
Article:
Bide, Bethan Katharine (2024) Learning from the Past:Why the Second World War 'Make Do and Mend' Scheme Provides a Poor Model for the Future of Sustainable Fashion. Fashion Studies. 4. ISSN: 2371-3453

https://doi.org/10.38055/FST030104

Learning from the Past: Why the Second World War 'Make Do and Mend' Scheme Provides a Poor Model for the Future of Sustainable Fashion

BY BETHAN BIDE

fashioning sustainment

ISSUE 1
ARTICLE 4

Keywords
Fashion
Sustainability
Social transformation
Co-creation

Abstract • This paper seeks to understand why the British 'Make Do and Mend' scheme, and the specific period of 1940s austerity with which it is related, holds such power in contemporary sustainability discourse. It argues that looking back at the history of this period and asking questions about its legacy provides a powerful critique to those who present it as a deceptively simple solution to a complex problem. It further hypothesizes that studying the history of 'Make Do and Mend', along with consumer behaviours during the Second World War, lays bare the flaws within some contemporary sustainability initiatives. These flaws highlight the disconnect between production and consumption activities, ultimately hindering progress toward a more sustainable fashion industry.

Bethan Bide is a design historian with an interest in the business histories of fashion, the role of fashion in museums, the development of fashion cities, and the relationship between materiality, memory and fashion as biography.

FASHION STUDIES

Fashion is, by common definition, related to change.[1] The Western fashion system is based on seasonal cycles of new trends, and in consumer societies like Britain, purchasing new clothing is a powerful act of identity formation and a way in which individuals are empowered to shift and challenge cultural norms.[2]

However, in recent years, the pace of fashionable change has become a growing issue. As the damaging environmental and social impacts of producing vast quantities of new clothes have become evident, public discourse around sustainable consumption practices in the UK has increasingly turned towards slow fashion. While many academic voices at the forefront of the slow fashion movement explore the need for systems-level change in the fashion industry, notably Kate Fletcher and Amy Twigger Holroyd, slow fashion has come to be associated in popular discourse with ideas about individual behavioural changes to consumption patterns, particularly the practice of extending the life of clothes through wearing, mending, and reuse.[3]

Much of this discourse looks nostalgically back to the practices of 'Make Do and Mend', which resulted from shortages and rationing during the 1940s. 'Make Do and Mend' was the name of a British government scheme that aimed to provide educational opportunities and materials that promoted the reuse, repair, and recycling of clothing materials during the Second World War.

[1] Bide et al, 'Introduction'.

[2] Slater, *Consumer Culture & Modernity,* 10.

[3] Fletcher, 'Slow Fashion'; https://fashionfictions.org/about.

Today, 'Make Do and Mend' is referenced widely in the titles and content of popular sustainable fashion blogs and initiatives, and the catchy phrasing of its title has become something of a battle cry for those calling for behavioural change in the way we consume fashion.

For some fashion historians, too, it provides a model for individuals today who wish to develop more environmentally conscious relationships with fashion.[4]

This paper seeks to understand why the British 'Make Do and Mend' scheme, and the specific period of 1940s austerity with which it is related, holds such power in contemporary sustainability discourse. It argues that looking back at the history of this period and asking questions about its legacy provides a powerful critique to those who present it as a deceptively simple solution to a complex problem. It further hypothesizes that studying the history of 'Make Do and Mend', along with consumer behaviours during the Second World War, lays bare the flaws within some contemporary sustainability initiatives. These flaws highlight the disconnect between production and consumption activities, ultimately hindering progress toward a more sustainable fashion industry.

Drawing on government records, retail and museum archives, and media sources, this paper first details the impact and limitations of the 'Make Do and Mend' scheme. Through exploration of the imagery and language used to promote mending and sewing, it challenges the idealized presentation of these practices in wartime Britain. Instead, it reveals how both Government and retailers reaped political and commercial benefits from the scheme, and how sewing practices reinforced existing gender and class roles. It concludes by reflecting on how the prevalence of 'Make Do and Mend' today can act as a lens through which to understand the challenges and impacts of contemporary sustainable fashion initiatives, asking who they benefit and who they exclude.

[4] Turner, *Clothing Goes to War*, 193-210.

LOOKING TO THE PAST AS A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

Today, there is growing academic interest in looking to the past to find solutions for sustainable futures. Amy Twigger Holroyd, Jennifer Farley Gordon, and Colleen Hill's recently revised book *Historical Perspectives on Sustainable Fashion: Inspiration for Change* provides a compelling international perspective on a range of historical methods for making and using fashion, offering inspiration for contemporary change.[5] There are also increasing numbers of collaborations between historians and technologists working across the past and present, inspired by calls to consider how interdisciplinary historical research can help us understand and work towards solutions for contemporary issues of sustainability.[6] Much of this work seeks to challenge preconceptions about sustainability, such as research into the paper dress trend of the 1960s, which highlights how disposable fashions are not necessarily unsustainable, so long as the materials and construction methods used align with the intended use of the product.[7] While these research strands highlight the potential of fashion history to offer a fresh perspective on the present, it is notable that they focus on the entirety of fashion systems, from the production of raw materials through to end-of-life. In this, they sharply diverge from popular discourses that seek a solution to issues of sustainability by focusing solely on consumer behaviour, like the 'Make Do and Mend' scheme.

Finding solace in the past from the disorientating pace and production of contemporary fashion is nothing new. There is a long history of looking back to an idealized, usually pre-industrial past for those critical of the fashion system.

For example, many designers involved in the Arts and Crafts movement prioritized supporting the work of individual rural craftspeople as a perceived antidote to the ills of mass production, exemplified by Lewis Foreman Day's collaborations with

[5] Twigger Holroyd et al, *Historical Perspectives on Sustainable Fashion.*

[6] Auerbach George et al, "Referencing Historical Practices and Emergent Technologies".

