

INTRODUCTION

In 1835, the editor of the *Hereford Journal* received a letter railing against the spending habits of female servants, particularly their clothing purchases, and the downward spiral of moral decline that this led them into:

All articles of consumption among female servants in particular are nearly fifty per cent cheaper than during the war ... [and there is an] extraordinary highness of wages [for female servants] ... there are few tradesmen or farmers' daughters having no other dependance [*sic*] who think they can afford to put upon their backs clothing to the same amount as an ordinary servant can ... the consequence is that servants are now *eaten out with pride* ... besides, the vanity of mind induced by dress, produces that *fickleness of disposition*¹

The writer's particular grievance seems to be the (in his or her opinion) excessive wages paid to servants. However, the comments echoed much criticism of how working people, especially servants, had dressed above their social station since the seventeenth century.² The fact they were expressed once more in a provincial newspaper shows that such views were still current in the 1830s. However, the debate had shifted slightly. As well as criticizing the blurring of social divisions, the letter pointed out the irresponsible behaviour of the servants and the effect this had on those around them. The letter-writer went on to criticize the Poor Law, suggesting that it offered too much support to the rest of the family, leaving female servants to spend money on their own clothes and enjoy life, instead of looking after their aged parents.³ The focus was on individual consumption of goods, such as clothing, to cultivate sociability outside the home, so neglecting the long-term needs of the whole household.⁴ On the other hand, an absence of consumption of clothing was also seen as a difficult:

Of all the cities in England I travelled through, Hereford seemed the poorest of all. The labourers were ... coarsely clad, and existed in dwellings no better than hovels⁵

Here the problem was blamed on the custom of paying part of the men's wages in cider, leaving no money over to spend on clothing or household goods. Coloured by the author's allegiance to the Temperance Movement, the poor appearance of the labourers shocked the author, as well as their lack of means to better them-

selves. Thus either too much or too little consumption of clothing presented a dilemma for those who sought to remark on the appearance of working-class people. Evidently, such commentators desired a middle way: a respectable, decent appearance for all.

This book will investigate how provincial working-class consumers were supplied with their clothing. It will question whether different supply networks led to a distinct way of dressing for various sections of the working-class population. The availability and nature of retail networks for the working-class consumer will be examined, as will the extent to which they catered exclusively, or even predominantly, for people living in towns. By considering urban, rural and industrial areas, a more accurate analysis of patterns of clothing acquisition across varied geographic regions will be gained. The type of clothing offered for sale to working-class consumers in retail outlets and by itinerant sellers will be discussed. With the end of the French Wars in 1815, there was over-production in the textile industries, meaning that the price fell and more textiles – and therefore clothing – were available at a cheaper price. This book will discuss if this was reflected in the retail development of shops selling working-class clothing, in particular, ready-made clothing. The complexity of supply networks will be considered and how much scope there was for individuals to decide what type of clothing they might purchase and from which network.⁶ The significance of clothing provision via the Old Poor Law and charities in comparison to retailing will then be examined, as will the nature of garments obtained from different sources.

The importance of clothing to the working-class consumer will also be addressed, focussing especially on the extent to which they changed their clothing in accordance with fashion. The acquisition of decent and respectable clothing, as seemingly desired by social commentators, will be discussed in the context of working-class fashions. By examining a wide range of sub divisions in the working-class population, including both young and old, the ‘poor’ and those with employment and apprenticeships, male and female, rural and urban, a more nuanced approach into how people acquired and regarded their clothing will be achieved. The research is based on the analysis of a wide range of sources derived from different locations, and takes into account economic and social position, geography and stage in the life-cycle, shedding new light onto this neglected area of consumer and retailing history.

