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WOMEN, CLASS AND CLOTHING IN BRITAIN DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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If, like me, you enjoy nothing more than watching a period drama, whether it's the new *Peaky Blinders* or *Foyle's War*, you will have seen that costume signals differences between British social classes: a street urchin is dressed in rags, a vicar's wife is clad in plain, modest dresses, and an heiress is adorned in decadent gowns. Winston Churchill famously said of the Second World War, 'this is no war of chieftains or of princes, of dynasties or national ambition; it is a war of peoples and of causes'. Whilst this suggests the common experiences faced by the British public superseded the existing class divide, the clothing worn may say otherwise.

When sorting through my grandmother's possessions after she died, we found an inconspicuous looking storage box hiding in the back of a cupboard. Upon opening it, we found treasure! My grandmother, Elaine Hall, was a member of the Women's Land Army (WLA) during the Second World War, working on a farm in Kent. Raised in Greenwich, South London, she trained as a textile designer but put her career aspirations aside to serve her country.

A photograph of Elaine Hall whilst serving in the Women's Land Army, c.1942. (Credit: Author's photo).

Having expertise in textiles and fashion, and recognising the importance of events that unfolded across the world during the conflict, she has preserved her 'land girl' uniform in this unassuming box in the cupboard.

Original Land Army Dungarees owned by ex 'land girl', Elaine Hall c.1942. (Credit: Author's photo).

As a researcher whose career has had, as my mother calls it, a 'crazy paving' approach to the career ladder, this discovery spoke directly to the present historian and the past art student within me. I felt compelled to discover more about the garments that enclothed our wartime women. What did other women wear, and how and why did this differ?

Owing to the financial crisis of the Wall Street Crash in 1929, the 1930s saw both great poverty, and, from those relatively unaffected, great wealth. This was characterised in global fashion trends. The extreme poverty experienced by American communities saw homemade clothing produced from dry goods sacks. Acknowledging this, retailers printed attractive designs on the bags as a marketing tool that featured upbeat patriotic imagery. In contrast, internationally, wealthier individuals embraced the bias cut; garments produced by cutting across the fabric grain to produce a luxurious drape. The diagonal 'across the grain' nature of pattern cutting produced a large surplus of waste fabric making this method much less economical than standard techniques, and consequently more expensive. Sporting a fine bias-cut garment, could therefore act as a declaration of wealth to onlookers.

Two sack dresses displayed by their maker. Texas, US, c. 1939. (Credit: the Farm Security Administration: Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-USF34-033102-D (b&w film neg.)] [https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/2017783139/]).

Satin bias-cut evening dress inspired by Madeleine Vionnet, 1932 – 34, France. (Credit: State Library of Queensland [https://collections.slq.qld.gov.au/viewer/IE146196]).

Disruption to trade routes and the redirection of resources to the military meant those on the Home Front in Britain during the Second World War faced goods shortages in most areas. Following the commencement of food rationing in 1940, the British government introduced clothes rationing between 1941 and 1949, restricting the availability of garments through a coupon system. An initial allowance of '66 coupons' per year per person was given with a requirement of additional payment. Rather than detailing the scheme's rationale as being resource shortages, the Board of Trade (BoT) implied that the reasoning was to give British citizens a 'fair share'. However, in practice 'fair share' was not equitable across socioeconomic backgrounds: wealthier citizens started the rationing period in a healthier position than those on the breadline and often had extensive pre-war wardrobes with better quality garments to utilise, whereas working-class citizens had fewer resources to draw upon, having had relatively few clothes to begin with.

To address this disparity, the government introduced the Utility Clothing Scheme in February 1942, which sought to produce quality clothing at low cost, saving material and labour for the war effort. In effect, the British government effectively controlled clothing and textile manufacturing, producing high quality garments at low cost without surplus details and decoration. Despite intentions to bring improved access to quality clothing, it was widely criticised by the public for being 'drab'. Whilst these clothes were produced to last, they were distinctively dull and were starkly contrasted with the luxury pre-war garments utilised in the wardrobes of the wealthy. A diarist for the Mass Observation project described being 'tired as dressing only for function' in utility clothing and delighted at the prospect of wearing 'more feminine clothes' post-war. The BoT attempted to combat the negative reception of Utility Clothing, by commissioning the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers to design for the scheme in spring 1942. This idea was proposed by Audrey Withers, then editor of *Vogue*. Having instructed readers with limited budgets throughout the 1930s on making garments at home, *Vogue* continued to support readers through the wartime clothing restrictions. Whilst this may have catered to readers with varying wealth, wartime *Vogue* availability was a barrier to poorer citizens. It was reported that each copy of the magazine had an average of fourteen readers. This was largely due to paper rationing which led the magazine to limit access exclusively to subscribers, with suggestion that *Vogue* only accepted new subscribers when an existing one had died. This led to second-hand copies being exchanged for several times the original price of the magazine. So, whilst the content of the magazine attempted to bridge the class divide, the wartime availability of the magazine was an obstacle to many.

Another government initiative to address shortages, was 'Make-do and Mend'. Officially launched in 1943, Make-do and Mend urged the public to extend the life of their wardrobes through repairing and repurposing clothing and textiles already in their possession. Whilst many were used to repairing clothes during the financial crisis of the 1930s, it was necessary to introduce 'Make-do and Mend' classes to upskill citizens on the Home Front.

A dressmaking class in a school hall in Brixton, London, c.1943. (Credit: IWM (D 12896 [https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205199899]), IWM Non Commercial Licence[https://www.iwm.org.uk/corporate/policies/non-commercial-licence]).

