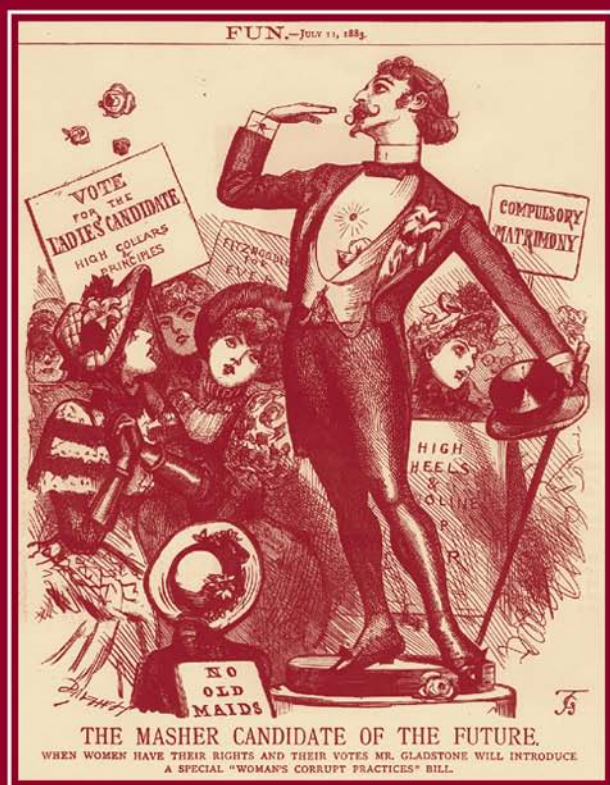


Men and Menswear

SARTORIAL CONSUMPTION IN BRITAIN
1880–1939

LAURA UGOLINI



THE HISTORY OF RETAILING AND CONSUMPTION

MEN AND MENSWEAR

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Sartorial Consumption in Britain 1880–1939

LAURA UGOLINI
University of Wolverhampton, UK

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Contents

<i>General Editor's Preface</i>	vii
<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
PART I CONSUMING MENSWEAR	
1 Identities, 1880–1939	19
2 Non-conformity, 1880–1939	47
3 Menswear and War, 1914–1918	71
4 The Democratisation of Menswear? 1919–1939	99
PART II SELLING MENSWEAR	
5 Tailoring and Manliness, 1880–1914	127
6 Menswear Retailing and War, 1914–1920	155
7 The Struggle for Survival, 1920–1939	175
PART III BUYING MENSWEAR	
8 Shopping Decisions, 1880–1939	203
9 Making a Purchase, 1880–1939	229
Conclusion	253
<i>Bibliography</i>	261
<i>Index</i>	287

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General Editor's Preface

The History of Retailing and Consumption

It is increasingly recognised that retail systems and changes in the patterns of consumption play crucial roles in the development and societal structure of economies. Such recognition has led to renewed interest in the changing nature of retail distribution and the rise of consumer society from a wide range of academic disciplines. The aim of this multidisciplinary series is to provide a forum of publications that explore the history of retailing and consumption.

Gareth Shaw, University of Exeter, UK

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List of Figures

1.1	‘Quotations on ’change’. Appearances could be deceptive. <i>Judy</i> , 5 August 1903. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.12.	20
1.2	‘Father and son. The effects of cycling.’ Adults dressed as boys and vice versa. <i>Judy</i> , 29 January 1896. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.12.	33
1.3	‘Clothes make the man.’ Older men’s bodies could let them down. <i>Tit-Bits</i> , 5 April 1924. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 c.6.	36
1.4	‘When a minute seems an hour.’ Relaxing at home? <i>Tit-Bits</i> , 3 May 1930. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 c.6.	41
2.1	Total UK expenditure on clothing, 1900–1919.	55
2.2	UK price increases and quantity index: clothing 1900–1919.	56
2.3	‘The masher candidate of the future’. The dandy as a ladies’ man. <i>Fun</i> , 11 July 1883. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.13.	66
3.1	‘Alas! Poor Gilbert’ Basil Hallam as Gilbert the Filbert. <i>The Bystander</i> , 30 August 1916. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2705 d.161.	72
3.2	Gilbert: the nut as shirker. <i>Illustrated Chips</i> , 12 June 1915. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 b.4.	78
3.3	‘Far from the trench’s madding strife’: loafing the days away. <i>The Bystander</i> , 19 September 1917. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2705 d.161.	82
3.4	Men doing their duty: munitions work. <i>Punch</i> , 2 August 1916. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.10.	84
3.5	Men doing their duty: investing in war loans. <i>Punch</i> , 7 February 1917. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.10.	86
3.6	War profiteers. <i>The Bystander</i> , 13 November 1918. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2705 d.161.	90
3.7	‘War economy’ and the ‘cult of shabbiness’. <i>Punch</i> , 24 November 1915. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.10.	91

- 3.8 Munitions work and working-class extravagance. *Punch*, 16 October 1918. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.10. 94
- 3.9 Price increases and quantity index of clothing in the UK, 1913–1919. 95
- 4.1 ‘The man she married’: back to civvies. *The Bystander*, 15 January 1919. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2705 d.161. 101
- 4.2 UK estimated average prices and quantity index, mens- and boyswear, 1920–1938. 107
- 5.1 ‘Drawing the line’: tailors’ low status. *Fun*, 12 December 1883. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.13. 131
- 5.2 ‘He had seen stars before!’ The old clothes’ man and a dissatisfied customer. *Comic Cuts*, 27 October 1894. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 b.2. 143
- 5.3 Hard work, respectability and business success. *The Tailor and Cutter*, 25 January 1900. By permission of the British Library, LD163. 146
- 5.4 ‘Don’t you envy the well-dressed man?’ A parody of contemporary advertisers’ claims. *Judy*, 18 November 1903. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.12. 151
- 6.1 ‘Clothes of the period’: the menswear shop and patriotic display. *Men’s Wear*, 12 September 1914. By permission of the British Library, LD178. 158
- 6.2 Menswear advertising in wartime. *Punch*, 8 September 1915. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.10. 160
- 6.3 ‘The clothing queue’: shortages of civilian garments. *The Outfitter*, 15 December 1917. By permission of the British Library, 183. 163
- 6.4 ‘A fashion plate for 1918’, according to *The Tailor and Cutter*, 20 December 1917. By permission of the British Library, LD163. 165
- 6.5 Anti-profiteering commercial ventures. *Men’s Wear*, 6 March 1920. By permission of the British Library, LD178. 173
- 7.1 Before and after: an old-fashioned and a modern shop-front. *Man and his Clothes*, April 1928. By permission of the British Library, LD171. 186
- 7.2 ‘The art of the shopfitter’: three modern interiors. *The Tailor and Cutter*, 3 May 1935. By permission of the British Library, LD163. 189
- 7.3 Independent bespoke tailoring: ‘Real tailoring’. *The Sartorial Gazette*, January 1932. By permission of the British Library, 125. 192
- 7.4 The menswear salesman: ninth part of a man? *Man and his Clothes*, April 1928. By permission of the British Library, LD171. 199

