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Performing Fashionable Selfhoods in the Transformed City

Urban redevelopment contributed to the emergence of a vibrant culture of shopping in interwar Liverpool and Manchester. Their city centres became more closely associated with retail culture; however, due to the combination of economic pressures, the energy and innovation of those in charge of the larger department stores, and the new urban infrastructure, shops in the outer areas of the cities simply could not survive. At the same time, there was a more general democratization of glamour that contributed to the populist marketing strategies pursued by department stores. As George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* famously depicted, on the whole, working-class people possessed greater access to consumer and cinematic culture during the decades following the First World War. He wrote,

The two things that have probably made the greatest difference of all are the movies and the mass-production of cheap smart clothes since the war. ... You may have three halfpence in your pocket and not a prospect in the world, and only the corner of a leaky bedroom to go home to; but in your new clothes you can stand on the street corner, indulging in a private daydream of yourself as Clark Gable or Greta Garbo, which compensates you for a great deal. ... Whole sections of the working class who have been plundered of all they need are being compensated, in part, by cheap luxuries which mitigate the surface of life.¹

Orwell's description of interwar cultures of fashion and glamour reflected wider shifts in retail culture. As Chapter 3 demonstrated, businessmen and shop owners in Liverpool and Manchester pursued deliberately populist marketing strategies in response to economic depression. The process was part of a wider democratization of consumer and leisure culture that seemed to fascinate and frustrate contemporary observers, such as Orwell, in equal measure.² More recently, historians have acknowledged the positive role that consumer culture and the democratization of glamour played in the lives of working-class women,

offering them agency and self-fulfilment.³ Glamour signalled a new form of femininity that stressed independence and confidence, which challenged traditional models of womanhood.⁴ Yet glamour also represented rebellion and the fashionably dressed working-class woman could be a problematic figure who embodied wider anxieties about gender and consumer culture in interwar Britain.⁵

Women's access to cultures of glamour emerged hand in hand alongside new employment opportunities for working-class women, particularly.⁶ These changes coincided with important technological developments that aided a democratization of glamour and, perhaps most notably, the mass availability of sewing machine permitted women with little spending power to obtain fashionable clothes, especially through home dressmaking.⁷ At the same time, popular culture offered women new, glamorous and aspirational images, which, 'playing on fantasy and desire, enabled women to *imagine* an end to domestic drudgery and chronic want'.⁸ The transformed cityscapes of Liverpool and Manchester gave women opportunities to perform the aspirational images that they saw in the cinema, in novels and in advertisements. There are similarities with studies of working-class women in New York, where 'putting on finery, promenading the streets, and staying late at amusement resorts became an important cultural style for many working women'.⁹ The transformed city centres of Liverpool and Manchester provided women with opportunities to perform fashionable identities in ways that obscured class divisions, which reflected a wider culture of using the streets for leisure in nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban communities.¹⁰ However, a key feature of the localized urban modernities in these cities lay in the way the local state valued women's roles as shoppers, and celebrated and encouraged women's engagement in shopping culture. Urban transformation contributed to a populist, cross-class space for women, where shopping and being fashionable was a public and performative act that had implications for self-identity.

Here, historical material from the Mass Observation Archive, alongside material from the local press and department store archives, is used to provide a case study through which to explore women's engagement with the transformed urban environment. Although much of the Mass Observation material focuses on Bolton, a town north-west of Manchester, it illuminates the relationship between Liverpool and Manchester's urban transformation and consumer culture in a number of ways. First, it shows how the redevelopment of Liverpool and Manchester shaped the consumer and retail culture of smaller towns. Second, it reveals how women from Bolton travelled to larger cities, especially

Manchester, for the experience of shopping in more glamorous shops, even if that did not involve making purchases and focused on the enjoyment of shop windows. Finally, the rich material from Mass Observation offers a detailed insight into the meanings of shopping and fashion to both younger and older working-class women. Used in conjunction with an analysis of Liverpool and Manchester's press, it permits a re-evaluation of women's engagement with urban space and places working-class women at the centre of accounts of the modern provincial city.

An 'anthropology of ourselves': The Mass Observation Archive

Women's interest in shopping and retail culture intrigued Mass Observation so much that it dedicated a great deal of research attempting to understand the culture, particularly in Manchester and the surrounding Lancashire towns. Mass Observation was a social research movement, which existed in its original form from 1937 to 1949. Established in 1937 by Charles Madge, a poet and journalist, Humphrey Jennings, a poet and documentary film-maker, and Tom Harrisson, an ornithologist and anthropologist, Mass Observation intended to create an 'anthropology of ourselves.' There were two main centres of research: a study of 'Worktown' and a national panel. Worktown provided a very detailed study of the Lancashire town of Bolton, fifteen miles north-west of Manchester. It covered several aspects of working-class life, including leisure, food, budgets, shopping, superstition and religious faith, most of which were researched in 1937–40. Mass Observation chose Bolton because of the town's significant level of unemployment and high proportion of working-class inhabitants. Bolton was a town in decline: in 1939, its population was 170,000, decreasing by 1,000 a year; 11 per cent of registered workers were unemployed; and half of its population were employed in the cotton industry.¹¹ Researchers undertook the Worktown study through a combination of observations, photographs and interviews, and by 'following' subjects, although this was not without problems as they faced hostility and ridicule from local inhabitants. The researchers complained they had been thrown out of pubs, made to blush by flirtatious mill girls and chastised by suspicious housewives.¹² Despite the challenges faced by researchers, the material offers a rich insight into working-class culture. As a town in the Greater Manchester area, Mass Observation's study of Bolton

is unrivalled in depicting the impact of Manchester's transformation in the wider area and illuminates how women's shopping practices were shaped by the revitalized shopping and consumer cultures. Alongside the Worktown materials, the national panels also provide rich and revealing material as they allowed Mass Observation to dispatch questionnaires on subjects of their choice, including clothes and personal appearance, and attitudes to war, or to ask them to keep diaries for a particular day: a total of 2,847 individuals replied to at least one directive during the period 1937–45. In addition, two hundred of these people kept diaries, and Mass Observation had a total of five hundred diarists during the Second World War.¹³

Like Orwell's extended stay in Wigan, Bolton attracted Mass Observation's researchers for political reasons. They 'were motivated by curiosity about the proletarian North, as well as by guilt over mass unemployment. It was not a *very* political way of expressing social concern, and its context was general unease about where modern society was heading, as Hitler, Franco and Mussolini strode on.'¹⁴ Their researchers tended to be Oxbridge-educated and politically left of centre.¹⁵ These political concerns shaped the movement's choice of research subjects and the researchers' interpretations of what they observed. The expectations and social identities of middle-class observers influenced the findings of Mass Observation's investigations, particularly in Bolton and Blackpool (also part of the Worktown study). As Peter Gurney's study of working-class sexuality asserts for example, they 'largely misunderstood the sexual activities and rituals that they mapped out so assiduously'.¹⁶ There are similarities between Gurney's findings on Mass Observation's misrepresentation of working-class sexuality and their attitude towards consumer culture. For example, when researchers visited Blackpool, they were bemused by holiday-makers' behaviour – writing 'whatever they get away from it is not shops and shopping'.¹⁷ Mass Observation was surprised as over 50 per cent of inhabitants only earned between £2.10 and £5 a week and 35 per cent earned less than £2.10 a week, but shopping played a substantial role in the lives of those who lived in Bolton.¹⁸ Mass Observation's findings in Blackpool inspired the researchers' return to Bolton in order to look at shopping habits more closely and 'see what part shops play there in communal life'.¹⁹