Women from all classes were traditionally taught a form of needlecraft as part of their education. Needlecraft skills of the middle to upper classes were largely decorative and a sign of 'accomplishment', whereas needlecraft taught to the working class centred around practical uses like mending. By 1943, over 20,000 Make-do and Mend and dressmaking classes were operational across the country. The class convenors reflected their needlework education in the skills they taught, and working class women were experts at repairing and repurposing.
However, some Board of Trade field reports detail the complaints of sessions run by wealthier convenors teaching attendees how to embroider 'evening slippers' instead of the basic skills to prolong household wardrobes. Nevertheless, fine embroiderers were not redundant in their contribution to the war effort: by the end of the conflict, The Royal School of Needlework had developed and released kits for the public to stitch their own regimental badges.

Debatably, women's uniformed services also served to unite the classes, in part, due to the uniform allocation within each organisation. During this period of wartime shortages, the uniformed services offered clothing resources to their members who were often exempt from coupons. In the military alone 640,000 women served during the conflict, and thousands more worked and volunteered in the auxiliary services. Hilary Wayne, who served within the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), said in her autobiography *Two Odd Soldiers*, 'to people feeling the coupon pinch and wondering where the next pair of stockings was coming from, it was miraculous to be handed four pairs'. In addition to the initial provision, the ATS were also known to issue additional

uniforms free of-charge when one wore out or was lost in an air raid. Those within the ATS reported that their civilian clothes lasted longer due to less wear. The levelling of class within the ATS was highlighted the in the 1943 film *The Gentle Sex* (directed by Leslie Howard), which centres around a group of women from different backgrounds following them throughout their service. They are united by their common experiences, and by using humour to deal with the shared frustrations of war, the characters are instantly likeable and relatable. It has been said of the film, and uniformed services more generally, that their uniforms eliminated outward signs of class, making them appear as equals. However, there were still deep-set divisions behind closed doors. Within the ATS, there were reports of the ritualistic act of 'scrubbing'. This would see an ATS member, typically of working-class background, who was considered 'dirty', forcibly scrubbed clean with scrubbing brushes by a group of her colleagues. This act reflects the continued social hierarchy regardless of the visual homogeneity that uniforms brought.

Whilst uniform may have offered benefits in clothing provision, the public were critical. Famed romance novelist Barbara Cartland wrote, 'I thought the WRNS [Women's Royal Naval Service] uniform very smart, the WAAF [Women's Auxiliary Air Force] passable, and the ATS hideous'. Her view of the ATS uniform was shared by those in the services. In a 1941 social survey, the 'main source of displeasure' was the uniform, with the most common complaint being the poor fit. Cartland's positive view of the WRNS uniform was widespread with it widely being regarded as the smartest uniform with the best provision.

WRNS admiralty uniform photographed by Cecil Beaton, 1942. (Credit: IWM (A 12619 [https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205146029]). Non Commercial Licence [https://www.iwm.org.uk/corporate/policies/non-commercial-licence])).

However, the organisation required applicants to provide references and due to an initial limitation in places, many of the early intake were related to current or retired naval officers, meaning the highly regarded uniform; was, at the start, out of reach for many working-class women, perpetuating the class divide. This is also true of the use of tailoring. During wartime, established tailors in larger cities diversified their remit to include military uniforms. Whilst customary for an officer to provide their own uniform, wealthier uniformed women in varying ranks also utilised these services. Thus, their uniforms fit better, were made of finer materials, and had longer lifespans. In contrast, those unable to afford these services resorted to home-sewn alterations. This practice is evident in the alterations visible on my grandmother's WLA dungarees.

Original Land Army Dungarees owned by ex 'land girl', Elaine Joan Hall nee/ Chapman, c.1942. (Credit: Author's photo).

The vertical lines enclose a seam that has been unstitched to accommodate a larger wearer than the dungarees were intended for. Additionally, the circles reveal the original location for the buttons further down the strap, indicating the dungarees were initially too long in the body for my petite grandmother, Elaine. These adjustments imply that either the dungarees were produced in limited sizes, or that she was not the first wearer of them. This experience is true of many WLA members and their poor uniform provision, with many workers accepting uniform with a 'hit-or-miss' approach to sizing. My grandmother Elaine was from a working class, multi-generational home and wouldn't have been able to afford a professionally tailored unform, but arguably this wouldn't have been appropriate for the agricultural nature of her work. Influenced by her wartime experiences, she became a life-long fan of gardening and would later meet my grandfather at a farming camp post-war. It may not have been a luxurious bias cut evening gown, but her war time experiences evidenced by her roughly altered dungarees paved the way for a family.

While World War Two may have been 'a war of peoples' whether they were dressed in sack dresses, evening gowns of WLA dungarees, next time you're curled up in front of the TV watching Cillian Murphy and the gangsters of Birmingham in wartime Britain, consider the history behind their garments.

Further Reading:

Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Berg, 1999).
Barbara Cartland, *The Years of Opportunity, 1939-1945* (Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1948).
Philomena Goodman, *Women, Sexuality, and War, Women, Sexuality and War* (Palgrave, 2002).
Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester University Press, 1998).
Nan Turner, *Clothing Goes to War* (Intellect Books, 2022).

Additional Resources:

'Elaine Joan Hall in the Women's Land Army', Their Finest Hour Online Archive (University of Oxford, 2024)
<https://portal.sds.ox.ac.uk/articles/online_resource/Elaine_Joan_Hall_in_the_Women_s_Land_Army/25898509>

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