[7] Auerbach George et al, "Challenging Perceptions of Fast and Slow".

the East Devon Cottage lace industry.[8] Around the same time, the Dress Reform movement similarly responded to late 19th-century modernity by turning back to the past, finding a 'healthier' female ideal in Classical and Regency fashions.[9]

Today, similar impulses can be seen in the cultural nostalgia that looks to 'Make Do and Mend' as an exemplar of slow fashion. 'Make Do and Mend' has become shorthand for sustainable practices of repair and remaking. Individuals wanting to learn techniques for mending, remaking, and caring for their clothes will find numerous options for sewing classes with 'Make Do and Mend' in their titles, many of which draw on the visual imagery of the 1940s and the 'Make Do and Mend' scheme.[10] Curators find that including examples of mended and remade clothing from the 1940s is a particularly effective way of engaging museum visitors with discussions about the history of mending in exhibitions on fashion and sustainability.[11] These stories are often amplified in press content about these exhibitions, with 'Make Do and Mend' used to communicate key themes about mending and longevity due to its cultural familiarity.[12] Some academic research projects also seek to draw parallels between 'Make Do and Mend' and contemporary sustainability as a way of enhancing the impact of research that reframes how we care for our clothes today. Such work includes the 'Make, Do and Mend' project at Sheffield Hallam University, which drew on the familiarity of the phrase and the informational remit of the original scheme in its exploration of methods to reinvigorate "community-based approaches to the repair of clothing".[13]

The use of 'Make Do and Mend' as a shorthand for practices of repair and remaking in popular culture is a trend that seems to have increased in prominence since the 1990s. This is likely because the growing distance from the Second World War allowed discussions of 'Make Do and Mend' to transition from a narrow focus on the named government scheme towards its use as a broader umbrella term for wider mending behaviours that were often unrelated to the official materials and activities of the scheme.[14] During this same period, 'Make Do and Mend' has continued to be conspicuous by its absence in broader histories of the Second World War.

[8] https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/how-arts-and-crafts-influenced-fashion

[9] Cunningham, *Reforming Fashion*, 11-12.

[10] https://obby.co.uk/classes/crafts/sewing/beginners-make-do-and-mend-alteration-workshop-1521053265

[11] *Thirsty for Fashion,* Killerton Hall. 11 February – 5 November 2023.

[12] https://www.theexeterdaily.co.uk/news/local-news/killerton%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98make-do-and-mend%E2%80%99-circular-fashion-exhibition-celebrate-sustainable

[13] https://www.shu.ac.uk/art-design-media-research-centre/archive/make-do-mend#:~:text='Make%2C%2Do%2and%20Mend'%20is%20an%20interdisciplinary%20research%20project,Material%20and%20Engineering%20Research%2Institute.

[14] One of the first examples of this is its use as a categorising term for oral history responses about mending in Wood's 1989 book *We Wore What We'd Got*.

While texts focusing on fashion history tend to cover the scheme as part of discussions on wartime government programmes, cultural, social, and political histories of the conflict largely do not. This is likely a reflection both of their authors' assessment of its limited relevance to larger narratives and its diminutive presence in the historical record.[15]

To understand the scheme's outsized cultural legacy and the enduring appeal of 'Make Do and Mend' as shorthand for a longing to return to a time when people owned fewer clothes, wore them for longer, and cared, repaired, and recycled them, it helps to think of nostalgia as a grounding force that can bring a sense of coherence and control to an increasingly complicated and frightening world.[16]

In the British cultural imagination, 'Make Do and Mend' is synonymous with ideas of collective sacrifice and resourcefulness in the face of wartime crisis and is connected to a broader cultural nostalgia for a moment in time when Britain, a small underdog nation, fought bravely in a righteous conflict.

But this is, in many ways, a problematic and flawed social memory, based on an imperial and deeply class-based understanding of the Second World War.

[15] For example, Howell's detailed volume *Wartime Fashion* offers a comprehensive outline of the scheme.

[16] Wilson, *Nostalgia*, 8.

While the British wartime coalition government did much to promote fair shares for all and equality of sacrifice for the war effort, the class structure of society inevitably meant that inequality persisted. For example, those with large wardrobes and high-quality clothes before the war had many more garments to fall back on when rationing was introduced compared to those who had never been able to afford many clothes, even if everyone had the same rations.[17] The persistent presence of the black market also disproportionately benefitted those with the largest disposable incomes. Furthermore, Britain was not an island nation that stood alone against the Nazis. In 1939, it still had a large empire and many people from those colonized countries fought for Britain, while the nation relied heavily on material resources from across the empire.[18] As such, the idea that the British Isles fought alone in the early years of the war overlooks the nation's deep global connections and resources.

The desire to connect behaviours during the dark and frightening times of the Second World War with the unstable and uncertain future we face under the threat of climate change repeats a broader pattern of British cultural nostalgia for war on the 1940s home front. As Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson have argued, the Second World War remains "potent and present" in British popular culture.[19] Its persistence as source material for everything from graphic design to TV dramas means that many British people still feel a connection to, and an understanding of, wartime experiences, even if they did not live through them.[20] This has particular implications for the way many women who consume these narratives understand their individual responsibilities in relation to sustainable fashion. Women are generally represented "as nurturers, as the moral guardians of the home, domesticity and, ultimately, the nation" in the stories we tell about the conflict, and this can encourage women who consume and identify with these narratives to consider how they can draw inspiration from the individual sacrifices of the wartime home front to combat the external threats of today.[21]

Such cultural nostalgia is a potential source for social good. In his influential book *The Myth of the Blitz*, Angus Calder concluded that the types of clarified national narratives that result from acts of collective myth-making can be a force for positive social change, as exemplified by the sense of collective responsibility that was used to unite British people behind the establishment of the National Health Service in the aftermath of the Second World War.[22] While this has potential applications for the types of collective action required to address issues of sustainability, such simplifying narratives also risk creating narrow and insular perspectives that fail to account for the multifaceted and international nature of the contemporary fashion industry.