The Working-Class Consumer

The definition of the ‘working class’ is a ‘most contested category’, and any attempt to use it as a framework for discussion is fraught with complexities and pitfalls.⁷ Penelope Corfield details descriptions used by eighteenth-century

commentators, which tried to define both an economic role as well as collective status, including: 'lower class', 'working people', 'labouring class' and 'working class', which was in use by the early nineteenth century.⁸ Anna Clark sees the first half of the nineteenth century as a period of profound change in the way that society was classified. She argues that it was not until the 1830s and the important political changes of the decade, for example the Reform Act, that 'middle class' developed as a definition, contrasted with the negative connotations of 'working class', disenfranchised from the political process.⁹

This book does not seek to resolve the debate about class definition, but uses 'working-class' pragmatically, as a descriptive term for the majority of the population, at some estimates numbering around 86 per cent of the total.¹⁰ In the geographical area covered by this book, lower middle-class occupations such as farmers, millers, clergy, doctors and lawyers, were often the local elite. They hired servants and workers and acted as overseers, forming arguably a binary class system rather than the three-tier system commonly recognized, but still one in which 'working-class' makes descriptive sense.¹¹

The two main areas for the study of consumption have been the early modern period with the 'birth' of the consumer society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the rise of mass consumption in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹² Certainly by the late nineteenth century, class, and the complexity of strata within a particular class, were to a degree determined by material wealth and the type of consumerism it was therefore possible to engage with.¹³ Indeed, historians have recently argued that the 'consumer society' has now superseded class-bound society, the act of consumption defining social standing.¹⁴ This book will not enter the debate surrounding consumerism and the consumer society, but will instead focus on what working-class people could buy and why they might acquire clothes in various ways.

Retailing Clothing 1800–50

In terms of retailing history, the first half of the nineteenth century has received less attention than either the long eighteenth century or the post-1850 period.¹⁵ The majority of research into clothes retailing in particular, has centred on urban areas, starting from the second half of the nineteenth century. Those who have considered the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have examined higher status shops that sold apparel to the upper and middle classes or focused on shops in the main streets of fashionable provincial towns.¹⁶ Retail historians used to assume that there was little retailing of new clothing for the working-class consumer before the late nineteenth century.¹⁷

The work of Beverly Lemire and John Styles has been invaluable in changing perceptions about non-elite dress in the eighteenth century. Both have pub-

lished seminal work linking the rise of consumerism in the lower classes to the availability of new textile products, namely the rise of the Manchester cotton industry, allied to a strong second-hand market in clothing.¹⁸ They have also studied the distribution of ready-made clothing and the way it was sold in large cities.¹⁹ However, little work has been carried out on retailing lower-status clothing to the working-class consumer, especially in rural and semi-rural settings.²⁰ Indeed, knowledge about daily practices of buying and selling in general, is still superficial.²¹ There is also an assumption that consumers in rural areas did not have access to slop shops and pawnshops, there being a strong divide between the metropolis along with northern industrial cities, and other areas, in the way low-status clothing was acquired.²² For Styles, only large towns could provide a level of demand necessary to justify carrying large stocks of ready-made clothing, either new or second-hand. In the late eighteenth century, he sees clothes dealers as 'overwhelmingly urban'.²³ This book will consider the situation during the first half of the nineteenth century within the regional context of Herefordshire and Worcestershire, by comparing rural and urban areas.

In 1970, David Alexander suggested that there was a rapid expansion in the numbers of shops in the period immediately prior to 1850.²⁴ However, more recently, researchers have questioned Alexander's claims, contending that there were steadily increasing numbers of shops over a much longer period. Shops gradually adopted competitive devices such as window dressing, advertising and price display and became the predominant means by which durable goods were sold to the public.²⁵ Nancy Cox's survey of retailing in the eighteenth century up until 1820 has firmly established the origins of many of these 'nineteenth century' retailing practices in the previous century.²⁶ Researchers have also now recognized that 'modern' developments in shops and retailing, such as 'ready money', the use of sales and the exchange of unsatisfactory goods, were in existence by the eighteenth century.²⁷ How far this retail modernity reached, outside larger towns and cities, is a matter of debate. Advertisements, for example, were usually formulaic notices suitable for polite society and new 'novel' goods were available only from traditional and established shops for instance, grocers and drapers. Jon Stobart has pointed out that the early nineteenth century saw a considerable growth in the numbers of shops and also in retail innovations, particularly in the drapery sector.²⁸ This book will investigate if these innovations were present in a provincial context and the effect that they had on the clothing available for purchase by low-status consumers.²⁹

