

“For the Masses not the Classes”: The Development of Rayon as a
Mass Consumer Good for Women in Interwar Britain.¹

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¹ “Round the Shops”, *The Times*, 14 February 1936, p. 9

Abstract

This thesis traces the growth in the consumption of the first man-made textile, rayon, in Britain in the interwar period. Rayon was first used commercially in the 1910s, but sales of the fabric soared in the late 1920s and by the 1930s it had become an established fibre in the textile industry. The thesis follows a “systems of provision” approach, and follows the entire rayon supply chain through various businesses to the end consumer.² The manufacture, design, advertising, retailing, purchase and final use of the fibre are explored in order to understand how rayon became such an outstanding success. With the majority of rayon being used in womenswear, this is where the focus of this thesis lies. The work also explores the many methods and practices which are first seen in this period, and which form the basis of the “fast fashion” model which has become the norm for many global consumers in the twenty-first century. By examining social, cultural and economic changes in the interwar period it will be shown that it was a combination of price, function, feminine modernity and glamour which meant that rayon became a mass-market product. A multi-disciplinary approach is used, covering business, fashion, art and consumer history, and a broad range of themes are covered. The thesis also makes extensive use of the broad range of original written and visual sources from all parts of the supply chain.

² Fine, Ben, Kate Bayliss and Mary Robertson, “The Systems of Provision Approach to Understanding Consumption”, in *The Sage Handbook of Consumer Culture* eds. Olga Kravets, Pauline Maclaran, Steven Miles and Alladi Venkatesh (London: Sage Publications, 2017), pp. 27-42

In Memory of

Elsie Rogerson

1924-2019

For Adam, Nina and Cara.

*Without all your support I could not have
completed this research and thesis.*

*And with many thanks to my supervisor, Peter Gurney, for
being such an excellent sounding board and for
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A Note on the Use of “Artificial Silk” and “Rayon”

During the interwar period, the terms “artificial silk”, “art silk” and “rayon” were used interchangeably naming the regenerated cellulose fibre and fabric which I am writing about. I have chosen to use the word “rayon” throughout this thesis, as it more accurately represents the fibre and fabric. The only incidences where I have not done this is in direct quotes, or on the rare occasion where it is more suitable for the term “artificial silk” to be used instead.

The naming of rayon has never been static, and even today there are various varieties and brands which are manufactured and sold, such as modal, Lyocell and Tencel.

Abbreviations

BDA	The Bradford Dyers' Association Ltd
BDC	The British Dyestuffs Company Ltd (later ICI)
CPA	The Calico Printers' Association Ltd
JWT	J. Walter Thompson London
TBL	Tootal Broadhurst Lee Ltd
<i>ASW</i>	<i>Artificial Silk World</i>
<i>AW</i>	<i>The Advertiser's Weekly</i>
<i>DO</i>	<i>The Drapers' Organiser</i>
<i>DR</i>	<i>The Drapers' Record</i>
<i>GH</i>	<i>Good Housekeeping</i>
<i>GMFR</i>	<i>The Garment Manufacturer and Fabric Review</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>The Hosiery Times</i>
<i>MW</i>	<i>Modern Woman</i>
<i>TM</i>	<i>The Textile Manufacturer</i>
<i>S&R</i>	<i>The Silk and Rayon Journal</i>
<i>SJRW</i>	<i>Silk Journal and Rayon World</i>
<i>WGT</i>	<i>Weldon's Good Taste</i>
<i>W&H</i>	<i>Woman and Home</i>
<i>WF</i>	<i>Woman's Fair</i>

FRP Fixed Retail Pricing

BASE British Artificial Silk Exhibition

BTE British Textiles Exhibition

MO(A) Mass Observation (Archive)

With the possible exception of aeroplanes, the most spectacular industrial development since the war is rayon, which has come to be a household word and daily necessity

Garment Manufacturer and Fabric Review, June 1930

Introduction

In the spring of 1885, in the heart of South Kensington, Joseph Swan (later Sir) set up a stand at the International Inventions Exhibition. In amongst his display of incandescent light bulbs was something rather unexpected: doilies and handkerchiefs crocheted by his wife, Hannah. But these were no ordinary handicrafts: Joseph Swan had been working on revolutionising and simplifying the production of electric light filaments, and had discovered that a solution of nitrocellulose and acetic acid could be forced through small nozzles into an alcohol bath to produce a fine, homogenous strand of indefinite length. These strands were explosive, but after being treated with ammonium sulphide the filament was suitable for use in electric lights. However, Swan also saw that these filaments had potential in another direction, that of textiles, and to this end he gave his wife some of the results of his experiments. Hannah Swan crocheted these filaments into doilies, and used them to edge handkerchiefs. It was these items which were put on display at the 1885 Exhibition, and described as “artificial silk”, they were the first glimpse the world would have of a man-made textile fibre, and what we now call “rayon”.

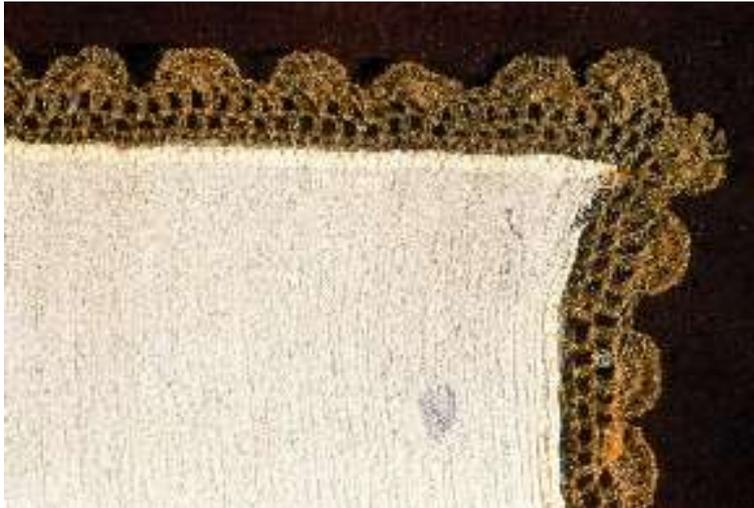


Figure 1 Nitrocellulose Rayon crocheted by Hannah Swan. © Science Museum Group Collection Online .