[17] Howell, *Wartime Fashion*, 97.

[18] Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire.*

[19] Noakes and Pattinson, "Introduction: Keep Calm and Carry On", 2.

[20] Bramall, "Memory, Meaning and Multidirectionality", 196.

[21] Noakes, *War and the British*, 165.

[22] Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, 272.

This paper argues that looking beyond the comfort of cultural nostalgia to understand a more fulsome history of Britain in the 1940s is vital to prevent proponents of sustainable fashion from reconstructing the same racist and class-based structures that permeated the past.

Taking an individual, rather than systems-led, approach to slow fashion excludes many people and processes from the narrative. The types of individual consumer solutions modelled on 'Make Do and Mend' tend to focus on environmental sustainability and resource use, ignoring the breadth of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, which also encompass health, wellbeing, employment, and an end to poverty.[23] Recent research conducted by a team from the Goa Institute of Management and the University of Leeds has highlighted how implementing policies that provide solutions to some of the UN Sustainable Development Goals – such as promoting slow fashion and a circular economy – have the potential to cause harm and limit progress towards others. For example, the dramatic decline of fashion consumption in the West in the early months of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic led to retailers cancelling orders. This negatively impacted many people in India whose livelihoods rely on the cotton supply chain.[24] Subsequent research communicating these findings to British consumers highlighted that there are clear disconnects between perceptions of what is considered sustainable to different people in different places, depending on the nature of their interaction with the fashion industry.[25]

[23] https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/

[24] https://modernslaverypec.org/assets/downloads/Research-summary-India-fashion-supply-chains.pdf

[25] https://soundcloud.com/leedsunibschool/cotton-hidden-voices-stories-from-the-makers-of-your-clothes?in=leedsunibschool/sets/modern-slavery

If this type of consumer-centric understanding of sustainability is a problem today, it follows that it is necessary to consider the relationship between historic production and consumption if we are to use the past to find inspiration for sustainable futures that benefit multiple stakeholders from different parts of the fashion industry.

This paper will therefore examine the impacts of 'Make Do and Mend' within the broader context of the Second World War government regulation of fashion production and consumption.

INTRODUCING THE 'MAKE DO AND MEND' SCHEME AND SECOND WORLD WAR REGULATION

Today, the phrase 'Make Do and Mend' is widely used to refer to a broad set of conditions and behaviours that emerged from the material shortages and resulting government policies of Second World War-era Britain. To understand how these ideas could inspire contemporary sustainable practices, it is necessary to unpack what 'Make Do and Mend' actually was, why it was initiated, how it related to broader government regulations and policies, and how members of the public interacted with it.

The early months of the Second World War saw a sharp increase in the price of clothing. This was largely the result of shortages of cloth as many production facilities were repurposed for wartime use. In April 1940, the British government introduced the 'Limitation of Supply Orders' to control the flow of raw materials to textile producers and prevent bidding wars for raw materials, but this had limited impact on inflation. As early as October 1940, Parliament received reports that the price of wool was around 20 per cent higher than pre-war levels, and yarns and cloths, which were not subject to the price controls of wool, cost between 60 and 100 per cent more.[26]

[26] Brown, *CC41,* 14.

Further official attempts were made to try and stabilize prices through the introduction of new purchase taxes in October 1940 to suppress consumer demand, but these also failed to bring inflation under control, and the cost of clothing rose much faster than other prices during 1941.[27] More dramatic interventions were required. Clothes rationing was announced on June 1, 1941, as an interventionist policy to further control demand and prevent the sense of unfairness that resulted from price rises during the First World War , when many resented that the impact of the war was felt unevenly across society, with the poorest bearing the brunt.[28]

By 1941, it was already clear that rationing alone would not solve this issue of fairness. The system benefitted those who could afford to buy more expensive garments, which were usually better quality and lasted longer, while there was a continuing shortage of inexpensive but decent-quality clothing. To address this situation, it was necessary for the government to involve itself not just in regulating consumer demand, but also in the business of fashion production. In June 1941, they set up the Directorate of Civilian Clothing. Its key remit was to ensure "adequate supplies of clothing, and in particular working-class clothing, were available to the population".[29]

One of the most significant solutions landed upon by the directorate was the introduction of two new pieces of legislation to accompany rationing. The first were the 'Utility Apparel Orders', which regulated the supply of cloth to manufacturers and profit margins at different stages of the supply chain between 1941 and 1952. The second were the 'Making of Civilian Clothing (Restrictions) Orders', which limited the design and embellishment of clothing between 1942 and 1946.[30] The government used these complex and evolving sets of legislation in tandem with rationing as mechanisms to regulate both the production and retail of clothing as the nation struggled with increasing shortages and supply issues throughout the war and the years of austerity that followed.

These regulations required cooperation from both producers and consumers. As the war dragged on, there were growing fears that public morale and willingness to contribute to the war effort would fade. This was exacerbated by ever-growing shortages, which led to further cuts to the clothes ration and the disappearance of certain items, such as waterproof rubber shoes that relied on imports of rubber from Malaya — a supply that dried up after the country fell to Japan in 1942.

[27] Sladen, *Conscription of Fashion*, 97.

[28] Reynolds, "Your Clothes are the Materials of War", 329.

[29] Brown, *CC41*, 25.

[30] The National Archives, BT 64/835.

