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Standardised or Simplified? The Effect of Government-Imposed Restrictions on Women's Clothing Manufacture and Design during the Second World War

Sarah Magill

Abstract

The Second World War necessitated the transferral of labour and supplies from civilian manufacture to war production. Orders initiated by the government, in an attempt to make economical use of limited resources, severely affected the clothing industry from production to consumption. As a result, many contemporaneous sources and contemporary scholars claim that civilian dress was standardised. Scrutiny of trade journals, government documents, Mass Observation records, extant garments, and sewing patterns demonstrates that though manufacturing methods were standardised and simplified, there continued to be a range of styles in women's dress.

As well as conscripting men and women into the services to serve and protect Britain and its allies, the conditions of the Second World War demanded that all non-essential industry be concentrated in order to clear factory space and labour for essential war work, resulting in reduced manufacture of civilian goods, including clothing. The government department, The Board of Trade, drafted orders and directives such as the Utility scheme, austerity regulations, and clothes rationing, which impacted the clothing industry from production to consumption and, thus, the way women dressed during the 1940s.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of wartime restrictions on the manufacture and design of women's civilian dress during the Second World War, with a focus on the cut and construction of dress. A range of primary sources, including government documents, trade journals, the Mass Observation Archive, and sewing patterns were used to determine whether and to what extent dress was standardised in this period as a result of government orders. This paper goes on to argue that although styles were simplified as a result of wartime restrictions, there was not a homogenisation of dress under the regulations. Women demanded variety in dress and manufacturers were obliged to comply.

The Board of Trade (henceforth the BoT) was responsible for controlling supplies and manufacture in industry. Orders included the control of raw supplies, production quotas, and price control.[1] However, these steps did not limit production and consumption to satisfactory levels and clothing prices rose steeply, so clothes rationing was implemented on 1 June 1941, lasting until 1949.[2] The system was devised on a quantity rather than value basis, providing everyone with an equal number of coupons (initially 66) enabling consumers of differing socio-economic backgrounds to purchase garments suited to their budget.[3] A coupon pointing was allocated to each garment based on the approximate amount of fabric required to make it.

"As a basis for the points calculations a yard of woollen cloth 30 inches or so wide counted as three coupons and a yard of any other material as two coupons."[4] For example, in 1943, a woollen dress cost 11 coupons, a cotton dress seven, and a rayon dress five.[5] This implies that there were approximately

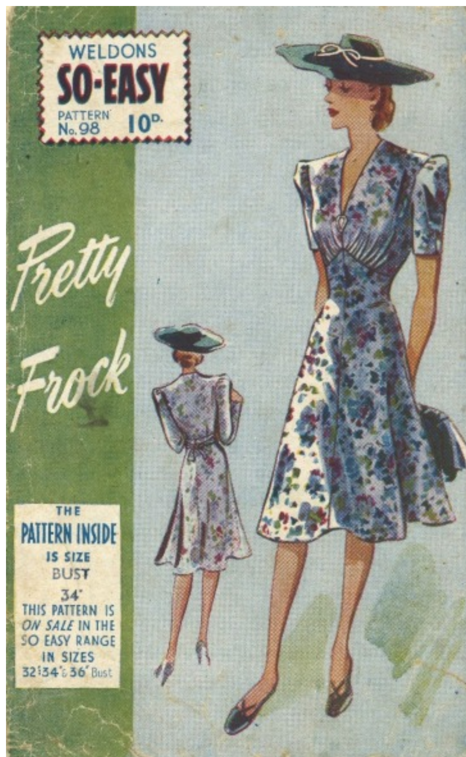

Figure 1
Weldon's So-Easy sewing pattern for a pretty frock, early 1940s, private collection. This pattern required 3¼ yards of material for a size 34 inch bust.

Figure 2
A group of women wearing Berketex Utility dresses designed by Norman Hartnell, 1942, ©The Drapers' Record, 1942.

3½ yards of cloth in a woollen or cotton dress and 2½ in a rayon dress. However, larger or smaller quantities would be required for different sizes. Yardage charts in period sewing patterns, such as that in Figure 1, indicate that a size 32-inch bust required under 3½ yards, on average, and a 40-inch bust required more, but this was dependent upon the cut of the garment.[6]

In September 1941, the Utility Scheme was introduced, which initially focused on the manufacture of cloth. Utility cloth was manufactured to strict specifications devised in collaboration with the British Standards Institute in a variety of qualities to supply the population's needs.[7] Specifications included: width of fabric, threads per inch, weight, and finish.[8] The Utility Clothing Scheme followed and was primarily designed to keep down the cost of living in order that the whole population could afford clothing.[9] Utility cloth was allocated to specific Utility garments, which bear the CC41 label (see Figure 2 for examples of Utility dresses). Utility was manufactured to larger quotas (approximately 80% of manufactured civilian clothing), which gave the government majority control of the clothing industry.[10]