Today we are surrounded by man-made and synthetic fabrics, but for most of human history textiles have been produced through the processing of natural fibres, most commonly cotton, wool, linen and silk. The most desirable fibre was silk, as not only did the resultant fabrics glisten and shine, but it had the additional cachet of being expensive due to its complex production. To make just one kilogram of silk, three thousand caterpillars, known as silk worms, have to consume 104kg of white mulberry leaves; once satiated the creatures form a cocoon, formed of a single long, fine strand. The silk worms are killed, the cocoons unravelled, and when these filaments are twisted together they form thread we know as silk. Aside from the fiddly production process, which was largely manual until the late nineteenth century, the *Bombyx Mori* caterpillar is particular about its diet and prefers to eat the leaves of the white mulberry tree, a species difficult to cultivate in Europe. Although some silk production has taken place in Italy and France, the majority of silk has historically been imported from Asia, the natural environment of the white mulberry tree. Given its convoluted production followed by the shipping of the fibre half way across the globe, it is not surprising that man dreamed of creating an alternative to silk. In 1664 an Englishman named Robert Hooke began to believe that there must be a way of creating a solution similar to that which silk worms and spiders produced, and drawing it out into similarly fine lengths. In the 1730s, René de Réaumur was also thinking along these lines: a “liquid gum” which spiders and silk worms produce might be reproduced by man. But it was the issue

of how to produce fine, unbroken filaments which confounded both Hooke and de Réaumur. Despite the dreams man may have had about recreating natural fibres, the technical capacity simply did not exist, and there the issue rested until the late 19th century.

The initial discovery of rayon cannot be credited to one individual: although Swan created filaments in the 1880s, his work built upon that undertaken by previous scientists, and in parallel to Swan, others were also working towards creating a man-made silk, most notably Comte Hilaire de Chardonnet in France. It was other scientists working on unrelated topics who would discover how cotton and wood cellulose could be turned into a liquid solution suitable for turning into filaments; whilst still others created spinnerets which allowed these solutions to be drawn out of fine holes. It was the cumulative effort of many researchers which would ultimately lead to the production of four types of “artificial silk” or “rayon”. All forms of rayon are characterised by being an artificial fibre which is produced using a cellulose from plants (usually wood or cotton, but bamboo is increasingly being used today), which is reconstituted using various solutions and processes to form long strands which can be turned into a thread.¹ Unfortunately, Swan’s variety of rayon was too flammable and unstable to be of any commercial use, but other forms of rayon would prove to be much more promising. There were three types of rayon which would prove to be commercially viable: viscose, acetate and cuprammonium, and all of these were produced in Britain in the interwar years. 1904 saw Samuel Courtauld & Co buy the rights to viscose production from the scientists who had developed it, and the company launched the first commercially viable rayon into the market shortly afterwards, although it would take until 1920 for sales to reach any noticeable scale. British Celanese Ltd created acetate rayon in the late 1910s and began marketing a yarn called “Celanese” in 1921. Finally, in 1930 cuprammonium rayon was being produced by a subsidiary of a German company, called British Bemberg Ltd.² Viscose rayon

¹ See Appendix I for information about the discovery of these rayons. These cellulose fibres are not “synthetics”: these are later discoveries and are based on the indirect synthesis of petroleum derivatives.

² As we shall see later, these were not the only producers, but this was the first time all of these types of rayon were produced on a feasible commercial scale in Britain.

dominated the market, having around 65% of market share in 1935, with acetate holding around 35%; the amount of cuprammonium produced was probably less than 1%, but Bemberg had a distinctive marketing campaign, which is why the production is of note here.³ The commercialisation of this artificial textile had a steep trajectory: in 1919 British rayon firms produced 7.6 million pounds (weight) of product, but by the end of 1938 this had risen to over 140 million pounds.⁴ The 1935 Census of Production showed that British companies held 92% of the home market, with just 11 million pounds of rayon being imported in that year.⁵ The ever increasing volumes of rayon in turn produced thousands of miles of fabric, which was used for a variety of purposes. Figures given by David Coleman suggest that almost two-thirds of the rayon produced was used in women's clothing, the remainder being split mainly between men's and children's wear, with very small amounts being for industrial and household usage.⁶ The mass production of rayon, and the marketing and retailing practices it generated in the interwar period set patterns for how textiles would be consumed in the future. The consumption of rayon set the precedent for seeing clothing as cheap and disposable, and in the present day, it is clear that this idea has simply been refined and sophisticated, and has grown to make use of global economies, labour and supply chains. It is not too bold a statement to say that rayon set the stage for the successful introduction and mass manufacture of other synthetic fabrics, and laid the ground for what we now term "fast fashion".⁷ The aim of this thesis is to examine how rayon became accepted by the British fabric trade and consumer so rapidly, and to investigate the practices and approaches taken by those involved in the supply chain to ensure the success of the product. It will

³ These are rough estimates based on various figures in Donald Coleman, *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History, Vol II*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). There does not appear to have been any calculation of this split done in the interwar period.

⁴ This fell back to 113m lbs in 1939, but I believe this is largely due to the outbreak of war: and had the last four months of the year been "normal", production would have reached 150m lbs.

⁵ Calculated from *The Rayon and Silk Buyer's Guide and Directory, 1940-41* (Manchester: Harlequin Press, 1941).

⁶ Donald Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 202

⁷ The origin of the term "fast fashion" comes from the 1990s when the retailer Zara opening in New York. The New York Times used the phrase, "fast fashion" to explain Zara's goal to take a fashion piece from the stages of being designed to hanging on a clothing store rack in a mere 15 days. Since then, its meaning has changed to mean any retailer producing fashion goods in a very short timescale, often for low prices in order to entice consumers to buy more and more clothing.

also illuminate how businesses behaved and how consumers reacted in these very early stages of a mass-consumption driven model of clothing provision.

Background to the Rise of Rayon

A brief explanation of the social and economic situation in the interwar period is necessary at this point, as the changes which took place during these years would prove to be the catalysts for the phenomenal growth in rayon production and consumption. Various surveys and censuses, and the resulting analysis of data collected provide historians with a great deal of insight into how the general population fared financially during this period. We can ignore the upper class in this examination, as although they did buy rayon, it was not the main market for the product; and the long-term mass unemployed in desperate poverty are also necessarily excluded, simply because new clothing was more or less unaffordable. In looking at rayon as a consumer good, we are concerned with those who “remained in continuous employment” during this period and who, because of this, made “marked gains” in their income, along with the middle classes.⁸ The traditional financial marker for being middle class in the interwar years was a family with an income of between £250 and £1000 per year. This means around 13-15% of the population fell into this category, however, there were some white collar jobs which did not provide an income of this level, yet these individuals were not manual labourers and should be included in the middle class category. McKibbin used census data to show that if we use occupation as a segregator of class, then around 9 million people, or just over 21% of the population were middle class in this period.⁹ The salaried portion of these individuals also rose: from 2.9 million in 1931, to 3.2 million in 1938. This was a small increase, but this 14% of the population were important consumers as they had a reliable and steady income. When looking at rayon, occupation and whether one was salaried or not, is certainly a better marker of class, as occupations often determined the aspirations and social “necessities” of individuals, and clothing was

