

# THE TAILORING AND DRESSMAKING TRADES, 1700-1850,

by Madeleine Ginsburg.

There is no systematic account of the garment making trades in England to compare with that of the French *Encyclopédie des Sciences*<sup>1</sup> and its successors. Here the hand that plied the needle hardly ever held the pen and a description of their conditions of work 1700-1850 must be gathered from many different sources. In default of easily accessible information the commonly held notion is that clothes were always home made and hardly an article of commerce, an idea untrue of any historical period and of any place in the main stream of economic development. Defoe,<sup>2</sup> describing his prototype farmer and small town grocer and their wives, makes their clothes into a microcosm of English trade and industry. Possibly their diverse origin was intended as a surprise to the eighteenth century reader — it certainly is to us. Since the crafts concerned are almost as numerous as they are inarticulate, I will, in the main, confine myself to those of the tailor and dressmaker.

In 1752<sup>3</sup> it was estimated that within London and Westminster alone there were at least 1,000 Master Tailors and Staymakers with at least 15,000 journeymen. In 1859,<sup>4</sup> there are 23,517 London tailors. There is no eighteenth century estimate of professional needlewomen or dressmakers but a high proportion of the women mentioned in the Old Bailey Sessions Papers,<sup>5</sup> a good cross section of London artisan life, so describe their occupation. In 1843 the Commissioners<sup>6</sup> suggest an estimated total of 15,000 with an average of 10 employees to 1,500 London dressmakers and milliners. Henry Mayhew<sup>7</sup> in 1850 notes the number as 20,780 basing it on the 1842 census with 17,183 over 20 and 3,480 under that age.

Traditionally clothes for both sexes were made by the tailors. In earlier periods they had been guild controlled but by 1747, *A General Description of All Trades*<sup>8</sup> com-

ments that “the Merchant Taylor is rather the Title of one of our grand City Companies than of any particular Tradesman”. In Irvine in Scotland the guild system survived in its purest and most restrictive form and in 1729 it was maintained that “the short note as to this matter is that all making of people’s Apparel and wearing Clothes whether Men’s Women’s or children’s belongs to the Tailors”. Anna and Margaret Clarks counterclaiming that “mantua making is truly a distinct Trade from that of the Tailor no less than the shaping or making of Hats and Shoes”,<sup>9</sup> were stating a fact accepted in England and even in France where the Guild system was more generally concerned with trade.

In 1675 the Maitresses Couturières had established their right to make all women’s clothes except the corset and the court robe and bodice.<sup>10</sup> A similar diversification was slowly beginning in England because Randle Holme notes by 1688<sup>11</sup> that very often “the Seamster occupies the Room and place of a Taylor” and mentions among their responsibilities one of the types of mantua, though the mantua proper “a kind of loose coat without any stays in it” remains the tailor’s responsibility. The term seamster is not in general use in the eighteenth century but when the “mantua” becomes generally accepted as a woman’s main garment the term mantua maker is adopted by what we would call the dressmaker who extends her range to include gowns worn by most women though not riding habits, still tailor made. And as Robert Campbell points out in *The London Tradesman*, 1747, “Her business is to make Night-Gowns, Mantuas and Petticoats, Rob de Chambres (sic) and etc. for the Ladies”.

By the eighteenth century the tailoring trade was capitalist in organisation. The employers, the masters,

should in theory have completed a seven year apprenticeship in the trade. In 1747<sup>12</sup> and 1757<sup>13</sup> it was considered necessary to have between £100 and £500 pounds capital but thirty years later the upper limit had dropped to £300.<sup>14</sup> Without capital it required a rare and ruthless efficiency to jump the gap between employee journeyman and capitalist employer. Ironic to relate the most successful exponent (he started with a mere £50) was Trades Union pioneer Francis Place. Tailoring establishments ranged enormously in size from the one man repairing tailor working from tiny shop or room through the country tailor with one or two apprentices or journeymen, varying his daily routine by "whipping the cat" (working in the homes of his customers) to the smart London establishment which even in the middle of the eighteenth century could be of some size. An enterprising Norwegian Lars Israels, came to London as a journeyman tailor in the 1740's. In his memoirs<sup>15</sup> he notes that he worked with a Mr. Lewick of Saulisbury Court who employed 50 or 60 journeymen. Mr. Racked of Pall Mall 80-90 and Mr. Nagel of Cornhill with 100-110. At this period all would have worked on the premises though, space being at such a premium in eighteenth century London, in very crowded conditions. Production must have been streamlined because by 1787 M. Cook of St. Martins Street<sup>16</sup> was promising a suit made in six hours and even found the time to write a pamphlet about it.

