

STYLE IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

FASHION ON THE RATION

JULIE SUMMERS

In Partnership with Imperial War Museums

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

In partnership with IWM
iwm.org.uk

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd
info@macguru.org.uk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays, Bungay, Suffolk

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

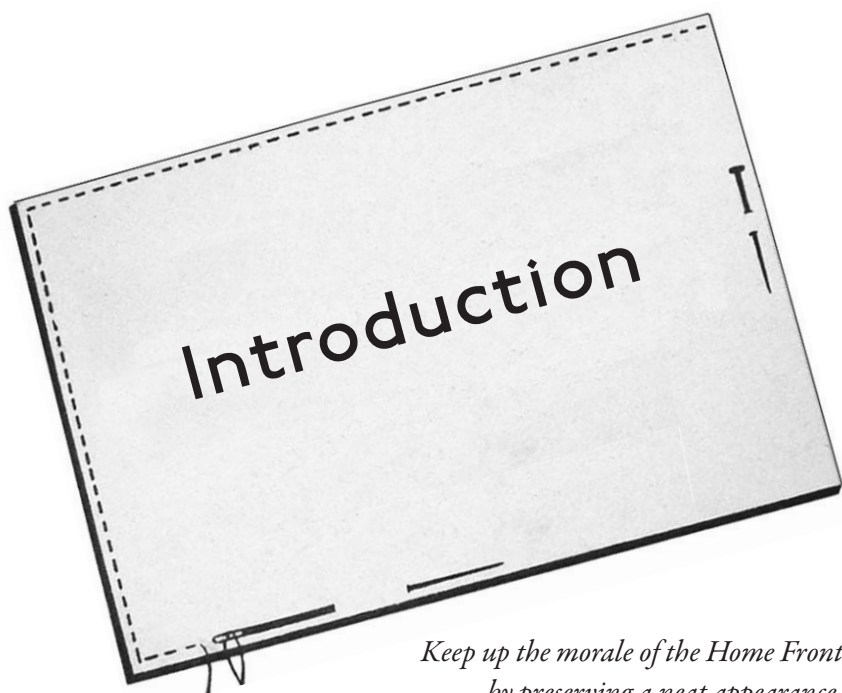
ISBN 978 1 78125 326 7
eISBN 978 1 78283 097 9

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*Keep up the morale of the Home Front
by preserving a neat appearance.*

The Board of Trade, 1940

When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, it was to be total war, a war in which there were no non-combatants. Civilians and the military would both have to face 'the enemy', as the government had warned the public as early as 1932. Stanley Baldwin told the House of Commons: 'I think it is well also for the man in the street to realise that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed ... The bomber will always get through.'¹ For many, especially those who had lived through the First World War over twenty years earlier, this was the worst conceivable nightmare. For others, it was thrilling and terrifying at the same time. A young journalist writing for *Mass Observation* recorded in her diary just four days after the war had broken out: 'My horror of all this war business is qualified by an eagerness to be a unit of it. I feel as if I have been waiting for this all my life and I have just realised it.'²