⁸ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

(and is) an important visual signifier for this group. Indeed, of the 700,000 salaried employees surveyed by the University of Manchester in 1938, Marley and Campion calculated that 57% of them actually earned less than £250 per year. For most of these individuals, clothing would have been an important spend, and other items would have been sacrificed in order to “keep up appearances”.¹⁰

The cost of living declined in the interwar period too: the Board of Trade index suggests that prices fell as much as 27% from 1924 to 1938, while at the same time real income rose by 24%. In monetary terms, this meant an increase in the average income from just over £200 a year to £240 a year whilst at the same time being able to buy significantly more for this amount. A 1937 survey of working-class families in Bristol showed that nearly 70% of families had an income of £4 5s a week, putting them well above the level of subsistence, and into the £250 annual income which would classify them as middle class. A study in 1936 suggested that 30% of the population had a “per head” income of 30s a week, or just under £78 per year per capita.¹¹ Although this figure does give a skewed view as the majority of the population lived in family units and this income would have been accumulated and split in different ways, it does show the amounts each man, woman and child had to cover all of their living costs, and demonstrates that there was significant numbers of people who now had money to spend on items which went beyond the mere essentials of life.¹² These non-essentials were not only material items, they could be things such as cinema tickets or spending money on sports and hobbies. Andrew Thorpe states that time and *money* are the prerequisites for leisure to become a part of a culture.¹³ The rise in real incomes means that a growing number of the population in the interwar

¹⁰ Taken from the title of Catherine Horwood’s study of middle-class clothing, *Keeping Up Appearances: Fashion and Class between the Wars*, (Stroud: Sutton, 2005) and taken from Rose Macauley’s 1925 novel of the same name.

¹¹ John Boyd Orr, “A Survey of Adequacy of Diet Food Health and Income in Relation to Income” (1936), <<https://www.sochealth.co.uk/national-health-service/public-health-and-wellbeing/food-policy/food-health-and-income/>>, accessed 3 September 2023.

¹² This was significantly higher than the poverty line determined by Seebohm Rowntree in *Poverty and Progress* (London: Longmans, Green, 1941) where a man, woman and three children needed a minimum of 43s 6d after rent to cover the basic costs of living. Using Orr’s numbers of 30s a week, this same family would have 150s per week, although this would need to include rent.

¹³ Andrew Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s: the Deceptive Decade*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 97.

period was in a position to enjoy leisure time as never before, and this would have a significant effect on the consumption of rayon.

Understanding how people spent their free time may seem somewhat tangential to understanding the history of a textile, but given the type of leisure activities popular in this period it is absolutely crucial. One of the largest cultural influences at this time was undoubtedly the cinema. As early as 1932, the Commission on Education and Cultural Films recognised it as “the staple entertainment of the average family” and later A.J.P. Taylor called it “the essential social habit of the age”.¹⁴ Cinema goers were never far from a “dream palace”: there were 4000 cinemas in 1925, and nearly 5000 in 1938, and around twenty million tickets were sold each week.¹⁵ With many seats costing just 6d, it was a cheap form of entertainment, and women in particular were drawn to it because of the “glamorous and mythical films” which were so opposite to their cultural, social and domestic “passive” lives.¹⁶ The lives, looks and clothing of film stars were pored over in new magazines like *Picturegoer* and *Film Fashionland*; Priestley saw girls who had “modelled their appearance on those of certain film stars”; and imitations of Hollywood dresses were available to buy ready-made and in pattern form.¹⁷ Andrew Davies argues that cinema “inspired a heightened sense of fashion” amongst the working class, but while it might be true that the working-class sought to emulate the stars more completely, I would argue that there was also a subtler influence on fashion: fashion historians Lou Taylor and Elizabeth Wilson have both noted that increasingly fashion influences came from

¹⁴ “British Film Industry”, Hansard, < <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1925/may/14/british-film-industry>>, accessed 3 September 2023; Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-39*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010), p. 11.

¹⁵ Taken from the title of Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010). See also Juliet Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History*, (London: Harper Press, 2010), p. 660; and C.L. Mowatt, *Britain Between the Wars*, (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 501.

¹⁶ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 421.

¹⁷ J.B. Priestley, *English Journey*, (London: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 352.

Hollywood as well as Paris.¹⁸ The glamour and fashion which was shown on the screen would prove to have an unprecedented influence on the design, advertising and retailing of clothing and textiles.

Alongside the cinema, a new “mass-press” was seeking to profit from large numbers of female readers, and women’s magazines entered a boom period. In 1932, there were twenty-five weekly women’s magazines, one fortnightly, and fourteen monthlies.¹⁹ These magazines appealed to women across all classes, and millions of women read them, whether they were bought or borrowed. Fiona Hackney’s 2010 PhD thesis argues that these magazines, in terms of editorial content and adverts, “set new patterns of behaviour and expectations”.²⁰ Magazines often reinforced notions of domesticity and femininity, but dependent on the class of reader, they might also stimulate new “behaviours” such as keep-fit, dancing, or going on holiday. Across all women’s magazines though, it was the consumption of clothing and make-up which was encouraged above all else. The magazines’ “hallucinatory” view of the world was one where glamour and fashion could help forge pathways to opportunity and self-improvement if a woman was willing to “remake” herself through new garments and her looks.²¹ Another popular leisure activity which also required a certain amount of “remaking” was a visit to the dance hall. Dancing was hugely popular amongst the working and lower-middle classes, and around 100 million admissions to dances were made in 1938.²² The dance halls were glamorous, there was a performative aspect to dancing, and there was a chance to meet someone of the opposite sex, so for women clothing and looks were important. Around half of the 1939 Mass Observation report on dance halls is made up of tallies of the clothing the women were wearing, showing just how important

¹⁸ Andres Davies, “Cinema and Broadcasting” in *Twentieth Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change* ed. Paul Johnson (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 263-280 (p. 271); Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 185; and Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 171).

¹⁹ McKibbin, p. 508.

²⁰ Fiona Hackney, ““They Opened Up a Whole New World’: Feminine Modernity and the Feminine Imagination in Women’s Magazines, 1919-1939”, PhD Thesis, University of London, (2010), p. 4.

²¹ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, p. 157.

²² James Nott, “Dance Halls: Towards an Architectural and Spatial History, c. 1918–65”, *Architectural History*, Vol 61, 2018, pp. 205-233 (p. 205).

an aspect of this social activity it was. For many of the participants, a buying or owning a dress or outfit for dancing would have been high up their list of priorities. The combination of these social and leisure activities means that, as Sally Alexander notes, shopping became a “ritual” that was “willingly saved up for”. This “ritual” was preceded by leisure activities linked to clothing and retailing: window shopping in advance of a purchase was common, as was reading magazines for advice and inspiration, and of course the cinema would have played its part in influencing a decision too.²³ It was in this changing landscape of increased spending power, and leisure and cultural activities where fashion, clothing and looks played a pivotal role, that rayon emerged.