The upper-middle-class backgrounds and political allegiances of Mass Observation often meant that they did not understand what they found, particularly in their Worktown study. By implication, Mass Observation 'failed to

take working-class selfhood seriously ... alternative identities and subjectivities were either ignored or simply observed, with varying degrees of empathy.²⁰ Mass Observers seemed particularly baffled by the role of fashionable dress in their subjects' lives and in 1941, their study of clothes rationing argued the majority of the British public felt pressured to be fashionably dressed before the Second World War, which was 'something of a strain ... both psychologically and economically'.²¹ The report claimed, 'A good deal of clothes spending is not determined by *necessity* so much as by prestige and social pressure motives. "Fashion" is only the most obvious example of the general tendency to dress for the benefit of others.'²² Mass Observation's attitude towards fashion, glamour and consumer culture mirrored that of Orwell, Walter Greenwood and other leftist intellectuals who particularly condemned young women's attempts to dress glamorously on small incomes.²³ Women did devote a great deal of time and effort to shopping and fashion, alongside significant financial and emotional investment. However, this tells us far more about women's ability to define and negotiate their own forms of identity and social status than Mass Observation or other contemporary critics recognized: it is through consumer culture that 'the everyday lives of large numbers of ordinary women were most deeply affected by the process of modernity'.²⁴

Fashionable women as agents of economic regeneration

Interwar consumer culture appealed to women of all ages and classes through a variety of mediums but especially the press.²⁵ The press increasingly catered for women specifically and there was explosion in articles and magazines aimed at women and girls. Notable titles such as *Woman* (1937), *Woman's Own* (1932) and *Good Housekeeping* (1922) emerged, alongside the more working-class titles such as *Peg's Paper* (1919). With a focus on glamour, fashion and the cinema, 'women's pages' and the women's press told young girls and women of all ages how to dress, wear cosmetics, what to wear to impersonate their favourite movie stars and, perhaps most importantly, how to use these skills to find and keep a male admirer.²⁶ As Chapter 3 demonstrated, shopping and consumer culture permeated the press in Liverpool and Manchester. Alongside the proliferation of department store advertisements in the local press, there also emerged a greater interest in fashion and dress that mirrored broader national trends and the rise of the 'women's press'.

There was a significant shift in attitudes from the local press towards shops and the women who used them, which seemed to appear hand in hand both with the rise of the 'women's press' more generally and Liverpool and Manchester's new retail culture. In Manchester, attitudes towards shopping moved from being ambiguous to celebratory as the press understood its role in economic regeneration. In 1925, for example, the *Manchester Guardian Yearbook* depicted the vitality of Manchester's shops but claimed, 'Manchester never consciously attempted to become a shopping centre.'²⁷ Similarly, the Civic Week Handbook of 1926 highlighted Manchester's vibrant shopping culture but emphasized its hierarchical nature, describing the city 'as carefully divided into shopping districts as it is into Council wards. Each district has its own speciality and its own following.' Stretford Road, for example, was 'for people who have to ponder over every penny spent', whereas Deansgate was home to the exclusive shops for wealthier shoppers.²⁸ That said, shops and the women who shopped in them were an integral part of Manchester's Civic Week in 1926 and, as we have already seen, shops hosted special events. The press not only helped to promote these events but the *Manchester Guardian* also included an article in all its issues during Civic Week titled 'Civic Week Shopping', which focused on the changing fashions and women's remarkable ability to keep up with them.²⁹ The articles also carried an important message, which stressed women's role as consumer-citizen. 'No Manchester woman', the *Manchester Guardian* explained, 'need set out to buy a particular article and come home without it.'³⁰

Manchester's Civic Week appears to have triggered a greater interest in shopping and retail culture. Urban commentators increasingly began to recognize women's specific role within the emerging consumer landscapes: The *Manchester Guardian Yearbook* of 1927 portrayed the Manchester woman, who

comes in from the suburbs ... not necessarily to buy, but only to stroll round admiring the window displays and the splendid collections of goods inside. She knows, as she looks, that she is seeing the very best that the season can offer her and that, whether her wants are ambitious or modest, she will find as wide as selection and good value as could be given anywhere in the country. ... The prosperous woman can buy everything she or her household needs, whether it be a Chinese lacquer bird-cage, a bottle of wine or a Paris hat. Here all the beautiful produce of other countries is gathered together and every new fancy and luxury is displayed.³¹

The extract's enthusiasm towards the women who travelled in to the city centre from the suburbs but 'not necessarily to buy' is striking. It represents these

shoppers as symbols of Manchester's cosmopolitanism, where a woman could find goods from around the world. Similarly, the *Yearbook of 1928* described a woman returning from a round-the-world trip, bringing goods back from every place she visited. On her return to the city, 'refreshed and sunburnt, sets out to look patronisingly at the shops. By the end of an hour she has found in their windows all the foreign novelties that she has brought laboriously home with her.'³² By the late 1920s therefore, the local press depicted Manchester as a cosmopolitan city in the sense it was international in the diversity of goods available for women (and seemingly only women) to buy.

Women shopping were also a source of fun and amusement within the press, which at times masked anxieties about the role of consumer culture in women's lives. Liverpool's monthly magazine, *Liverpolitan*, epitomized this ambiguous attitude through a semi-regular column called 'Lucille of Liverpool'. Penned by an anonymous author, the tongue-in-cheek column reveals both the centrality of shopping and consumer culture in women's lives by the early 1930s and also the duality of gender identity as women could move between the roles of housewife at home and fashionable girl-about-town:

November 10th Receive brochure from George Henry Lee's, assuring me that this is the time to shop, as prices were at the lowest and bargains could never be repeated ... suggest to David that 'this is the time to shop' who looks unmoved, and says he must be going. Am aware of certain unwifely thoughts, and viciously decide to take the wherewithal out of the housekeeping money, which means dealing at Irwin's, shepherd's pie every Wednesday ... but am undeterred.

November 12th Spend highly pleasurable morning at Lee's ... I buy horribly expensive gown. Visualise the effect on David of (a) the gown; (b) its price.