The Second World War wrought almost incalculable destruction

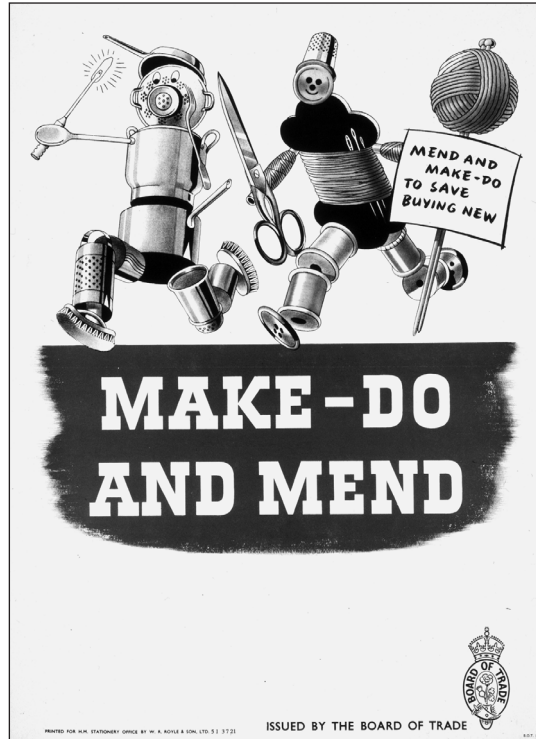
and horror, but it also produced astonishing bravery, great leadership and determination, as well as creativity and inventiveness. And as this was total war, these characteristics were mirrored on the home front as well as on the battlefield. The war accelerated the process, begun in 1914, of moving women 'out of the wings' and into an active role, if not usually into active combat. Only the very young, the sick and the very elderly were passive participants in this war.

At the beginning, the government hoped that it could get away with the minimum amount of social and economic dislocation. The evacuation programme put paid to the first – and the hole in the nation's budget, which only got worse during the early months of the war, put paid to the latter. By the time France fell in June 1940, it was clear to everyone that the country was in for a long war and the government, which had by then already gained considerable control, took ever more steps to manage every minute aspect of people's lives. As the novelist Barbara Cartland grumbled, in 1944 everything was rationed except, possibly, love.

If you ask anyone who lived through the war about clothes rationing, they will almost certainly tell you about coupons, parachute silk, utility clothing, Make-Do and Mend and perhaps Mrs Sew and Sew. Words such as drab, grey and threadbare are often applied to wartime clothing. Certainly, evacuee children who returned from abroad after the war were shocked by the absence of colour after the bright shades they had been used to in Canada, Australia and the United States. How we see clothing in wartime Britain is shaped by our knowledge in hindsight of the whole war and the years of austerity that followed it. Some people believed that the fashion industry stagnated during the war; others claim that it carried on creatively. The truth is somewhere in between. Far from being a story of drabness and misery, it is a story of colour, inventiveness and determination to carry on regardless of the shortages and constraints of the coupon culture.

The aim of this book is to take an overview of clothing and fashion during the Second World War in Britain. There was a marked difference then, as there is now, between haute couture and what the man or woman on the street wore. Early in the war, this gap narrowed and the style of

Introduction



One of a number of posters injecting a sense of urgency into the Make-Do and Mend campaign.

everyday clothing changed and simplified, reflecting the desire to avoid wanton extravagance and frippery while men were away in the forces, fighting for the country's freedom. I will look, too, at the consequences of having over 15 million Britons wearing uniform of one kind or another, and tease out the rationale and bureaucracy behind clothes rationing. Many myths have grown up around wartime clothing, from parachute silk underwear to Make-Do and Mend, obscuring some fascinating details of the real story, and I will examine these too.

While women's fashion changed twice a year, men's suits and clothing tended to be mass produced and so did not go out of fashion so quickly. Thus it is the focus on the changing face of women's fashion that this book

will concentrate on, though the austerity measures brought into play in 1942 had a major impact on the length of men's socks and the abolition of turn-ups on men's trousers, which caused uproar. Not everyone in Britain sought to wear the latest fashion all the time: for some it was a matter of choice or practicality; while for others it was simply that fashionable clothes were beyond their budget. Some had well-stocked wardrobes, others had plenty of dressmaking material, while many struggled on a meagre supply of pre-war clothing and what they could get with coupons. All these factors are relevant in illustrating how ordinary people dressed on and off coupon during the Second World War in Britain and how the fashion industry changed to reflect the different moods in the country over the course of the war.