Campbell<sup>17</sup> sets out the qualities needed by the successful tailor: "his Fancy must always be upon the Wing and his Wit not a wool gathering but a Fashion-hunting; — he must change shapes as often as the Moon and still find something new; He ought to have a quick Eye to steal the Cut of a Sleeve, the Pattern of a Flap or the Shape of a good Trimming, at a glance. Any Bungler may cut out a Shape when he has a Pattern before him but a good Workman takes it by his Eye in the passing of a Chariot, or in the Space between the Door and the Coach. He must be able not only to cut out for the Handsome and Well shaped but to bestow a good Shape where Nature has not designed it; the Hump back, the Wry shoulder must be buried in Flannel and Wadding;<sup>18</sup> he must study not only the Shape but the common Gait of the Subject — he must be a nice Cutter and finish his Work with Elegancy."

Francis Place speaks from a life-long experience in the tailorial trade, but it is the PR aspect that he stresses — "I could not cut out a coat as it should be cut out nor make it up as it should be made up. I never thought it worth while to do either — the most profitable part for me to follow was dancing attendance on silly people to have no opinion of my own but to take special care my customer should be pleased with theirs . . . how often have I taken away a garment for a fault which did not exist and which of course I never intended to rectify, how often have I taken back a garment without it ever having been unfolded and been commended for alterations which have never been made and then been reprehended for not having

done what was right at first."

His cynicism is justified by results. As qualified skilled breeches maker he had starved. As shopkeeping, later master tailor, stocking ready to wear as well as made to measure, he succeeded. He moved into his first shop with cash in hand 1/10 but credit good, moving at night so that the neighbours should not spy his poverty. It took 10 years before he could work on ready money. By 1816 his profits exceeded £3,000 p.a. He supported his homespun version of Godwin's philosophy with business methods of ruthless efficiency. Initially he worked entirely on credit paying his debts with an absolute regularity even going hungry to do so. The result "suppliers ran a race to supply me with goods" and he could make his own terms with them. Cloth was sent on approval so that no unnecessary time was spent away from the shop and he never drove bargains, leaving to the suppliers the decision whether to under cut. If no monthly statements were submitted then the account was terminated and as a result he never had a dispute about a bill.

His relations with his staff were similarly efficient. He paid well over union rates giving his foreman in 1800 three guineas a week and his second foreman, an expert leather breeches maker, thirty-five shillings per week. Conditions in the crowded workroom were no more than average, he himself found it unbearably stuffy but his men stayed with him for twenty years or more and though he never repeated an instruction more than twice "no customer was ever neglected or disappointed" a thing unusual then or at any time.

His shopkeeping techniques are modern in their concern with appearances. In his small first shop his prime care was to have it new painted with the name in large gilt letters. In his much larger shop at 16 Charing Cross in 1801 he installed plate glass windows at £3 each "I think mine were the largest in London if indeed they were not the first" and if his silk braided pantaloons were too novel for many buyers at least they brought in the customers. In his first shop he had sold enough from the window to pay his rent and his later shop sold enough to pay journeymen's wages and housekeeping expenses. He says his is the first fashionable shop at the West End of Town. True, he chose a good location at Charing Cross, an area ripe for development at the period, but his methods, based on a study of all the failed business men, family friends and neighbours of his period of adversity, would probably have been sufficient in any case.