In the face of these challenges, the government sought to promote a sense of collective unity while also finding ways to discourage consumption by encouraging people to prolong the life of their clothes. In July 1941, the Board of Trade published a paper entitled *Extension of the Life of Clothing – A Preliminary Investigation into Possibilities*, which noted the need for a campaign promoting certain practices related to caring for clothing amongst organizations such as the Women's Institute and the Women's Group on Public Welfare. The report particularly identified the need for classes to teach sewing skills, the organization of activities such as materials swaps, and a general publicity campaign.[31]

The resulting government 'Make Do and Mend' scheme was launched in the September 1942, although the Women's Voluntary Service had started running 'Make Do and Mend' parties as early as September 1941.[32] While technically an official scheme, the government provided minimal support as the Board of Trade believed it was best carried out by voluntary organizations. Official support instead came from the Board of Education, which promoted classes and provided instructors, and the Ministry of Information, which produced publicity materials that served as morale-boosting propaganda.[33] Much of the scheme's promotional material came in the form of posters and instructional leaflets with titles such as *Look After Your Woollens*.[34] These gave factual information about mending and altering clothes as well as caring for them – most importantly, by avoiding much-dreaded moths. The materials were also visually appealing, with illustrations and layout reminiscent of popular women's magazines of the time. The same design scheme was also used to produce standardized signage and posters for classes and sessions organized by the various voluntary organizations, with spaces left for additional information about times and dates to be added at a local level.[35]

ASSESSING THE REACH AND LIMITATIONS OF THE 'MAKE DO AND MEND' SCHEME

This coordinated graphic design scheme helped provide a sense of coherence to what was a rather uneven and fragmented collection of local activities. Its legacy in museum collections and visual depictions of the war has served to exaggerate the impact of the scheme on public behaviour, suggesting it was ubiquitous and widely engaged with.

[30] The National Archives, BT 64/835.

[31] Reynolds, 'Your Clothes are the Materials of War', 330.

[32] Howell, *Wartime Fashion,* 135.

[33] Howell, *Wartime Fashion,* 137-139.

[34] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1502006467

[35] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/32238

In this regard, it is not unlike the Ministry of Information's famous 'Keep Calm and Carry On' poster, which was rarely displayed during the war but has been widely distributed since its rediscovery in 2000 and is often cited as an example of the strength of British stoicism in the face of the conflict.[36] In reality, 'Make Do and Mend' was not a scheme aimed at the entire population. Its primary audience was a relatively narrow segment of predominantly middle-class women.

'Make Do and Mend' materials almost exclusively feature women and girls. Where men appear, it is only ever in passive supporting roles, having things made or mended for them. Women are presented as tidy, slim and well-dressed, caring for children and their homes.[37] At the heart of this gendered presentation is the scheme's mascot, Mrs. Sew and Sew, a female rag doll who wears an apron and appears to be the ideal housewife archetype.[38] Although domestic sewing was extremely gendered during this period, particularly within heterosexual family units, Mass Observation diaries kept during the Second World War suggest that a number of men began to sew and mend for themselves during this time due to a shortage of domestic labour and the need to prolong the lives of their clothes.[39] This trend is not at all acknowledged in 'Make Do and Mend' materials, and there are no male-directed equivalents of the leaflets entitled *Useful Jobs That Girls Can Do – To Help Win the War.*[40]

Most classes and printed material targeted individuals with little experience of mending or remaking. As design historian Alison Slater has found in her oral history research, this means 'Make Do and Mend' did not have a large impact on working class communities, who already made do and mended out of necessity, and therefore had little to learn from the basic skills taught by the scheme.[41] This is further evidenced by the content of the official materials. Their instructional focus on how to launder and maintain different types of materials, for example, indicates they were aimed at an audience who previously had the resources to outsource such labour to housekeepers or laundry services.[42] Many materials specifically appealed to women with families and time for recreational sewing. One leaflet with instructions for making slippers out of scraps recommends the reader can produce them "for the whole family," and a British Pathé newsreel, produced in conjunction with the Ministry of Information, sets a cast of old, disused clothes in conversation with a middle-aged mother about how she might adapt them for use by her family.[43]

[36] Walker, *Home Front Posters*, 45.

[37] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1502006222

[38] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/27972

[39] Mass Observation, Diarist 5103.

[40] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/41376

[41] Slater, "Teenage fashion and respectability".

[42] Ministry of Information, *Make Do and Mend.*

[43] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/41376; https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/65627/

This film, which would have been shown before the main feature in a cinema, opens with a family seated around a table and an adolescent girl grumbling about the shortage of clothes coupons. In response, a series of disembodied garments enter, providing helpful suggestions as to what useful new items they could be transformed into. The responsibility for this transformation is clearly directed at the mother. Upon protesting: "But I've never turned a pair of trousers into a skirt in my life," the woman is promptly instructed to take herself to a local 'Make Do and Mend' class. The film ends with a further suggestion that learning this new skill could even be a pleasurable social activity: "why not get together with your friends… you can all help each other."

The middle-class, social nature of 'Make Do and Mend' groups is further evidenced by the documentary images of London County Council classes, commissioned on behalf of the Ministry of Information. The women featured in the photographs are largely middle-aged. They are well dressed in the latest styles and there is a clear, convivial social atmosphere conveyed through their body language.[44] One of these photographs (see *Figure 1*) shows a fashion parade, where class participants can be seen proudly modelling their creations to friends and family. While this appears to be a fun and celebratory occasion, it is notable that the garments shown are largely poorly made, suggesting that participants held little previous sewing knowledge and have not managed to become accomplished seamstresses as a result of the class.[45] Furthermore, although some of the garments do demonstrate the ethos of remaking old clothes to fulfil a material need, others seem to be impractical. While Mrs. Hill, second from the front, wears a sensible skirt remodelled from a pair of postman's trousers, Mrs. Johnson in the foreground has remodelled her old wedding dress by adding pink and white silk fabric. The overall effect of this outfit is novel but certainly not practical, and it seems unlikely that Mrs. Johnson will wear this piece often as part of her regular wartime wardrobe.