Literature Review

Although clothing and the way people dress appear ephemeral, showing us a snapshot of a particular time and style if we take garments as a prism through which to observe the past, it is possible to understand far more about the society and economy. Looking beyond the immediate fabric, stitching and notions to the manufacture and creative processes behind textiles, the marketing and selling of goods, and the ultimate use and wearing of clothing can illuminate many aspects of a particular period. In a consumer-based economy and society, there is symbiosis between business, fashion and consumption, and these are deeply enmeshed within the broader social, cultural and economic context in which they sit, and for this reason, the examination of the history of rayon must be an interdisciplinary exercise. Until fairly recently, historical studies of business, fashion and society have remained separate spheres. The reasons for these distinctions remaining so strong may be judged to be largely down to the personal interests of historians, but also because linking, for example, economic history with fashion history can seem incongruous. Yet this is not the case: a look at fashion businesses today shows that economic success is their main driver, as indeed it always has been. The fashion industry could not sustain itself if not for economic success; but it is also directed by cultural

²³ Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman: and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*, (London: Virago, 1994), p. 221.

and societal norms, trends and fads. In her 2017 book *Fashionability*, Regina Lee Blaszczyk argued that

The history of design, production and distribution in textiles should not be isolated from the history of retailing, fashion and consumer culture, as it so often is.²⁴

Fashionability was one of the first books which attempted to mesh these broad topics together. Textile histories have traditionally been broadly split into fashion histories, which focus on the garments and fashion, or business and economic histories, which examine the manufacturing companies or the wider industry. This being the case, this literature review is split into three categories to roughly designate the classification of the works which provide a background for my work.

Business History

Forming a major part of the British economy in the Industrial Revolution and subsequently declining in the twentieth century, the textile trade has long been a subject of fascination for economic and business historians. With their much deeper roots, the cotton and wool business have drawn much attention, but as a fibre with a far more recent history, and having a smaller economic footprint, rayon has failed to garner the same level of attention. The book which best covers the subject is primarily concerned with the history of the textile manufacturer, Courtaulds Ltd.²⁵ The second volume of Coleman's history of this manufacturer, first published in 1969, still stands as the most complete study of UK rayon production with his work drawing heavily on the Courtaulds' archives. However, although its title claims to be an "Economic and *Social* History" [my italics], the book is a company history, with almost no focus on the social side of either employees or the market into which rayon was sold.²⁶ The undeniable strengths of the book lie in the detailed scientific history of the discovery and development

²⁴ Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Fashionability: Abraham Moon and the Creation of a British cloth for the Global Market*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 8.

²⁵ Coleman, *Courtaulds*.

²⁶ Coleman does give usage and market figures, but the closest we get to an analysis of the consumption of rayon is a brief 7 pages, filled mostly with tables.

of rayon; and the presentation and analysis of figures pertaining to the manufacture of rayon in Britain, by both Courtaulds and other smaller companies. For the most part, Coleman's focus is resolutely on the senior management, production and finances of this company. An obituary remembered that Coleman could be "jowl-shakingly splenetic" about art history, so it is perhaps not surprising that the actual product itself, which was a fashion product, is almost irrelevant in this study, meaning that design, marketing, and consumption habits remain elusive.²⁷ Nevertheless, Coleman's understanding and dedication to the textile trade is undeniable, and his synthesis of the Courtaulds' archives is a tour de force.²⁸ Given that these archives are not publicly available, Coleman's book is an invaluable source which shows management decisions and the changes to Britain's dominant rayon company. This information can guide our understanding of the wider rayon industry.²⁹ In addition to Coleman's book, Geoffrey Owen has examined the later years of the British rayon industry. However, his focus is on the decline of the Courtaulds from 1970s onwards, and takes a much broader product view, including the many other goods which Courtaulds later manufactured such as paints and other man-made fibres.³⁰ A more recent study of rayon has been Paul D. Blanc's book *Fake Silk* (2019), which looks at the history of the human and environmental hazards of the manufacture of the fibre, largely in America and Europe. In this book, Blanc does look all the way back to the first manufacture of viscose, but as a medical doctor, he excludes the consumption of rayon, and elucidates instead the hidden and dangerous side of the product.³¹

Whilst many textile business histories formerly focused on the workings of the business, to the exclusion of the goods themselves, more recent studies have sought to bring together business and

²⁷ Negley Harte, "Donald Coleman: An Appreciation", *Textile History*, 27(2), 1996, 127-131, (p. 128).

²⁸ Coleman was involved with the Pasold Research Fund as a governor, and later Chair of the Governors for sixteen years.

²⁹ In the opening Vol II, Coleman noted "[I]t is hoped that at some suitable date a further instalment [sic] of these records will be made available to the public." Sadly, this has not been the case.

³⁰ Geoffrey Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Great Companies: Courtaulds and the Reshaping of the Man-Made Fibres Industry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press and Pasold Research Fund, 2010).

³¹ Paul D. Blanc, *Fake Silk: The Lethal History of Viscose Rayon*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016).

fashion history, to better demonstrate how they are intricately linked in the textile trade. The extent of this development can be clearly seen in a book already mentioned: Regina Lee Blaszczyk's *Fashionability*. Here the author brings together business and fashion history through the detailed study of Abraham Moon, a woollen manufacturer, from its founding in 1837 to the present day. Unlike Coleman, she looks beyond the mere organisation and operations of the company to the wider environment within which the industry sits. One of the successes of this approach is that she is able to demonstrate the influence which wholesalers, clothiers and retailers had upon manufacturers, particularly in connection to fabric design and construction. Being further down the supply chain, it was these businesses who were in much closer contact with the consumer, and they were able to relay information about customer requirements and desires back up the supply chain. Connections such as this clearly demonstrate that "the interface between textile manufacturer and the fashion marketplace is centuries old", and that the separation of these factors in previous textile histories, such as Coleman's, creates a narrow, and perhaps distorted, view of the industry.³² Fiona Anderson's *Tweed* does not claim to be any form of business history, but like Blaszczyk she also studies the role of the manufacturer within the wider "Fashion System".³³ By focusing in on a specific textile she hopes to chart the history of tweed in a more "holistic" way, looking at

connections...between the production of the cloth and the consumers who wore the cloth made up into garments.³⁴

For a true understanding of business and economic history, studies must consider the broader context in which a company or industry was sited. Many businesses have their economic foundations in the consumption of goods, and this consumption is informed by economics, politics, culture and society. These factors are never static and the response of businesses to outside dynamics can only be understood by historians if they also have a knowledge of the wider context in which a business or trade is situated. If no business is an island, then in an area like textiles where commerce exploits the

³² Blaszczyk, *Fashionability*, p. 4.