November 13th Ring up butcher and cancel order for meat on Wednesday, also MacSymous, to say that we shall be out of town for the rest of the month. Transfer order to Irwin's.³³

Lucille's diary was a light-hearted, satirical representation of women's attitude towards shopping and the extract above suggests women would reduce their spending on their husband's food in favour of gowns from department stores. Yet its sense of mockery and anxiety indicates that the press perceived women as losing all sense of wifely responsibilities when they entered the city and lured into making purchases.³⁴

Stories like Lucille's diary, which depicted women's extreme enthusiasm for shopping, may not be an extreme exaggeration. A 2006 exhibition at the

Liverpool Walker Art Gallery, 'A Liverpool Lady's Wardrobe', suggested fashion was central to at least one woman's experiences of the interwar city. The gallery received a donation of seven hundred items of clothing (many of which were unworn and still with price tags attached), owned by Emily Tinne, a doctor's wife who lived in Liverpool from 1906 until her death in 1966. The curators stress the donation 'does not reflect the true nature of Emily's buying', as many items were unsuitable for exhibition.³⁵ Much of the collection consisted of clothes Emily bought in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly from the department stores Bon Marché and Owen Owen. Emily Tinne was almost certainly exceptional in that she kept her clothes until her death and could afford to own numerous fur coats and a 'huge collection of hats', many that remained unworn.³⁶ Nevertheless, since purchases were not always necessary, Emily may well not have been exceptional in her love of shopping and fashion. Her daughters remember 'their mother going shopping almost every afternoon, much as one pursues a hobby'.³⁷ Although shopping as a hobby required time, it did not necessarily require spending power, and, as we shall see, enjoyed by women without Emily Tinne's disposable income. Emily Tinne and Lucille of Liverpool suggest that compulsive shopping habits were not unimportant issues in the 1930s transformed city.

The influence of America and of Hollywood in particular was also evident in the local press. In 1937, the *Liverpolitan* published an article titled 'Oh Miss 1937, Please Stop Trying to Look Like a Film Star!', which called for women in the city to stop copying Greta Garbo and Ginger Rodgers. 'Do you suppose ... that they achieved world-wide fame through looking like anyone else? Of course they didn't. They dramatized their own styles'.³⁸ The *Liverpolitan* called on women to make the most of their own features and find their own glamorous look, arguing it would save them from changing their appearance every time a new film star appeared. At the same time, however, local discourse around women who enjoyed shopping and glamour contributed to new images of Liverpool more generally. As we saw in Chapter 1, the Lord Mayor of Liverpool made an important civic visit to New York in 1931. During the visit, the Lord Mayor's wife declared the similarities between the two cities when it came to women and shopping, although she conceded that the women of New York were 'more glamorous' than those in Liverpool.³⁹ Images of women shopping and enjoying fashion were important because they helped to forge a close association between the city centres, the new retail culture and women's local citizenship, turned shopping into a public and performative act.

‘One of the most tantalising and engrossing
pastimes known to women’:⁴⁰ Shopping as
a public and performative act

Women’s apparent preoccupation with shopping was not confined to the pages of the local press and Mass Observation was especially struck by the centrality of shopping and consumer culture to the lives of the women they studied in Bolton and Manchester. In 1939, while undertaking a study of shopping habits in Manchester, one middle-aged woman caught the eye of a Mass Observation researcher. Described as dressed neatly in black with a hat with veil, grey stockings, black gloves and black handbag and considered by the researcher to be working class, the woman, the researcher noted, ‘looks very distinguished’, and her activities were recorded as she moved around the city centre:

[She] glimpses at Nasby’s Draper, Market St. Has a look at Johnson summer frocks. ... Looks at Marks and Spencer window handbags and in Marks and Spencer looks at all stalls in passing ... goes to stockings, short look at them, then slips, takes some of the artificial silk vests in her hands, opens them ... goes on, interested in blouses and comes to frocks, goes on ... looks at blue shoes and goes to exit, looking once more at stockings.⁴¹

According to the observations made by the researcher, despite spending several hours in (mainly clothes) shops, the woman only bought some buttons, toilet roll and boot polish. It seems the public role of shopping lay in its appearance, rather than the act itself, and women could participate without making actual purchases. Mass Observation made similar observations in Bolton and, in a study of Woolworths, one researcher noted there was ‘little actual buying. People just wander round, looking’.⁴²

Statistics from George Henry Lee’s in Liverpool support these findings by Mass Observation. Table 4.1 illustrates the growing difference between the numbers of actual sales and the numbers of people who came into the store in the period 1925–36. For the period of 1925/26, the difference between sales and customers stood at 168,748 and, by the period 1934/35, this difference increased to 445,106. The number of visitors rose steadily over the period but the actual sales fell. A graph best illustrates the increasing difference between visitors and customers, shown in Figure 4.1.

Table 4.1 G. H. Lee's sales and customers, 1925–36

Year	Sales	Customers
1925/6	596,375	765,123
1928/9	561,802	783,450
1932/33	436,755	858,104
1934/35	452,639	897,745
1935/36	448,548	853,757

Source: John Lewis Archive Box 180/3/a.

Figure 4.1 Graph depicting gap between customers and sales at G. H. Lee's, 1925–36

Source: John Lewis Archive Box 180/3/a.

According to the *Manchester Guardian*, the idea of a woman looking, but not buying, was a common one and supported by the shops themselves;

The large, modern shop is furnished like a palace. It is light and airy, with wide rooms and thick, soft carpets. It has lifts and comfortable stairs, restaurants, writing-rooms, and lounges, the woman coming in from the country or suburbs may use it as a club if she wishes. ... That in the course of the day she buys only a card of darning wool or even nothing at all does not worry the people who own the shop. They like her to feel that she can stroll in at her pleasure and see the pretty things they have collected there.⁴³

Alongside the statistics from G. H. Lees, this extract suggests that the broader technological and marketing developments outlined in Chapter 3 transformed retail experience in Liverpool and Manchester, which helped to manifest the public and performative nature of shopping for women. The smartly dressed working-class woman who 'looks very distinguished,' as noted by Mass

Observation in Manchester, was typical of the new identities women could perform within the transformed urban centres.

Mass Observation identified the important social role shopping had for women:

The working-class wife's activities outside her own home are not very many. ... So that when the wife does go out of the house, coming into contact with people outside home-circles, it represents a means of social intercourse for her, and it is this significance that the journey to the shop, whether one in the next street or in the centre of the town, assumes.⁴⁴

Significantly, the report highlighted the particular social importance of shopping for housewives from the new suburbs, as opposed to young single wage-earning girls, usually assumed to be the social group most likely to engage with fashion and shopping between the wars.⁴⁵ The social role of shopping also extended beyond the more aspirational shops and department stores and encompassed everyday experiences. Mass Observation studied Bolton market, which took place three times a week, and was shocked when they found two-thirds of one hundred houses they visited over a mile away from Bolton town centre were empty on market day. Mass Observation concluded that the market 'cannot simply be regarded as a place for buying and selling. People meet each other, chat, stroll about looking at and fingering, and listen to the talk of the barkers, particularly those selling cures, or dealing in magic'.⁴⁶

Shopping without making actual purchases was fundamental to the performative nature and social role of shopping by the 1930s. One woman showed a Mass Observation researcher her shopping list, which included tea towels, sheets and other household goods. The researcher noted that the women said 'she would need a coat, but does not want to buy it but only have a look round'.⁴⁷ A Day Survey completed by a housewife in Burnley, Lancashire, in 1937, shows the centrality of 'just looking' and she explained how a typical Saturday would involve two trips to the town shopping centre (returning at lunch to cook for the family). The survey also shows that the Saturday trip to the shops gave her valuable opportunities for eavesdropping, which was, surprisingly, fundamental to her enjoyment of the day. First of all she listened to two ladies in conversation as she travelled on the bus to town and told Mass Observation they were talking about leaving their 'new houses which were a disappointment'. Later that morning,

Went shop-gazing in main-streets. Returned 10.45 to market-square now busier – smartly dressed people came in cars and bought vegetables, fruit etc. ...