The study of ready-made clothing is one of the most important ways of looking at retail change for the working-class population during this era.³⁰ The ready-made clothing seller was essentially a middleman, much like drapers and grocers, although some also manufactured garments. Indeed, until the mid-eighteenth century, those supplying ready-made outerwear were some-

times called shopkeeping tailors, along with the descriptive 'salesmen tailors', in contrast to the 'craft' tailors. Their enthusiastic selling techniques and Sunday opening in the city of London were noted by contemporaries in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³¹ By the seventeenth century, salesmen were also associated with the second-hand clothing trade, making identification of new ready-made clothing more difficult.³² Boundaries between the first and second-hand clothes markets retailed through shops were thus blurred and flexible. Professional nomenclature was used loosely, with new and old displayed together. Where clothes came from, neither identified as new or second-hand, was possibly not as important to a buyer as the price, quality and look of a specific garment that they wanted to purchase.³³ Whereas historians have examined the development of the ready-made clothing trade in terms of the expansion of the mass market, and ultimately mass manufacture by the later nineteenth century, it was also of fundamental importance in the development of clothes retailing. The availability of ready-made clothing allowed non-specialists, general traders, to sell clothing. How successful these sales were and where ready-made clothing sellers were located will be discussed in Chapter 1. The main themes and debates between historians surrounding ready-made clothing in the period before 1850 will be set out in the following section in order to analyse how the provincial trade fits into this framework.

The Manufacture of Ready-Made Clothing Pre-1850

Ready-made clothing has long been associated with low-status clothing. There has been an extensive debate between historians about when ready-made clothing originated and it now seems certain that some ready-made garments were manufactured centuries before the era of factory production and machine-made clothing in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Accounts of ready-made clothing have been found from at least as early as the sixteenth century.³⁴ Nevertheless, care should be taken in defining what is meant by 'ready-made' clothing. Accessories such as hats, stockings and gloves were usually ready-made by at least the seventeenth century, but there is less evidence for the larger items of clothing such as gowns or coats.³⁵ Continental Europe often had strict guild controls on manufacturing ready-made clothing. In 1535, in Nuremberg, Germany, tailors were prohibited from making up new clothing to have in stock, suggesting that some had already tried to produce ready-made clothing.³⁶ As Harald Deceulaer has found in Antwerp and the Southern Low Countries, there was already a buoyant ready-made clothes trade there during the seventeenth century. Where guild control was flexible, as in Antwerp, commercial freedom allowed entrepreneur tailors to produce ready-made clothing for their stocks.³⁷ Guild control in England was less effective by the seventeenth

century, although the ready-made clothing trade still came into conflict with the Tailors' Guild and continued to do so until the nineteenth century, as will be discussed in Chapter 2.³⁸

Certainly, where clothing was given or purchased for a number of people at the same time, charity clothing and military and naval clothing being the most obvious examples, making up those garments before purchase appears to have been common since at least the sixteenth century.³⁹ As noted by Janet Arnold, this type of ready-made clothing manufacture entailed little financial risk as the contract was already negotiated and in the case of liveries or charity clothing, they were paid for, for example, by the monarch or nobleman who had ordered them, albeit perhaps with a delay.⁴⁰

From the late sixteenth century onwards, the idea of uniform for soldiers, and the standardization of that uniform, was taken up by European armies.⁴¹ Wars then presented huge opportunities for nascent clothing manufacturers as thousands of garments were required which could not be supplied through existing stocks. Rules on materials and shapes, along with details negotiated in the contract, provided a minimum standard of quality, standardized items and competitive prices.⁴² For instance, the ready-made trade received a boost with orders for military uniforms during the English Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century and again with the Nine Years War and War of the Spanish Succession in the 1690s and 1700s.⁴³ During the same period, ready-made clothing was increasingly required for colonial settlement and also the navy.⁴⁴ The clothing required for seamen is the origin of 'slop' clothing, 'slop' eventually becoming a term meaning a cheap, ready-made garment. The 'ratings', ordinary sailors, did not have an official uniform until 1857. Ready-made clothes were bought before departure and some were kept on board in the slop chest to be purchased under supervision of the purser during the voyage.⁴⁵ Despite a reputation for poor quality, Amy Miller has detailed how slops were checked before they were accepted on a ship, and bales that contained slops of an inferior quality were rejected and ultimately suppliers' contracts revoked.⁴⁶ Thus the manufacturers who took on such contracts had to oversee a complex process of production, distribution and ultimately payment.