While it makes sense that Ministry-commissioned photographs would tend towards presenting a glamourized view of 'Make Do and Mend' for promotional purposes, this outfit offers support to the numerous concerned internal reports of government funded 'Make Do and Mend' classes that criticized the use of public money for teaching skills like decorative embroidery, rather than more functional skills like darning holes.[46] Such surviving archival materials suggest that, from the perspective of upskilling a broad group of the general British populace and making material changes to the way people cared for and reused their clothes, the scheme had a limited impact.

[44] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205199899

[45] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205199900

[46] Reynolds, 'Your Clothes are the Materials of War', 332.

Figure 1 Photograph of a fashion show at a 'Mend and Make Do' dressmaking class in London in 1943. Imperial War Museum (D 12897).

THE EMOTIONAL APPLICATIONS OF 'MAKE DO AND MEND'

Materials produced to promote 'Make Do and Mend' undermine the idea that the scheme was about finding a straightforward solution to issues of shortages.

The impact of 'Make Do and Mend' is, perhaps, better understood as fulfilling an emotional, rather than material, need.

Although rationing and government regulation of the fashion industry were extremely effective in stabilizing prices and fashion supply chains, they were undeniably top-down structures, imposing limitations on an often-unwilling public. 'Make Do and Mend' was part of a broader system of information campaigns devised by the government to help individuals feel like they had some agency over their consumption of goods and services.[47] Through this, they performed a vital role in helping raise morale and bind society together under a narrative of collective sacrifice.

[47] Slocombe, *British Posters*.

Although clothes were in short supply during the Second World War, fashion still played important psychological, emotional, and symbolic roles in people's lives. For some, engaging in mending and remaking provided a much-needed creative outlet. Even during a period of intense shortages, sewers derived pleasure from challenging their sewing skills.[48] For others, 'Make Do and Mend' helped provide for deeper emotional needs. Many people faced great uncertainty, with loved ones serving in faraway places and the continual threat of aerial bombing in cities. Faced with a discombobulating awareness of the fragility of day-to-day life, making and remaking textile objects offered a grounding and reassuring practice. Several 'Make Do and Mend' materials catered to this desire to create a cozy and comforting home environment; for example, by promoting making cushion covers and "snug" slippers.[49] Information leaflets and booklets particularly promoted acts of making that emphasized the normalcy of family relationships, such as encouraging mothers to sew stuffed cloth "mother and baby" elephant dolls out of leftover fabric scraps.[50]

The power of these acts of making is best understood through the long history of women using sewing as a tool to mediate and establish relationships, as well as to preserve and record memories.[51] In the emotionally turbulent wartime years, remaking old textiles that were imbued with memories and gifting them provided a means of both recording and processing memories.[52]

[48] Bide, "Signs of Wear", 461.

[49] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/41376

[50] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205195785

[51] Dolan and Holloway, 'Emotional Textiles', 155.

[52] Bide, 'In Their Shoes'.

This can be seen in the way people kept their 'Make Do and Mend' creations as treasured possessions long after the war ended, even gifting them to museums to preserve for future generations.[53] It is also evident in the choice of gifts people made for each other, such as a 1945 lingerie set made from recycled silk escape maps.[54] This set was made by a professional seamstress but commissioned by the RAF serviceman who had been issued these escape maps while on active duty. Although silk was extremely hard to come by and therefore a highly desirable fabric at the time, the reuse of these maps in this context was clearly not just about material shortages. The serviceman who commissioned the set for his girlfriend perhaps hoped that this gift could act as both a souvenir and a form of emotional communication of his wartime experience.

PERFORMING PATRIOTISM AND SELLING PRODUCTS

Fashion plays an important role in the negotiation of an individual's place within a collective social identity.[55] There is a long history of the use of dress to express allegiance to political groups or opinions, such as the wearing of suffragette jewellery or the adoption of the recognizably working-class fustian jacket by the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor.[56] In Britain, people used the reuse and recycling of old materials to perform a public display of patriotic sacrifice in both the First and Second World Wars.

Lucie Whitmore's research demonstrates that, while middle- and upper-class women may not have experienced actual deprivation when it came to fashion during the First World War as there was no rationing in place, and they were largely able to continue to consume despite inflation, there was a tangible change in attitudes towards spending habits, luxury goods, and what constituted extravagance. Many women responded by making a show of reusing old fabric and remaking garments, highlighting their contribution to the war effort by saving materials.[57] This resulted in a popular trend for "scrap fashions," as evidenced both in women's magazine articles from the period and in surviving clothes that proudly display alterations incorporating a large number of different, sometimes mismatched materials joined together with amateur stitching.[58]

This visible show of reuse is also apparent in the popular patchwork styles of the Second World War. Patchwork was an attractive way of combining fabric scraps and therefore reusing old materials, but it also provided a recognizable shorthand for the act of recycling and a way of showing off one's sewing skills.

[53] Dress made from bedspread material, 1944. Museum of London, 77.122/3.

[54] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30115129

[55] Crane, "Fashion and its Social Agendas".

[56] Goring, "Suffragette Jewellery in Britain"; Clarke, "Fustian Jackets".

[57] Whitmore, "Fashion Narratives of the First World War".

[58] Ibid.