Listened to what conversation possible whilst shopping. ... Went into Public Reading room (deserted) to look at magazines.⁴⁸

Her testimony is revealing because it shows that the act of shopping was about seeing, being seen and listening, as both an active and a passive actor. In 1939, one Mass Observer noted similar findings when they joined a housewife (listed as 'M') in Bolton on her Saturday shopping trip. The researcher was bemused by the amount of looking, touching and talking that the day involved:

M said now we should have coffee at Collinson's what is the usual proceeding. What we did. But we did not talk very much about the coat or other purchases, besides one or two remark that we did quite well and had a satisfied feeling.⁴⁹

Interestingly, the researcher notes that the performative aspect of shopping did not end when the housewife returned home and that she was excited about leaving the café:

After 30 minutes we went home, looking forward to unpack, and see how things looked. What we did with great pleasure showing out thing to the people at home. M. says that she always likes unpacking and to show things at home.⁵⁰

The material from Mass Observation thus shows how shopping gave women not only pleasure but also status and agency. For the housewife joined on her Saturday shopping trip by a Mass Observer, returning home to show family the goods and, perhaps most importantly, receiving their admiration and praise, was an important aspect of the day itself.

The public and performative role of shopping meant that women took extra care and attention towards the way they dressed on days when they visited the shops. As Mass Observation noted, the weekly trip to town was a special occasion for women: 'Women have usually two shopping baskets, one for every day and one for town shopping. On Friday the weaver comes out with very nice baskets to the mill because they go shopping in the afternoon.'⁵¹ Women wore their finest and most fashionable clothes when shopping, which was one of the most important aspects of the performative role of shopping. One female respondent told Mass Observation that it was the opinion of strangers that mattered most: "Other people" are basically "strangers." It doesn't matter so much at home.⁵² Returning to the earlier extract, the Mass Observation researcher noted the working-class woman who walked around Manchester's shops was dressed in black, including a hat and veil, grey stockings, black gloves and black handbag, suggesting the woman had taken great care in dressing for her afternoon at the shops.⁵³ The

Burnley housewife's Day Survey for Mass Observation also noted that when she went to look at the shops on Saturday afternoon, 'the market square was now busy with work people (half-holiday) in best clothes doing shopping.'⁵⁴ Responses to Mass Observation's national Directive Response on personal appearance show how seriously women took dressing for a shopping trip to town. One young teacher from Liverpool, for example, told Mass Observation that she dressed carefully for her shopping trips to the city. She went 'wearing my best – (on) Saturday mornings when I shop with friends' and claimed, 'I generally wear my second best for theatres etc. and important visits.'⁵⁵ Although the respondent does not explain why she felt the need to wear her finest clothing, it seems it was a way to become absorbed into the exotic culture of retail the young teacher and her friends ostensibly consumed.

It seems that by dressing up in their finest clothing for a weekly trip into town, these women sought to see and be seen within the transformed city centres. As we saw in Chapter 3, shop windows became increasingly extravagant and shop window gazing became an essential part of women's shopping experience. Mass Observation's study of Bolton offers some sense of just how much shop window-gazing took place. After a period of observation of shop windows in Bolton, Mass Observation researchers recorded forty-nine people staring into shop windows and not making a purchase, fifteen people staring into windows and making a purchase, and only ten going into a shop to make a purchase without first window gazing.⁵⁶ On one level, shop windows were significant because they allowed those who felt too poor and shabby to enter the stores and gave 'pleasure to those who love beauty whether they have money to buy it or whether they can only look and pass on.'⁵⁷ Mass Observation noted that women window-shopped in places where they could not afford to make purchases, such as Mrs Jackson, the wife of a mill worker, 'keen on fashions, and looks around in shop windows' and 'likes looking in Manchester shops, but prefers to shop in Bolton.'⁵⁸ For Mrs Jackson, the shops in Manchester gave her pleasure and enjoyment but she made her actual purchases in Bolton, which was probably cheaper but did not have the grandiose department stores as cities such as Manchester did.

It is also apparent that for the fashionably dressed shopper, shop windows had an active role in permitting access to the new consumer culture. For many women, shop windows directly informed their shopping choices. One housewife told Mass Observation that she and her daughter 'will go round the shop windows and compare, a week or two before they buy', allowing them to think carefully about what to purchase.⁵⁹ The depth of research and careful consideration over which purchases to make is particularly striking among

middle-aged housewives, for whom shop windows was one of the key ways they assessed what they would buy. As the Burnley housewife, aged forty-eight, reported to Mass Observation,

I always study fashion articles, advertisements and women's magazines to keep my ideas up to date. I never discuss with friends, but I take notes on what well-to-do people wear, and notice ... of the Queen or Duchess of Kent as naturally the fashion houses who dress these people know what is coming in. I take every chance of studying the displays in the best shops, though I could not afford to patronize them. The fashion in this locality lags behind the fashion in a large city like Manchester so I like to see the shops there.⁶⁰

As the housewife reveals, the costs of fashion meant that it took careful consideration and research when choosing what to buy and that the larger city stores were the most useful in informing her spending choices. Significantly, their use of shop windows in Manchester shows that cultures of fashion and consumerism that emerged in the two decades following 1918, which historians tend to associate with young, single women, did not necessarily exclude older housewives.⁶¹ As the material from Mass Observation shows, shop windows opened cultures of fashion up to these women because they could spend time, perhaps between buying household items and undertaking more practical tasks, informing their decisions about what to buy but often making their purchases in cheaper shops. Crucially, as both the Burnley housewife and Mrs Jackson from Bolton both tell us, the spectacular shop window displays in Manchester city centre influenced what they bought back in the own town centres, which were likely to be far cheaper. For housewives, therefore, shop windows were key in permitting them to balance their desire to be fashionable with their need to be frugal, and they may be able to incorporate window-shopping into other housewifely duties.

For younger women with fewer responsibilities, shop windows were even more central in influencing their shopping decisions. As one housewife informed Mass Observation, her daughters 'didn't bother to read any women's papers or women's pages, but got most of their ideas by looking in the shops'.⁶² Even for the young Liverpool teacher with a rather generous budget of £25 a year, her purchasing decisions strongly relied on what she saw in shop windows:

Decision as to what to buy – this needs a great deal of thought and review of the current contents of my wardrobe. I must choose something suitable in colour and style. I then study shop windows – Bold St here is the poshest shopping street and Bon Marché the best shop. I study the windows carefully for style and

price etc. I also watch the magazines – notable *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman's Fair* and *Woman and Beauty*. If these occur conveniently I attend mannequin parades. I balance my accounts and count up my assets and decide how much I can spend. ... I take a friend (trusted and tasteful) to tell me about back fits etc. My friend is a great help for buying clothes as she has good taste. I discuss styles and prices with her and my mother and other friends.⁶³

At the same time, it seems that shop windows also allowed women to imagine another identity for themselves, as one article on Liverpool's shopping culture revealed:

Shop window gazing is one of the most tantalising and engrossing pastimes known to women ... we, in imagination, don the gowns, the ravishing hats and the luxurious underwear that drape the lay figures. ... We enjoy vicariously all the pleasures of possession.⁶⁴

Shop windows thus shared similarities with the appeal of the cinema, magazines and novels, which all thrived between the two world wars and offered women new opportunities to imagine and perform different selfhoods.⁶⁵ Figure 4.2 depicts men and women staring intently at one of the window displays in Manchester's Kendal Milne department store. The display seems to have

Figure 4.2 Window shoppers outside Messrs Kendal, Milne & Co in Deansgate, Manchester, 27 August 1931

Source: Getty Editorial Image 99174504.

attracted more men than most windows, because it contained sitting room furniture and more likely to have been a joint-purchase than just fashion or smaller decorative items. The image gives some sense of the size of the windows and their popularity among shoppers as they appear to scrutinize the display closely and deliberate with their companion, if they have one. For women, shop windows and the department stores that were home to them offered the images of glamorous femininity that they sought to obtain through cheaper means, which had important implications for the forms of selfhood that they performed within the transformed urban centres.