8.1	The limits of women's dressmaking abilities. <i>Punch</i> , 6 September 1905. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.10.	211
8.2	'Men do not like buying in a women's shop.' <i>Man and his Clothes</i> , May 1930. By permission of the British Library, LD171.	214
8.3	'I'll tell yer the name of my tailor': passing on sartorial information. <i>Judy</i> , 20 May 1903. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 d.12.	224
9.1	'The tailor and his customer. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.' <i>The Tailor and Cutter</i> , 24 January 1907. By permission of the British Library, LD163.	232
9.2	'A suit-able occupation': the tailoring shop in the popular press. <i>Illustrated Chips</i> , 10 May 1919. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, N.2706 b.4.	233
9.3	Trying on a suit. <i>The Tailor and Cutter</i> , 28 April 1910. By permission of the British Library, LD163.	242
9.4	'It's about time you brought your bill to be receipted': paying the tailor's bill. <i>Men's Wear</i> , 14 February 1931. By permission of the British Library, LD178.	249

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Introduction

Men and Menswear, 1880–1939

Not long before the outbreak of the First World War, ‘M.R.’, a seventeen-year-old Birmingham boy ‘who seemed fitted for skilled work but had succeeded in getting into unskilled’, described how he spent a fairly typical Saturday afternoon. After dinner, he read the *Birmingham Weekly Post* until about 2.30 pm, then ‘rote [*sic*] to London for a list of banjo music’. Having finished his letter, he ‘went out to buy a cap and tie’. By the time he returned home, it was time to get ready for the evening, which he spent at a local music hall.¹

This is not exactly the stuff that makes for a thrilling history book. On the Saturday in question, ‘M.R.’ did not have a ‘life-changing experience’. Neither did he witness nor commit an act that would ‘change the course of history’, to use two well-worn clichés. This was a normal Saturday afternoon, filled with mundane consumer activities: reading a newspaper, sending off for a catalogue, buying a couple of small items of clothing, enjoying an evening at a music hall. Nonetheless, the fact that these were unremarkable, routine events, does not mean that they were either unimportant or meaningless. Indeed, thrilling or not, these are the sort of ‘ordinary’ consumer activities to which this book is devoted.

‘Routine’ consumption could of course involve the acquisition, exchange or use of a variety of goods and services, sometimes all at the same time: a packet of cigarettes, a pint of beer, a bet on the horses, or for the more comfortably-off, a glass of wine, a newspaper, a cigar.² However, the aim of this book is to explore the consumer practices associated with one particular commodity: clothing. Or, to be more accurate, British men’s clothing in the half-century before the outbreak of the Second World War. My intention is to focus on three particular points in this commodity’s ‘life’: use, sale and purchase. That said, this book is not primarily concerned with the goods *per se*. It does not describe in any detail the actual garments worn or sold by men and boys in this period, and neither does it attempt to chart changes in clothing style or form. Rather, the purpose of this book is to explore men’s relationships with clothes, and the motivations and influences that lay behind male consumer behaviour. In a sense, therefore, this book is more about men than menswear, and more about ‘M.R.’ than about his cap and tie, as it seeks to find out what the use, sale and acquisition of clothes reveal about men’s lives and identities in this period.

¹ A. Freeman, *Boy Life and Labour: The Manufacture of Inefficiency* (P.S. King and Son, London, 1914), p. 113.

² Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift have pointed out that the consumption of individual commodities is not generally self-contained and sealed off from other activities. P.D. Glennie and N.J. Thrift, ‘Modern consumption: theorising commodities and consumers’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 11, no. 5 (1993), pp. 603–6.

The commodity: clothing

In 2001 Jukka Gronow and Alan Warde included clothes consumption among those aspects of consumption to which social scientists – they suggested – had hitherto devoted a misleadingly large amount of attention. ‘The sociology of consumption’, they suggested, ‘has concentrated unduly on the more spectacular and visual aspects of contemporary consumer behaviour, thereby constructing an unbalanced and partial account.’³ They have a point. The consumption of dress, and especially the most visually arresting forms of ‘fashionable’ dress, has certainly received more attention than the consumption of seemingly mundane but widely used commodities such as – to name the first that come to mind – hair-brushes, pens or watches.

Nevertheless, there *are* reasons why clothes are a useful lens through which to view consumption in general, and male consumer practices in particular, especially during the period covered by this book. First, and most obviously, the use of clothing was universal. Not only was nakedness ‘wholly inappropriate in almost all social situations’,⁴ but everybody would have experienced clothes consumption in some form, even if only the routine wearing of the same garments day after day. At the same time, the nature of the items worn, the ways in which they were sold and acquired could differ widely: clothes spanned the spectrum between miserable necessity and extravagant luxury. But perhaps more important than their ubiquity and variety, was the fact that clothes were perceived by contemporaries to be commodities whose consumption possessed a ‘special’ meaning, even if there was no consensus about what that meaning was.⁵

Then, as now, the questions of why people wore particular clothes, and perhaps most notably, what influence constantly changing fashions had on individuals’ sartorial choices, were a source of endless – even if not always wholly serious – speculation. Among sociologists, psychologists and other thinkers, contemporary Western dress, and ‘fashionable’ dress in particular, was variously theorised as, for example, providing a conspicuously visible way of indicating wealth, status and worth, as enabling the elite to differentiate itself from the rest of the population, constantly evolving new styles as others sought to emulate it, or as reflecting changing notions of ‘modesty’ and enhancing sexual attractiveness.⁶ Alongside these ‘serious’ discussions, contemporary dress was also widely described, discussed and indeed joked about in novels, songs, cartoons and the press (including the menswear

³ J. Gronow and A. Warde, ‘Introduction’, in J. Gronow and A. Warde (eds), *Ordinary Consumption* (Routledge, London, 2001), pp. 3–4.

⁴ J. Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000), p. 6.

⁵ An interesting comparison is provided, for example, by the ‘special’ meanings attached to tobacco and to smoking. See M. Hilton, *Smoking in British Popular Culture 1800–2000: Perfect Pleasures* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000).

