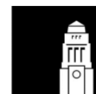
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À la Mode in Maesteg: The Fashion Cultures of South Wales Garment Factories, 1945–1965

Bethan Bide

There are certain places where we do – and, conversely, where we do not – expect to find fashion. We expect to find this season's hemlines in evidence along New York's Fifth Avenue and its handbags gracing arms on the Boulevard Saint Germain in Paris. In Britain people have historically looked to the West End of London to measure the temperature of emerging trends. The fashionable dominance of the West End can be traced to a number of factors through time, varying in importance as technologies of fashion manufacture and dissemination have changed. These include London's role as the location of the Royal Court, its connections to international trade and migration, its high concentration of skilled makers of clothing and accessories, and its sheer size and wealth.[1] It is not, therefore, a particular surprise to find London and Londoners represented in histories of British fashion. When the curators of the Victoria and Albert Museum's 2019 *Mary Quant* exhibition issued a call for people to come forward with their memories of wearing Quant's designs, responses from a large number of women from West London, not too far from the Kings Road location of Quant's Bazaar boutique, were to be expected. Less expected was the emergence of another geographical concentration of responses, hailing not from an urban metropole, but from the industrial towns of the South Wales Valleys.[2]

Although the Valleys may not be front of mind when plotting fashion on a map of the British Isles, they played an important role as manufacturing centres for the garment trades in the second half of the twentieth century, and their omission from fashion histories betrays a

tendency to locate the practice of fashion in places where it is designed and sold, rather than where it is made. While Mary Quant's name is synonymous with 'Swinging London', her 'Ginger Group' label clothes were made in conjunction with Steinberg & Sons Ltd., at their factory just outside of Pontypridd, Wales.[3]

Exploring the processes by which unassuming Welsh towns such as Pontypridd became sites at the forefront of youth fashion consumption requires a re-examination of the role of making practices in the everyday production of fashion cultures. Between the 1940s and the 1980s garment making boomed in industrial South Wales, and with it grew new local fashion cultures as inhabitants gained increased access to both material fashion objects and knowledge about the latest styles. This chapter explores how everyday practices of making fashionable clothes shaped the way garment workers practiced self-fashioning in the early years of the Welsh garment industry, between 1945 and 1965, and asks what happens to our understanding of where and how fashion happens when we elevate the fashionable agency of garment workers and incorporate their stories into histories of British fashion cultures.

Inspired by Hayden Lorimer's calls to consider the 'more-than representational', this chapter demonstrates how researching the everyday embodied material experiences, routines and repeated actions of garment workers on production lines broadens the way we think about where fashion happens and the types of fashion practice that grow fashion cultures.[4] In order to access these everyday lived experiences of factory workers and situate them within the broader context of twentieth century fashion and social history, the chapter combines archival research into the industrial history of Wales and the broader history of British ready-to-wear manufacturing, drawn from Government records and the fashion trade press, with local newspaper articles and oral histories with former garment workers, collected as part of the 'Voices from the Factory Floor' project conducted by Archif Menywod Cymru/ Women's Archive Wales between 2013 and 2014.[5] Although the types of repetitive manual processes

involved in the mass-manufacture of garments are not usually considered in terms of creative fashion making, this chapter considers how the everyday labour practices of cutting, sewing, pressing and packing clothes shaped distinctive localised fashion cultures within the factories by influencing the way the women employed to do them used fashion in their own lives. As garment factories provided the main source of employment for women in the local areas, it also considers the impact of these factory fashion cultures on the wider local communities.