Fashion and status in the transformed city

Dressing fashionably was closely associated with the public and performative importance of shopping. Women's investment in their physical appearance contributed to their status by the 1930s and, more importantly, represented a form of self-identity defined by women themselves. Respondents to Mass Observation on their 1939 Directive on Personal Appearance revealed the ambivalent feelings women had towards fashion and dress, often claiming not to care and showing that they did indeed care very much. One 25-year-old typist from Liverpool admitted, 'I have two distinct moods with regard to personal appearance. Sometimes I want to be smart and well turned out, and then on the other occasions I see no virtue of being dressed up. ... Why can't everyone just dress for comfort?'⁶⁶ Yet she also admitted how much time and investment she made in her personal appearance and accepted how much she thought it mattered:

I think that one's appearance does matter. People, unconsciously, judge one by appearance. ... Personally, I spend as much as I can afford on clothes and make up but, to my mind, it is not one spends on these things as much as what one chooses ... I go to any amount of trouble to match accessories etc., and spend lots of my spare time going round the shops to see where I can get exactly what I want. This is where the rub comes in. I know what I want, but I cannot always afford to pay for it.⁶⁷

The typist herself was shocked when she realized just how much time and expense she invested in her personal appearance. She confessed,

Since the beginning of this year I have kept a record of the amount I have spent on make-up, and it averages (much to my astonishment) at 2/- per week, which

seems quite an appreciable amount reckoned over the whole year. So far as time is concerned, I estimate I spend about half an hour three times a day over my face.⁶⁸

The testimony gives some sense of just how much time and effort women invested in their appearance by the late 1930s.

Testimony from older women echoed the young typist's confessions and ambivalent attitudes towards personal appearance. A 47-year-old single teacher from the Wirral, near Liverpool, also began her answer to Mass Observation's questionnaire on personal appearance denying that it had any bearing on her life at all. 'I take the minimum trouble and expense to achieve' a well-groomed look, she explained, because of

Lack of means and also because I do not find my personal appearance at all engrossing, whereas many other things are. Lack of means make it difficult to maintain the standard I would prefer ... I do not use cosmetics – I haven't time for what I regard as a trifle. It simply never occurs to me to make up an artificial appearance.⁶⁹

The teacher claimed that her mind was too preoccupied with work to think much about her appearance, yet further on in the questionnaire she admitted to spending an increasing amount of time on her hair:

A well-groomed head of hair I think is an asset socially. The appearance of the hair and the dressing of it makes for a pleasant or unpleasant appearance of face and whole head, and thus it is a factor in sex appeal. A well-groomed head is certainly a more comfortable one and the feel comfortable and well-groomed does add to one's sense of self-respect.⁷⁰

The testimony is revealing because it shows that women who deemed themselves beyond the realm of fashion and glamour were still anxious about their personal appearance. The middle-aged teacher was able to find status by participating in some form of fashion, in this case by focusing on her hair, rather than the more showy fashions of dress and make-up. The reference to 'sex appeal' is interesting because although she is aware of looking appealing to the opposite sex, it seems her own self-respect is the most important factor in caring about her appearance. As the Burnley housewife we encountered earlier explained, she found 'clothes have a slight tonic effect but I do not trouble much about their effect on others so long as I am satisfied with them'.⁷¹ For older women therefore, clothing and personal appearance were more about self-fulfilment but they were reluctant to admit any concerns about the ways in which others thought about the way they dressed or looked.

Although the testimony of younger women showed that they admitted to being more concerned about the approval of others, they did not confess that that they sought the approval of men. The young Liverpool typist was explicit in her explanation: 'Personally I don't dress to please the male sex, because my experience is that men never know precisely what you are wearing. They get the general idea – you either look nice or you don't, but can't say why.'⁷² Although the typist did admit she knew what to wear to attract male attention if needed and confessed to wearing a white collar to tease her male colleagues:

They don't notice the dress – the collar does the trick: give me a white collar! The same thing applies to a transparent blouse – although perhaps in this case it's easier to analyse the reaction. A transparent blouse will keep you busy all morning, dealing with the visitors to your desk.⁷³

Despite this mischievous confession, the typist explained that male attention was not the motivation behind her dedication to her personal appearance: 'No, I confess I dress to please myself and annoy other women. They are such catty creatures, most of them.'⁷⁴ The young Liverpool teacher responded similarly to the same directive:

I love wearing new clothes because I feel smart and confident in their good taste. A new outfit generally acts as a tonic, because if I still feel fed up I don't think about it in the interest of choosing make-up and accessories. ... When dressed I hold a sort of mannequin parade, I say it is to prove if my slip shows but really it is for approval. (*On Prize Day at her school there was great competition with other teachers over clothes*), an occasion for much mutual admiration and some veiled sarcasm. Prize Day was also an occasion for trying clothes and their effect on men. Most of them pretend to be oblivious to them but it's surprising how much nicer they are when they approve of your outfit.⁷⁵

As both young women acknowledged, dressing to gain the attention of men was amusing and a source of entertainment but dressing for the attention of women was serious and took considerable time and effort. The young typist's concern about her appearance was driven, in part, to 'annoy other women' because she recognized people were judged by what they looked like. Likewise, the young teacher enjoyed investing in her appearance both because it made her feel better about herself and because of the approval of others it attracted.