⁶ T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Dover Publications, New York, 1994; first published 1899), especially chapter vii; G. Simmel, ‘Fashion’, *International Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1904), pp. 130–55; J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (The Hogarth Press, London, 1930). For early theories on dress, see also M. Carter, *Fashion Classics: From Carlyle to Barthes* (Berg, Oxford, 2003); K.K.P. Johnson, S.J. Torntore and J.B. Eicher (eds), *Fashion Foundations: Early Writings on Fashion and Dress* (Berg, Oxford, 2003).

trade press), as well as in subsequent autobiographical writings and reminiscences. These discussions and personal reflections provide vital insights into attitudes towards the sale, purchase and use of dress, generally reflecting those contemporary 'common-sense' views that are frequently hidden from the historical record. Indeed, they are the main foundations on which this book is built.⁷

One further aspect of clothing makes it a particularly useful commodity through which to examine male consumer practices: the fact that dress, and 'fashionable' dress in particular, was overwhelmingly associated with women and femininity, even though in practice, as Christopher Breward's pioneering work has been particularly important in showing, men wore, bought and sold clothes just as enthusiastically.⁸ This paradox has given rise to a variety of discourses and theories, which have sought to portray British men as hidden, reluctant or even non-consumers of fashionable dress, at least until the emergence of the so-called 'new man' of the 1980s. The late eighteenth century, J.C. Flügel suggested in 1930, saw the beginning of a 'sudden great reduction of male sartorial decorativeness ... Man abandoned his claim to be considered beautiful. He henceforth aimed at being only useful.'⁹ Without wishing to simply rehearse the arguments already ably put forward by Breward about the limitations of the notion of a 'great masculine renunciation',¹⁰ it is one of the aims of this book to explore the nature of men's (and to a lesser extent boys') 'encounters' and relationships with this deeply gendered commodity.¹¹ How did men negotiate the purchase, consumption and sale of a commodity (or set of commodities) overwhelmingly associated with femininity and its largely negative attributes? The relationship between masculinity, 'manliness' and consumption is thus a central theme of this book. However, alongside gender, it is also an aim of this book to explore the relationship between consumption and identities more generally, taking into account issues such as class, age and ethnicity, and investigating the ways in which men constructed identities for themselves as users, buyers and sellers of clothes.

Of course, this is easier said than done. In practice, disentangling the different strands that made up men's identities, and identifying which were the most important

⁷ As Christopher Breward explains: 'it is incumbent upon the fashion historian to pursue ... alternative maps and self-realizations if connections between clothing, consumption and gender identities are to be made ... popular novels, music hall dramatisations, store promotions and *cartes de visite*'. C. Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life 1860–1914* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999), pp. 19–20.

⁸ Breward, *The Hidden Consumer*. See also T. Edwards, *Men in the Mirror: Men's Fashion, Masculinity and Consumer Society* (Cassell, London, 1997). For the association of dress with femininity, see E. Tseñlon, *The Masque of Femininity* (Sage, London, 1995). For an ethnographic perspective, see R. Barnes and J.B. Eicher (eds), *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts* (Berg, Oxford, 1992).

⁹ Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes*, p. 111.

¹⁰ Breward, *The Hidden Consumer*, chapter 2.

¹¹ It can rightly be argued that all commodities are imbued with particular gendered connotations. What seems to set clothing apart, however, is the extent to which discourses and representations differed from actual practice. The relationship between consumption and gender is explored, for example, in V. de Grazia with E. Furlough (eds), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996).

in influencing consumer behaviour at different times, is far from an easy task. All too often, consumers' (and to a lesser extent sellers') identities seem to fragment into a myriad of component parts, making generalisation seem impossible. The youthful Siegfried Sassoon's trip to London to try his new (and first London-bought) hunting clothes, described in his semi-fictional autobiography, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, provides a useful example of the complexities of even an apparently straightforward shopping trip. A few years before the outbreak of the First World War, Sassoon travelled up to London from his rural home to try on the garments he had ordered from an illustrious West End tailoring firm. This seems to point to the future poet's identity as a member of the upper classes, engaged in shopping practices perfectly suited to his status. However, the autobiography recounts this episode in order to illustrate Sassoon's uncertain status and identity at this time. The preliminary visit to this and other shops had left him rather nervous: 'the individuals who patrolled the interiors of those eminent establishments had received me with such lofty condescension that I had begun by feeling an intruder'. He was afraid that the cut and style of his clothes had marked him as a provincial nonentity. 'Emerging from Charing Cross I felt my personality somehow diluted. At Baldock Wood station there had been no doubt that I was going up to town in my best dark blue suit, and London had been respectfully arranged at the other end of the line. But in Trafalgar Square my gentlemanly uniqueness had diminished to something almost nonetitive [*sic*]'. So, should the Sassoon who went shopping for hunting clothes be seen as a young gentleman and a member of the rural gentry, or as an inexperienced, immature provincial nobody, left without an older male relative to advise him on consumer matters?¹²

It is tempting to approach this question from a different standpoint. Working on the reasonable assumption that identities were constructed in the very act of consumption, it then becomes more important to discover the identity thus created, rather than the messier business of trying to work out the factors that led to particular consumer practices. At least in part through his purchases, thus, Siegfried Sassoon was seeking to become a 'fox-hunting man': simple! The problem with this approach, however, is that it presupposes that individuals were free to create their own identities by making particular sartorial choices, and that all choices were viewed as equally valid and acceptable. Consequently, it does not take into account the influence of hierarchies and of both material and cultural limitations on consumer 'freedom'.¹³ Indeed, even putting aside for the moment issues of disposable income and availability of supply, it only requires the most cursory examination of contemporary discourses on dress to reveal that there existed more or less explicit rules and codes about what should be worn by different people at different times and in different places. This does not simply mean that contemporary (whether Victorian, Edwardian, or inter-war) society was especially 'formal' or rule-bound. Rather, it suggests a link between clothes consumption and the organisation of power and authority within contemporary society, and promises to provide insights into the ways in which these operated in

¹² S. Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (Faber and Faber, London, 1989; first published 1928), pp. 114–15.

¹³ Discussed, for example, in M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (Sage Publications, London, 1991), pp. 86–7.

practice, as well as into how compliance was enforced.¹⁴ Thus, one of the aims of this book is to discover the pressures that were brought to bear on men's consumer decisions, as well as on the ways in which individuals negotiated their way through the more or less explicit 'rules' that governed dress.

