumers. Furthermore, as Irene had previously managed another fashion retail business, she would have already had an existing network of suppliers. Indeed, early Renee Shaw advertising (see: *Sutton Advertiser,* 1941, p.5) shows that the clothes sold by the two businesses were similar.

The conditions of World War II were undoubtedly challenging for fashion manufacturers and retailers alike, many of whom had to pivot their business operations to survive the war. For fashion manufacturers, this often meant producing garments under more lucrative wartime contracts. For retailers, however, the situation was perhaps more difficult, with consumers across the class spectrum unable to purchase clothing as they had during the 1930s, due to diminished disposable incomes and the onset of rationing.

Although World War II ended in 1945, conditions were challenging for retailers until the late 1940s. Clothes rationing remained in effect until 1949, severely limiting the number of garments available for consumers to purchase. Additionally, as Bide (2020, p.49) notes, ‘high rates of purchase tax further dampened the luxury market, and inflation materially diminished the purchasing power of many middle- and upper-class consumers.’ While austerity regulations were revoked in 1946 (these regulations had controlled clothing styles, cuts, and embellishments to eliminate unnecessary materials and labour at a time when such resources were in short supply) (Bide 2017, p.134), this did not mean that more clothing was available; labour and material shortages still hampered the industry (see: *Fashion and Fabrics,* 1946, p.25). However, the removal of austerity restrictions at least allowed for greater freedom in terms of designs and styles, provided staff and materials could be found to execute these designs. It seems likely this is why, from 1946 onwards,

Renee Shaw began to advertise regularly in two key local newspapers, the *Sutton Advertiser* and the *Sutton Times*. Small pictorial advertisements were placed throughout the year, appearing exclusively on the last Thursday of the month. It can consequently be conjectured that these were payday-minded (Figure 2). Whilst circumstances for retailers were challenging, Renee Shaw seemingly thrived in this period.

Indicative of Renee Shaw’s success, in 1948 the shop was refurbished. An article in *Fashion Trade Weekly* (1948, p.14) suggests:

Renee Shaw completed the transformation of her fashion shop so that it got a Swiss look, complete with window boxes and fancy sunblinds. And she opened up the first floor as a Utility showroom, installing the workroom on top. It makes quite the most striking shopfront in Sutton, and Renee Shaw promises to keep it gleaming white in the Swiss tradition.

The white shopfront was undoubtedly striking, and photographs of Sutton High Street in the 1950s show that Renee Shaw was one of the only shopfronts painted white (Figure 3). Visually distinguishing the shop from others helped to allude to its exclusivity. The installation of a workroom on-site is also noteworthy. Alterations of ready-to-wear garments were typically offered by high-end independent dress shops in the 1940s. Having a specialist workroom on-site allowed for a better fit of garments, enhancing the exclusivity of the pieces stocked there.

Without business records, it is difficult to gauge the store’s financial success. However, the continued expansion of the business in the 1950s and 1960s indicates a highly successful venture. In the mid-1950s, Irene took on a further unit at 55 High Street before expanding to three units at 51-55 High Street in 1960 (*Croydon Times, 1958*, p.8; *Sutton Times*, 1960, p. 7) The business expanded beyond Sutton too, with a further shop opening in Brighton in the 1960s (*Sunday Express,* 1964, p.5).

**Creating the shopping experience**

Between the 1940s and 1960s, Renee Shaw endeavoured to create a veneer of luxury on the high street and an elevated shopping experience for its customers. This was achieved through carefully curated stock, distinctive store design~~,~~ and attentive staffing. While, as I will later discuss, clothes at various price points were sold at Renee Shaw, customers remembered the shop as ‘posh’ and ‘classy’ (*Sutton and Cheam History*, 2016 and 2018). The shop assistant was a vital actor in the broader network of marketing the goods at Renee Shaw, with customer recollections highlighting the highly personalised and attentive service that they provided (*Sutton and Cheam History*, 2016 and 2018). The expected demeanour of staff was also reflected in staff advertisements. For instance, an advertisement in the *Croydon Times* (1952, p.7)stated, ‘first-class experienced saleswomen required. Only those with high-class fashion experience need apply for position of first sales on model floor.’ Personalised service actively contributed to the symbolic value of the garments for sale and the perception of Renee Shaw as ‘posh’.