Both the typist and young teacher were part of a generation of women who accessed consumer culture through their experiences of employment: 69 per cent of women and girls aged fifteen to twenty-four years were in paid employment

in the 1930s.⁷⁶ Although representations of interwar Britain often stress a north–south divide, there is evidence to suggest that there ‘was also a sexual division’, as men experienced unemployment and women enjoyed employment and the new consumer culture it permitted.⁷⁷ Helena Forrester’s autobiographical writings about life in Liverpool in the 1930s described girls working from the age of fourteen who enjoyed a few crucial years of affluence. Helena was excluded from the consumer culture other girls accessed as teenage workers and consumers:

They were cheap labour and at the age of sixteen they would often be unemployed, like their elder sisters, but in the meantime they were frequently the most affluent members of their household, with money to spend in Woolworth’s on cosmetics and rhinestone jewellery. I envied them their neat, black, work dresses and, even more, their best Sunday coats and hats and high-heeled shoes. They never spoke to me, except sometimes to jeer at my rags.⁷⁸

Forrester was atypical because she had been born a middle-class girl, whose family went bankrupt and were plunged into poverty, yet Forrester’s articulation of her social alienation and her exclusion from being able to dress fashionably like her peers is revealing. Forrester’s experience supports recent historical research that emphasizes the social isolation felt by young women who could not afford new clothes or trips to the cinema.⁷⁹

As the evidence from older women to Mass Observation showed, the interest in fashion and appearance was by no means limited to young women. It seems that many women were competitive in finding and wearing the most fashionable clothes that they could. The owner of a clothes shop in Bolton told Mass Observation that most women in the town worked hard to be fashionable because it enhanced their social status:

If you sold a customer something and they were well satisfied once upon a time they would tell their neighbours. Not today. They would exaggerate the price and say that they got it from somewhere else. A woman bought an overcoat here at 7/6. She told me that a friend asked her where she had got it from and she said she had got it from the Co-op and paid 30- for it.⁸⁰

The shop owner suggests women were competitive in their quest to be fashionable, going so far as to deceiving others over where and how they obtained their clothes. They perhaps did not want to be imitated, or may have wanted others to perceive their clothes as being more expensive than they actually were. Such competitive, and almost duplicitous strategies, were typical in the ways in which women of modest means successfully imitated the glamorous images

of fashionable women that they saw inside department stores and within shop window displays.

Becoming a fashionable woman

In Liverpool, Manchester and the surrounding towns, women's significant concern when choosing clothes, thinking about their personal appearance or balancing their budgets, was fashion. The young Liverpool teacher told Mass Observation: 'Am I well dressed? I consider I am because my clothes are good, fashionable and carefully chosen to match each other without being in the extremes of fashion.'⁸¹ Although the Burnley housewife told Mass Observation, 'I do *not* think myself well-dressed', she explained her priorities when choosing clothes to purchase focused on fashion: 'I spend a *little* on a few things and have frequent changes. If one buys an expensive thing to make it last, the length of coats and skirts changes or something else in fashion alters so it is no use spending much on any article.'⁸² These women did not mention respectability or smartness as something they looked for in clothes, rather fashion and being fashionably dressed was their paramount concern.

The concern with being fashionable very clearly shaped where and how these women acquired their clothes. Perhaps surprisingly, the concern with being fashionable turned women away from making any significant purchases in the annual sales periods shops held, the largest being in January. Mass Observation's survey on the January sales in Bolton, undertaken in 1939, showed that people did not perceive them as useful opportunities to obtain clothes cheaply. In contrast, respondents to the Mass Observation questionnaire claimed the Sales were occasions for curiosity and leisure, but considered the clothes on sale unfashionable and therefore undesirable. The questionnaire asked three questions:

- Did you save money in order to shop at the sales?
- Did you go to sales to pick up bargains, without knowing exactly what?
- Did you wait for the sales to buy any particular thing?⁸³

Mass Observation's archived material show the overwhelming response to all questions was no.⁸⁴ At the same time, Mass Observation found 62.4 per cent of shops with Sales in January were clothing and shoe shops, and the Sales were very much concentrated in the city centre.⁸⁵ The January Sales may, therefore,

have been part of the broader culture of shopping as a leisure pursuit, rather than as a rational strategy of purchase.

Mass Observation's report on the Sales concluded: 'Trading at Sales time has developed into a combat between the experience of the woman shopper and the knowledge of the shopkeeper. The woman will rarely admit that she has been beaten.'⁸⁶ Mass Observation's findings undermine the stereotypical image of the ruthless and duplicitous shopkeeper, who seduced gullible women into making unnecessary and exploitative purchases, most famously portrayed in the character Octave Mouret, department store owner in Emile Zola's 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames*. In contrast, the evidence from Bolton shows women were not lured into the Sales and seduced into spending by promises made by shopkeepers, but were rational and measured in their approach to spending. Nor did women make purchases for the sake of it. One interviewee told Mass Observation the Sales disrupted her enjoyment of shopping, complaining, 'I'm always quite glad when they are over. All the shops seem to look too untidy and some are rather like junk shops.'⁸⁷ Those who complained about the Sales believed they were an opportunity for shopkeepers to sell unfashionable items of stock. One respondent admitted: 'Curiosity plays a part. But I would not always feel it was wise to buy goods at a sale. They may be going out of fashion.' Another commented, 'The trouble with January sales is that most of the fashions are from the year before.'⁸⁸ Visitors were suspicious of the Sales as they were not an opportunity to obtain fashionable clothes, although it is likely that shoppers still made purchases in the Sales but, like the shoppers who refused to admit they used the Co-operative, did not admit doing so. Mass Observation's findings revealed that those who did confess to making purchases during the Sales only admitted to buying items that could not easily go out of fashion like gloves, stockings and underwear, but never hats, dresses or coats. 'I think the sales are a good opportunity to purchase garments which do not vary much in style from one year to the next', one respondent confided.⁸⁹ As the respondents to Mass Observation's questionnaire testify, the Sales were a period in which women shoppers were particularly astute and cautious in their purchases because they could not be guaranteed to find the fashionable clothes that they most wanted.

The focus on fashion exceeded far beyond the Sales period and was a startlingly important focus of women's lives. Mass Observation's interviews with housewives are striking, in that they reveal the centrality that fashion and dress occupied within the weekly effort to make ends meet, and both the passion women had for fashionable clothes and the innovation they displayed in order to obtain the clothes they wanted are apparent. 'If we want any clothes I'll try an'

get 'em', confided one housewife to a Mass Observer, 'I made this blue one I'm wearing now, last year, it cost me 6/10 wholesale – you see I get it wholesale – the wool, an' knit myself a dress. That was the price with the buttons, everything.'⁹⁰ In similar ways to the shopper who proudly displayed her purchases to her family once she had returned home, this housewife's enthusiasm to divulge her achievement in obtaining a woollen dress illustrates the sense of pride she felt about her ability to obtain new clothes through inexpensive methods. The same housewife was particularly pleased with her determined efforts to obtain a fur coat. As Chapter 3 noted, the fur coat was the most aspirational of all fashionable and glamorous clothes for women in 1930s Britain and the housewife interviewed by Mass Observation had taken on an extra job specifically in order to be able to purchase one: 'She pointed out that she had got a fur coat by going out and cleaning at her sister's every Friday at 3/ a time.'⁹¹ The fur coat was an iconic item of clothing during the 1930s: the housewife's investment was not only financial, but an emotional one too and a fur coat gave her a sense of fulfilment and achievement, as well as enhanced status. Mass Observation continually noted the sacrifices women made for fashionable clothes; for example, a housewife with two adult daughters said: 'Last year family sacrificed their holiday in June, to buy clothes', revealing the priority clothes occupied when it came to making choices about spending.⁹² Mass Observation also cites a discussion one researcher witnessed between another housewife, who worked as a weaver, and her adult daughters, who received unemployment allowance, over whether or not to take a short holiday to London. The mother stated: 'It is a choice whether new clothes or the trip', before deciding, 'I think we shall have new clothes.'⁹³ These women prioritized spending on clothing, over other forms of leisure or expenditure, because of the social and emotional investment they placed in fashionable dress.