Questions of what makes, and unmakes, a fashion culture lie at the heart of this chapter. The act of making – that is, the physical fabrication of fashionable goods – has long been an important, albeit frequently overlooked, component in what makes a place fashionable. In spite of the propensity of fashion businesses for concealing the processes by which their products are made, exploring the relationship between what Christopher Breward terms 'Fashion's Front and Back' – the activities of the sales room and the work room – can illuminate our understanding of how fashion cultures thrive in certain places and at certain times.[6] As Nancy Green's research into the twentieth century fashion industries of Paris and New York lays bare, manufacturing processes were hugely significant for the construction and functioning of those fashion cities.[7] Yet the role of making activities in building creative cultures has historically been downplayed by both fashion businesses and cultural intermediaries such as schools of art and design.[8] Instead, creativity and artistry are located in acts of design, rather than making, and many creative professionals actively work to distance themselves from associations with manufacture.[9] But while the repetitive acts of stitching and shaping goods in mass-manufacture processes are not generally understood as creative, the generative, expressive, identity-forming and even subversive potential of those same acts are more widely recognised in bespoke and craft making, and particularly in home dressmaking.[10] By highlighting this discrepancy and revisiting these practices in connection with their impact on individual and community identity, this chapter calls for a reassessment

of the contribution made to creative fashion cultures by the everyday activities of making mass manufacture garments.

Industrial South Wales and the Garment Industry

[Figure 28.1 near here]

[Figure 28.1. Map of Industrial South Wales, c.1940. Author's own collection.]

Popular representations of twentieth century South Wales conjure images of landscapes dominated by the chimneys of steel mills and slag heaps (Figure 28.1). However, while its economy is best known for heavy industries, light industry flourished in the years after the Second World War and the garment trades in particular made a significant economic contribution. In order to understand why the garment trades came quite suddenly to South Wales, a place with little historic relationship with the fashion industry, it is first necessary to situate their story within the longer industrial history of South Wales. The rich natural resources of the area have been exploited for the best part of 800 years, starting with the working of coal in the thirteenth century and copper smelting in the late sixteenth century.[11] In the mid-eighteenth century, ironworks were established, first in Swansea and then up into the Valleys to be close to the sites of coal extraction as the growth of canal networks created faster and cheaper travel options.[12] Both the economy and the population boomed during the first half of the nineteenth century, and the opening of the railway connecting Swansea to the Midlands and London in 1852 expanded coal extraction further still.[13] However, improved transport connections brought goods in as well as out, and it soon became more profitable for metal works in South Wales to import iron ore from other places in England, leading to the closure of ironworks in many places and the conversion of the ironworks in Blaenavon,

Dowlais, Ebbw Vale and Tredegar into steelworks.[14] The coal industry expanded to make up for the loss of ironworks between the 1860s and 1880s, shifting the balance of economic activity and leaving many areas, such as the Aberdare Valley, dangerous reliant on coal mining as the sole source of economic activity.[15]

It was this lack of diversity, particularly in the upper Valleys, that caused significant economic problems for South Wales in the aftermath of the First World War. The disruption of the export of coal and steel caused by the war and subsequent post-war collapse in demand saw mines and steelworks move away from the upper Valleys, leaving extremely high unemployment in their wake.[16] Although many of the workers were highly skilled in their particular field, there were simply no other jobs available in these areas. The lack of economic diversity also made it difficult for women to find work in these areas, and high competition meant that wages were unusually low due for jobs considered suitable for women, such as retail and domestic service.[17] But the legacy of South Wales' nineteenth century industrial revolution also offered opportunities. These areas had good transport connections to London and the Midlands by road and rail as well as large populations eager for work. This made South Wales an ideal site for inclusion in the government's 'Special Areas (Development and Improvement) Act' of 1934, alongside Cumberland, Tyneside and parts of Southern Scotland.[18] The act provided money for local authorities to invest in encouraging economic development, but as is evident from the Board of Trade's yearly surveys on Industrial Development in the late 1930s and early 1940s, it had little impact on the problems of South Wales.[19] At the same time, the area continued to import clothes and shoes due to a lack of local manufacturing.[20]

During the 1940s the processes and geographies of clothing manufacture in Britain started to change in a way that created new opportunities for South Wales. The assembly processes that began to be championed as the future for the ready-to-wear fashion industry in

the 1930s were further encouraged by the British government's wartime regulation of clothing production, which stipulated longer production runs of garments and more standardised sizing and quality controls.[21] Heavy bombing of urban centres of fashion production, in particular London, encouraged many fashion businesses to more seriously consider relocating their factories and workrooms. This was the case for Steinberg & Sons Ltd., makers of Alexon brand clothing. Steinberg's growing business had already outgrown its multiple small premises in London by the mid-1930s, and was aware of the difficulties of finding a site in the city big enough to build a modern, efficient factory. Drawn by its status as an Economic Development Area, the company built an exhibition factory on the Treforest estate, just outside Pontypridd, which began production in 1939.[22] Disruption to their London operations by the Blitz and the availability of willing workers subsequently caused them to expand to nearby Hawthorn, Pontypridd.