A fashion shop like Renee Shaw was a site for consumers to accrue and display their cultural capital. A place to see and purchase the latest fashions, but perhaps too, to be ‘seen’. Serena Dyer (2022, p.5) writes that shopping can be viewed as a ‘holistically embodied experience’. Beyond the simple act of browsing and trying on clothes, this embodied experience can be cultivated in various ways. At Renee Shaw, the experience was enriched through areas where customers could linger, such as seats for relaxation while mothers, daughters, wives and girlfriends tried on clothes. The shopping experience was further enhanced by imaginative window displays and mannequin parades, featuring some tableaux scenes created with live models in the windows themselves (See, for example, *Sutton Times*, 1954, p.4).

One parade, organised by Renee Shaw at Sutton Public Hall in 1953, was particularly noteworthy and made the local front-page news. This event featured couture dresses by Christian Dior, marking the ‘first’ showing of Dior’s 1953 Autumn collection in Britain, alongside garments ‘made in Renee Shaw’s workrooms’. The article does not clarify how Irene managed to procure these garments. However, what is particularly interesting is how this show acted to promote Renee Shaw. By showcasing the shop’s own garments alongside couture, it enhanced the cultural capital of Renee Shaw’s items, aligning them with Dior and suggesting that they were akin to couture (*Sutton Times,* 1953, p.1 and 4).

**Fashion at Renee Shaw**

Photographs of Renee Shaw from the 1940s and 1950s show that signage was affixed to the frontage stating ‘Town and Country Clothes by Renee Shaw’ in striking cursive font. The shop’s focus on ‘town and country’ clothing was also implied in early advertisements (see, for example, *Sutton Advertiser*, 1946, p.3). ‘Town and Country’ clothing can be viewed as inherently suburban, given the suburb’s ‘hybrid’ geography, one that was in close proximity to both the countryside and the city (Georgiou 2014, p.179). Rebecca Arnold (2007, p.121-123) posits that town and country wear was influenced by British men’s tailoring traditions. Originally designed for English ‘aristocratic’ sports, such as shooting and fishing, these garments were regarded as versatile, suitable for travel, and ‘smart enough’ for city wear, widely promoted as a means to ensure that a woman was appropriately dressed for all occasions. Overall, ‘town and country’ clothing suggested flexible attire suitable to the lives of middle-class women, who were Renee Shaw’s target market. ‘Town and Country’ clothing undeniably carried class-based connotations. Fashion was one of the key signifiers through which British people made class distinctions in this period. I argue that using the term ‘town and country’ in the 1940s and 1950s was what Katherine Appleford (2011, p.49) describes as a ‘euphemism for middle-class respectability.’ The ‘town and country’ signage was removed around the time that Renee Shaw expanded to three retail units in 1960. This certainly reflects the changing fashion preferences of the early 1960s, as many ready-to-wear brands began shifting their production focus away from the heavier tweeds and woollens that might be associated with ‘country’ clothing. For instance, Frederick Starke noted in 1960 that he was increasingly selling garments made from lighter-weight fabrics (*Women’s Wear Daily,* 1960, p.18).

While Irene’s shops targeted a ‘middle-class’ customer base, it is simplistic to assume that customers were exclusively middle-class. Discussing the British ready-to-wear brand Horrockses, Christine Boydell indicates that the price of garments would suggest that the ‘typical purchaser was a reasonably well-off middle-class woman’, yet interviews with women who had owned Horrockses dresses indicate that whilst some were well off, many others had to ‘scrimp and save’ to buy one (2010, p.159-161). The same can be seen with Renee Shaw, the boutique offering options for customers for whom the garments stocked may have typically been beyond their means. Regular advertisements appeared for budget accounts, allowing customers to purchase on credit (*Croydon Times,* 1958, p.8) and the shop also had occasional sales. As one customer remembered: ‘It was too expensive for me but they did have sales and Ms Shaw would do lay by so I was able to buy the odd thing. And we had lots of chats - she was very kind to me as an impoverished young mum who liked fashion’ (*Sutton and Cheam History*, 2016 and 2018).