The sale, purchase and consumption of clothes are thus approached in this book primarily as social activities, rather than as having exclusively to do with the individual 'self'. Indeed, the self-fashioning consumer (or retailer) who created a distinctive identity for himself out of sartorial and other consumer acts features little in this book, while the consumer who managed to do so with impunity, appears hardly at all. Clothes consumption, it will be argued, served to forge and reinforce identities, but these were primarily social and collective identities, not unique, individual ones. It is clearly impossible to weigh the relative importance of class, age, gender or other factors in the consumer acts of all men and boys. However, in a context where consumer decisions were influenced by social and cultural, as well as economic pressures, it is certainly possible to investigate the nature of such pressures, and the ways in which they influenced the consumption of menswear: this is what this book sets out to do.

Use, sale and purchase

In their contributions to the 1986 collection of essays on *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff suggested that adopting a 'biographical' approach to the study of 'things' can provide valuable insights into the nature of the circulation of commodities within different societies. They argued that there does not exist a fundamental distinction between 'commodities' that are suitable for exchange, and goods that cannot and should not enter the market. Rather, most (if not all) 'things' move in and out of the 'commodity state', and have the potential to become commodities in the course of their 'social lives',¹⁵ their connotations changing as they move from hand to hand and from context to context. A tie for sale in a shop at the turn of the century, for example, was a commodity among many others, ready to be exchanged for cash, either immediately or through a variety of credit arrangements. The tie might be hidden away in a box, or it might be displayed in a window, its selling points shown off to potential customers. It could then become the object of negotiations between buyer and seller, its 'value' being evaluated, and

¹⁴ See the detailed description of late-Victorian and Edwardian middle-class men's sartorial codes in W. Macqueen-Pope, *Twenty Shillings in the Pound* (Hutchinson, London, n.d. [c. 1949]), chapter xi. The relationship between male dress and power is explored in D. Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England, 1550–1850* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002). See also M. Barnard, *Fashion as Communication* (Routledge, London, 1996), pp. 39–40; Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, p. 9.

¹⁵ A. Appadurai, 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value'; I. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process': both in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992; first published 1986), pp. 3–63 and 64–91. See also the notion of 'systems of provision' developed in B. Fine and E. Leopold, *The World of Consumption* (Routledge, London, 1993).

hopefully agreed on by all the parties involved. The negotiation safely over, the tie could acquire new characteristics, including as a treasured possession, a mark of wealth, status and good taste (or the very opposite), or a gift for a third party.

Using the notion of commodities' 'social life' as a departure point, this book aims to explore men's relationships with clothes as the latter moved through three stages in their 'social lives': the moment when they were worn, when they were sold, and when they were acquired. This does not mean that other stages in menswear's life-cycle are entirely absent from this book. The disposal of clothes, for example, will crop up again and again, as discarded garments were often sold or handed down, patched and adapted for other, generally younger, wearers. But most notably, perhaps, in a context where even on the eve of the Second World War the manufacturing and retailing processes had not yet become entirely separate, it would be impossible to examine the consumption and especially the sale of garments without at least some reference to production and craft work.

That said, manufacturing takes a back seat in this book, the focus being primarily on consumption, retailing and shopping, with a section devoted to each. Indeed, the original plan was to arrange these three sections so that they followed the chronological order of the commodity's life-cycle: having previously been manufactured, the commodity was offered for sale, then purchased, and subsequently used. The hitch, however, turned out to be that men's attitudes towards the sale and purchase of menswear cannot really be fully understood without first having some insight into attitudes towards use: as this book will suggest, both tailors' and other menswear retailers' supposed lack of manliness, as well as the often difficult negotiations between buyers and sellers in the menswear shop, need to be seen in the wider context of male attitudes towards the use of clothes. For this reason, the book opens with a section dealing with consumption, and with the factors that – it is suggested – influenced male sartorial practices and decisions. The first two chapters concentrate on continuities, and on those pressures and influences that remained as relevant in 1939 as they had been in 1880. Chapter 3 then turns to sartorial practices in the context of the First World War, while the final chapter of Part I focuses on, and questions the extent and nature of changes in clothing consumption in the two decades following the 1918 Armistice.

This investigation does not take place in a vacuum. Indeed, reflecting the increasing attention being paid by historians to issues of consumption, the relationship between men, masculinities and consumer cultures has recently become the focus of a small, but growing, body of scholarship.¹⁶ However, the 1980s, and especially the

¹⁶ See, for example, P. Jobling, *Man Appeal: Advertising, Modernism and Menswear* (Berg, Oxford, 2005); K. Honeyman, 'Style monotony and the business of fashion: the marketing of menswear in inter-war England', *Textile History*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2003), pp. 171–91; L. Ugolini, 'Men, masculinities, and menswear advertising c.1890–1914', in J. Benson and L. Ugolini (eds), *A Nation of Shopkeepers: Five Centuries of British Retailing* (I.B. Tauris, London, 2003), pp. 80–104; K. Honeyman, 'Following suit: men, masculinity and gendered practices in the clothing trade in Leeds, England, 1890–1940', *Gender & History*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2002), pp. 426–46; C. Breward (ed.), Special issue on masculinities, *Fashion Theory*, vol. 4, issue 4 (2000); N. Stevenson, P. Jackson and K. Brooks, 'Ambivalence in men's lifestyle magazines', in P. Jackson, M. Lowe, D. Miller and F. Mort (eds), *Commercial Cultures: Economies, Practices, Spaces* (Berg, Oxford, 2000), pp. 189–212; J. Greenfield, S. O'Connell and

phenomenon of the 'new man', have been researched much more extensively than other historical periods and topics, while 'commercial epistemologies',¹⁷ journalistic prescriptions and cultural representations and images, have all received a good deal more attention than men's everyday practices and experiences.¹⁸ Quite apart from the influence on histories of consumption of semiotics and especially of what can generically be termed post-structuralism (particularly the work of Michel Foucault), there are also very good methodological reasons for the privileging of texts over practices.¹⁹ Indeed, if there exists a book, manuscript or oral history recording by A. Man, *How My Contemporaries and I Felt About Clothes Consumption, 1880–1939*, I certainly have not come across it. The evidence for men's experiences of sartorial consumption, let alone feelings, desires and expectations is extremely patchy, and sometimes frustratingly difficult to find. However, it *does* exist, tucked away in autobiographies, oral history recordings and other contemporary writings. Once found, what clearly emerges from these sources is the fact that dress was an interesting and sometimes controversial (but never taboo) topic, about which men from the whole range of social backgrounds had something to say, whether it was to look back in bemusement at the folly of their youth, to lament contemporary manners and modes, or simply to relate an anecdote that readers might find amusing. Opinionated, prejudiced, occasionally very funny and sometimes depressing, angry

C. Read, 'Gender, consumer culture and the middle-class male, 1918–39', in A. Kidd and D. Nicholls (eds), *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle-Class Identity in Britain, 1800–1940* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999), pp. 183–97; S. Nixon, 'Advertising executives as modern men: masculinity and the UK advertising industry in the 1980s', in M. Nava, A. Blake, I. MacRury and B. Richards (eds), *Buy this Book: Studies in Advertising and Consumption* (Routledge, London, 1997), pp. 103–19; S. Nixon, *Hard Looks: Masculinities, Spectatorship and Contemporary Consumption* (Routledge, London, 2003; first published 1996); J. Harvey, *Men in Black* (Reaktion Books, London, 1995); K. Breazeale, 'In spite of women: *Esquire* magazine and the construction of the male consumer', *Signs*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1994), pp. 1–22; J. Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (Routledge, London, 1994); F. Mort and P. Thompson, 'Retailing, commercial culture and masculinity in 1950s Britain: the case for Montague Burton, tailor of taste', *History Workshop Journal*, issue 38 (1994), pp. 106–27.