By the late seventeenth century, as Lemire has detailed in her groundbreaking work about the cotton industry, large quantities of ready-made shirts of various qualities, were being imported into England by the East India Company.⁴⁷ From the second half of the seventeenth century, references in advertising to ready-made staples became common: coats (petticoats), banyans (a loose gown), cardinals (red cloaks). These were purchased by all social classes from 'warehouses', a new type of shop where stock was sold relatively cheaply for cash, giving the retailer a quick turnover. For example, Samuel Pepys notes purchasing a banyan, a loose fitting informal Indian morning gown, in his diaries.⁴⁸ As Aileen

Ribeiro has pointed out, the concentration on everyday ready-made clothing has led historians to overlook the fact that specialist garments, for example, legal and livery robes, clerical dress, theatrical and masque costumes, as well as leather breeches, were also ready-made.⁴⁹ Tailors and drapers were thus making up clothing speculatively, putting money into a garment which they made, or got made up, in the hope that they would be able to sell it to a customer at some point in the future.⁵⁰ Although large contracts for organizations such as the army and navy continued, there was also the recognition that there was a wider market for sales to the general public. Indeed, Lemire suggests that it was government self-interest, as the largest single customer for ready-made clothing for the army and navy, which meant they did not back the tailors' campaign against ready-made clothes makers in 1702, leaving such retailers to flourish during the eighteenth century.⁵¹

Cloaks, shirts and petticoats were not fitted or could be gathered in by the wearer to fit the body. They could be made in a size to fit all and therefore represented the lowest risk to make up to sell as ready-made. They would be likely to find a willing purchaser as sizing and fitting could be accomplished by the buyers themselves. When sizing was introduced into the ready-made trade for garments which did need a better fit and how standardized this was, is a matter of debate.⁵² For naval clothing, Miller found evidence in the Admiralty records during the second half of the eighteenth century of slop clothing being issued in sizes 36, 38 and 40, an average chest measurement in inches.⁵³ A civilian numerical sizing system, from 1 (small) to 10 (large), seems to have been developed for men's clothing in the slop shops of London from the 1740s, obtaining some sort of uniformity within the capital by the 1780s.⁵⁴ However, the idea that ready-made clothes rarely fitted was maintained into the nineteenth century, showing that such standardization was probably not always accurate or indeed put into practice.⁵⁵

By the late eighteenth century, as Giorgio Riello has noted in his study of footwear, the ready-made markets, along with the second-hand trade, were not only integral elements of industrial change, but also important factors affecting the development of the British economy, including the way goods were retailed and distributed.⁵⁶ The repeal of the old Elizabethan apprenticeship statutes in 1814 made it possible to become a tailor without serving an apprenticeship. James Schmiechen sees the break-up of the London Tailors' Union in 1834, after an unsuccessful strike, as leading the way to piecework, homework and increasingly female labour in the capital. Some contemporary commentators saw two distinct trades: the honourable traditional tailor and the dishonourable sweated, piecework slop trade.⁵⁷ Schmiechen traces the growth in the ready-made clothing trade from the 1840s onwards, the changes in the trade aided by a doubling in working-class incomes in the second half of the century which allowed more

expenditure on clothing, principally of a ready-made variety.⁵⁸ As discussed, and as highlighted by Lemire in particular, such patterns of female labour were already prevalent during the eighteenth century, with the ready-made clothing trade already firmly established by the turn of the nineteenth century.⁵⁹

In the French and American ready-made markets, the focus was principally on male garments, perhaps as an off-shoot of military contracts. The female ready-made clothing market was still under-developed, with most garments still made by local dressmakers or at home.⁶⁰ In England, it is interesting that the references to women's ready-made dresses often come from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the simple neo-classical ideal dominated. These dresses, when filtered down the social scale away from court and society fashion, were simpler to make and often fitted through drawstrings at the waist and bust and through ties to the internal lining.⁶¹ Such styles would be easier to sell ready-made and Lemire has found examples of a substantial business in dress manufacture emanating from Manchester from the late 1760s.⁶² By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, this simplicity had been lost and references to ready-made dresses become rarer.⁶³