# In the 1950s and 1960s Renee Shaw stocked a wide range of garments, from daywear to eveningwear, with some wedding dresses offered too. The products stocked can be traced through the many advertisements placed by the store in local newspapers across Surrey and the southern edge of Greater London and the stockist lists in leading fashion magazines. Garments sold at Renee Shaw were primarily made in Britain or Ireland and produced by brands with headquarters in London’s West End. Some American and French garments were also stocked at Renee Shaw, although these were less prevalent than the British-produced garments (see, for example, *Croydon Times*, 1959, p.8). To provide just one example of the wide variety of stock offered, a 1958 advertisement (C*roydon Times*, p.8) for the boutique suggested, ‘choose your spring and summer clothes from the largest selection of fashions under one roof […] Norman Hartnell, Susan Small, Brenner Sports, Sambo Fashions and other leading advertised merchandise’. The brands represented here are a broad mix – Sambo Fashions manufactured relatively low-price ready-to-wear garments. In contrast, Brenner Sports was a wholesale couture brand, producing expensive ready-to-wear, often basing their designs on French and Italian haute couture.

Advertisements and editorials highlight the wide age demographic catered to by Renee Shaw from the early 1960s. Suggestive of its older clientele, the boutique was featured as a stockist for a navy blue silk dress and jacket with a box-pleated skirt by Julian Rose, priced at £41 5s 6d, in a special ‘Mother of the Bride’ feature in *The Tatler and Bystander* (1962, p. 745). However, at the other end of the spectrum, it is equally evident that Renee Shaw also appealed to teenage consumers. Just a month before the *Tatler* editorial, Renee Shaw was mentioned as a stockist in a *Harper’s Bazaar* ‘Young Outlook’ (1962, pp. 90-95) feature, which was specifically aimed at teenage shoppers. In this piece, Renee Shaw is listed as a stockist for a midriff-exposing two-piece outfit comprising fuchsia pink trousers and a cropped sleeveless blouse in sunset hues of pink and orange by Sambo Fashions, priced at 6 guineas. These editorial features further indicate the broad and comprehensive range of garment prices available at Renee Shaw.

Customer memories also corroborate the varied garments sold. One suggested, ‘My mother bought a lovely dress at Renee Shaw to wear at my wedding in 1959’‬ (*Sutton and Cheam History*, 2018), while another wrote, ‘I loved Renee Shaw and bought a lot of clothes there when I was in my teens, especially Dollyrocker dresses’ (*Sutton and Cheam History*, 2016 and 2018). The growth of the teenage consumer was profoundly significant for fashion retailing in Britain after World War II. Illustrative of their importance, teenage girls were reported to have bought almost half of the total women's outerwear sold in 1967, disproportionately to their share in the population (Majima 2008, p.504) These consumers sought new types of garments and fresh retail establishments to purchase them from. Renee Shaw tapped into this demand while still catering to a broader customer demographic. Davison and Currie (1994, p.84), in their reminiscences of Surrey life in the 1960s, suggested:

Renee Shaw was a renegade in a High Street stodgy with outfitters and ladies’ wear retailers. It was a microcosm of what was going on in the King’s Road complete with music, eye-catching windows and assistants wearing what horrified elderly ladies looking on at the door described as pelmets round their bottoms.

This description is perhaps surprising, given the ‘Mother of the Bride’ clothes that were also stocked at Renee Shaw. In many ways, by the early 1960s, Renee Shaw’s stock represents the ‘marriage of tradition and modernity,’ which Georgiou (2014, p.179) notes was so prevalent in the twentieth-century suburb. However, it is striking that the clothes reminiscent of the fashionable zeitgeist are the ones best remembered. The comparison to ‘King’s Road’ fashion is also notable. Here, the authors effectively qualified the fashionability of Renee Shaw by comparing it to London boutiques. In the 1960s, ‘London’ carried a strong cultural capital of its own and suburban fashion stores like Renee Shaw tapped into this.

By 1960, Renee Shaw had expanded to encompass three fairly sizeable retail units. The store’s large footprint allowed for the effective establishment of mini boutiques within the shop, enabling the business to more directly target the young consumer. In 1960, an advertisement was placed in the *Croydon Times* (p.11) seeking a ‘junior sales [assistant] for a ‘new young idea’ fashion house in Sutton, Surrey.’ The advertisement provided only a phone number rather than the shop’s name, but this was Renee Shaw. The archetypal boutique owner of the 1960s was young and fashionable, distinctly different to the madam shop owner, whom Fiona McCarthy (1965, quoted in Halbert 2022, p.103) described as ‘bridge-playing matrons with fat Pekineses’. However, shops like Renee Shaw disrupt these archetypes to an extent. Thanks to the clothes stocked, the atmosphere, the staff employed and their marketing, the store clearly presented an image to some that conveyed luxury, and to others implied edginess.