The conventional route to the top is set out in T. Carter's *Guide to Trade*, 1845.<sup>20</sup> The tailor started as an apprentice 12-14 years old and the fee does not change throughout the period. He spent two years in miscellaneous jobs about the workshop, running errands, keeping the iron hot, matching materials, cleaning the room, tidying the cutting board, keeping the journeymen's piece bundles sorted, hanging the paper patterns in alphabetical order of customer, arranging thread from ¼lb. bundles in paper

skeins. He brushed the finished clothes, removed any marks and packed them for delivery. For the next five years he proceeded steadily to journeymen status learning the necessary stitches, basting, back and fore, side, back, backpricking, forepricking stitch, serging, cross and button stitch also hemming, filling, stenting, rantoring, fine and prick drawing, overcasting and button covering. He first learned to sew linings and cover buttons gradually progressing to putting the suit together and the proper use of "the iron the best tailor". He had to accustom himself to the tailor's traditional posture, crosslegged on the bench, slipping a pad under the ankle to ease soreness. If reluctant the journeymen persuaded him with a goose (iron) weighted sleeve board placed across his knees. His articles for "the whole art and mystery of tailoring" did not at this date include instruction in cutting unless specifically stated.

Without experience he would have been completely at a loss for cutting was an art which had to be learnt direct. There are no detailed instruction books before the late eighteenth century<sup>21</sup> and the very few earlier works on the art of tailoring that exist relate more to layout than to *naunces* of cut. English tailors seemed to have taken the guardianship of their mystery with exceptional seriousness, for none of the works are English.<sup>22</sup> Even in France there is nothing between Benoit Boullay 1671,<sup>23</sup> and Garsault, 1769.<sup>24</sup>

Thomas Cook may be practical in his description of daily routine but he is not realistic or perhaps even straightforward about conditions in the trade. Implied is the concept of a tailor to a suit but by this time specialisation of function, the sectional system, with the suit divided in the making between several workers, was already well established. Francis Place was using this system in the early years of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> There is no mention of The House of Call, the local public house, where at least since the eighteenth century tailors had gathered to be chosen for jobs. It acted as a labour exchange and benefit society, and in bad times as trade union headquarters. Campbell describes it,<sup>26</sup> pointing out that drinking while waiting there, "runs away with all a Tailors' Earnings and keeps them constantly in Debt and Want", a view which a hundred years later Mayhew's<sup>27</sup> said "Type of the Intemperate Tailor" would have heartily endorsed.

The men worked in groups under a "captain". They were summoned from the "house of call" as needed by their masters at three appointed call times, nine a.m., three p.m. and nine p.m., the teams taken in strict order of precedence as set down in the roll book. Such an organisation fostered in the tailors, a literate and superior class of artisan, a spirit of co-operation which with the opportunity for informal political discussion while waiting in the "house of call", or plying the needle in a relatively silent work-room was early expressed in industrial action. Because such action was illegal in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the constitution of only one of these

"houses of call" survives, and that was ostensibly a benefit club.

The tailors found their lot unbearable. In their first surviving manifesto of 1721,<sup>28</sup> they point out that their conditions of work are contrary to the Statute of Artificers. They worked fifteen hours a day, "sitting so many hours in such a position, almost double on the shopboard, with their legs under them and poring so long over their work by candlelight, their spirits are exhausted, nature is wearied out and their health and sight are soon impaired."<sup>29</sup> Their wages were a basic two shillings and sixpence per day in 1752 but the chance of employment except between March and June quarter dates, the season, negligible. They did not earn enough to put money by for slack times. Most were relatively unskilled and Campbell notes "not one in ten of them knows how to cut out a pair of breeches". By 1748 the foreman, who could cut and fit, earned one pound plus tips. Most would remain journeymen all their lives, short ones enough, for it was found in 1818 that out of a sample of 405, only 16 were over 45 years old.<sup>30</sup>

Both men and masters appealed to Parliament who attempted to incorporate their different points of view in the ensuing legislation. There were disturbances in the trade in 1744/5, 1752/3, 1763, 1768, 1799, 1809, 1811, 1834, and further appeals to Parliament, Privy Council, J.P.s, and the General public. There were strikes, lockouts, riotous assembly, claims and counterclaims, the sides equally vociferous and articulate. Outside London similar agitations occurred in Edinburgh, Dublin and provincial towns.