During the early years of the war, the fashion houses continued to produce spring and autumn shows, and sometimes even a mid-season range would appear. In February 1940, the Paris couturiers presented their spring collections, which the London fashion editors quickly absorbed and recycled with comment for their readership. The emphasis was on coloured accessories such as scarves and hats, as well as nails and lipstick, to complement the grey-green, pinks and delicate blues of the early year. Tweeds were much in vogue and the cut of the two-piece costume for women and the suit for men owed much to the military uniform which was by then seen everywhere. *Vogue* featured 'Rhavi's tweed coat ... tailored on guardsman lines, with spanking gold buttons. They make it in coral, too (more practical as a housecoat). Price 20 gns' (approximately £1,100 in 2014).³ Paris still produced fashion into the summer of 1940 but their ability to export ended after the occupation of France.

Later on in the war, fashion became constrained by shortages of materials, and designers simply had to work with what was available. In 1989, Maggie Wood published a slim volume to accompany an exhibition on wartime clothing at the Warwickshire Museum. The book, entitled *We Wore What We'd Got*, offers a revealing and highly entertaining snapshot of women's fashion away from the high street and the pages of *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*. Like many, Wood had expected to find an overall picture of women 'usually in a queue – dressed in severely tailored coats, with

heads bound in turbans. The impression ... of a nation of women in a kind of civilian uniform.⁴ Yet she was astonished and impressed by the patience and imagination of women determined to maintain their individuality: 'they created clothes, shoes and accessories from the most unlikely of materials, and "customized" plain utility dresses with embroidery, paint and home-made trimmings. Such garments were not "high fashion", and not always very elegant, but they ensured that beneath the austere functional coats and jackets some women were uniquely clad.'⁵

For the poorest members of society, clothes rationing actually had a beneficial aspect in that the quality of clothes they could purchase increased significantly after utility cloth and clothing was introduced. This is one of the lasting legacies of rationing for mass market clothing. It was always the government's intention that good quality materials would be used to make clothes that would be sold at prices that could be afforded by all. For the wealthy, the impact of rationing was barely felt. Far more significant for them was the reduction of formality, the demise of the evening dress and 'occasion-based garments' so loved by *Vogue* and the other fashion magazines, though that demise had already been foreseen by editors before the war. It was the men, women and children sandwiched in the middle who were most affected by clothes rationing and the coupon culture of the 1940s.

I have been involved in researching the Second World War for the best part of fifteen years and fashion and clothing are a fascinating aspect of the social history of that era. It was a time of uniformity on the one hand and individual expression on the other. What people wore and how they felt about it – whether smart in battle dress or tatty in patched and darned clothes – said much about the spirit of the time.

Some of the most revealing and enticing details are found in personal documents and I have made use of the letters, diaries and archive notes of a number of men and women who kept records of their wartime experiences. The first is Bill Fagg, who worked at the Board of Trade from 1940 until the end of the war. At the age of just twenty-seven, he was in charge of utility clothing for men's outerwear, a daunting responsibility. His friends would tease him about his role and in March 1942 one of them,

Edmund Rolfe, wrote: 'My *Daily Express* warns me of all sorts of new sartorial developments for the future. I suppose the Board of Trade has to be kept going somehow.'⁶

Florence Hyatt, known as Flo, was a typist at Oughborough House in Godstone, working for the Cereals Import Committee. She had family in America who would periodically send her clothes, and she responded with long letters telling them all the latest war news. Fifty years after the war, she settled down to turn the surviving letters into a book. 'Panic! I'll never do it!' she wrote in the Introduction to her unpublished book. 'Am I trying to convince myself that these letters will be of interest years after the events took place to a generation who did not experience them? I think: was it really like that? Did that happen?' Flo died before finishing the edits but they were completed by her niece, Janice Hyatt, and comprise nearly 300,000 words. They are a priceless record.