**Sam Sherman and Renee Shaw**

It is striking that in both editorials mentioning Renee Shaw and in advertisements for the shop, garments manufactured by Irene’s second husband, Sam Sherman (they married in 1941) appear more often than any other manufacturer. While it is beyond the scope of this article to thoroughly explore Sam’s fashion business, it is vital to provide some information as it offers context for Irene’s business. In addition to stocking his garments, between 1960 and 1978, Irene served as a non-executive director of Samuel Sherman Ltd., and two of her siblings were employed by the business (*Samuel Sherman PLC.,* 1978).

Sam was born in 1910 in Soho, London, to Davis and Rebecca Sherman, Jewish immigrants from the Russian Empire (‘Household of Davis Sherman’, 1921). During the 1910s and 1920s, the Sherman family ran a fashion manufacturing and retail business in London and Kent, called ‘Le Petit Magasin’ (see: *Thanet Advertiser,* 1925, p.2). Sam followed in his parents’ footsteps, beginning his career with Adrian Mann around 1928. In the 1930s, he joined Blanes, remaining with the company until 1947. Blanes would later become one of his direct competitors. In 1947, Sam established his own fashion manufacturing business, Samuel Sherman Ltd. The company initially employed just six staff members, with Sam acting as both director and head designer. Over the next twenty years, the business expanded significantly so by 1969, it had approximately 160 staff (*Ambassador,* 1969, pp.58-74). The majority of garments were produced in Peckham, London, between 1947 and around 1960 at 194-196 Old Kent Road, before moving to a larger, purpose-built factory at 506-510 Old Kent Road in around 1960 (*Samuel Sherman PLC.*, 1947-1991).

Sam initially produced garments under the now highly controversial brand name Sambo Fashions. Production focused on affordably priced cottons for young, smart women, and most of the exuberant fabric designs were exclusive to the brand. By the 1960s, Sam operated several different fashion brands under the umbrella of Samuel Sherman, catering to a broad customer base, from inexpensive ready-to-wear aimed at a teenage market to relatively costly tailored pieces. Brands included: Sambo Fashions, Dollyrockers, Super Dolls, Dolly Long Legs, Concept, Clothes by Samuel Sherman, Mr Sherman of London, Sherman Field, and Colin Glascoe. Reflecting his prominent position in the ready-to-wear sector, Sam received various prestigious accolades from the fashion industry, including *The Ambassador* Award for achievement in 1961 and the Textile Trade Society’s Golden Nibs Award in 1968 (*Ambassador,* 1969, pp.58-74).

Sam and Irene’s businesses had a symbiotic relationship and advertisements for Renee Shaw frequently featured garments from Sambo Fashions (see, for example, *Croydon Times,* 1953, p.3). This close connection with a manufacturing business provided Irene with intriguing opportunities, such as acquiring exclusive versions of particular garments for the store or hosting special parades to showcase new clothes. On several occasions, live models were seen in Renee Shaw’s windows wearing Sambo Fashions garments (see: *Sutton Times*, 1954, p.4). Furthermore, it is conceivable that Renee Shaw served as a testing ground for garments, allowing new styles and brands to be tried out before a wider release, with the retail environment facilitating fast feedback on new designs (Figure 4).

**The end of Renee Shaw**

Renee Shaw closed in 1988 and was replaced by a Garfunkel’s restaurant (see: *The Thomson Local Directory*, 1988-1989 and *British Telecom Telephone Directory*, August 1988)**.** Irene moved to the United States in the 1980s, and it is unclear who owned and operated Renee Shaw during the last few years of its existence. Regardless,this means the shop survived for over forty years on Sutton High Street. When one considers the changes in fashion manufacturing and retail broadly during this period, this is quite remarkable. The closure of Renee Shaw in the 1980s reflected transformations occurring within the fashion market at large. Perhaps most significantly, many of the brands sold at Renee Shaw between the 1940s and 1970s had gone out of business by the 1980s. There were various contributing factors, notably British fashion manufacturing was in steep decline owing to rising manufacturing costs. Some surviving businesses moved garment manufacture overseas in an attempt to cut costs and increase profits. However, many of these brands had built their marketing around the ‘London’ or ‘British’ nature of their brand and moving production overseas diluted the ‘Britishness’ of the garments that they produced (See: Bearne, 2018).