In the immediate aftermath of the War there was a shortage of garment workers in London, and rebuilding damaged premises was difficult due to a lack of labour and materials. In Wales, however, demobilisation had driven high rates of female unemployment, which grew from 6,835 to 29,079 in the year between July 1945 and 1946, and South Wales' status as an Economic Development Area made it easier to obtain materials for building projects.[23] In the face of such challenges and incentives, other London-based firms were soon to follow Steinberg's lead. Encouraged by government support, many firms invested considerable resources in relocation to South Wales, including Windsmoor, who opened a training school and state-of-the-art factory on Swansea Industrial Estate in 1948.[24] The rapid ascent of South Wales as a centre for the garment trades was confirmed by the formation of a new branch of the Council of the Clothing Institute in Cardiff in 1953.[25] The expansion of production in South Wales was given a further boost by new government incentives in 1958. The 'Distribution of Industry (Industrial Finance) Act' of 1958 gave the Treasury power to

provide loans and grants ‘for purposes likely to provide more work’ – such as clearing sites, building approach roads and training staff – in areas in Wales with high unemployment, including South East Carmarthenshire, Rhondda, Milford Haven, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Caernarvonshire, Rhyl and Wrexham.

While there was a readily available workforce keen for employment in the garment trades in South Wales, these potential employees lacked relevant cutting and sewing skills. Many firms temporarily brought in staff from established factories to train recruits for a few weeks or months. However, there was also a need to bring senior staff to South Wales on a more permanent basis in order to oversee production. As a meeting of the London Clothing Designers’ and Production Managers’ Association discussed in 1954, the inexperienced nature of recruits in South Wales posed challenges in achieving consistent quality standards.[26] The range of small advertisements for roles in trade publications such as *The Maker Up* throughout the 1950s demonstrates the national recruitment effort to lure experienced staff to South Wales to combat this problem. These staff were either brought in to work in highly technically skilled roles such as ‘Top Grade Designer-Cutter’ or supervisory roles such as Production Managers.[27] Alongside technical knowledge, they brought material literacy, understanding of fashion trends and connections to wider networks of national and global fashion. As South Wales became a hub for fashion manufacture, the arrival of these outsiders collapsed the distance between the Valleys and the fashionable world cities of London, New York and even Paris.

Making, Material Knowledge and Access to Fashion

The arrival of garment factories in South Wales changed the relationship between the local community and the materiality of fashion objects. In order to understand how everyday factory routines re-shaped local fashionable knowledge and the material literacy of entire

communities, it is necessary to examine what employees were making and the processes and technologies they were using.

Because these factories were established in areas without garment-making traditions there was a need for serious investment in training.[28] Locals were recruited for their ability to do the work, not as a result of prior experience or knowledge of the garment trades. At Steinberg's Treforest factory, interviews included an eye test to check candidates were physically able to do the detailed work, but there was no expectation of prior experience or skills.[29] Instead, the Steinberg factory operated its own apprenticeship system from 1946 onwards, training staff on the job for four years by moving them through every department in the factory, after which they are considered 'fully qualified tailors or tailoresses'.[30]

The new garment factories that were built in South Wales from the 1930s onwards utilised the latest technology and assembly line processes to improve efficiency and ran on a much larger scale than the urban factories and workrooms they replaced.[31] Technological efficiency gave manufacturers a clear competitive edge during the immediate post-war period. Reflecting on how his operating costs had changed between 1939 and 1960, Leslie Berker, founder of Berkertex, explained that his business had achieved a dramatic drop in labour costs, down from around a third of total operating costs to only a quarter, through 'improved production methods and machine usage'.[32]