As one 'Make Do and Mend' advert promised, making a patchwork garment could make you the "centre of attention".[59] Patchwork became symbolic of wartime struggle, both in Britain and beyond, exemplified by the Dutch fashions for *nationale bevrijdingsrok*, or national liberation skirts, which used patchworks of old fabrics to symbolize the hope that the nation could come together and rebuild something new from the broken past.[60] The significance of these patchwork objects for the construction of their makers and wearers identities is further confirmed by the fact that many were kept as souvenirs of war, reminding people of their participation in this extraordinary historical event.[61]

Professionals and retailers also took part in this performative austerity, such as a dressmaker who displayed a beautifully executed patchwork housecoat in their shop window to promote both their patriotism and their skills to potential clients.[62] Larger retailers also capitalized on the positive associations of remaking and reuse to promote their brands and stores. The department store Marshall and Snelgrove displayed unusual and creative 'Make Do and Mend' garments, reportedly including a sun dress made from silk escape maps of China.[63] While these items were not for sale, presumably the store hoped they would foster positive associations and interest in their merchandise, ultimately generating sales of unrelated items. Leach-Way paper pattern manufacturers similarly used 'Make Do and Mend' to promote their products by producing leaflets with information about how to update old clothes. While the leaflets were presented as a charitable act in support of the war effort and do not directly sell Leach-Way patterns, there is little doubt the firm was at least partly motivated by a desire to improve their brand image with the goal to stimulate future consumption in more prosperous times.

Although 'Make Do and Mend' was supposedly about reusing what an individual already had, it was still used to sell fashionable goods, and the growth of home sewing and mending during the 1940s offered opportunities for business.

[59] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1502017681

[60] Withuis, "Patchwork Politics".

[61] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30081017

[62] Quilted housecoat, 1943. *Fashion on the Ration exhibition*, 2015, Imperial War Museum.

[63] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30082112

Many retailers found 'Make Do and Mend' a useful and lucrative tool for driving haberdashery sales. Trading reports from department stores during the war show that increased promotional attention was given to sewing materials and sundries in place of ready-made fashion displays as a result of the shortage of ready-made clothing.[64] The push for home sewing was supported by the government through coordinated national 'Sewing Week' campaigns, where stores ran promotions encouraging home sewing through large displays and demonstration events, using slogans such as "Sew, Save and Be Smart." These displays clearly aimed to stimulate desire for new fashion-related products, rather than to encourage people to mend and recycle clothes they already owned. Displays featured tag lines, such as "Sewing puts fashion within everywoman's reach", accompanied by issues of the latest *Vogue* magazines, paper patterns for new garments, and an array of new fabrics and trimmings to tempt customers (see *Figure 2*).

Figure 2 Sewing Week window display by A. Lindons (Drapers) Ltd, London. ***Display Magazine***, February 1944, p. 30. Author's collection.

[64] Plant and Fowler, *Report on Department Store Trading*.

Looking again at how 'Make Do and Mend' was used by individuals and businesses to perform patriotism through public displays of sacrifice whilst also driving sales of new products demonstrates that wartime shortages and upheavals did not diminish people's compulsion to participate in fashion or find fulfilment through acts of consumption.

These desires are also apparent in Mass Observation diaries, in which people from a range of backgrounds and locations discuss their desire for, and pursuit of, fashionable fulfilment through a range of methods, from remaking second-hand clothing to shopping on the black market. Such accounts make clear that, while participating in 'Make Do and Mend' classes and broader cultures of remaking did fulfil a range of emotional needs during the 1940s, they were not enough by themselves to make a material impact on consumption.

GOVERNMENT REGULATION AND SYSTEM-LEVEL CHANGE

Consumption patterns and the way people used fashion did change during the 1940s, but this was primarily because of the impact of government regulations that compelled consumers and the fashion industry to make those changes. It is well documented that rationing limited consumption and encouraged people to buy better quality garments; however, the impact of regulations governing the production of fashion on the way people bought and used clothes is not as well understood.

To qualify as a participant in the government 'Utility' scheme, which guaranteed the supply of cloth to clothing manufacturers so they could continue production despite wartime shortages, manufacturers needed to meet certain criteria.

The 'Utility' scheme specified that production runs of each style should exceed 1,000 items, whereas before the war the industry average was approximately 100.[65] Government restrictions on design simplified garment styling, particularly by reducing trimmings on womenswear, which made a wider range of clothing more suitable for adaptation to the mass-production methods developed in men's tailoring during the interwar period.[66] These changes encouraged a concentration of the industry, reducing the number of small independent factories and prompting many businesses to invest in purpose-built facilities.[67]

The new and expanded factories were better placed to invest in modern machinery. This helped standardize production by automating some processes that were previously done by hand, often with the result of improving overall garment quality.[68] Some large manufacturers also invested in new testing facilities, such as Marks and Spencer, whose industry-leading textile testing laboratory collaborated with the British government during the war to share new processes that would improve durability, dye fastness and consistency in production.[69] By 1947, it was the mass producers who had invested in new machines and technologies, rather than traditionally trained dressmakers and tailors, who were praised by the British Standards Institute as setting the highest standards in ready-to-wear.[70] These trends continued for at least a decade after the end of the war. As Margaret Wray stated in her comprehensive 1957 study of the British clothing industry: "There has been a post-war technical revolution which can be attributed largely to the impact of war-time trading conditions and government controls."[71]

The 'Utility' scheme additionally specified that participating manufacturers should meet minimum specifications relating to "garment measurements, sewings, seams and labels."[72] Initially, adherence to these standards was by no means universal and poorly policed. In 1945 and 1946 there were vocal concerns in the industry about the poor quality of some Utility garments.[73] However, the war also brought new mechanisms for ensuring standards were met. In 1942, the government officially recognized the British Standards Institute as the single issuer of national standards, and by 1949 the organization had made progress implementing new minimum quality standards for certain types of ready-made clothing, embedding state intervention into the fashion industry for the long-term benefit of British consumers.[74]

[65] Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions*, 28.