The closure of the business in the 1980s is unsurprising, given the dramatically different retail landscape that had emerged by that time. As Colin Jones and Nicola Livingstone argue (2018, p. 49), from the 1970s onwards, the car began to influence British retailing and the manner in which people shopped; this shift extended beyond the purchase of fashion yet remains undeniably pertinent here. Consumers increasingly moved away from high streets, engaging more with new out-of-town retail formats, particularly retail parks. As they have noted, such out-of-town businesses attracted numerous national chains away from town shopping centres, diminishing the high street’s significance. This transformation paralleled the declining status of the department store—the traditional ‘anchor’ of the high street. The changes in 1980s Sutton can be traced through telephone directories, where an increasing number of women’s fashion chains appeared alongside a decline in independent fashion boutiques. For instance, the Thomson directory for 1987-1988 (the second-to-last directory in which Renee Shaw appears) listed the following chains on the High Street: Warehouse (52 High Street), Etam (104 High Street), Chelsea Girl (133 High Street), Richard Shops (145 High Street), Jean Jeanie (151 High Street), and Next (155 High Street). The 1980s marked the onset of a different retail experience, one that the New Economics Foundation has referred to as ‘a bland and cloned experience from street to street’ (Carmona 2022, p. 26).

**Conclusion**

The history of independent fashion shops is a hitherto under-researched area, in part because of the lack of surviving primary sources relating to these businesses. However it is valuable to try and uncover the history of such ventures. This paper has primarily explored the history of one woman’s suburban fashion businesses, showing how important family networks were in their establishment and success.

Suburbs are typically not represented in fashion history although they are deserving of greater recognition. Studying the histories of independent retailers in the suburbs can help us to break free from stereotyped tropes of the twentieth-century experience of the suburb. The relationship between the suburban fashion store and London more broadly as a fashion city has been explored here. On a symbolic level, this relationship allowed suburban boutiques to cultivate some of the ‘luxury’, ‘glamour’ or even, as time went on into the 1960s, the ‘edginess’ associated with the city- using their proximity to London or their ‘London’ merchandise as a marketing tool. But also, on a more practical level, the geographical proximity of the London suburbs would have made nurturing links with London-based manufacturers more straightforward and offered the opportunity to visit central London boutiques for inspiration.

As Bide (2020, p.50) indicates suburbs have disparagingly been seen as ‘homogenous’, yet, unquestionably in the period Renee Shaw was open for business, places like Sutton High Street were diverse, filled with a plethora of stores catering to different people. Independent fashion shops had an important role in shaping the identity of the suburb with their often-outward facing nature, for example, Renee Shaw was named in the pages of leading national magazines and newspapers, adding a degree of personality and difference to the suburb. As an independent store, Renee Shaw offered something arguably unique in Sutton. Whilst it stocked garments that could be bought elsewhere, what was significant was the atmosphere of shopping there, the retail ‘experience’, including personalised service, imaginative window displays and desirable, perhaps even aspirational, clothing. Looking at the history of Sutton more broadly it is important to tell this story because in 2011 51-55, High Street became part of *The* *Sutton Town Centre High Street Crossroads* Conservation Area.

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**Figure list**

Figure 1: Ann Harley shopfront, Orpington c. 1934. Ref. 1217/7 John Edwards, Slide 533. Bromley Historic Collections.

A street with buildings and cars

Description automatically generated

Figure 2: Advertisement, *Sutton Advertiser*, 28 March 1946. Courtesy of Sutton Local Studies & Archives and Family History Centre.

A black and white sign with text

Description automatically generated

Figure 3: Editorial feature, *Fashion Trade Weekly*, 11 November 1948. Copy in possession of author.

A black and white photo of a building

Description automatically generated

Figure 4: Sambo Fashions dress in Bourec print cotton, 1954. This dress featured in a *Good Housekeeping* advertisement in March 1954. Author’s Collection.

A pink and yellow striped dress on a mannequin

Description automatically generated

1. Here, I use the term high street to denote a major shopping area. However, all of Irene’s businesses were also on main shopping thoroughfares called ‘High Street’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The city has various names in different languages and consequently appeared differently in documents relating to the family; Vilno, Vilna, Wilna, Wilno and Vilnius are some of the names commonly used. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. She was also known as Bessie and Bashka [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bobbie secured her job at Ralph King through Irene. Despite their different retailing practices, they were friendly with each other. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)