Welsh factories were set up to maximise efficiency by breaking production down into individual tasks. Although this work was highly mechanised and comprised individual specialised workers making only parts of the garment, it was still pressured, skilled work. As a 1958 profile on the Windsmoor factory in Swansea details, the production process for coats and suits was complex and required different employees to have mastered skills including under-pressing, sewing piped buttonholes and hand-finishing garments.[33] The profile also indicates that Welsh employees were often working at higher skill levels and to

higher standards than factories elsewhere, with Windsmoor choosing to produce tricky tailored outwear at their Swansea factory while the simpler job of making skirts was left to their Macclesfield facility. The highly-developed skill-base of Welsh garment workers is further evidenced by their flexibility. Steinberg's 'Alexon House' factory in Pontypridd was not only responsible for the production of quality coats for the discerning North American market, it was also set up in flexible units to allow the facility to quickly adapt to manufacturing many different types of goods – from jersey separates to suits – in response to consumer demand.[34] Handling such a wide range of fabrics required strong material literacy and the ability to quickly master new processes, dispelling the idea that this was unskilled work.

The high level of skills that were fostered in these factories changed local fashion cultures by equipping people with the skills to make their own clothes. Once they had mastered sewing skills at work, many factory employees invested in small machines to use at home, making clothing for themselves and their families.[35] Often domestic sewing practices clothed the wider community too, with machinists producing clothes for friends and women who left their factory jobs in order to raise families subsidising their household income by taking paid commissions.[36] It was also widespread practice – if not official policy – for employees to be permitted to make clothes from their own materials on the factory machines during their work breaks.[37] This was a particularly popular option for those making 'something special' since it was possible to get a far more professional finish using factory equipment than a domestic sewing machine.[38] The workplace also offered opportunities for skills-sharing, and often the more experienced makers and supervisors would step in to assist in the production of special-occasion wear, such as wedding dresses. This enabled local women to attend significant functions in bespoke garments, made to their own designs and

out of fabrics of their choosing – a luxury far beyond the financial means of other similarly paid factory workers.[39]

Working at or living near a factory could also facilitate greater access to raw materials for home sewing. Factories were known to donate remnant fabrics to local schools and community groups, such as a donation made by the Louis Edwards factory in Maesteg to the Nantyffyllon Young Married Women's Guild, which the members used to make themselves garments.[40] Such acts of charity were often mutually beneficial; encouraging former factory employees to maintain their sewing skills meant that there was a pool of 'former staff with own machines' in the local community that the factory could employ as outworkers at times of high demand.[41] Not all of the material goods that found their way onto the sewing machines of the local community were obtained as legitimately. Much found its way out of the factory through 'pilfering'.[42] Although not strictly legal, at certain factories it was tacitly accepted that cotton and occasional cut fabric components would go missing, to be taken home and constructed by employees for their own use:

> We were always looking on jackets and you know. It's so funny because they'd start on the line by here and by the time they got down to the bottom of the line, there was two jackets missing and nobody know where they went, isn't it. Oh – they were taking parts so when they'd go home they'd sew them up... and make a jacket up when they'd go home you know? But that went on... I mean that went on... people knew... and cotton reels – you were allowed to take cotton reels home. You could have the cotton reels you know, they never stopped you... I mean nobody done a lot of pinching, but you could have a reel of white cotton if you wanted it like...[43]

However, most did not recall (or at least admit to recalling) theft being particularly prevalent. This was largely attributed to the regular sales of seconds and last-season stock held in the factories, where employees 'could buy the material quite reasonably'.[44] These sales were another means by which the factories increased local access to fashion goods. As a Louis Edwards employee explained, sales were a significant perk to working at the factory as the 'imperfect' garments only had 'a little flaw here and there'.[45] At Kayser Bondor these factory rejects were known as 'NQPs', or 'not quite perfect' and could be obtained at 'ridiculous prices' from a dedicated on-site shop.[46] Windsmoor even went so far as to offer perfect garments for sale at cost-price, acting as a duel staff benefit and deterrent to stealing from the factory floor.[47] Factory management recognised the significant appeal of sales as a staff perk. Some made extra efforts to ensure a wide range of styles and stock were available by shipping in garments from other factories they operated around the country. Horrockses' factory in Cardiff hosted such sales around twice a year, generating excitement as employees got access to 'lovely dresses' in different styles and fabrics than those they had been making.[48]