¹⁷ I have borrowed the terms 'commercial epistemologies' from 'Commercial epistemologies: advertising, marketing and retailing since the 1950s', the title of part 2 of F. Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late-Twentieth Century Britain* (Routledge, London, 1996).

¹⁸ Works that do consider consumers' experiences include L. Ugolini, 'Ready-to-wear or made-to-measure? Consumer choice in the British menswear trade, 1900–1939', *Textile History*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2003), pp. 192–213; M.C. Finn, 'Men's things: masculine possessions in the consumer revolution', *Social History*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2000), pp. 133–55; Hilton, *Smoking in British Popular Culture*, especially chapters 5 and 7; L. Ugolini, 'Clothes and the modern man in 1930s Oxford', *Fashion Theory*, vol. 4, issue 4 (2000), pp. 427–46; I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939–1955* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000), especially chapter 2; D. Wight, *Workers not Wasters. Masculine Respectability, Consumption and Unemployment in Central Scotland: A Community Study* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1993).

¹⁹ For an excellent discussion of the various theoretical approaches to the study of dress and adornment, see Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, especially chapter 1.

or detached, these personal accounts of clothes consumption are, in brief, enormously valuable. They may be short on detail about what was actually worn, and inevitably, individual accounts generally only present a partial and often idiosyncratic picture of sartorial practices, but collectively, they (hopefully) provide this book with unique insights into experiences and attitudes, and a useful counterpoint to commercial images, prescriptive texts and 'serious' writings on dress.

Following this consideration of attitudes towards the consumption of clothes, Part II in a sense moves back a stage in the commodity's life-cycle. Focusing on the moment when the garment was put on the market, the chapters in this section explore men's experiences of selling menswear. In a way this is a more straightforward task than trying to gain an insight into attitudes towards consumption, for although the autobiographical material originating from tailors and other retailers is not abundant, there do exist alternative sources of information about their opinions and feelings. Among these, the most useful has proved to be the tailoring trade press. Periodicals such as *The Tailor and Cutter*, *Men's Wear* and *The Outfitter*, along with a variety of other magazines and technical publications, aimed to provide readers in the trade with guidance on technical matters (particularly relating to garment cutting) and on the latest (especially 'West End') styles, as well as advice on all aspects of conducting a tailoring business, including buying supplies, organising the workshop, dealing with workers, and implementing the most up-to-date methods of shop display, advertising and salesmanship. Information was also carried about administrative and legal matters, trade organisations, meetings and charitable activities, as well as other educational, social and (to a far lesser extent) political initiatives. And, of course, plenty of space was devoted to advertisements by wholesalers, manufacturers and (increasingly) firms that offered to relieve retailers of part or all of the garment-making process, and by shop-fitting, advertising and display specialists.

Usefully, these publications sought their readership primarily among the men who are the main focus of this section of the book: those who were chiefly involved in the selling, rather than the production side of the business, the small (and not so small) businessmen, managers, salesmen and cutters whose central function was in the 'front' shop, selling goods and interacting with customers.²⁰ It is these men's roles as sellers of clothes and 'fashion' to a specifically male clientele, and their attempts to create positive identities for themselves as men and as businessmen, in the face of both old

²⁰ The partial exception were cutters, who, as the job title suggests, also had a manufacturing role: taking the customer's measures and cutting the cloth accordingly. Male retail employment remains an under-researched area. But see, for example, G. Crossick (ed.), *The Artisan and the European Town, 1500–1900* (Scolar Press, Aldershot, 1997), pp. 1–40; G. Crossick and H.-G. Haupt, *The Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe, 1780–1914* (Routledge, London, 1995); C.P. Hosgood, 'The "pigmies of commerce" and the working-class community: small shopkeepers in England, 1870–1914', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1989), pp. 439–60; J. Benson, *The Penny Capitalists: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Entrepreneurs* (Gill and Macmillan, Goldenbridge, 1983), chapter 10; M.J. Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World 1830–1914* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1983).

prejudices and new challenges to established trade practices, which will be explored in this section of the book.²¹

However, here too there are difficulties, due at least in part to the nature of the menswear trade in this period, and particularly to its sheer diversity. Outlets selling clothes included market stalls offering a variety of fusty second-hand garments, no-frills shops specialising in cheap ready-to-wear items, well-appointed hosiers or outfitters selling underwear, shirts, and other small garments such as collars and ties, and bespoke tailoring shops, where made-to-measure outfits – most notably, suits – could be obtained. There were also enormous differences even between businesses nominally selling the same goods, reflected in the wide range of prices, location and services offered. Taking the example of bespoke suits, these could be sold in venues ranging from a village one-man shop, to a high-class outlet situated in the most prestigious areas of London's West End. They could also be obtained by mail order, or in shops where no one had any craft knowledge of tailoring, and from where the order would be sent off to be executed by a separate firm. Especially in the inter-war years, they could also be purchased from a branch shop of one of the rapidly expanding number of multiple businesses. These examples, while by no means exhausting all the possibilities, give an indication of the difficulties of trying to make generalisations about opinions and identities within a trade that was much more diverse in this period than it is at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Rather than attempt to generalise, therefore, this book focuses principally on retailers based in fixed outlets, and particularly (although by no means exclusively) those who sold garments made to measure. Of course, these retailers were not necessarily 'typical' of the menswear trade as a whole, although as Table I.1 shows, they represented by far its largest section: between 1881 and 1911, tailors comprised just under 30 per cent of the whole male workforce engaged in making *and* selling clothes in England and Wales. Furthermore, bespoke tailors catered for a wide range of the population, with the exception of the very poorest, even though the goods they sold were not necessarily 'typical'. By the 1880s, the overwhelming