"Not a single shilling was obtained at any one of those periods except by compulsion"<sup>32</sup> but by 1818 they had so far succeeded that the wages on the traditional day work system of twelve hours a day totalled £1.16. 0d. per week, though the purchasing power was less than it had been forty years before. After 1834 and the collapse of the Grand National Trades Union, of which the tailors had been among the prime movers, there followed a period of quiescent exhaustion during which there was a change to a piece work rate of 6d. per hour, worked out on a time log basis which varied from shop to shop. This was to the eventual disadvantage of the men for they were no longer paid for waiting time, and by 1849 Mayhew<sup>33</sup> comments that workers had to work a day and a half for the former one days' wages. Nevertheless, the union men in the regular branch of the trade considered themselves fortunate. An average hand in steady work might earn £1.2.0d. per week, but such formed a steadily decreasing number for the tendency was to put work out at an average rate of 1½d. per hour to be undertaken by the "outlaw" branch of the trade, the outdoor and slop worker reinforced by a constant influx of female labour and immigrants willing to work for even less money.

In 1745<sup>34</sup> the journeymen published a breakdown of a tailor's bill for a suit of velvet "dittos" with gold wire

buttons and serge lined. The twelve yards of velvet at £14.0d. per yard cost £148.0d., the serge £2.15.0d., buttons were £2.0.6d., linings and facings £4.12.0d. The suit took seven and a half working days to complete at 2/6d. per day for labour, so that out of a total bill for £23.0.10½d., the journeymen earned 18/9d., plus 10½d., breakfast allowances and the master gained £5.0.3d. profit, to include about 50% on the cost of labour. The relation of the value of labour to material alters very little during this period.

The customers relations with his tailor are set out in the Purefoy letters, which cover the years 1734 to 1757.<sup>35</sup> The Purefoys a well to do county family, lived at Shalstone on the Buckinghamshire border. The series as published is incomplete and not accompanied by a set of accounts but is sufficient to show fairly consecutive dealings between Henry Purefoy and several of his tailors. In 1736 he dealt with John Bryce, a London tailor, to whom he paid £13.15.0d., (a price average enough for the eighteenth century) for a suit with a gaping waistcoat, a dipping coat and breeches which were too short. Most of his dealings, 1738/51, are with Edward Fell and Francis Fell, presumably his son, of Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire, who made his clothes and the liveries and working frocks (smocks) for his servants. Usually but not invariably they provided cloth and trimmings. It is as well that Henry Purefoy's epitaph states that he was "in conversation pleasing and well meaning of which an oath never formed a part", because the Fells seemed to have given minimum satisfaction. For example, 5 June, 1738, "I have sent you the grey breeches again, your man prevailed with mee to take them . . . . I despair of your altering them, they are so unfit". On 14 May 1745, "My clothes are all too little about the belly . . . . I beg you would not come in such a hurry another time so as to forget your measure". Henry was a considerate customer and apologised with genuine sincerity on asking for a suit at a week's notice.

Small wonder men turned with relief to the "show shops" where they could see what they were buying. Tailors who made in advance of purchase are mentioned in fifteenth century guild records and there are sixteenth century stock inventories which include ready made clothes.<sup>36</sup> Such establishments proliferate in the later seventeenth century, their increase having as much to do with the more easy fitting simply cut suit as with any increase in middle class purchasing power. They catered for the lower end of the trade and were common in market towns where they are known as "sale" or "show shops". and in seaports. In the latter tending to be called "slop shops", providing supplements to the slop chests carried by every ship. Campbell<sup>37</sup> described salesmen as dealing with old and new clothes, "they trade very largely and some of them are worth some Thousands". He suggests the capital necessary as between one hundred and one thousand pounds. By 1786 this had risen and Kearsley<sup>38</sup> advocates two hundred to five thousand pounds, a similar

amount to that needed by a silversmith. Slop men in particular needed to have quantities of cash in hand because thousands of pounds worth of goods were locked up in the slop chest every time a fleet set sail.<sup>39</sup> The inventory of Thomas Webb senior, of Tonbridge<sup>40</sup> gives an indication of the stock which consisted of basic garments of working men and children, and to a limited extent, women. There are suits of druggets at £1.10.0d. each and three pairs of worsted shag breeches are valued at 14 shillings the lot.