Not all employees obtained clothes for their own wardrobes from their places of work. For some, the garments they were making were just too expensive for them to purchase, in spite of sales and concessionary rates, and for others the clothes were not to their taste:

> They didn't so much make young people's clothes in those days, in my day they mostly made men's suits and uniforms and things like that. […] Maybe they did but they weren't something I would buy. Because they were perhaps well you're young and you don't have a lot of money you don't go for things that were going to last, maybe too posh.[49]

However, the presence of the garment factories still gave these employees an increased ability to participate in fashionable consumption by virtue of earning their own wage. While

women generally earned less than men within the factories, the work was comparatively well-paid for the local area, and many women machinists earned more than their husbands who worked in coal mining.[50] This spending power could be transformative. Numerous interviewees who started work in garment factories as teenagers vividly remembered the sense of freedom they derived from their ability to choose and buy their own clothes for the first time, liberating their wardrobes from hand-me-downs or the garments their mother chose for them.[51] Listening to their interviews, it is striking to note the strong memories they still have of specific details of their fashion purchases all these years later, even when other details of their social and work lives have faded.[52] Equally striking are the memories of the places they travelled to perform their acts of consumption – 'Went shopping, went to Cardiff, wonderful' – contextualising their purchases as fashionable through association and confirming their understanding of themselves as knowledgeable, well-connected fashionable consumers.[53]

Practice, Performance and the Development Local Fashion Cultures

The looming presence of Cardiff as a shopping destination in the memories of former garment workers provides a reminder that access to fashion is not just about access to material goods – it also requires access to fashionable spaces, networks and communities. The presence of garment factories in South Wales provided access to these more intangible things alongside the tangible materiality of clothes. Workers in garment factories gained knowledge about what was fashionable through the things they made. Their confidence in this knowledge is evident in the clarity of the language used to describe the fashionable elements of both the clothes they produced at work and the ones in their own wardrobes:

> I did have some lovely dresses. I can remember one in particular what I was very fond of was an emerald green satin. Beautiful, beautiful dress with little diamantes coming down the front, full skirt, which was the fashion then, you know.[54]

This clarity is also apparent in discussions about what was not fashionable. When asked whether the Louis Edwards factory made clothes that young people wanted to wear, one interviewee was not only able to confidently answer 'No', but also to describe the details of the shape, construction and materials of the garments that led to her reasoning.[55]

While much of this fashionable knowledge relates to broader national trends, the oral histories also provide evidence of distinctive factory fashion cultures. As Anna Pollert has established, women factory workers alleviated the boredom of manual labour by developing unique shop floor social cultures and 'informal codes of resistance' in order to maintain their dignity as individuals within the monotony of the factory production line.[56] The words of employees suggest that dressing practices formed as part of these shop floor cultures, allowing them to negotiate their own fashionable identity within the factory community.

Where you worked influenced both what you wore and how you wore it. Kayser Bondor in Merthyr produced stiff netted petticoats as part of their lingerie offering, and many of the young women who worked there in the 1950s would layer these in order to achieve dramatically wide silhouettes under the full skirts that were fashionable at the time.[57] Evidence of very localised, factory-specific fashion cultures can be seen clearly in photographs of groups of workers socialising. Comparing photographs from different factories suggest that the types of clothes women made influenced their choice of dress. As an image of a number of women wearing similar printed fabrics at the St Margaret's factory in Bargoed indicates, this was likely influenced by the relative ease with which these women were able to obtain clothes and materials from the factory.[58] But similarities between the way workers chose to style their garments – exemplified by the matching hair, accessories and

dresses of two friends who worked at Windsmoor on a night out (Figure 28.2) – suggest that localised fashion practices were also about belonging in the factory community.

[Figure 28.2 near here]

[Figure 28.2. Patricia Ridd and friend on a Windsmoor Factory night out. © Archif Menywod Cymru www.lleisiaumenywodffatri.cymru / Women's Archive Wales Voices www.factorywomen'svoices.wales.]