[66] Wray, *The Women's Outerwear Industry,* 52.

[67] Ibid, 55.

[68] Bide, "London Leads the World".

[69] *Marks and Spencer Staff Training News Bulletin,* November 1948.

[70] *Draper's Record,* 13 December 1947, 18-19.

[71] Wray, *The Women's Outerwear Industry,* 60.

[72] *Draper's Record,* 6 April 1946, 16.

[73] *Fashions and Fabrics*, February 1946, 28-29.

[74] *Draper's Record,* 5 March 1949, 19 and 13 December 1949, 18.

Much of the 'Utility' scheme's success in producing affordable clothing of a consistent quality can be attributed to the cooperation of government and manufacturers for their mutual benefit. Businesses knew there was a guaranteed market for the 'Utility' clothing they made, ensuring a good return despite strict government controls on profit margins.[75] As a result, manufacturers were keen to participate and adopt the new technologies, standardized processes, and quality control procedures championed by the government. In turn, consumers developed greater trust in clothes labels as a marker of quality and source of information.[76]

CONCLUSION: LESSONS FROM THE PAST AND THE NEED FOR SYSTEMS-LEVEL CHANGE

This paper has demonstrated that the official government 'Make Do and Mend' scheme was less well-known and less impactful on consumer behaviour than popular exhibitions and histories about Second World War fashion might suggest. The gendered and classed nature of 'Make Do and Mend' also limited its impact by excluding many people who could have benefitted from expanding their sewing skills. Indeed, Mass Observation data indicates that creative dressmaking actually fell during the war.[77] It is highly likely that the promotion of sewing in the 1944 Education Act was more effective in creating long-term improvements to the nation's skill levels due to its wide reach across class boundaries, even though boys were still excluded from learning advanced sewing skills.

Instead, this paper suggests that government regulation, and in particular rationing, had a far greater impact on the number of people recycling and reusing clothes. This is because rationing placed hard limits on consumption, rather than nudging consumers to change their behaviour. As rationing eased and the buyers' market returned to the fashion industry in the late 1940s, consumer behaviour shifted back towards a pre-war normality. While there was undeniably an increase in mending, reuse, and repurposing of clothing during the war, this reduced consumption was temporary and did not result in significant or sustained long term behavioural change. For example, Mass Observation surveys from 1947 demonstrate that while restrictions temporarily changed some aspects of consumer behaviour, the majority of respondents longed for a return to a state where it was possible to consume freely and make impulse purchases of clothes.[78]

[75] *Draper's Record,* 2 August 1947, 15-16

[76] Bide, "London Leads the World"

[77] Mass Observation, FR 3085.

[78] Mass Observation, FR 2502.

It is likely that the greatest impact of 'Make Do and Mend' itself was as a tool to boost morale, providing an outlet for creativity and fashionable aspiration whilst also helping people feel that they were contributing to the war effort.

These findings have implications for us today due to the way that 'Make Do and Mend' is held up as a model of how individual behavioural changes can provide a solution to issues of sustainability. This paper instead suggests that interventionist government regulation during the Second World War may provide a better model for creating sustainable change by tackling the issue at a systems-level rather than placing responsibility for change upon individuals.

The systems-level changes caused by wartime regulations, such as the 'Utility' scheme, demonstrate that these interventions were effective because they balanced the impacts felt by various stakeholders. Recycling and reduced consumption of new products ran alongside a regulated mass-production system in which workers were fairly compensated and had secure employment thanks to the sellers' market that ensured consistent production. The reduction in the number of jobs available in the fashion industry during the war was mitigated by full employment, caused by the surge in other types of war work. While wealthier consumers saw an impact on their consumption habits, others, particularly young working-class women with jobs and without the responsibilities of care, found themselves with more disposable income and better-quality, ready-to-wear clothes at their disposal.

Despite the proven efficacy of mass government regulation at reducing fashion consumption, it is not considered a realistic solution to create a more sustainable fashion industry today.

This is due to multiple factors, including the significant importance of the fashion industry as a driver for economic growth and the complexity of global commodity chains, but also because fashion consumption is so intimately linked to ideas of free self-expression. Second World War-era restrictions were broadly accepted and adhered to because enough people believed that they were a necessary sacrifice to overcome a more significant threat to their way of life, and that this sacrifice was equal among everyone. While there are clear contemporary parallels to the external threat of climate change, it is striking that there is little discussion today of how to combat this threat in a way that balances the impact equitably. The focus on creating a circular economy through individual acts of recycling and reuse provides a façade of responsible consumption for Western consumers but ignores its impact on the many people engaged in the global supply chain who rely on garment work. If we are serious about building a more sustainable fashion industry, we must recognize that history shows us the necessity of understanding ourselves as part of a bigger fashion system, not as individuals.

Works Cited

Auerbach George, H., Stenton, M., Kapsali, V., Blackburn, R.S., and Houghton, J.A. "Referencing Historical Practices and Emergent Technologies in the Future Development of Sustainable Textiles: A Case Study Exploring 'Ardil', a UK-Based Regenerated Protein Fibre." *Sustainability* 14, no. 4 (2022): 8414.

Auerbach George, H., Tregenza, L., Stenton, M. Kapsali, V., Blackburn, R.S., and Houghton, J. A. "Challenging Perceptions of Fast and Slow in Contemporary Fashion: A Review of the Paper Dresses Trend in the United Kingdom and the United States during the 1960s." *International Journal of Sustainable Fashion & Textiles* 2, no. 1 (2023): 29-52.

Barkawi, T. *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II* (2017): Cambridge University Press.