The main London centre for the slop trade in the eighteenth century was Rosemary Lane, and J. Lackington,<sup>41</sup> the ebullient shoebinder who became a bookseller, tells of his adventures when searching for a greatcoat about 1767. "I . . . was hauled into a shop by a fellow who was walking up and down before the door of a slop seller. Here I was soon fitted with a greatcoat of the same sort as my landlord. I asked the price but was greatly astonished when the honest slopman told me he was so taken with my clean honest industrious looks, that he would let me have it cheaper than he would his own brother, so in one word, he would oblige me with it for five and twenty shillings, which was the very money it had cost him." Lackington attempts to leave but finds the door "had a fastening to it beyond my comprehension . . . nor would the good man let me out before I had made him an offer . . . . I told him that my landlord . . . had purchased such a coat for ten and six on which he began to give himself airs and assured me that however some people came by their goods for his part he always paid for *his* . . . . I told him I had but ten and six, and of course could not offer him any more than I had got . . . . I now expected more abuse from him, but instead of that the patient good man told me that as he perhaps might get something by me another time I should have the coat for my half guinea though it was worth more than double the money."

By the 1840's the sales methods had been refined by such energetic purveyors of "cheap clothes and nasty" as the firms of E. Moses & Sons Ltd., of Aldgate and Minories, founded by 1834<sup>42</sup> and H.J.D. Nicoll of Regent Street,<sup>43</sup> both of which had their garments made by outside contractors, or middlemen "sweaters", who had the work done by outworkers in unregulated conditions. They were a necessary part of the system giving financial guarantees for materials entrusted to them and organising the putting out to workers in their own homes helped by whoever they could get, wife, child or neighbour. This was not the creation of the hungry forties and Francis Place<sup>44</sup> describes its destructive impact on the workman and his family, i.e. himself, in the 1790's. It was rather the standard of efficiency demanded by an organised commercial and administrative system that caused the manufacturer to press ever more heavily on the worker as the century progressed. Government contracts for the clothing of public servants increased and were always given to the lowest tender.<sup>45</sup> Only the most enlightened of workhouse

guardians realised that employing inmates by underbidding on a contract could result only in an eventual increase in their number. In short, "that the protected poor can become the greatest cause of oppression to the unprotected poor".<sup>46</sup>

Nicholl's started as a show shop similar to that of Francis Place, with tailors making stock on the premises for the usual sixpence per hour. The price for the making of a Nicholl's paletot — a loose unfitted overcoat — was fourteen shillings. The men refused to make it for nine, so it was jobbed out for seven and sixpence to workers who were paid five shillings and found their own trimmings. On this the saving alone to Nicholl's was calculated at £1300 per annum. Mayhew exposed their practices in his *Morning Chronicle* articles in 1848/50 but their advertising was too important, the hands of the directors were forced, and Mayhew was sacked, though not soon enough to prevent full publication of his investigations<sup>47</sup> and their use by Charles Kingsley for his novel *Alton Locke*.

Moses was the target of *Punch*<sup>49</sup> and *The Times*, when in 1843 they charged an outworker, Mrs. Biddell, a trouser-hand for pawning trousers entrusted to her for making at sevenpence each. The plight of their shirtmakers inspired Thomas Hood to write *The Song of the Shirt*.<sup>50</sup> E. Moses might trumpet in his speech at the opening of a new branch in 1860,<sup>51</sup> "The public were amazed to find that we could give them ready made suits that Beau Brummell would have been proud to wear at prices that a mechanic could afford to pay", but to some contemporaries the price was flesh and blood. As *Punch* put it in 1842,<sup>52</sup>

"For mourning suits this is the fittest Mart,

"For every garment helps to break a heart."

Undeterred Moses flourished through the period to the 1870's, handing out bright yellow rhyming advertising booklets at railway stations. Their survival was assured, as a contemporary waste paper merchant sadly observed, because they were too small for any useful purpose. The shop was ever expanding along Aldgate & Minories, the gas light flaring through 30 feet high plate glass windows. Men had more and cheaper clothes, but this system lasted till the twentieth century, bringing degradation to the worker and disease to the purchaser.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century a woman's main garments were made up by a mantua maker, accessories made and purveyed by milliners and haberdashers and linen made up by sempstresses.

Campbell states "the Mantua Maker must be a sister to the Tailor and like him must be a perfect Connoisseur of Dress and Fashion".<sup>53</sup> This she certainly had to be for until the last quarter of the century the average mantua maker had no regular guidance in changing styles. Ladies' journals increase steadily in number throughout the century but had great difficulty in providing any systematic fashion service. Not until the *Gallerie des Modes* 1778-1787<sup>54</sup> and *Heideloff's Gallery of Fashion* 1794-1803<sup>55</sup> were they easily obtainable. Some milliners, presumably the

most affluent, maintained correspondents in Paris.<sup>56</sup> True, miniature fashion models, or dolls, were sent from Paris to London<sup>57</sup> but there is no regular service and their destination is only the most fashionable mantua maker or fashion conscious of customers. So much contemporary correspondence is concerned with the nuances of fashion that it must be supposed that most guidance came from the client.