³³ The Fashion System is a term widely used to indicate the various industries, businesses, and processes involved in the creation, production, and marketing of clothing and accessories.

³⁴ Fiona Anderson, *Tweed*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 1-2.

desire for the new, and fashions and trends dictate ever-changing production lines, the historian's engagement with the broader environment is not only desirable, but absolutely essential.

Fashion and Clothing History

Just as business history has changed, so too has fashion history: in the early twentieth century, the inclination was to record the material facets of dress i.e. how it felt, what it was made from, and how it looked. For example, some of the earliest collectors and historians, husband and wife team Phyllis and Cecil Cunnington recorded fashions year by year in their multiple volume work *The Handbook of English Costume*.³⁵ Detailing the changes in style and the way garments were worn, these tomes are still incredibly useful in terms of dating and identifying mainstream clothing, but they offer nothing in terms of the wider social and cultural background in which the garments existed. The garments which are illustrated are suspended in a contextless bubble, and it is only with further research by the reader that they can be better understood. Another fashion historian, James Laver, who held the role of curator of dress history at the V&A for thirty-seven years from 1922, did acknowledge that all arts, not just fashion, were influenced by political, economic and social events, and he incorporated these into his works. However, to today's eyes his works seem opinionated, rather broad ranged, and misogynistic. His interpretation of the 1920s was that the "monstrous" fashions arose because emancipated women "tried to look as much like a man as possible".³⁶ He was however, one of the first fashion historians to attempt (however badly) to try to explain why particular items of clothing were worn. His theory of the "Attraction Principle" whereby

...men still choose their mates by their physical allure; [women's clothes]...are designed to make their wearers as physically attractive as possible...³⁷

³⁵ These six volumes covered dress from the Medieval period to 1950, and were published from 1952 onwards, each running to multiple editions.

³⁶ James Laver, *Taste and Fashion - From the French Revolution to the Present Day*, (Naismith, 2013) Kindle Edition, loc. 1626.

³⁷ James Laver, *Dress: How and Why Fashions in Men's and Women's Clothes Have Changed during the Past Two Hundred Years*, (London: John Murray), 1950 p. 15.

was already out-dated (by nearly twenty years), and was a triumph of oversimplification. In 1933, the psychologist J.C. Flügel had already noted that fashion was not only driven by sexual competition, but also by social and economic concerns. In his view, fashion is “born” because

it is a fundamental human trait to imitate those who are admired or envied... But the higher social classes on their side are naturally unwilling to abandon the signs of superiority...³⁸

Any innate desire to emulate social and economic superiors was given extra stimulus in the interwar period, with “large commercial interests” such as magazine publishers and film studios portraying new, fashionable clothing and forms of beauty to millions of women in Britain. To satiate this demand for new clothing Flügel observed that “great industries have been built up to supply a constant stream of novel garments.”³⁹ It is this triumvirate of innate human characteristics, commerce, and industrial processes which form the heart of modern fashion. Despite these themes being raised by psychologists as early as the 1930s, they were only advanced in dress historiography in the late twentieth century, when dress historians began to move away from detailing every “pleat and flounce” and towards a more vigorous and academic approaches to their studies.⁴⁰ It was also at this point that they rightly demanded that their work be recognised as a valid historical discipline.

There are three seminal texts which set out the ways in which dress or costume history can be studied: Elizabeth Wilson’s *Adorned in Dreams* (1985), Lou Taylor’s *The Study of Dress History* (2001) and Christopher Breward’s *Fashion* (2003).⁴¹ These authors are united in their belief that art, social, economic and cultural history need to be woven together in a “cross-disciplinary academic approach”.⁴² As cultural historians both Wilson and Breward argue that the study of clothing from an aesthetic perspective can help elucidate “ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society”.⁴³ It is often

³⁸ J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), pp. 138-9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, p.73.

⁴¹ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*; Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*; Christopher Breward, *Fashion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴² Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, p. 1.

⁴³ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, p. 9.

said that skirt length can be directly linked to global or national economic prosperity or depression; such a broad claim is hard to qualify, even if the data suggests it to be the case. Nevertheless, Wilson and Breward are correct in arguing that what happens in society affects clothing. To take a recent example, there was a huge demand for casual sportswear (athleisure wear) during the Covid-19 pandemic: this was informed by people's desire to be comfortable, and their belief that at home you are not judged on sartorial presentation. A more historical example taken from the interwar years is the popularity of unrestricted clothing and short skirts in the 1920s, which can be seen to be driven by a desire to retain some of the hard-earned freedom women had gained during the First World War, and the slowly changing belief that they could hold their own against men. The longer skirts and more clinging lines of the 1930s demonstrated the increased view set out by the media that a woman's primary role was in the home, and that femininity was a desirable asset.

A persistent obstacle which dress history has had to navigate is the "cult of the designer", where exclusive and high-end fashions have received what Ellen Leopold terms a "disproportionate share" of attention.⁴⁴ These circumscribed fashions, worn by the elite, cannot enlighten the historian about the day-to-day wearing of clothing by the general population, or its relationship with it. This thesis will have to recognise the prevailing trends which were set by world-famous designers in the interwar period, but the consumption of rayon demands knowledge of a much broader field of clothing history. Breward and Wilson believe that the reinterpretation of high-end fashion for the mass market creates an alternative art, or branch of aesthetics, filtered as it is through

industrial manufacture and distribution, metropolitan sensibility, the energies of a consumer culture, and the expanded sphere of visual representation.⁴⁵

Recognising that mass-consumerism, not haute-couture, lies at the heart of modern fashion and that it needs to be investigated elevates the value of everyday clothing. A mass produced garment is no less significant than a haute couture dress in terms of what it can tell the historian: the taste of the

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁵ Breward, *Fashion*, p. 15.

masses can actually tell us more about the “ideas, desires and beliefs” in society than any high-end garment can. Indeed, viewing clothing as both a commodity and as a form of aesthetics has a particular resonance in the interwar period: whilst fashion became a “mass pastime, a form of group entertainment, of popular culture”, it was also inherently commercial. One interwar writer noted

[Fashion] is the deliberate incitement to discard goods before they are worn out by providing irresistible substitutes.⁴⁶

The selling of clothing on an unheard of scale required a structure to be put in place which would build upon the existing desire for change, variety and emulation, and which would also encourage more frequent purchases and faster fashion obsolescence. To this end, the commercialisation of textiles depended upon different forms of media presenting fashion more frequently and with greater intensity. Newspapers and the consumer press provided readers with more and more information about fashion, and helped put in place clothing-based ideologies, such as desire, obsolescence and femininity; whilst at the same time cinema was providing an immersive experience, which was increasingly fashion-forward and which promoted ideas of glamour and modernity. These presentations meant that fashions were more embedded in wider cultural life than at any previous time. Through this cultural impact, fashion also became embedded in society: women could discuss fashions, and shopping became a leisure activity. More importantly, for a growing number of the population, clothing came to have a social, as well as monetary value. The way we dress provides the wider community with a set of visual signs which help indicate an individual’s status: Catherine Horwood examines the impact of this on the middle classes in interwar Britain in her book *Keeping Up Appearances*. Her work highlights the complex social rules which are constantly changing as fashions and social patterns change.⁴⁷ For dress historians today, understanding the consumption of clothing is just as critical as its development and production as a fashion item: consumption is the nexus where garments as economic goods, as methods of non-verbal communication, as pieces of art and design, and of personal symbolism meet. Moving consumption to the centre of modern dress and textile

⁴⁶ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, p. 60; “Creating Demand by Novelty in Design”, *HT*, October 1931, p. 26.