Simplified styles of clothing (or austerity regulations) were introduced to save labour and materials in 1942 and most were in force until 1946.[11] Regulations dictated the simplification of manufacture for Utility and non-Utility clothing alike and applied to manufacturers, tailors, and professional dressmakers. Within the orders, the number of seams, pleats, and pockets were limited and decoration was eliminated: certain styles, such as double-breasted jackets were also prohibited. In amendments to the orders, standards of manufacture were prescribed including seam finishes, minimum stitches per inch, and minimum seam allowances.[12] For example, French, double-stitched, overlocked, or taped seams were prescribed for shoulder and armhole seams of blouses, presumably because these seams suffer the most strain and these methods might prolong the lifespan of a garment.[13] The minimum amount of seam allowance was more for wool and rayon dresses than cotton (¾ inch on main seams of wool and rayon, compared to ½ inch on main seams of cotton dresses).[14] These fabrics are more likely to fray than cotton and clothes had to last much longer than they did before the war. Women's blouses and dresses also

had to conform to standard sizes, devised in collaboration with the British Standards Institute. Parameters were provided, within which garment measurements had to conform. The aim was to provide the population with well-fitting garments that would not require alteration after purchasing.[15]

Consequently, it has been suggested by many contemporary scholars and in contemporaneous accounts, that clothes of the 1940s were standardised. Lant suggests that due to restrictions imposed on dress, Utility resulted in "a subtle uniformity of the nation."[16] Wood states, "The impression is always one of a nation of women in a kind of civilian uniform, all looking very much the same."[17] McDowell concurs, asserting that it was "the nearest thing to a civilian uniform for women in the history of dress."[18] In Utility Furniture and Fashion, clothing is referred to as "almost entirely utilitarian."[19] More recently, scholars, such as Howell have suggested, "While the austerity measures did not formally restrict creative freedom, they limited the number of design options available."[20] Therefore, the overall impression of women's dress in the 1940s is one of uniformity and utilitarianism.

Contemporaneous sources also reflect a growing concern for standardisation of dress. In the Mass Observation Clothes Rationing Survey, one man commented on a shop-window display, "Oh yes, standardised I suppose."[21] In 1943, Goldsmith wrote, "Utility dresses, the simple lines of which are certainly an education in good taste, are continuing the process of standardisation."[22] An article in The Drapers' Record stated, "Control of specifications, whether of materials or make-up, must lead to stereotyped manufactures and standardisation of design."[23]

Despite the previous arguments that suggest fashion was adversely affected by the austerity regulations, couturiers welcomed the simplified styles, which focused on cut rather than decoration. Hardy Amies reflected that he and Edward Molyneux had been making Utility for years.[24] Digby Morton described making dresses that were "rather tailored and plain."[25] He also revealed that he was making dresses out of 3 yards, rather than 3½-4 pre-war.[26] In an interview in Vogue, Charles Creed stated that simplicity "has always been the keynote of my clothes."[27]

The public began to agree: "Women too have found that ornament and undue elaborateness of dress is unnecessary and are beginning to believe that simplicity is both more becoming and more economical."[28] The Drapers Record publicised the Utility Scheme positively in an article in 1942, comparing Utility to pre-war garments, demonstrating there was little difference between the two.[29] However, the BoT found that manufactures of Utility were paying large amounts to designers, despite the fundamental principle of price control.[30] This could suggest that manufacturers were concerned women might not find Utility clothes appealing.

To combat the negative attitudes towards Utility, the BoT promoted the clothing through the Couturier scheme.[31] A group of couturiers designed a range of garments, the patterns for which were sold to manufacturers. Reaction to the scheme was not always favourable, however, as the group only designed 32 garments (eight styles of suits, coats, dresses, and blouses), which the public thought might further endorse standardisation of clothing. In addition, of the 1400 designated Utility manufacturers, only 100 initially bought the patterns.[32]

In spite of the simplification of clothing styles and the allocation of cloth to garments, the range of qualities of cloth manufactured was not limited. For women's dresses alone, there were 13 cotton cloth specifications, 51 rayon, and three mixtures.[33] Cloth can also be decorated in various ways through dyeing and printing, not to mention the way it is cut and constructed into a garment (Figures 3 and 4). A Pathé film from 1942 demonstrates how one dress design can be interpreted in countless ways using a variety of different cloths in various colourways.[34] In addition, a maximum of 50 styles of women's dresses were permitted per manufacturer per annum.[35] Given the need for economy this seems a generous number and one might question why the number was so large. One reason could be that the government understood the demand for variety by the public.