Even after forgoing holidays and taking extra paid work, affording fashionable clothes was difficult for many women and required careful spending choices. Dressmaking (whether at home or by semi-professional dressmakers) was an essential part of the rational culture of clothing acquisition for women, which allowed those with little spending power to dress fashionably. As the women quoted above testified to Mass Observation, department stores and shop windows were crucial in shaping how they wanted to dress but the sewing machine was absolutely fundamental in helping them achieve what they saw. As the young Liverpool teacher testified, she researched what clothes she wanted carefully through department stores but her best dress was made by a local dressmaker with material she had bought herself costing 45 shillings; the same dressmaker

also made her a coat for 45 shillings, which ‘would have cost 45 guineas in a shop’.⁹⁴ Dressmaking was thus an affordable method to obtain the clothes on display in department stores. The practice seemed to be commonplace and the young teacher reported, ‘My own friend buys her clothes by buying material and getting the dress made. She plans an outfit before buying anything’.⁹⁵ The young Liverpool typist also used the same method:

I just tell my tailor what I want and choose the material, he measures me, I have a couple of fittings, and then it’s all over. ... Sometimes I choose suit materials entirely by myself, and in that case I have a good idea what I want by looking in various shops. This process also tells me what to avoid.⁹⁶

Women in Bolton also relied on home dressmaking skills to obtain fashionable clothes. An interview by Mass Observation with one young woman reported she ‘makes all of her clothes herself, if one buys a reliable pattern and good material things look very nice’, and through this method, ‘she likes to get every season something new’.⁹⁷ The interviewee clearly desired to maintain a fashionable appearance, despite the seasonal variations, and reveals the importance of the pattern industry (widely available to women by the 1930s and often provided for free in women’s magazines) in allowing women to imitate changing fashions.⁹⁸ Home dressmaking allowed women to access the changing world of fashion and glamour, permitting women with little spending power to imitate the clothes they saw in fashion pages and in department stores.

Women chose home dressmaking against the rise of chain stores and the increasing availability of off-the-peg clothes. Clothing chain stores increased significantly in numbers over the interwar period, rising from 5,957 nationally in 1920, to 9,814 in 1939.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, until the Second World War many women considered the ready-to-wear women’s clothes offered by chain stores to be of poor quality and higher cost and lacking in style and fashion.¹⁰⁰ Although access to sewing machines is difficult to quantify, often handed down through generations and even affordable to skilled workers by the late nineteenth century, it seems fair to assume that most families could access one by 1918.¹⁰¹ The interwar period witnessed a further expansion in the availability of the sewing machine: the number of Singer retail outlets rose by 50 per cent, from 600 in 1920, to 900 by 1938.¹⁰² There was also the opportunity to obtain a sewing machine on hire-purchase between the two world wars.¹⁰³ These developments indicate that most women could access a sewing machine, in some form or other, by the 1920s and 1930s. The sewing machine was thus fundamental to the interwar democratization of fashion and, through home dressmaking, women

could become fashionable women and imitate the styles they had gazed at in shop windows or at department store mannequin parades.

Women overcame limited spending power through the sewing machine; this was especially important because not only were ready-made clothes inadequate, but co-operative societies failed to provide women with the materials they required to become fashionable. Superficially, it seems co-operative stores were also part of the interwar democratization of fashion: there were over 2,000 co-operative draperies by 1938 and 97 per cent of members belonged to societies with drapery departments.¹⁰⁴ By implication, 'virtually all members of Co-operative Societies were able, if they so wished, to purchase women's and girls' wear and drapery from their local Society'.¹⁰⁵ Yet, like their left-wing allies such as Orwell, the leaders of the co-operative movement distrusted the glamorous mass consumer culture that emerged between the two world wars. Rather,

Co-operators underestimated the allure of the new commodity culture and they also failed to think seriously about fantasy more generally ... many co-operators regarded the showy extravagance of these palaces of consumption as both wasteful and immoral; and in the hostile interwar climate the puritanical voice of the local leadership became shriller ... the mode of consumption in the 1930s was very different to that envisioned by the co-op.¹⁰⁶

Furthermore, it seems that the movement struggled to recover from the economic crash of 1929–31. Mass Observation noted that 'although the Bolton Co-operative Society has held for many years a strong position in the retail trade of the town, it has been badly hit by the depression and does not seem able to adjust itself very readily to changing economic circumstance'. The researchers found that membership to Bolton's Co-operative had stalled with 54,214 members in 1929 and 55,398 in 1932.¹⁰⁷

Other retailers in Bolton informed Mass Observation of the Co-operative's lacklustre marketing effort and reluctance to follow the broader trends in consumer culture that were emerging elsewhere. One retailer told a researcher that 'when new brands of goods, new materials or processes were offered to the public, the private trader took the risk of first introducing it and when it was established as a favourite, the Co-op shop started to stock it'.¹⁰⁸ The Co-op was literally left behind: 'It was also suggested by some of the retailers interviewed that the Co-op. had serious disadvantages in that it appeared to lack imagination in selling policy, had little initiative, and was liable to miss the best trade because of this'.¹⁰⁹ The drapery department of Bolton's co-operative experienced crushing

falls in sales across the interwar period: in 1925 sales stood at £113,810, falling to £102,033 in 1927, before falling again to £99,455 in 1931 and to just £68,995 in 1934.¹¹⁰ The demise in fortunes of the Co-op drapery department is especially surprising considering the rise in popularity of home dressmaking between the two world wars. In the words of one retailer in Bolton however, ‘if a girl wants a new blouse for Blackpool, she doesn’t go to the Co-op’.¹¹¹

The demise of Bolton’s Co-operative drapery department was a response to the movement’s reluctance to participate in the emerging consumer culture. As Mass Observation reported, ‘The general impression is that while it deals in good solid quality goods, it cannot meet the demand for “fashion goods”’.¹¹² Women were indeed reluctant to shop in co-operatives because it denied them access to the exotic and glamorous consumer culture they associated with department stores. Although women were generally sympathetic to the co-operative ideology, they understood the movement to be oppositional to the particular identity they sought to appropriate through fashionable dress. ‘The co-operative is a good movement’, admitted one Bolton woman to a Mass Observation, ‘but I don’t like their goods.’¹¹³ Again, women in Bolton emphasised the importance of fashion to Mass Observation researchers. One interviewee conceded the co-operative often provided ‘genuine bargains,’ but admitted she was reluctant to shop there as it ‘is not encouraging to see the same dance dress displayed sale after sale.’¹¹⁴ This woman made it clear that fashion came second to price. Women like her, despite restricted spending power, publicly rejected the co-operative store because it did not provide the status they sought through fashionable dress.