Bide, B., Halbert, J., and Tregenza, L. "Introduction: Negotiating the Everyday." In Bide, Halbert & Tregenza (Eds.), *Everyday Fashion: Interpreting British Clothing Since 1600* (2023): Bloomsbury Publishing.

Bide, B. "Signs of Wear: Encountering Memory in the Worn Materiality of a Museum Fashion Collection." *Fashion Theory* 21, no. 4 (2017): 449-476.

Bide, B. "In Their Shoes: Using Fashion Objects to Explore the Duration and Complexity of Wartime Experiences." *Critical Military Studies* 7, no. 4 (2021): 418-434.

Bide, B. "London Leads the World: The Reinvention of London Fashion in the Aftermath of the Second World War." *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 3 (2020): 349-369.

Boydell, C. *Horrockses Fashions: Off the Peg Style in the 50s and 60s.* (2012): V&A.

Bramall, R. "Memory, Meaning and Multidirectionality: 'Remembering' Austerity Britain." In Noakes & Pattinson (Eds.), *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (2014): 195-211. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Brown, M. *CC41 Utility Clothing: The Label that Transformed Britain.* (2014): Sabrestorm Publishing.

Calder, A. *The Myth of the Blitz.* (1992): Pimlico.

Clarke, V. "Fustian Jackets, Unshorn Chins, Blistered Hands': Fabric and Political Feeling in the Chartist Movement". *Everyday Fashion: Interpreting British Clothing Since 1600* (Bide, Halbert, and Tregenza, Eds.). (2023): 1837-1848. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Crane, D. *Fashion and its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing.* (2000): University of Chicago Press.

Cunningham, P. *Reforming Fashion, 1850-1914: Politics, Health and Art.* (2003): Kent State University Press.

Dolan, A., and Holloway, S. "Emotional Textiles: An Introduction." *TEXTILE* 14, no. 2 (2016): 152–159.

Fletcher, K. "Slow Fashion: An Invitation for Systems Change." *Fashion Practice* 2, no. 2 (2010): 259-266.

Goring, E.S. "Suffragette Jewellery in Britain." *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850 - the Present* 26, (2002): 84–99.

Holroyd, A.T., Farley Gordon, J., and Hill, C. *Historical Perspectives on Sustainable Fashion: Inspiration for Change,* second edition. (2023): Bloomsbury.

Howell, G. *Wartime Fashion: From Haute Couture to Homemade,* 1939-1945. (2013): Bloomsbury.

Ministry of Information. *Make Do and Mend.* (1943): London: HMSO.

Noakes, L. *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity.* (1998): IB Tauris

Noakes, L., and Pattinson, J. "'Keep Calm and Carry On': The Cultural Memory of the Second World War in Britian." *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (Noakes and Pattinson, Eds.). (2014): 1-24. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Plant, A. and Fowler, R. *Report on Department Store Trading.* (1950): Retail Distributors Association.

Reynolds, H. "Your Clothes are Materials of War." *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Burman and Barbara, Eds.). (1999): Berg.

Sladen, C. *The Conscription of Fashion: Utility Cloth Clothing and Footwear* 1941-1952 (1995): Scholar Press.

Slater, A. "Teenage Fashion and Respectability: Negotiating the Culture Clashes of Young Working-class Women's Dress in Post War Lancashire." Unpublished paper, *The Look of Austerity Conference*. (2015): 11-12. Museum of London.

Slater, D. *Consumer Culture & Modernity*. (1997): Polity.

Slocombe, R. *British Posters of the Second World War*. (2010): Imperial War Museum.

Turner, N. *Clothing Goes to War: Creativity Inspired by Scarcity in World War II*. (2022): Intellect.

Walker, S. *Home Front Posters of the Second World War*. (2012): Shire.

Wilson, J. *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*. (2014): University of Minnesota Press.

Withuis, J. Patchwork Politics in the Netherlands, 1946-50: Women, Gender and the World War II trauma. *Women's History Review* 3, no. 3 (1994): 293-313.

Whitmore, L. *Fashion Narratives of the First World War*. Unpublished PhD thesis. (2019): University of Glasgow.

Wood, M. *We Wore What We'd Got: Women's Clothes in World War II*. (1989): Warwickshire Books.

Wray, M. *The Women's Outerwear Industry*. (1957): G. Duckworth.

Author Bio

Bethan Bide is a design historian with an interest in the business histories of fashion, the role of fashion in museums, the development of fashion cities, and the relationship between materiality, memory and fashion as biography. As Lecturer in Design and Cultural Theory at the University of Leeds she has worked on research projects with a number of different partners from the cultural and heritage sector to produce exhibitions and educational and outreach activities. Most recently, this includes collaborating with the Museum of London on the exhibition Fashion City: How Jewish Londoners Shaped Global Style. Prior to joining the University, Bethan worked as a researcher and producer of comedy programmes for BBC Radio 4. Bethan is currently Director of the Pasold Research Fund.

Article Citations

MLA • Bide, Bethan. "Learning from the Past: Why the Second World War 'Make Do and Mend' Scheme Provides a Poor Model for the Future of Sustainable Fashion." *Fashioning Sustainment*, special issue of *Fashion Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2024, 1-27. 10.38055/FST030104.

APA • Bide, B. (2024). Learning from the Past: Why the Second World War 'Make Do and Mend' Scheme Provides a Poor Model for the Future of Sustainable Fashion. *Fashioning Sustainment*, special issue of *Fashion Studies*, 3(1), 1-27. 10.38055/FST030104.

Chicago • Bide, Bethan. "Learning from the Past: Why the Second World War 'Make Do and Mend' Scheme Provides a Poor Model for the Future of Sustainable Fashion." *Fashioning Sustainment*, special issue of *Fashion Studies* 3, no. 1 (2024): 1-27. 10.38055/FST030104.

ISSN 2371-3453