No English mantua maker or milliner has survived the years with the éclat of a Rose Bertin. In part this is due to the secretiveness of their customers, Mrs. Delany<sup>58</sup> was wrath indeed when the maker disclosed the name of her client. A French 'ton' was as necessary in the eighteenth as in the nineteenth century and eighteenth century ladies were just as eager as those of later periods to cross the channel and buy from the best known French establishments and this despite rigorous customs checks.

The ladies are dust so we cannot appreciate the skill with which the eighteenth century mantua maker was able to "flatter all complexions and favour all shapes"<sup>59</sup> but we can appreciate her skill in the cutting out and manipulation of large scale patterned fabrics so that they were symmetrically disposed on garment and wearer without undue waste. The ingenuity displayed is amazing. No wonder that Garsault<sup>61</sup> states that this ability is the most important a dressmaker could have.

The make of the eighteenth century dress is not refined. I have not found any information on the training of the English dressmaker at this period and from the 'thrown together' look of so many garments begin to wonder whether in fact they received any. The dresses are held together by running along the selvedge and the jagged unmatching armholes and unevenly hanging skirts suggest that most of them were, rather hurriedly, made on the customer while she stood, more or less, still. In the last quarter of the century there is an extraordinary improvement in the dressmaking techniques. It is as sudden as it is unprecedented. There has been nothing lacking in the skill of the needlewoman throughout the century, the lingerie, for instance, amazes with its fine stitching. Moreover the average sempstress was adaptable. Elizabeth Mitchell, falsely accused of theft in 1746, was described in court<sup>62</sup> by her various character witnesses as engaged in plain work, hoop petticoat maker, child's coat maker, bonnet and cloak maker, a milliner and a quilter of petticoats. As styles and customers demanded it so were these techniques pressed into service.

Despite the swift and slipshod make, Campbell warns that the "profits are but inconsiderable and the Wages they give their Journeywomen small in proportion". Apprentices paid a premium £5-£20 and he suggests a small capital of £20-£100. The neatest workwoman working a 13 hour day earned but 5/- or 6/- per week out of which she probably had to find herself in board and lodging. I am unable to discover the extent to which 'living in' was practised in the eighteenth century. Apprentices almost

certainly did so but though there are references to workers living in the same house as the dressmaker such was the subdivision of accommodation in the eighteenth century that this may be convenient coincidence. Despite the low wages there was no shortage of applicants because the needle was the main resource for the girl who needed to earn her own living but did not want to go into service.

If remuneration was low so were prices. In 1739-42 Lady Sackville<sup>63</sup> paid 12-14 shillings for making mantuas, the most complicated of eighteenth century dress types, and 6/- for a wrapper to Mrs. Marsh of St. Albans Street, a fashionable address and presumably a fashionable dressmaker. In 1768 Augusta Princess of Wales<sup>64</sup> paid 2 guineas to Elizabeth Howard for making a mantua for which the material cost £120. At the end of the century styles simplified and prices fell. Though allowance must be made for a country dressmaker Nancy Woodford<sup>65</sup> only paid 3/- for making and 2/- for lining a gown.

A dress could have been made in a day and quick service was demanded and obtained. Lady Mary Coke<sup>66</sup> collected the silk for her royal Birthday gown from the mercer on Tuesday 13th January 1767, tried it on the following Friday morning, finding it, to everyone's relief I am sure, "extremely pretty" and received it, finished the following day. This was not a simple inexpensive dress but a gala gown for a discriminating fashionable lady.

No wonder home dressmaking was but little practised in the eighteenth century. Pamela,<sup>67</sup> that paragon of womanhood and a trained ladies' maid, made her own clothes and at the other end of the scale there is a tantalising glimpse of the Duchess of Montague surprised by Lady Mary<sup>68</sup> in the process of making a gown. A lesson was promised but to judge from the correspondence, sadly, never received.