⁴⁷ Horwood, *Keeping Up Appearances*.

history means that the field can no longer be accused of being a superfluous “prolonged picnic” which is concerned only with the visual and physical properties of its subject.⁴⁸ Instead, the examination of the making and wearing of these every day objects offers historians an opportunity to gain a deeper insight into society, culture and economics at a particular moment. As Wilson states acerbically, for historians “to despise fashion as frivolous is...the most frivolous posture of all.”⁴⁹

Marketing, Retailing and Purchasing

There are myriad books, studies, and journals related to the history of consumerism and consumption, and which cover a large spectrum ranging from marketing through to the end purchase. The increasing consumerism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have meant that many of these works focus on this period, as it was during these years that many of the advertising and retailing to large segments of the population began to occur in earnest. This has led to a rich historiography much of which has relevance to this thesis. Among the more recent developments, questions have been raised about the role and understanding of the public themselves; once overlooked in favour of the businesses and retailers who made and sold goods, historians are now attempting to understand how the complex balancing act between producer and consumer functioned.

One of the most overt aspects of the fashion system to which the public is exposed to is advertising, and it is advertising which also marks the start of the process of the acquisition of goods. Its graphic qualities, not to mention occasional dubious and extravagant claims, have proved to be a powerful draw to historians. Despite the delights of the many original sources on offer, these must be used guardedly: Stefan Schwarzkopf argues that studies which privilege primary and secondary advertising sources are at great risk of “preserv[ing] the perspectives of corporate managers”. Instead, historians should try to understand advertising from the perspective of the consumer, that is, looking at

⁴⁸ Negley Harte, quoted in Taylor *The Study of Dress History*, p. 68.

⁴⁹ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, p. 273.

'marketing from below'.⁵⁰ The consumption of rayon is bound up with its advertising and the reception of this by the public. By examining both advertising and acts of purchasing it is possible to begin to understand marketing from below, and this will be attempted in this study. Fiona Hackney's 2010 thesis on women's magazines in the interwar period offers a starting point in understanding how marketing in consumer magazines was understood by readers. Her interviews with women who read these magazines when they were first published suggest that they would "take it all in", reading the advertising just as much as the editorial features, and that adverts had an "informative function" for their readers.⁵¹ Her analysis of women's magazines also shows that print advertising became more sophisticated in terms of placement within the magazine itself, and in terms of the advertisers learning "the right thing to say".⁵² Just as advertising was becoming more sophisticated, so too were the public: the interwar period saw a blossoming of "visual literacy" and Le Mahieu writes

with the simultaneous rise of both cinema and the popular national daily press, mass produced images became a central part of cultural life in Britain.⁵³

Throughout the 1920s, technical advances meant that printing improved so that magazines and newspapers could include ever more images; and by 1934 nearly twenty million people a week were visiting the cinema. This exposure meant that the public was increasingly well-equipped to interpret the visual images they were bombarded with, whether illustrated or photographic. By the late 1930s, the use of photogravure printing, and eventually colour, made visual modes even more appealing. Helen Wilkinson has argued that this increased use of visual modes in fact created a "complex set of visual signs that are *widely* understood" [my italics]. She terms this "the new heraldry", suggesting a level of standardisation and subconscious codification amongst the producers of images and the viewers.⁵⁴ In viewing this heraldry today, we must try to encounter it as the original

⁵⁰ Stefan Schwarzkopf, "Marketing history from below: towards a paradigm shift in marketing historical research", *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, Vol. 7 No. 3 (2015), pp. 295-305, (p. 295).

⁵¹ Hackney, "*They Opened Up a Whole New World*", pp. 49-54.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ D. Le Mahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 80.

⁵⁴ Helen Wilkinson, "The New Heraldry": Stock Photography, Visual Literacy, and Advertising in 1930s Britain", *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 10 No. 1 (1997), pp. 23-38 (p. 28).

readers/viewers did; with nearly one hundred years of cultural difference, and in an era where we are conscious of the effects of marketing, our own views of historical advertising are often blinkered by our own filters. Even so, we should not assume total naivety on the part of the advertisers or the audience in the interwar period. In terms of the adverts themselves, producers knew that successful marketing relied on strong material which appealed to the tastes of a specific set of readers. One way in which this could be achieved in the sphere of textiles and garments was by using illustrations or photographs which set fashions against backdrops which evoked certain ideas, usually glamour and sophistication, which would help sell items of clothing pictured. Heraldry such as this meant that advertisers were no longer reliant upon the fabric or garment alone selling itself, the symbolism which surrounded it encouraged potential purchasers to think of the auxiliary benefits of a particular piece of clothing (whether real or imagined). The idea that clothing can be aspirational is long established, but in the interwar years, engrained class consciousness combined with augmented levels of social mobility meant this rhetoric had extra significance.⁵⁵ Commentators of the period noted that it was “possible to mistake working class girls for titled ladies, if one judged by dress”; that “Jill beautifies herself exactly as her Mistress does”; and that it was “difficult to distinguish the factory worker from the doctor’s daughter”.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, to suggest that all women wanted to look like someone of a higher class or a film star is to simplify far too much: there were individual and local variations, for example Constance Harris said that the working class simply wanted “cheap clothes the same as everybody else buys”; whereas questionnaires undertaken as part of Mass Observation in Bolton suggest that many women actually felt uncomfortable and conspicuous in new clothing.⁵⁷ Nuances such as this have to be taken into account when we are looking at the advertising of rayon: its creators may have had a message to spread, but its efficacy and interpretation is much more difficult to gauge.

⁵⁵ This has been noted Lou Taylor, Elizabeth Wilson, Catherine Horwood, Selina Todd, Sally Alexander, Andrew Davies and Janice Winship to name but a few. Social mobility in this period should not be overstated, but the growing number of middle class individuals was a significant change to the previous structure of society.

⁵⁶ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939*, (London: Norton, 1994), p. 167; Priestley, *English Journey*, p. 376; C. Delise Burns quoted in Gary Cross, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.64.