Figure 3
Early Utility rayon dress in a tree print, circa 1941–1942, Alex Magill, private collection, Bournemouth, England.

Figure 4
Utility dress in burgundy rayon with an abstract print, circa 1942–1945, Alex Magill, private collection, Bournemouth, England.

Figure 5
Laura Lee, tartan day dress with bias-cut skirt, 1942, ©The Drapers' Record, 1942.

Although the BoT simplified clothing manufacture, it never dictated cut or yardage, except in women's overalls and underwear, where maximum yardage was stipulated per dozen garments.[36] This still allowed manufacturers the freedom to use patterns of their choosing. However, McNeil intimates, "The amount of fabric allowed for a garment was strictly controlled, resulting in shorter skirts, and a reduction of pleats."[37] Cawthorne concurs, stating, "The total amount of cloth in each garment was strictly fixed" and that maximum widths of skirtsalso dictated.[38] The restrictions stated that skirts could have no more than six seams and two inverted/box or four knife pleats, with pleat width prescribed, but the style and length was never referred to.[39]

From a manufacturing perspective, fabric had to be used more economically than before the war, since coupons were also used by manufacturers to purchase cloth. This may have encouraged simpler cutting, since the machining and finishing of six seams could equate to more time and labour than a skirt with four seams and, potentially, more fabric, depending on the style. However, in The Drapers' Record, there are several examples of skirts with bias cut panels, which is an uneconomical use of fabric compared to cutting panels on the straight of grain (Figure 5).[40] In addition, a four–gore flared skirt in The Drapers' Record shows, "An example of the generous cutting that can be achieved within austerity."[41] Furthermore, when compared to late 1930s bias–cut skirt styles, early 1940s skirts were usually cut in fuller, A–line styles suggesting economy of fabric was not a concern.[42] More significantly, BoT documents from 1943 reveal it was debatable what savings had actually been made by limiting seams in skirts to six.[43]

Figure 6
Utility blouse in red–and–white striped rayon with chevron pocket detail, Marks and Spencer, circa 1942–1949, Hampshire Cultural Trust, Winchester, England, C1996.17, Photography by Sarah Magill, 2016.

Figure 7
Utility blouse in red–and–white striped rayon with bias-bound cuff detail, Marks and Spencer, circa 1942–1949, Hampshire Cultural Trust, Winchester, England, C1996.17, Photography by Sarah Magill, 2016.

In Utility Reassessed, Reynolds also states that the austerity regulations "limited the amount of material and trimmings manufacturers, tailors and commercial dressmakers were allowed to use."[44] She suggests that a Marks and Spencer blouse demonstrates economical use of fabric through bias edgings and offcuts used for the pocket.[45] Examination of the same blouse in a red and white stripe rayon at Hampshire Cultural Trust revealed that, in fact, both details are cut on the bias. Even if made from offcuts, these details would be more laborious to piece together and apply then cutting on the straight of grain, particularly as the pocket is strategically cut to create a chevron effect (Figures 6 and 7).

Incidentally, the blouse referred to has eight buttons. From 1942 to 1946, under the austerity regulations, only seven buttons were permitted on a long–sleeved blouse.[46] This suggests the blouse pre– or post–dates the regulations or that the manufacturer evaded them. Since Marks and Spencer were known to have worked with the BoT on Utility specifications, the latter is unlikely.[47] The label has a British Standards Institute size, suggesting it was made during or after 1942 when standard sizing was introduced. The austerity regulations were designed to save labour and materials, which included the removal of decorative elements. It is arguable that the bias trim on the collar and cuffs is decorative, rather than functional, since the raw edges of these components could be finished using a much quicker process. In addition, the careful piecing of the pocket could also be deemed decorative, as it could have been cut from a single piece of cloth.