There is similarly little demand for ready made gowns although lingerie and children's clothes had been readily available from the sixteenth century.<sup>69</sup> Even Defoe's grocer's wife only quilts her own petticoats "if she be good housewife". By the 1830's part made dresses were becoming available and the number increased throughout the century.<sup>71</sup>

The lot of the dressmaker worsened as the simplicity of style of the early nineteenth century gave way to the complexities of Regency and early Victorian dressmaking so dependent for its effect on fit and fine finish. The apprentice fees also rise. £30 is given for five year and £50 for three year articles. The anonymous authoress of the section on dressmaking in the *Guide to Trade*<sup>72</sup> (1840 but more probably based on the dressmaking practices of the late 1820's and 1830's) comments that dressmakers "whether they are edging with cording hundreds upon hundreds of little vine leaves . . . while they are spending whole days in embroidering with piping of their own making . . . they must eventually sigh for a change of fashion . . . so that they may again be able to make a dress in a day . ." She asks the dressmaker what difference she made to her

charges when such troublesome fashions came in: "If we set about charging according to the labour at present required," replies the dressmaker, "we must charge more than the ladies would ever think of paying. So we are underpaid now and in hopes of a contrary fashion coming in soon. When a fashion of untrimmed dresses comes in we shall pay ourselves for present hardships". True the dresses of the 1840's are plainer in style but the period is one of economic depression. I hope the unknown but optimistic dressmaker lived to own a sewing machine.

At this period the training of the dressmaker was rigorous, similar in some ways to that of the tyro tailor. The girl, usually 12 or 14, started by tidying up and running errands then, after 6 months, was entrusted with straps and bands, the long seams of the skirt and the endless yards of piping. In the second year she graduated to making the dress body. By the end of her apprenticeship she might have been considered competent to make the simpler type of muslin dress. After an apprenticeship of 2-5 years, the girl, if career-minded, might decide to become an improver, paying a premium to work unpaid in a big London house so as to expand her experience. She would then become a hand or assistant. Both apprentices and hands lived in: the wages of the latter ranged from £10-£30 p.a. A first hand or fitter is mentioned in 1853 as earning £160.<sup>73</sup>

The facade of the fashionable dressmaking establishment of the mid nineteenth century was intentionally impressive:<sup>74</sup> large mansions in the best end of town, some discreet with nothing but a well polished brass plate to proclaim their trade, others with a very large plate glass window displaying some miniscule and unostentatiously luxurious item. The door was opened by a liveried footman and the lady client was conducted to a vast showroom, carpets and curtains and mirrors of the most luxurious and a few inconspicuous counters for display. An assistant, more or less French, the "Magazinière" wearing a short sleeved silk dress and a cap with ribbon streamers down to her heels, shows the materials to the customer and discusses styles. The fitting is done at home, the First Hand going out in a stylish one horse brougham attended by a servant in livery. The dresses are made in large crowded workrooms above stairs and a 24 hours service could be given. There is an interesting divergence between Mayhew's account based on that of "a Lady" in which skirts are made up by outworkers at risk from dirt and disease and that of the Commissioners to whom it was stated that this practice was exceptional.

The dressmaker also suffered from the seasonality of the trade though her problem was rather over employment especially from April to the end of July, the high season. The vast majority worked a 15 hour day and 8 a.m. - 11 p.m. were considered to be easy hours only to be achieved in the best houses where work was well organised and the proprietor willing to consider the extra expense of ad-

ditional labour, day workers, to help. Two of Queen Victoria's dressmakers receive favourable comment in the 1842 report; Madame Elise worked only from 8-10 in high season and Mrs. Bettans from 7-10. Most of the witnesses to the Commissioners<sup>75</sup> had some experience from two or three months together of working 18 hours or more out of the 24 with but hurried pauses for meals usually consisting of tea and bread and butter. They had a month's paid holiday after the season but the physical consequences were dire and some girls after a year in London had to revert to working in the country where the pressure was less great. Dr. Hughes, Assistant Physician at Guy's Hospital, comments, "The individuals are marked by a pale face, a dull lack lustre eye, a careworn countenance, a pallid indented tongue and oedematous hands and feet and ankles. They complain of pains in the side varying as to position, direction and intensity, loss of appetite and dyspepsia often accompanied with pyrosis; debility in exertion, shortness of breath and palpitation from all sorts of excitement, physical and moral and are always afflicted with leucorrea and amenorrea; not infrequently with lateral curvature of the spine and occasionally with haemorrhoids". Day workers were less afflicted. Was it their slightly lower class background, daily walk or slightly shorter hours?