⁵⁷ Constance Harris quoted in Gary Cross, *Time and Money*, p. 56; MOA, Topic Collection 18_1_C.

Along with advertising, the way in which most of the public in this period encountered consumerism was through retail. The interwar years saw continual developments in shops and shopping habits, something which had begun in earnest in the late Victorian period. Not only was the sector still adapting to the rise of department stores, but the appearance of chain stores was an even broader revolution, encompassing as it did shoppers from the middle and lower classes. Such a seismic shift in a sector which encapsulates the cultural, social and economic life of a nation has led to numerous studies, often from a single retailer's perspective, such as Goronwy Rees and Rachel Worth writing about Marks and Spencer; Asa Briggs on Lewises; Maurice Corina on Debenhams; and Lindy Woodhead about Selfridges.⁵⁸ These books are often interesting, but the focus on one store risks being hagiographic, and the wider social and cultural phenomena are all too brief in the desire to fit in copious detail about the retailer in question. Just as Schwarzkopf argues we should look at "marketing from below", so we also need to consider "retailing from below". The retailer and shopper are entwined in a complex relationship with both parties wielding powers over purchasing: the retailer because they have stock and have marketed it to make it desirable; and the consumer because they often have notions of what they want to buy and spend before they even step into a shop. Both Janice Winship and Mica Nava look at shopping from the perspective of a female consumer and show that women in this period were making self-determined decisions about how and where they shopped. This was particularly the case where there was a decline in independent, local shops which women would have traditionally had some loyalty to. The anonymity of large and multiple chain stores meant women could increasingly shop around for a better value or better quality item.⁵⁹ Despite the success

⁵⁸ Goronwy Rees, *St. Michael: A History of Marks and Spencer* (London: Pan Books, 1973); Rachel Worth, *Fashion for the People: A History of Clothing at Marks and Spencer*, (Oxford: Berg 2007); Asa Briggs, *Friends of the People: The Centenary History of Lewises*, (London: B.T. Batsford, 1956); Maurice Corina, *Fine Silks and Oak Counters: Debenhams 1778-1978*, (London: Hutchinson Benham, 1978); Lindy Woodhead, *Shopping, Seduction and Mr Selfridge*, (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2008).

⁵⁹ Mica Nava, "Modernity Tamed? Women shoppers and the rationalization of consumption in the inter-war period", in *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture*, eds. Andrews, Maggie and Mary Talbot, (London: Cassell, 2000), pp. 46-64 (p. 53); Janet Winship, "New Disciplines for

of their work in showing a broader view of retail, both Nava and Winship are limited, like many other historians, by a dearth of sources from retailers and consumers in this period. The records which are left are those mainly from department stores and chain stores, and even these can be scant for the interwar period.⁶⁰ J. B. Jefferys calculated that in 1939 independent stores still made more than 60% of sales in womenswear by value in Britain and there is practically no evidence left from these stores and a close examination of their retail practices is almost impossible.⁶¹ Records of retail sales are almost non-existent so it is hard to establish exactly *what* was bought; and there are only very limited accounts of individuals engaging in shopping practices, so it is also hard to establish *how* consumers made purchases.

What we do know about womenswear retailing is that the products sold were shifting: the Censuses of Production show that sales of fabrics dropped as the decline of home dressmaking began, with women aspiring to the convenience of ready-to-wear clothing. This is also apparent from the fact that Courtaulds and British Celanese introduced their own ranges of ready-to-wear clothing alongside their fabrics. In her study dating from the 1950s, Margaret Wray states that the ready-to-wear sector was “well-established” by the 1930s and that the middle classes were keen purchasers; meanwhile, the number of small dressmaking and tailoring workshops began to decline.⁶² It is important to state that mass production and ready-made clothing are not analogous: even in 1942, 46% of garment manufacturing businesses employed less than twenty-five people, meaning that much of the clothing on sale was not made in vast factories in the way which has become common today.⁶³ Nevertheless, simpler styles of garment and technical advances in the 1920s meant that clothing manufacture was ready to take its first tentative steps away from small establishments and home-based sweated labour,

Women and the Rise of the Chain Store in the 1930s”, in *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture*, eds. Andrews, Maggie and Mary Talbot, (London: Cassell, 2000), pp. 23-45 (p. 35).

⁶⁰ For example, Marks and Spencer’s Ltd pulped all of their records from the early years of their story to help with the war effort in World War II.

⁶¹ J.B. Jefferys, *Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 349.

⁶² Margaret Wray, *The Women’s Outerwear Industry*, (London: G. Duckworth, 1957) p. 21-2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

and onto the factory floor for mass production. Although a retailer like Marks and Spencer Ltd was buying and retailing vast (for the period) quantities of identical garments, the existence of smaller manufacturing establishments meant that there was a wide range of ready-made styles available to purchase so that women did not risk wearing the same thing as someone else.⁶⁴ Jefferys may have argued that women did not want to be seen wearing the same outfit as another individual, but equally, many wanted to “keep up with the Joneses” and blend in.⁶⁵ Most ready-made clothing offered women fashions which were alike, but not identical, allowing women to demonstrate their fashion awareness, but also their own personal taste. Mass production and mass consumption did not nullify individual choice or turn consumers into a uniform body, rather it increased availability and aided the democratisation of sartorial practices.

The examination of consumerism and consumption inevitably leads to the question of how far the public have their purchasing choices pushed upon them by businesses who supply and advertise products, and how much choice is truly individual. When we are considering female consumers, this question becomes even more paramount, as they have traditionally been thought of as important but passive consumers, pliable and susceptible to marketing. Many women controlled the domestic budget, and were often skilled at doing so, but within that budget it was believed their purchasing decisions were easily swayed by advertising and branding put in place by businesses. The idea that if you “capture a woman’s imagination you can sell anything” was not an uncommon one in the interwar period.⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, many feminist historians have seen twentieth century fashion and its resultant purchases as yet another form of social control, foisted upon women by an economy and

⁶⁴ Today a sell-out item from a retailer can actually be a badge of prestige, even when there is a high risk of being seen with someone else in the same outfit.

⁶⁵ Janice Winship, “A culture of restraint: the chain store in the 1930s” in Jackson, P., M. Lowe, D. Miller and F. Mort (eds.) *Commercial cultures: economies, practices, spaces*, (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2000), pp. 15-34 (p. 29).