Without the factories these communities of young, fashionable women would simply not have existed because many would not have lived in the area. Before light industry moved into South Wales in the 1940s and 1950s a lack of employment opportunities forced large numbers of women to move away to find work. As the supervisor of the Polikoff factory in Treorchy put it, 'This factory has helped to keep Rhondda families together'.[59]

The built environment of the factories gathered these women in shared spaces, enabling new friendships and support networks to be forged through these shared acts of styling and cultural consumption. Music played a significant role in building a shared identity amongst workers on the factory floor. It was primarily played over factory sound systems to 'motivate and improve afternoon productivity', but it also served as a form of cultural education that bonded workers together over their shared tastes.[60] Employees engaged in communal sing-along sessions, and the promise of 'Music while you work' was advertised as an incentive to attract new recruits.[61] The Denex factory in Tredegar even encouraged employees to bring in their own records to be played out to the entire floor, allowing staff a hand in shaping the work environment by sharing their tastes with colleagues.[62]

Away from the factory floor, many employers provided specific facilities, sports clubs and social opportunities to foster community in order to create a productive and loyal

workforce.[63] Canteens were key social spaces. They were often subsidised to encourage workers to spend time together and acted as a venue for special events such as dances.[64] There were also other, less formal spaces within the factory that employees claimed for socialising and shared practices of self-fashioning, including the toilets where they could congregate away from the prying eyes of their supervisors. More than one person who worked as a machinist at Polikoff's Rhondda factory recalled washing and setting their hair in the toilets on Friday afternoons in preparation for an evening out.[65] Work friends often went on to socialise together outside of the factory. Favoured social activities included trips to the cinema for the young machinists at St Margaret's factory in Bargoed and 'pubs and dancing' for machinists from Berlei Bras in Merthyr.[66]

Participation in social activities with colleagues helped create a sense of belonging and identity that was entwined with work. Recognising the value of this for staff satisfaction and loyalty, factory management arranged subsidised social events themselves. The most memorable of these were dinner dances, held at glamorous venues including the Connaught Rooms in Cardiff and the Grand Pavilion in Porthcawl.[67] These social gatherings gave an opportunity to dress up, providing access to new fashionable experiences to women who would not otherwise have had occasion to don formal wear and cementing the practice of fashionable self-styling in the way people understood their relationship to their work community:

> that was my first ever dinner dance where I bought my first evening gown which we thought we were wonderful – having our hair done, then buying special shoes you know – it was lovely.[68]

The factory provided multiple opportunities for women to embody fashion within the workplace too. It was not unusual for young women from the factory floor to be used as occasional fit models. One machinist from Steinberg's Hawthorn factory vividly remembered

the experience of being called to model for management on a semi-regular basis. Although it was ‘a bit embarrassing you know. I wasn't used to anything like that’, her lengthy description of the process of putting on the suits and walking up and down in them indicates that the experience left a strong impression on her sense of self.[69] Glamour and self-fashioning were further encouraged through formal beauty pageants run by some factories, including St Margaret’s in Bargoed and Berlei Bras in Merthyr (Figure 28.3).[70] The winner of these factory pageants would go on to compete against winners from factories operated by the company elsewhere.[71]

[Figure 28.3 near here]

[Figure 28.3. Anita Jeffery (second from left) coming second in the 'Miss Polikoff' competition. © Archif Menywod Cymru www.lleisiaumenywodffatri.cymru / Women’s Archive Wales Voices www.factorywomen’svoices.wales.]