Ready-made clothing in England between 1830 and 1850 generated much negative commentary.⁶⁴ Henry Mayhew interviewed second-hand sellers who criticized the quality of clothes sold as slops and likewise Charles Kingsley in 'Cheap Clothes and Nasty'. Albert Smith wrote *The Natural History of the Gent* as a satirical account of working-class oneupmanship played out through the clothing of the new 'cheap' tailors.⁶⁵ Much of this commentary was linked to a new awareness about the sweated trades and the harsh conditions of the workers who made the clothing, in particular, unskilled women who laboured on minute sub-divisions of the work.⁶⁶ Thomas Hood's poem 'Song of the Shirt', first published in 1843, exemplified this new worry about the exploitation of workers. Although the outworkers, the seamstresses, who laboured to provide ready-made clothing for poor wages within their own homes had been a continuous, often hidden, trade since the second half of the seventeenth century, by the 1840s their plight was being highlighted by commentators.⁶⁷ The problem of the so-called 'dishonourables' was emphasized, with claims that they brought the whole tailoring trade into disrepute and were in stark contrast to the traditional craft tailor.⁶⁸ The focus was often on only one sector of the market, the slop trade with poor-quality clothing frequently made with 'shoddy', a material manufactured from reconstituted old rags. The benefits that such new clothing brought to the working classes were not seen to justify the exploitation of a section of that society to provide cheap clothing. Only a few commentators such as Francis Place, from working-class origins himself and who had started his own career making ready-made leather breeches, noted the improvement in cleanliness and hygiene that wearing cotton clothing had brought to working

people. In 1828, he observed that the old clothes trade was 'greatly diminished' as people no longer liked wearing second-hand garments.⁶⁹ It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that ready-made clothing came to reflect respectability and affluence for the working-class people in the eyes of English commentators.⁷⁰

Andrew Godley sees the ready-made clothing industry in Britain as the most sophisticated clothing sector in the world, even before garment production was mechanized with the advent of the sewing machine from the 1865 onwards.⁷¹ This book will trace this vibrant and expanding business during the first half of the nineteenth century, and examine how its multifarious strands supplied the varied needs of the working-class consumer.

Regional Studies

A regional approach is taken in this book, concentrating on an area that encompasses varied geographical locations, but is clearly defined by timescale and the limits of that geography. This allows the habits of and influences on the whole strata of the working-class population to be examined with greater precision than a more general survey, including both urban and rural populations.⁷² The need for micro-analysis of particular areas and comparison within and outside these boundaries has recently been recognized by historians, both of retailing and of rural history.⁷³ The local environment impacted significantly on the experience ordinary people had in their daily life. It is therefore essential to understand local circumstances before evidence can be placed in a wider social and cultural context. And these local circumstances can be very place-specific even within a small geographical boundary.⁷⁴

This book will focus on Herefordshire and Worcestershire, the 'near west' as they have been termed.⁷⁵ The counties present an intriguing mix of rural, urban and industrial landscapes, old established cathedral cities of Hereford and Worcester, along with new developing industrial settlements such as Dudley, a close proximity to Birmingham,⁷⁶ yet with access to the major port centres in the north-west and Bristol. In particular, the available source material on which this study is based is varied, ranging from existing costume in museum collections, poor law records, a depth of newspaper provision with up to four competing titles, a rarity for a provincial area by this period, as well as trade directories and archive documents.⁷⁷

In her study of the clothing trades, Christina Fowler examined a compact area within a county boundary. If primary evidence is restricted to specific areas, she argues, it can reveal a more cohesive and united picture than finding evidence to suit an argument from random surviving nationwide sources. The resulting model, she proposes, is much more likely to produce conclusions that

are surprisingly different and challenge currently dominant narratives.⁷⁸ Styles drew specifically on his research into non-elite clothing in the north of England for his publication, *The Dress of the People*. He states:

Examining regional variations in the supply of a basic commodity like clothing can help us avoid excessive concern with the extraordinary and the unusual, and arrive at a more balanced assessment of the relationship between the consumer and the market.⁷⁹

County boundaries are, of course, somewhat arbitrary when studying retailing. Consumers do not determine which shop they will use by which county it is in but by a host of other factors, including geographical proximity, access, type and price of stock. Indeed, there were businesses in towns such as Ludlow and Hay-on-Wye, just over the border from Herefordshire, and likewise Alcester for Worcestershire, which it seems probable were also used by consumers who were customers of the retailers examined in this book but beyond the county borders of this study.⁸⁰ A regional study does need a boundary and county boundaries, although not perfect, are one way of defining such research and enable evidence to be sorted and analysed in detail.

The Study of Clothing

This book is focused on the retailing of clothing. Within the category of clothing, it will concentrate on the garments themselves, rather than accessories such as shoes, hats and gloves. This is pragmatic decision, partly driven by the need to organize evidence and partly by the fact that shoes and gloves in particular, were seen as a separate trade with little cross-over with those who made clothes. Milliners are perhaps more problematic, with, for instance, variations in the classification of milliners in trade directories. Some directories, such as *Bentley's Directory*, list them as a separate trade; others list them together with dressmakers. Where distinguishable, in smaller towns and villages women were often listed with both occupations and likewise in the newly industrial areas, such as Dudley. In more traditional market towns, Pershore and Upton-upon-Severn for example, the two roles were separated, at least in the pages of a directory.⁸¹ Certainly, headwear was an important part of an outfit for both men and women and helped to identify status and occupation. However, the hatting trades demand a fuller study than the attention that they receive in this research. This focus on the specific, as with Riello's work on shoes, counters the macro-scale analysis of consumption which risk leading to simplistic and generalized assumptions about demand and the relationship between goods and people.⁸²

This research is placed within the current call for a 'new interdisciplinary approach' between object-based curatorial research and academic discourses.⁸³ Objects and artefacts should also be used actively as evidence rather than pas-

sively as illustrations, this book examining surviving examples of 'best' dress in Chapter 6 within their local context.⁸⁴ Their investigation can shed light on variations and differences not readily visible through other sources.⁸⁵ Empirical knowledge of object-based dress history must underlie the discussion of clothing in other contexts; in this research, retailing.⁸⁶ However, dress historians should acknowledge that knowing how and where textiles and clothing were acquired is essential to understanding the clothing that people wore as a result.⁸⁷

The first three chapters of the book will therefore investigate the 'formal', supposedly regulated networks of supply from which the working-class consumer, male and female, could purchase clothing. Chapter 1 will investigate the location of shops and types of clothing retailers across all areas of Worcestershire and Herefordshire, including urban and rural districts. Chapter 2 will trace the development of particular retailers in Worcester and Hereford before considering the role of advertising. Hawkers and pedlars, travelling drapers and markets, and their contribution to clothes retailing, will be examined in Chapter 3. The following two chapters of the book will focus on informal networks of supply, and will explore the 'makeshift' economy in relation to clothing, examining how clothing was obtained without recourse to cash. Chapter 4 will briefly discuss networks of illicit clothing exchange before turning to investigate clothing given out as part of parish relief. Charity clothing and clothing societies will be considered in Chapter 5. The interaction between the formal and informal networks of acquisition will be investigated, questioning how much fluidity there was between the two systems. Who actually acquired clothing through these different methods will be investigated, taking into account issues such as economic necessity, practicality, desire for novelty and decency.

The final chapter will then turn the attention from issues of supply to consumer attitudes towards clothing. Working-class attitudes to fashion and emulation will be investigated. Differentiation between genders and age groups will also be examined. Conclusions can then be drawn about the variety of supply networks which served working-class consumers, their comparative importance, and how they were integrated with each other, as well as the importance of fashion in influencing the choice of clothing for such consumers. As observed in the letter quoted at the beginning of this chapter, female servants were noted as practised consumers of clothing. This book will investigate where their clothing came from and how it might have been obtained.