At the outbreak of war, Eileen Gurney was married with a baby boy. Her husband John was away from autumn 1940 and her letters to him are full of details about dressing herself, baby Richard and later her daughter Stella. They offer a vivid snapshot of life in London for a young mother during the war and of the frustrations of day-to-day life. She wrote to John: 'I have hundreds of wet nappies on the line so I am just praying the rain will hold off till they dry. I wage an eternal war against the weather, trying to get the washing dry each day. At the moment the weather is definitely winning.'⁷

Gladys Mason's diaries tell the war story of a young woman who married in October 1939 in a wedding costume made by her mother in just four days. Her observations are matter of fact and sometimes almost comically juxtaposed with the enormity of events in Europe. On the day the war broke out, she wrote: 'Lovely day. Germany given until 11 a.m. today to withdraw troops. Refused, so we declared war on her. Prime Minister spoke at 11.15. Air raid warning at 11.30 but false alarm. France at war at 5 p.m. Felt better today. Frank came. Had terrible thunderstorm in the night.'⁸ The dress and the diaries are in the collection of Gladys' daughter, Barbara Hall, and they have never been published.

Zelma Katin was a tram conductress in Sheffield during the second

half of the war and her autobiography gives wonderful detail of life in uniform for a middle-aged woman. Of the interview day she wrote: 'Women, even as strangers, tell each other far more of their private lives than men divulge to their own sex, so it was not long before we knew that among us were three housewives, a tailoress, the manageress of a food shop ... a typist, an ex-university student and a music-shop assistant. We were not nervous. On the contrary I liked the philosophical way in which everyone accepted the situation.'⁹

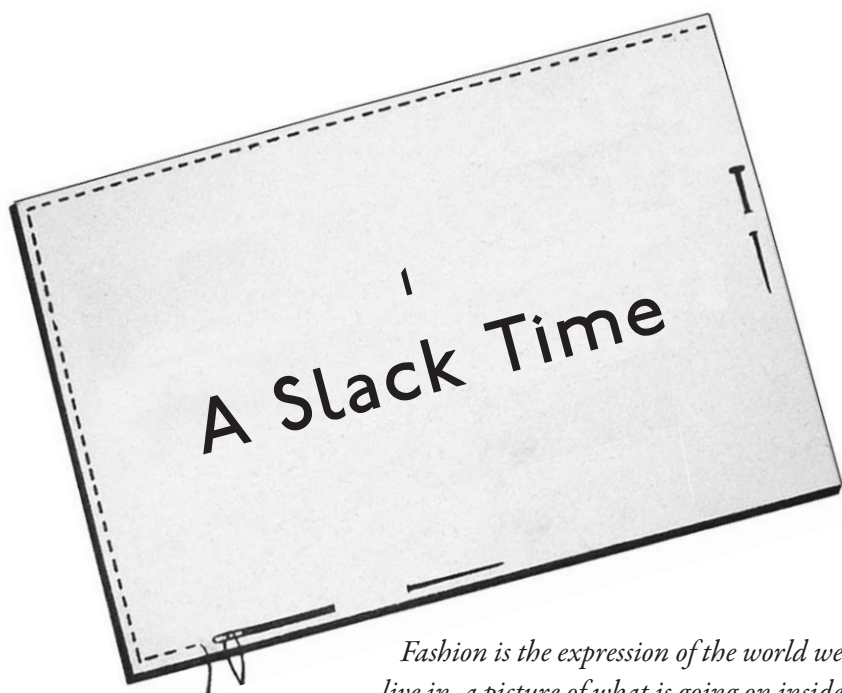
May Smith was a schoolteacher in Derbyshire and wrote a diary that was published under the title *These Wonderful Rumours!* One of her preoccupations during the war was shopping for coats and dresses. She was one of a new class of post-First World War women whose families had moved out of the cities to suburban Britain. They had jobs and therefore money to spend in the new chain stores which had sprung up on the high streets throughout the country.