As well as home dressmaking and a rejection of chain stores and co-operatives, women were very careful about the kinds of items they purchased. More specifically, they deliberately used token items to help their homemade clothes look appropriately fashionable. It seems this trend emerged in response to the broader shifts in retail and consumer culture illustrated in Chapter 3. At the start of the period for instance, women (largely middle and upper class) visited department stores for their entire outfits: in April 1920 Liverpool’s Bon Marché’s dress department took £1,070, whereas the glove department took just £176.¹¹⁵ By the early 1930s however, department stores reported a different pattern of spending. Table 4.2 illustrates small items of dress and adornment, particularly hosiery and haberdashery, attracted the most customers in Liverpool’s G. H. Lee’s in 1933. These items allowed women access to the culture of the department store through the purchase of fashionable inexpensive items. As the statistics show, Lee’s most popular feature in 1933 was the Restaurant, which further

Table 4.2 G. H. Lee's number of customers in relation to department, 1933

Department	Number of Customers (making purchases)
Dressmaking	49
Fur	50
Millinery	948
Hosiery	2,949
Gloves	1,139
Haberdashery	4,396
Gowns	564
Laces and Ribbons	3,588
Restaurant	7,954

Source: John Lewis Archive Box 180/3/a.

suggests department stores became demotic sites of leisure and pleasure: women could enjoy the stores without making actual purchases. Haberdashery, Laces and Ribbons, and Hosiery were, following the Restaurant, the most popular departments and sold items that helped homemade clothes to look like the fashionable clothes sold by department stores. By the 1930s therefore, when department stores became more popular sites of leisure and pleasure, women bought smaller, less expensive items, as part of their enjoyment of department stores. They provided a key role in women's rational purchasing strategies to obtain fashionable clothes.

Testimony by women to Mass Observation further reveals the ways in which women used inexpensive items from department stores to ensure homemade clothes looked fashionable and up to date. For the young Liverpool teacher, dresses could be cheap but she invested more money on items not easily copied or imitated. She described hats as a necessary expense and justified the cost: 'To be fashionable I have to buy an expensive one because the cheap ones are too tight and just look silly.' Similarly, she admitted she could spend up to 10 shillings on gloves as 'they have to last until the outfit they match is discarded', which could be six months to two years.¹¹⁶ The local press also acknowledged the importance of appropriate accessories: 'Today, to be chic, accessories must be correct, not only in colour, but in style and fabric, and they must definitely link up with the costume with which they are worn,' wrote a journalist in the *Liverpoolian*.¹¹⁷ Interestingly, although not actually rationed, Mass Observation reported that people stopped buying hats following the outbreak of the Second World War and the introduction of clothes rationing. Mass Observation argued that this was because hats provided the finishing touch to an outfit and with

rationing women lacked new outfits to accessorise.¹¹⁸ By the 1930s, therefore, accessories were an important aspect of self-adornment and its implications for women's public demonstrations of status and fashionable selfhoods.

Conclusion

Dressing fashionably was central to the lives of women in Liverpool, Manchester and Bolton, despite the very modest means many of them possessed. Department stores gave these women glamorous images of fashionable femininity and through determination and rational spending choices, women were able to imitate the images they saw. The fashionably dressed shopper became an important aspect of the new images of Liverpool and Manchester promoted in the press as the local state valued women's roles as shoppers. However, she was in many ways a mirage: these women made few purchases and probably possessed less spending power than the journalists or urban commentators who wrote about them realized. They were not 'silly girls with their synthetic Hollywood dreams,' or a 'prosperous woman' looking for 'a Chinese lacquer bird-cage, a bottle of wine or a Paris hat'.¹¹⁹ Rather, these women were probably mill girls, working-class housewives or the young single typist or teacher, looking to spend their small disposable incomes carefully on items of dress and adornment or merely staring intently at department store windows, planning their next hard-won dress.

This new culture of shopping and glamour offered working-class women the opportunity to take on new identities. Matt Houlbrook suggests that interwar Britain represented a distinct shift in the nature of selfhood, and 'rather than authentic, stable, and immediately discernible, identity was increasingly presented as something fashioned through a careful engagement with consumer culture'.¹²⁰ As the writings of Orwell show, the working-class woman dressed like a film star epitomized this emerging culture. By implication, the fashionably dressed woman seeing and being seen and shopping but not buying ensured that the transformed urban centres transcended class divisions. For example, Mass Observation found it frustratingly challenging to judge a person's class by his or her appearance in the 'Follows' part of their study. Researchers who undertook the Follows often had to examine what items shoppers bought, if they bought anything at all, to define their class. One Follow included the description of a woman who, the researcher presumed, was aged about twenty-five who

went into Woolworths with her 3-year-old daughter. Described in the Follow's notes as being 'very well got up, camel coat, silk stockings, good shoes', the woman, the researcher observed, bought a toothpaste for 6d., and on seeing the child's balloon burst, she quickly replaced it with a new one costing 1d. From this exchange, the Mass Observer classified the woman as middle class.¹²¹ In contrast, a woman assumed to be nineteen years old, wearing a 'short grey fur coat, light stockings', looked around the shop but made no purchase, and so was classified as 'good working-class'.¹²² 'Black coat – Astrathan collar, black dress, black hat, stockings, snakeskin shoes, bad at heels' was the description of one woman who was defined as being working class because she 'has a look round doesn't [but] buy'.¹²³ Mass Observers relied on making judgements about shoppers' apparent spending power to define class because their fashionable dress obscured other divisions.

The Follows undertaken by Mass Observation also indicate that the majority of women used dress to portray their apparent respectability and those who could not dress fashionably experienced poor status. Mass Observation described one couple which was observed in Woolworths where the woman was heavily pregnant, with 'old brown-fawn coat, old brown hat, rather frayed on back of head, dirty face. Cotton socks, greyish old black shoes, heels (worn) down, bought biscuits for 3d after deliberation'.¹²⁴ For Mass Observation, the poor dress and 'deliberation' over the purchase of biscuits led them to describe the woman as 'poor, unemployed'. Mass Observers also suggested poorly dressed shoppers were ashamed of their appearance and felt alienated. A report described one woman as, 'dressed in faded, shabby brown coat, with a dirty flowered frock underneath ... her husband is unemployed – she is embarrassed about this'.¹²⁵ 'Shabby ill-fitting coat glasses, with boy, 12, blue coat, glasses, weedy,' was the description of another woman deemed by Mass Observation to be 'poor working class'.¹²⁶

Mass Observation's anthropological study of Bolton and Manchester can be criticised for maintaining middle-class expectations of working-class culture and people. Mass Observation 'rendered them quaint, harmless, slightly peculiar and comic, as were Malekulan (tribe studied by Harrisson) cannibals'.¹²⁷ What the Follows do reveal, however, is the social isolation experienced by those who could not participate within consumer culture or obtain fashionable clothes. Thus, dressing fashionably was important because it publicly displayed status and the rational culture of spending practised by women to obtain clothes meant even those with limited spending power could access fashionable clothes, through

careful and measured methods of acquisition. Although the cultures of fashion and glamour that suffused women's lives by the 1930s required some money and certainly a great deal of time, commitment and passion, the implications meant that it offered women new forms of selfhood that transcended class divisions. What Mass Observation and their contemporaries misunderstood, therefore, was the potentially liberating and transformative power of this new consumer culture: the transformed city offered opportunities for new glamorous identities that took women nearer to Hollywood and to the lives of the movie stars they sought to imitate. As a case study, it uncovers the ways in which women experienced the redeveloped city centres. It also shows how Liverpool and Manchester's transformation shaped consumer and retail culture more generally in the surrounding region. By implication, the material stresses women's experiences were central to the redeveloped city centres. As we shall move on to see, women's roles as shoppers and consumers became no less important when Catholic leaders turned their attentions to urban transformation.