²¹ For an interesting parallel, see Frank Mort's exploration of what he terms 'the forms of knowledge generated by ... consumer professionals' in the 1980s. Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, p. 1, and especially part 1. Retailers' and shop assistants' ambiguous social standing, and their attempts to create more positive identities for themselves have been considered, for example, in R. Coopey, S. O'Connell and D. Porter, *Mail Order Retailing in Britain: A Business and Social History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005), especially chapter 4; A. Taylor, *Working Class Credit and Community Since 1918* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2002), especially chapter 3; M.C. Finn, 'Scotch drapers and the politics of modernity: gender, class and national identity in the Victorian tally trade', in M. Daunt and M. Hilton (eds), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Berg, Oxford, 2001), pp. 89–107; C.P. Hosgood, "'Mercantile monasteries': shops, shop assistants and shop life in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 38, no. 3 (1999), pp. 322–52; M. Hilton, 'Retailing history as economic and cultural history: strategies of survival by specialist tobacconists in the mass market', *Business History*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1998), pp. 115–37; G.R. Rubin, 'From packmen, tallymen and "perambulating scotchmen" to Credit Drapers' Associations, c. 1840–1914', *Business History*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1986), pp. 206–25.

majority of male consumers bought most of their clothing ready-made, while the made-to-measure trade relied mostly on suits and, to a lesser extent, overcoats. In addition, ready-to-wear suits were certainly available, although despite the efforts of firms like Austin Reed, they never really took off beyond the cheaper end of the market before the Second World War. Despite these reservations, an argument can nevertheless certainly be made for the centrality, both numerically and culturally, of ‘tailors’ to the menswear trade, as well as for the continued importance of the made-to-measure suit to the male wardrobe and to male fashions.

However, tailors’ real usefulness in this book is primarily as a case study of the relationship between commercial activity, masculinity and identity, in a context where both the practice of retailing and the commodities they sold had deeply ambivalent cultural and gendered connotations. Thus, the second section of the book will question how tailors sought to create positive identities for themselves and for their trade out of what were – as will be seen – some exceptionally unpromising circumstances. Bespoke tailors also provide a valuable study of responses to crisis, firstly as they and other menswear retailers sought to adapt to wartime conditions during the First World War, and secondly as new forms of retailing – some of them destined to become highly successful – constantly emerged, leading to sometimes bitter battles for market share. Chapter 4, then, focuses on responses from within the trade to well-established negative characterisations of tailors, tailoring and shopkeeping in general, as well as to the new challenges to emerge in the pre-1914 period, epitomised by the competition of the so-called ‘brass and glass’ shops. Chapter 5 goes on to consider menswear retailers’ responses to the cultural climate and trading conditions of the First World War, while Chapter 6 examines the competing claims of independents and multiples in the inter-war years, as they sought to convince customers of the superiority of the products and service, and the overall shopping experience each could offer.

Table I.1 Men ‘working and dealing in dress’, England and Wales, 1881–1911 *Source:* Census reports, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911.²²

	Total	Tailors	Tailors as percentage of total	Next largest category (excl. boots and shoes) as percentage of total
1881	365,000	108,000	29.6 %	5 % (hosiery manufacture)
1891	408,000	119,000	29.2 %	4.4 % (hosiery manufacture)
1901	415,000	120,000	29 %	4.3 % (clothiers, outfitters / dealers)
1911	439,000	122,000	27.8 %	14.6 % (dealers)

²² Changes in the ways occupations were classified (particularly the separation of manufacturing from retailing) makes it impossible to directly compare employment in the ‘dress’ trades in the pre- and post-First World War censuses. It should also be noted that between 1881 and 1911 many of the occupational categories included under the general heading of ‘working and dealing in dress’ also changed. For example, the category of ‘clothiers, outfitters / dealers’ only appeared in 1901.

Following this discussion of men's roles as consumers and as retailers of menswear, the book's third and final section is then devoted to the moment when the two finally got to meet: the shopping process. If little empirical research has yet been undertaken by historians on men's experiences of consumption or retailing, this is even more so in the case of the acquisition of commodities. Again, this is hardly surprising, given the scattered nature of the evidence, as well as the lack of market research surveys or similar material for the pre-Second World War period. It should also be added that the belief that men – quite simply – did not shop has not exactly encouraged research either. As Breward pointed out in 1999, 'the role of men within a burgeoning culture of city shops and fashionable spaces [in the nineteenth century] has not yet been studied in its own right, presumably because the majority of males are assumed to have been absent from this sphere of activity'.²³

As recent research, including this book, is beginning to acknowledge, there is actually plenty of evidence that British men were fully engaged within contemporary consumer culture, and that shopping for clothes and other commodities was more than a marginal or minority activity, relegated to effeminate or 'unmanly' men, even before the rise of the so-called 'new man' in the 1980s. That said, despite the lack of empirical research, there nonetheless seems to be an overwhelming agreement within the literature on consumption that when men did shop, they did so differently from women: they bought different commodities, generally from different shops, and their choices were influenced by different motivations.²⁴ Tempting as it is to try and disprove this (partly, it has to be admitted, out of sheer contrariness), in fact the issue of gender differences (or similarities) in shopping practices is not a major concern of this book. This is partly because of the often overlooked fact that, although we do know a great deal about contemporary perceptions and representations of women shoppers, we actually still know relatively little about their practices and experiences in this period.²⁵ It is also partly because once we turn away from the representations of shopping in the contemporary media (which are indeed full of contrasting

²³ Breward, *The Hidden Consumer*, pp. 1–2. An exception is, for example, F. Anderson, 'Fashioning the gentleman: a study of Henry Poole and Co., Savile Row tailors 1861–1900', *Fashion Theory*, vol. 4, issue 4 (2000), pp. 405–26.

²⁴ See, for example, J. Benson, *Affluence and Authority: A Social History of Twentieth-Century Britain* (Hodder Arnold, London, 2005), p. 17; T. Edwards, *Contradictions of Consumption: Concepts, Practices and Politics in Consumer Society* (Open University Press, Buckingham, 2000), p. 136; Craik, *The Face of Fashion*, p. 72.