The final voice is that of Audrey Withers, the wartime editor of *Vogue*, and my grandfather's cousin. She was one of the most powerful and influential women in British fashion and was responsible, with other senior editors of women's magazines, for disseminating the government's thinking on clothes rationing and helping to shape ideas about design, fashion and hairstyles. She wrote in her autobiography, 'Women's magazines had a special place in government thinking during the war because, with men in the forces, women carried the whole responsibility of family life; and the way to catch women's attention was through the pages of magazines.'¹⁰

I have set out to cover all aspects of wartime wardrobes from haute couture to flourbag shirts and parachute silk undies. The story of *Fashion on the Ration* is one of inventiveness and creativity, determination and stoicism, all laced with rich humour. We will follow the chronology of the war by looking first at the clothes and wardrobes of the 1930s, through uniform and functional fashion, to rationing, utility and the concept of beauty as a form of national duty. The final chapter takes a glimpse of the New Look which swept through fashion in 1947 and finally blew away the cobwebs of austerity in Britain in the early 1950s. When all is said and

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done, the world of fashion judged the war years of utility and austerity to have been a positive time for British design, even if the collective memory tends towards recollections of dreary Make-Do and Mend. I hope this book will present both sides of the story.



Fashion is the expression of the world we live in, a picture of what is going on inside our minds as well as outside in historic fact.

Alison Settle, 1937

At the beginning of the twentieth century, most women either made their own clothes or had them made up. Some, who could afford it, had them designed *and* made, while a lucky few had their own dress-makers on their staff. The 'well-bred, well-off' British woman understood only too well the importance of correct dress, as opposed to fashion, for the right occasion. Britain in the late 1930s was a country deeply divided by tradition and class. The decade had been scarred by mass unemployment and poverty, while the affluent seemed to grow ever richer. The gulf between the unemployed of Jarrow and the smart set of Mayfair was immense, but in between was the burgeoning middle class that had moved into newly-built suburban Britain and shopped on the high street for Paris fashion look-alikes. The desire to buy and wear beautiful clothes seems never to have been stronger.

In 1939, what you wore still said a great deal about who you were. It

defined what class you came from and was a powerful reflection of status. Men and women in the highest tiers of society changed several times a day and always for dinner. The *Vogue* pattern book for June–July of that year defined five categories of clothing: ‘For Town, Active Sports, For Afternoon, For Evening, Spectator Sports’. Although for some time clothes had been designed with greater flexibility so that the wearer could go between town and country without having to change constantly, dinner jackets and dresses were still de rigueur for the evening. While it was acceptable to look business-like and efficient during the day, the image of the woman in the evening as ‘mysterious, alluring, witty, veiled, gloved, corseted and even button-booted as any romantic, fairytale queen’¹ persisted.

By contrast, the poorest town and city dwellers might have only one set of clothes, which meant they could not go out on washday and their children were often lacking adequate footwear to attend school in the winter. Their plight was largely invisible and it was only with the onset of the war and the evacuation scheme that the government put in place in 1939 that the conditions of the poorest section of the population came to the wider public’s attention.

In the middle class, men wore suits and women wore skirts, stockings, hats and gloves to go to work, to go shopping or to attend church. Wardrobes changed with the season. Winter clothes were put away when the warm weather set in and summer dresses and shoes were given a brief few months in rain or shine. According to a Mass Observation survey, conducted in 1941, the average wardrobe of a middle-class woman consisted of seven dresses, two or three ‘costumes’ or two-piece suits, a similar number of skirts, three overcoats, one mackintosh and five or six pairs of shoes, split between the seasons; while a poor woman might have only three dresses, one skirt, one or two overcoats and one or two pairs of shoes. A middle-class man might have three suits, two overcoats and four pairs of shoes; whereas a poor man was likely only to have one suit, one overcoat and a pair of shoes or clogs. Iris Jones Simantel’s family belonged in the latter category: ‘Mum, as I recall, had two dresses, both of which Dad had made for her. One was made out of an old curtain and the other cut down from someone else’s very large cast-off. He made hats out of an