Recognising that a wide range of employees found pride and enjoyment in the embodied experience of modelling fashionable clothes, beyond the small numbers selected to be fit models or compete in pageants, a number of factories also put on fashion shows where staff modelled clothes for an audience of their colleagues and, on occasion, reporters from the local papers. These events seem to have been particularly prevalent in Merthyr factories, where they often took place in the staff canteen and were open to members of the public as well as being covered by the Merthyr Express newspaper.[72] At Berlei Bras in Merthyr, shows took place on the factory floor, in the aisles between the machines, and the models were able to choose what they wanted to wear from a selection of garments produced in the factory. Considerable effort was expended to make the event feel exciting, with supervisors organising choreography and music as well as hair and make-up. These shows were inclusive and focused on celebrating workers’ connections to the garments they produced rather than

showcasing industry beauty standards. Older married women and those with fuller figures took part enthusiastically and remember them fondly: ‘I loved doing all of that – yeah – although I wasn't very skinny, so they didn't give me any of the flimsy lingerie’.[73]

Factory workers in Tredegar expressed pride in their status as a garment workers in other, more self-effacing public activities. In the early 1960s machinists borrowed a large lorry and sewing machines from the factory to create a carnival float based on the British television sitcom *The Rag Trade*, which aired on the BBC from 1961 to 1963.[74] In a conscious act of self-deprecation, the young women dressed themselves in hair nets and pinnies, using their material knowledge to style themselves as the feisty, unionised characters who terrorised their male supervisor. This joke encapsulates the pleasure factory employees felt in seeing themselves reflected in British popular culture and recognised for their role in the wider British fashion industry.

‘Wales helps to make a woman’s world’[75]

The role that making fashion plays in making you fashionable and connecting you to wider fashion networks is a theme that runs throughout the oral histories collected for the ‘Voices from the Factory Floor’ project. Interviewees repeatedly stressed that they made fashionable garments, not just any old clothes or textile products. This is particularly starkly expressed by people who worked at Horrockses’ Cardiff factory:

> It made dresses, we didn’t do sheets – I don’t know whether you’ve heard of Horrockses’ sheets, cotton sheets? They did them, but our factory was just making dresses.[76]

Interviewees then used these fashionable clothes to make imagined connections between themselves and other places they deemed to be fashionable. When asked where the clothes they manufactured ended up for sale, they described exclusive clothes shops in big cities and

the distant and prosperous United States of America.[77] But the choice of these locations was based more on conjecture than knowledge:

> somewhere like Howells and David Morgans in Cardiff, I believe they used to get them in. I'm not sure exactly. As I say, it was, once we made them they were taken away from us and we never knew exactly where they went.[78]

Workers in these factories were actively encouraged to imagine themselves part of exclusive and extensive fashion networks. Alexon chairman Alexander Steinberg invited the film star Sally Ann Howes to open the Alexon House factory with him in 1950, drawing media attention and creating a local narrative that connected this factory with the arrival of modernity and a world of cinematic glamour very far away from the South Wales Valleys.[79] Factory owners and managers from outside the local area were also keen to stress their own connections to other places, particularly to North America. Many employees assumed the bosses were themselves American, when in fact many were either first or second generation Eastern European Jewish immigrants who had settled in London.[80] It is likely those bosses did little to correct this perception as anti-Jewish prejudice was rife in Britain at the time, but this connection was also advantageous in the way it made employees feel part of a global fashion system. This explains why Jack Steinberg, Alexon's London director, devoted a significant chunk of his speech at the 1953 staff dinner dance in Cardiff to describing a recent American tour and reassuring the audience that they produced internationally competitive fashionable clothing.[81]

Factory management and the Welsh media and government worked together to stress the importance of Welsh garment workers in shaping both national and international fashions through their knowledge and skills. Significant local media coverage was generated in celebration of factories expanding export production. This coverage stressed how continental export connected factories in locations like Maesteg to great historic fashion centres such as

Paris.[82] These connections were framed in a way that highlighted the contribution factory employees made to creating not just clothes, but fashion. As Louis Edwards' general manager in Maesteg, P. Pereths, told reporters, 'We will now have to become stylists as well as machinists for the very essence of Continental fashion is in the style'.[83] Such framing was a useful recruitment tool, persuading young women that factory work could be exciting and fulfilling, but it also reflects a reality about the access working in these factories gave women to the latest fashion trends. Geographical connections between South Wales and international fashion markets reversed the assumption that women in places like Maesteg were destined to learn of new trends after their counterparts in cosmopolitan urban areas. Instead, because Louis Edwards manufactured copies of the very latest styles emerging from Paris, the inhabitants of Maesteg became some of the first people in the country to gain access to, and knowledge about, those fashions.[84] As the Glamorgan Advertiser told its readers of the presence of garment factories in their communities: 'They Bring Fashions Home To You.'[85]