²⁵ For studies of shopping practices in later periods, which show that (unsurprisingly) they were a good deal less straightforward than stereotypical representations, see, for example, P. Lyon, A. Colquhoun and D. Kinney, 'UK food shopping in the 1950s: the social context of customer loyalty', *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2004), pp. 28–39; N. Gregson and L. Crewe, *Second-Hand Cultures* (Berg, Oxford, 2003); A. Clarke, "'Mother swapping": the trafficking of nearly new children's wear', in Jackson, Lowe, Miller and Mort (eds), *Commercial Cultures*, pp. 85–100; N. Gregson, K. Brooks and L. Crewe, 'Narratives of consumption and the body in the space of the charity / shop', in Jackson, Lowe, Miller and Mort (eds), *Commercial Cultures*, pp. 101–21; D. Miller, *A Theory of Shopping* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998); D. Miller, P. Jackson, N. Thrift, B. Holbrook and L. Rowlands, *Shopping, Place and Identity* (Routledge, London, 1998); P. Falk and C. Campbell (eds), *The Shopping Experience* (Sage, London, 1997);

images of enthusiastic female shoppers and their opposites, the disinterested male ones), the need – or desire – to differentiate their shopping activities from those of women does not actually feature with any prominence in men's personal narratives of consumption.²⁶ Although of course women (especially as mothers and siblings) were not entirely absent, it seems to have been other men – either in the guise of fellow consumers or of retailers of menswear – who were of central importance in influencing male shopping practices. The former were particularly important in influencing, and indeed even shaping, the process of making shopping choices, which will be considered in Chapter 8. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the relationship with the latter was central to the actual shopping experience, which will be the subject of Chapter 9, the book's final chapter.

As with Parts I and II of the book, exploring these issues is not as straightforward as it may seem at first glance. Indeed, if there are problems with the nature of the evidence about male consumer and commercial activities, these are multiplied tenfold in the case of purchasing practices. There exists, of course, a wealth of advertising material produced by manufacturers and retailers, which sought to inform, guide and influence male shoppers. However, this cannot provide direct insights into consumers' experiences, desires or expectations. Much more useful are personal narratives, autobiographical writings and reminiscences. Indeed, these regularly deal with shopping, although, as one might expect, one-off, exceptional purchases were a good deal more likely to be recorded than mundane, day-to-day provisioning, while accounts are by their very nature highly individual and fragmentary, providing snapshots of purchasing activities at particular times in the narrator's life, rather than a coherent narrative of shopping.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that shopping frequently appears in autobiographical accounts, alongside other recurrent themes, such as family life and work experiences, as men tried to make sense of their past, and to place their life experiences in a larger historical context. Recounting the ways in which they had acquired various garments at different points in their lives provided a key way of recalling and placing into a wider context personal experiences and relationships. To return for a moment to Sassoon, his description of the London shopping trip was not only intended to entertain the reader by describing an activity – a visit to a high-class tailoring shop – that he or she may have been unfamiliar with. It was also intended to provide the reader with a revealing perspective through which to view an apprehensive and unsophisticated young man before his life was irrevocably

N. Gregson and L. Crewe, 'Performance and possession: rethinking the act of purchase in the light of the car boot sale', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1997), pp. 241–63.

²⁶ Of course, this may have been because these differences were so much taken for granted. Representations of gender differences in shopping are explored, for example, in C.P. Hosgood, "'Doing the shops" at Christmas: women, men and the department store in England, c. 1880–1914', in G. Crossick and S. Jaumain (eds), *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850–1939* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999), pp. 97–115. See also E.D. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000), pp. 128, 171–2, 203–6; P. Glennie and N. Thrift, 'Consumption, shopping and gender', in N. Wrigley and M. Lowe (eds), *Retailing, Consumption and Capital: Towards the New Retail Geography* (Longman, Harlow, 1996), pp. 221–37.

changed by the experience of combat during the First World War. Indeed, as this book seeks to show, acquiring clothes and shopping may often have been a routine and even boring activity, but it was not an insignificant or somehow meaningless part of men's lives.

The late-Victorian menswear trade

By the 1880s, the clothing trade had already undergone half a century of considerable change, a trend that was to continue to the outbreak of the Second World War and, of course, beyond. Technical innovations, particularly the invention of the sewing machine, had revolutionised the manufacture of clothes. As Andrew Godley has shown, although sewing machines had been available since the 1850s and 1860s, it was the 1890s that witnessed the most rapid growth of labour productivity in the clothing trades before 1950, reflecting the fact that the 1880s and 1890s had seen a rapid increase in the use of technically much improved machines.²⁷ However, the reorganisation of the production process had been an equally important factor in the process of change, with the subdivision of tasks previously undertaken by one operative making possible the employment of cheaper, unskilled labour. The 1830s have been identified as a key period of change (especially in London), although the seeds had seemingly already been sown by the system of army and navy contracting developed during the Napoleonic wars, which had created a sharp rise in the demand for cheap, ready-to-wear military clothing. According to Barbara Taylor, during the 1830s 'the transformative agents were usually not steam-powered machines and factory masters but profiteering merchant investors and sub-contracting systems which undercut the craft strength of the skilled man and introduced thousands of unskilled workers – particularly women workers – into his trade'.²⁸ This analysis begs further questions about the causes, nature, timing and extent of these developments, all of which are outside the scope of this book. However, it certainly was the case that by the 1880s the clothing trade was already on its way to becoming a mass production industry, although not based in large-scale, steam-driven and mechanised units of production. By then, sewing machines had almost entirely replaced hand sewing, but garment production remained a labour intensive process, whereby the work was often minutely subdivided into a series of repetitive tasks: throughout the period, large-scale, mechanised factories and small, sometimes tiny units of

²⁷ A. Godley, 'Singer in Britain: the diffusion of sewing machine technology and its impact on the clothing industry in the United Kingdom, 1860–1950', *Textile History*, vol. 27, no. 1 (1996), pp. 59–76; A. Godley, 'The development of the UK clothing industry, 1850–1950: output and productivity growth', *Business History*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1995), pp. 46–63. Other technical innovations included the band knife, developed by the Leeds firm of Barran. This made it possible to simultaneously cut through several layers of cloth. K. Honeyman, *Well Suited: A History of the Leeds Clothing Industry 1850–1990* (Pasold Research Fund and Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000), pp. 21–2.