Despite these surely inhibiting physical symptoms the dressmaker throughout the period was considered morally at risk, subject to what was delicately referred to in 1840<sup>76</sup> as "temptations and perplexities" They were so near yet so far from a life of luxury and extravagance. Campbell had noted that "of all the common women of the town who take their walks between Charing Cross and Fleet Ditch, more than half have been bred milliners". He cautions parents to make sure that the milliner to whom they entrust their daughters really is what she seems. The caution is borne out by court cases and that somewhat unevocative guide to eighteenth century vice, the *Covent Garden Magazine*.<sup>78</sup> A dressmaker's house with its constant flow of female callers and secluded fitting rooms made a convenient House of Assignment. Even Sundays provided moral perils for the Victorian apprentice; the most conscientious employers<sup>79</sup> dragged their girls from bed to church but others were less solicitous. Mrs. Gaskell's unfortunate Ruth,<sup>80</sup> a dressmaker's apprentice, fell because neither meal nor comfort was provided on her only day of rest. The book's subtitle should have been "Seduced on a Sunday." To the poorly paid workers at the lowest end of the trade, prostitution could become an essential source of income. The personal accounts given to Mayhew are harrowing in their pathos.<sup>81</sup>

Some of the worst hazards of the respectable side of the trade could have been avoided by well drawn indentures and vigilant relations. *The Book of Trades*<sup>82</sup> advocates a rigorous scrutiny of terms; bedtimes, daily walks, Sunday comforts could all be written in. A contract or even an agreement was an exception and in any case the

girls would hardly know the details, nor, debilitated as they were, be in a position to insist on them. Fortunately though, by her relatively greater age, the young dressmaker seems to have missed the revolting cruelties occasionally visited on the very young and unprotected apprentices in the more repetitious trades of netting and tambour embroidery.<sup>83</sup>

After the disclosures of the 1842 Commission a Dressmakers and Milliners Association was formed with a Dr. Richard Ducange Grainger as President, a competent working secretary in Charlotte Newton and a well connected Ladies Committee dedicated to never wanting a dress in a hurry.<sup>84</sup> Its aims were to restrict the hours of labour to twelve a day, by encouraging the use of day workers. To this end an employment registry was compiled giving preference to competent girls and reliable houses. A start was also made on organising comfortable and respectable lodgings for outworkers. Mayhew notes the improvements achieved by the Society by the end of the 1840's,<sup>85</sup> but some five years later the situation had again deteriorated so much that legislative action in regard to the dressmaker's lot was contemplated. Though this reached the stage of a House of Lords enquiry,<sup>86</sup> the idea was abandoned as impractical.

Perhaps the saddest comment on the lot of the Victorian working woman comes in 1842 from Mr. Wain, of Messrs. Stultz, Housley and Wain, the largest firm of London tailors who employed over 300 journeymen in the season. He stated — "I would decidedly say there is nothing in our trade like working 16 to 18 hours a day consecutively for three to four months. The best of dressmakers is not so protected as the least of tailors in the regular trade."<sup>87</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

This article should be read as the first part of my series on the history of the garment making trades. The period 1860-1890 is in *High Victorian*, a Symposium of the Costume Society 1968 and the period 1860-1914 is in *La Belle Epoque*, a Symposium of the Costume Society 1967.

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*L'Art de la Lingere* 1771
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25. Suggestions to a Friendly Member of the Select Committee on Tailors, 1811. Francis Place. Quoted in Galton. Op cit.
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28. An Abstract of the Master Taylor's Bill . . . with the Journeymen's Observations. 1721. Quoted in Galton. Op cit.
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45. Thompson and Yeo. Op cit.
46. Children's Employment Commission. Op cit.
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76. *Guide to Trade*. Op cit.
77. *Covent Garden Magazine or Amorous Repository*. 1773.
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81. Thompson and Yeo. Op cit.
82. *Book of Trades*. Op cit.
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85. Thompson and Yeo. Op cit.
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