This fashionable access is framed in terms of agency by both employees and employers alike. It is notable that there is broad agreement between oral history interviews, trade reports and media coverage in the way different parties discuss the benefits that Welsh women derived from working in garment manufacture. These benefits clearly went beyond the economic, and the importance of the fashionable identity many people gained from their time working on the factory floor is exemplified by the sadness they expressed about having to leave that employment, commonly when pregnant or when made redundant when the factories closed.[86] Making clothes empowered people to use fashion to craft both individual and collective identities, beyond the traditional roles available to them as wives and mothers.

The Rise and Fall of 'Made in Wales'

The rapid ascent of South Wales as a centre of fashion manufacture in the middle decades of the twentieth century dramatically increased the exposure local people had to the fashion industry and its material products. As this chapter details, the presence of garment factories embedded the practice of fashion into the daily lives of both those who worked in them and those who lived nearby. Daily lived experiences of making and consuming fashion – both in the form of material products and knowledge – fostered distinctive local fashion cultures in previously 'unfashionable' industrial locations surprisingly quickly. Investment in training empowered people with the skills to cut and sew materials into fashionable outfits and sales of factory seconds and occasional 'pilfering' gave people the tools to engage with the latest fashions. Factories also brought together new communities of young women and fostered their fashionable confidence through social activities such as fashion parades, beauty contests and dances, leading to the emergence of localised fashion trends and the development of highly-fashion conscious consumers.

The processes discussed in this chapter highlight the power of making as a catalyst for the creation of vibrant fashion cultures, the everyday routines of the factory equipping garment workers with knowledge about the latest styles and how to manipulate materials to achieve them. If everyday engagement with making fashion can build fashion cultures, then this chapter calls for fashion histories to pay more attention to shifts in manufacturing trends and to further explore the perspectives that can be gained from incorporating business and social history sources into cultural histories of fashion. This chapter also suggests the importance of looking to networks of making, in the form of commodity chains, to reframe our understanding of where fashion happens. These networks stretch the boundaries of what we consider to be fashionable spaces, connecting the urban, suburban, rural and international. They demonstrate that fashionable places are not static or isolated. People, materials and goods come and go, facilitating knowledge exchange through their everyday engagement

with the work of the fashion industry. Although this type of fashion practice exists beyond the glamour of fashion industry events and urban cultural hubs, it is no less significant for the production of fashion cultures for that.

[Figure 28.4 near here]

[Figure 28.4. Laura Ashley 'Made in Wales' label. Photograph by the Author.]

As fashion manufacture later grew throughout Wales, some local Welsh cultures would come to influence broader British fashion cultures. When Laura Ashley opened a factory in Carno, Powys, in 1963, it changed the area's fashion cultures (Figure 28.4). As the factory became the dominant local employer, so the younger (and sometimes also the older) people who worked there adopted the romantic, nostalgic styles they produced.[87] In turn, the rural village itself came to epitomise Laura Ashley's brand to consumers elsewhere, transforming Mid Wales into an unlikely fashion symbol with a network of shops that bore the signage 'London, Paris, Llanidloes'.[88]

But the story of Welsh fashion manufacture is not just one of upward trajectory. Processes of deindustrialisation accompanied the fashion industry's ever-expanding global commodity chains between the 1980s and early 2000s, leading to massive reductions in the workforce and the shuttering of factories. Laura Ashley's Carno factory and Alexon House in Pontypridd held out longer than many of their competitors, finally closing in 2005 and 2009, respectively. If manufacturing jobs brought fashion cultures to the South Wales Valleys, then logic suggests that the decline of those industries would have cultural as well as economic impacts on the local communities, stripping them of fashionable agency and access. Considering the key role that the practice of fashion plays in identity formation, the story of what happened when making fashion stopped being part of the everyday lives in these

communities is not only worthy of further study, but of being considered as seriously as existing research into the impact of the decline of heavy industries such as mining and metal working.

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