Similarly, a Utility blouse in The Museum of London collection cleverly uses stripes to add detail, but these elements are predominantly cut on the straight of grain.[48] The collar is cut in two parts, so that the stripes are perpendicular to each other. The cuffs are also cut at 90 degrees to the sleeve, creating the same effect. Cutting these elements on the straight of grain, as opposed to the bias, would have utilised fabric more economically. The blouse also has four buttons (less than the permitted five for a short–sleeve blouse), suggesting it was possibly made within the timeframe of the austerity regulations.[49]

BoT records reveal that manufacturers did evade the restrictions.[50] Reluctance to conform could reflect a negative attitude towards perceived standardisation and to provide more variety in dress. An article in The Drapers' Record suggested, "The greater the number of controls, the greater the incentive and opportunity for evasion and subversive activity."[51] A record of complaints made by members of the retail trade were investigated by technical officers, often resulting in no action if the evasion was unremarkable.[52] This suggests that the austerity regulations were vague and not easy to enforce. The most common infringements were ruching, gauging, frills, applique, and rouleau, which suggests that manufacturers believed plain, tailored styles were not desired by all consumers.[53]

In 1945 frills were causing a "minor crisis" and a "wholesale evasion and sabotage of the order" was likely.[54] Frills were not banned in the orders, but ruching and gauging were, unless used to add fullness; in other words, gathered frills were not permitted.[55] However, a frill can be produced using a circular piece of material, which was not banned, such as those in a Dorville advert from the September 1944 issue of Vogue (Figure 8).[56] However, in this example, it is clear that the frills were used purely as decorative trimming and not used to add fullness. The BoT agreed, stating that "a frill is a cheap way of giving variety to an otherwise commonplace frock."[57]

In April 1945, government Technical Officers visited 30 shops in London to carry out inspections of garments to investigate infringements. Of these, only three shops sold garments evidencing no infringements.[58] In other words, the majority of retailers at this time were selling garments that did not conform to austerity regulations. Contradictory to the finding, the BoT stated that, over a three–year period, the majority of manufacturers conformed to the restrictions.[59] The BoT clearly realised the difficulty of policing the regulations, as some terms were vague and manufacturers used imaginative terminology to evade the restrictions.

Figure 8
Dorville advertisement showing a dress with circular frill detail, British Vogue, September 1944.

An example of a complaint made to the BoT by the British Mantle Manufacturers' Association regarding two double-breasted "effect" jackets advertised in national newspapers confirms the vagueness of terminology.[60] The first jacket, by Whiteley Ltd, was investigated and found not to be an infringement as it was only "semi-breasted," a style not banned in the restrictions. The second jacket, in the Technical Officer's opinion, was a double-breasted jacket. However, in correspondence to the complainant, the jacket did not constitute contravention of the style restrictions, explaining that there were differences in opinion of what constituted a double-breasted jacket: two rows of buttons or the amount of wrap at the front. Had the restrictions been more prescriptive, more prosecutions might have been made. In 1943, there were 140 prosecutions of manufacturers.[61]

Another method of evasion was through home dressmaking. The austerity regulations did not apply to home dressmakers, but coupon pointing of fabric and a 25% purchase tax was applied to paper patterns as a deterrent.[62] This suggests the government wanted to encourage civilians to buy Utility clothing, rather than making their own from an unlimited amount of yardage. Although paper patterns never followed restrictions, discussions took place between the BoT and pattern manufacturers about styles complying.[63] However, according to The Drapers' Record, 78% of styles were within coupon value and comparable to austerity styles, which was confirmed through the examination of yardage charts and styles of period patterns.[64] Reminders were also printed on sewing patterns to ensure professional dressmakers complied with the simplifications.[65] This meant home dressmakers could evade Utility styles if they found them too plain, adding extra pockets, buttons, frills, and pleats, as seen in Figure 9, which features eight inverted pleats (six more than the two permitted in manufactured styles). In contrast, the Make-Do and Mend scheme was promoted through publications, magazine articles, Pathé films, and sewing classes offering advice on remodelled or reusing clothes by replacing sleeves and yokes of dresses or taking apart a man's suit to make a woman's suit. In addition, patching fabric was coupon-free and the amount increased from half a square foot to a full square foot in 1942.[66] Mending and repurposing was encouraged, whereas home dressmaking from new, often scarce, materials was not.

Figure 9
Economy Design, sewing pattern for a box-pleated skirt, early 1940s, private collection.

Manufacturers were clearly limited by the amount of cloth available to them and by the austerity regulations, which simplified the production of clothing. The BoT succeeded in standardising clothing through the allocation of Utility cloth to specific garments, prescribing manufacturing methods, and regulated sizing. However, the removal of embellishment and decoration may have made garments simpler or plainer, but it could be argued that cut, colour, and print was then the focus of dress design. The regulations were never prescriptive enough to dictate the cut of a garment enabling significant variety of style within the limitations. Flouting of the regulations by manufacturers suggests that variety was required, but the BoT claim the majority did not, suggesting designers were able to creatively work within the limitations. Home dressmakers could also evade the regulations, but the sewing patterns published at the time were comparable to Utility styles. In addition, manufacturers were able to make 50 different cuts of dress per annum in at least 54 specified cloths. Therefore, countless possibilities could be fashioned.

Endnotes

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