²⁸ B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Virago, London, 1991; first published 1983), p. 101.

production remained inter-dependent. Both, however, shared a reliance on cheap, frequently female or foreign (especially Jewish) labour.²⁹

By the 1880s, it was thus increasingly rare for all aspects of the production of clothes to take place under the same roof, or to be undertaken by the same firm. Particularly as far as urban retailers were concerned, the shop and the workshop were increasingly becoming separate entities, with outwork, whether in large or small workshops, or in the worker's own home, fast becoming the norm. Arrangements could be complex, with production usually taking place in far less glamorous or prestigious areas than the shop.³⁰ In the late 1880s, for example, the ten-year-old A.E. Coppard started working as a presser in an East End workshop, where half a dozen women were employed making 'men's trousers at 1 and ninepence a time for the various smart tailoring establishments of the city' of London. This small business, owned by a Jewish master called Alabaster, had its

most cherished house ... in Cheapside; there the whole suit was designed and cut out to measures of the particular customer, but the trousers part, cloth trimmings, buttons and so on, would be ... fashioned by Mr. Alabaster of Whitechapel, the waistcoat somewhere in Spitalfields, and – Allah knows where the coat graduated, it might be from Wapping, certainly not Cheapside.³¹

Furthermore, quite apart from the stalls, barrows or packs from which garments could also be sold, the nature of the retail outlets that dealt with menswear varied enormously, as did individual firms' marketing strategies. Some shops crammed windows and entrances with garments, and prominently displayed prices, while

²⁹ Honeyman, *Well Suited*. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century developments in the manufacture and supply of clothes are explored in B. Harris (ed.), *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005); J. Styles, 'Product innovation in early modern London', *Past & Present*, vol. 168 (2000), pp. 124–69; A. Godley (ed.), Special issue on the history of the ready-made clothing industry, *Textile History*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1997); B. Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade Before the Factory, 1660–1800* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1997); A.J. Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors: Trade Unionism Amongst the Tailors of London and Leeds, 1870–1939* (Frank Cass, Ilford, 1995); P. Sharpe, "'Cheapness and economy': manufacturing and retailing ready-made clothing in London and Essex 1830–50", *Textile History*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1995), pp. 203–13; J. Styles, 'Clothing the North: The supply of non-elite clothing in the eighteenth-century North of England', *Textile History*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1994), pp. 139–66; S. Chapman, 'The innovating entrepreneurs in the British ready-made clothing industry', *Textile History*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1993), pp. 5–25; S. Levitt, 'Cheap mass produced men's clothing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', *Textile History*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1991), pp. 179–92; J.A. Schmiechen, *Sweated Industries and Sweated Labor: The London Clothing Trades, 1860–1914* (Croom Helm, London, 1984); M. Stewart and L. Hunter, *The Needle is Threaded: The History of an Industry* (Heinemann and Newman Neame, London, 1964).

³⁰ Not, of course, that shops were always located in glamorous or prestigious areas.

³¹ A.E. Coppard, *It's Me, O Lord!* (Methuen, London, 1957), pp. 22, 46. See also A. Hartog, *Born to Sing* (Dennis Dobson, London, 1978), p. 41. Hartog began working for a tailor in London's East End in 1937. He points out that 'we were working at all hours on rubbish and selling it at fancy prices', but 'we didn't make mass-produced rubbish'.

other – generally higher-class – shops either avoided displays entirely, or simply placed a few rolls of cloth in the window (where a window even existed). Some firms were enthusiastic advertisers, regularly placing notices in local and occasionally even national newspapers or sending circulars out to potential customers. Others operated chiefly through connections, and saw advertising as unnecessary or even harmful to their reputation. Some shops were small, dingy and unappealing, while others were well-lit, well-appointed with good-quality fixtures, and elegantly laid out. The majority of businesses, no doubt, operated somewhere between these extremes, their window displays, advertising strategies and interiors never appearing in the pages of the trade press, either as examples of the ‘best’, most up-to-date and successful retail methods, or as examples of the ‘worst’, most reprehensible trade practices, a warning to other retailers.³²

What the majority of menswear shops – or perhaps more specifically urban shops – had in common, however, was the fact that with the exception of the cutter, customers were unlikely to have anything to do with the actual makers of their clothes, or to witness garments being manufactured. Even firms that continued to combine production and retailing (of which the inter-war multiples were a notable example), generally located production and distribution in separate spaces. The sale of menswear may have continued to be replete with the symbols and language of craft work, but by the 1880s, the customer who went to ‘his’ tailor would have been fairly certain to enter a shop, not a workshop.

He does not seem to have cared. After all, the advantages to the consumer of subdivision, sub-contracting and mass production were considerable: they provided him with the opportunity of buying new clothes of reasonable quality at an affordable price. Even, for a little extra expense, made to his individual measures! On the eve of the First World War, a working-class customer could buy a decent, although perhaps not terribly sturdy, made-to-measure suit for less than thirty shillings. A solidly middle-class tailor-made suit could be purchased for around £2 2s.³³ Despite the often highly misleading reassurances provided by retailers in their advertising material, some individuals may have worried about the exploitation of clothing workers that they must have suspected lay behind very cheap garments, particularly

³² The various categories of retailer selling menswear are considered in Breward, *The Hidden Consumer*, chapter 4, although the differences between the types of shop are perhaps slightly overstated. See also J. Benson and G. Shaw (eds), *The Evolution of Retail Systems, c. 1800–1914* (Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1992); D. Alexander, *Retailing in England During the Industrial Revolution* (The Athlone Press, London, 1970), especially pp. 136–42; J.B. Jefferys, *Retail Trading in Britain, 1850–1950* (Cambridge University Press, 1954), especially pp. 295–321.

³³ A.L. Bowley, *Prices and Wages in the United Kingdom, 1914–1920* (The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1921), p. 64. Macqueen-Pope, *Twenty Shillings in the Pound*, p. 223. Most historians agree that demand-side factors (the growth of demand for good-quality clothing among a better-off population) had a fundamental impact on the clothing trade, fuelling changes to the production process that eventually resulted in lower prices. Supply-side factors, on the other hand, have received little attention, but cheaper textile materials must surely also have had an impact on lower clothing prices. See, for example, D.T. Jenkins and K.G. Pointing, *The British Wool Trade Industry 1770–1914* (Heinemann Educational Books and The Pasold Research Fund, London, 1982), p. 47. More research is needed into the relationship between the textile and the clothing trades.

during the well-publicised anti-sweating agitation at the turn of the century.³⁴ That said, I have found little evidence of wide-spread concern about the conditions under which garments were manufactured. Clothes consumption, this book argues, was a 'social' activity, influenced by an awareness of 'others'. In choosing what to wear, where to buy it and how to sell it, men were very well aware that they did not exist in a vacuum, or that sartorial decisions were seen by the people around them with a sort of benign indifference. However, the 'others' whose opinions mattered were rarely the female or foreign 'hands' who made the garments, generally tucked away out of sight in factories, workshops or their own homes. Much more important were the fellow men with whom consumers came into contact in their day-to-day existence, as they moved between home, work, street, pub, club, school, and so on. It was they who could make life miserable for the man or boy who did not conform with the 'norm': as far as the average consumer was concerned, menswear was, indeed, overwhelmingly men's business.

³⁴ Ugolini, 'Men, masculinities, and menswear advertising', pp. 90–91.