⁶⁶ *Advertisers’ Weekly*, October 1931, p. 94.

culture which was almost entirely male-dominated.⁶⁷ This is too simplistic an approach as it denies women any agency *at all* in the purchase of goods which are ultimately expressions of either their own taste or informed by some form of emotion. After all, fashion indicates a broad scheme, but there are still personal decisions to be made, even if, to use an extreme example, there is only the choice of two dresses in a shop. Breward puts it succinctly:

fashions succeed or fail at the whim of a fickle market - in this respect the consumer is omnipotent."⁶⁸

When we consider that the very early industrialisation of Britain was driven by the consumer demand for calicoes and paisleys which could no longer be imported from India, we see how powerful the consumer can be. Yet "the consumer" is often *not* an individual if we regard them in purely economic terms: in fact they are a conglomeration of people all desiring the same, or similar, thing. It is this "same thing" that the mass fashion industry needs to drive and control. Large-scale production of textiles and clothing not only requires a certain level of general fashion-consciousness in society, it also relies on trends being dictated and aligned such that economies of scale can be realised. Naomi Tarrant correctly points out that

modern dress is part of a major industry where individual taste is less important than keeping the whole structure profitable.⁶⁹

The production of rayon fabrics and garments in the 1920s and 1930s certainly exhibited this trait, and helped shape the fashion system and industry we have in place today. In the interwar period, it was not only the profitability of individual businesses which drove textile consumption, there was also pressure from the British government to improve the national economy. The fashion system cannot provide any economic benefits if clothing is identical and Utopian, nor if styles are too individual and fragmented for industrial levels of production. The fashion industry locates itself between these two extremes, and aims to maximise profitability by offering maximum choice for the least cost and effort.

⁶⁷ Mary Louise Roberts, "Samson and Delilah Revisited: The politics of Women's Fashion in 1920s France", *The American Historical Review*, (98:3) 1993, p. 663.

⁶⁸ Breward, *Fashion*, p. 161.

⁶⁹ Naomi Tarrant, *The Development of Costume*, (Edinburgh: National Museums of Scotland in conjunction with Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

Some form of choice is always necessary, even within the confines of fashion and the economic needs of a business: choice allows the “thrill” of purchasing, and keeps customers returning for the same sensation. Yet the autonomy granted to a customer at the point of purchase is also risky: it can make or break a product, line, brand or business. Susan Porter Benson noted that in retail, “fashion...injected a note of uncertainty and unpredictability” and without doubt, this also applies to the textile manufacturing and garment industries.⁷⁰

The work done by historians and theorists has placed the way we view production and consumption, particularly with regard to dress and fashion, in the strongest place it has ever been. By pulling together all of the themes I have looked at in this section, I hope to be able to provide a broad-ranging and thematic view of the consumption of rayon in the interwar period, which will hopefully add to existing historiography, and also provide an insight into a the growth of a textile which until now has been mentioned by many in passing, but which has not been the subject of an in-depth study.

Methodology

Whilst rayon found uses in menswear and children’s wear; home furnishing fabrics and industrial productions, it was womenswear which proved to be the ideal outlet for this textile, as Jefferys showed.⁷¹ The focus of this thesis will, therefore, be on the use and consumption of rayon in fabrics and garments designed for women. It was the properties of rayon, including lack of durability, which made it more suitable for use in dresses and blouses, which tended to be lighter weight and more fashion driven than menswear, which usually required heavier weight fabrics such as wool, and which were often designed to be long lasting and “outside” of fashion.⁷² Rayon also proved to be extremely

⁷⁰ Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*, (University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 109.

⁷¹ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 202.

⁷² Despite the fact that menswear was seen as less influenced by fashion in this period, it was of course still subject to it. Menswear trends simply moved more slowly, and were not commercialised in the same way as womenswear.

suited for women's underwear, nightwear and stockings as it could be knitted into comfortable and dainty items. Rayon was also conceived by its producers as a high volume, low cost good, and for this reason, the thesis will also largely focus on the middle and lower ends of the market. In order to become a successful mass produced good, rayon fabrics could not simply rely on the small market for imitation silks in underwear and outerwear: to truly grow it had to prove itself an alternative to cottons, linens and wools which were worn on a daily basis; and as a product which could be used as an admixture to improve the properties of natural fibres. Whilst the economic and social circumstances which surrounded the rise of rayon provided the perfect environs for its extraordinary rise and acceptance, the same cannot be said of rayon itself. Early rayon textiles were not particularly consumer friendly: they had a harsh metallic lustre and felt cold to wear, and they were difficult to launder, being prone to tearing, shrinking and stretching. Yet despite these flaws it was able to become a widely accepted and even desirable fabric, used in many forms of dress fabrics and women's garments. Reducing the aim of this thesis to the simplest terms, the question is: why were manufacturers of rayon able to take advantage of a specific set of context and what strategies were put in place to ensure rayon achieved spectacular volume growth, and a positive reception from consumers?

As I have already noted, to examine the rise of rayon as a mass-consumer good it will be necessary to look at many aspects of the fashion system, in this particular case my focus will largely be on the supply and distribution chain. Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold argued that a "System of Provision" approach should be taken with consumer goods, with Ben Fine refining this methodology in later texts.⁷³ These authors have argued that consumption is best examined in a vertical manner, and that it is also

⁷³ See Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *The World of Consumption*, (London: Routledge, 1993); Ben Fine, *The World of Consumption: The Material and Cultural Revisited*, (London: Psychology Press, 2002); and Ben Fine, Kate Bayliss and Mary Robertson, "The Systems of Provision Approach to Understanding Consumption", in *The Sage Handbook of Consumer Culture* eds. Kravets, Olga, Pauline Maclaran, Steven Miles and Alladi Venkatesh (London: Sage Publications, 2017), pp. 27-42.

necessary to engage with the “broader context within which consumption takes place”.⁷⁴ Making use of this approach and by generally following the production, distribution and sale of goods will elucidate how in the course of getting a fabric into a woman’s wardrobe, many influences are brought to bear, be they research or manufacture; promotion and retail; and the final consumer choice. Each of these are important and interlinked with the other facets. Studying these myriad stimuli requires a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary approach, and as such this thesis will take in business and economics; social, cultural and fashion history, along with consumerism, and it will also touch on gender and political history. Whilst covering such a broad range leaves the impression of the author as a jack-of-all-trades and master of none, it is only through this method that any form of conclusion can be reached. It goes without saying that such an approach requires a diverse selection of source material all of which require different skills to make evaluations. Trade journals offer one of the best sources of information about rayon in this period, whether specific to rayon, or intended for the broader drapery trade. The British Library holds *Artificial Silk World*, *The Rayon Record* and *Silk Journal and Rayon World* all of which have valuable information about rayon businesses, fashions, trade shows and scientific research; *The Hosiery Times* looks at knitwear of all types; whilst journals such as *The Draper’s Organiser* and *The Draper’s Record* provide a wider view of the textile industry. These journals can provide insights into the aims and attitudes of those in these trades and the way in which there were ‘communities’ created by the businesses involved in the supply chain. In terms of archived business records, there are none available for the manufacturers of rayon filaments. Courtaulds Ltd and British Celanese Ltd who were the largest filament manufacturers have extant archives, but these are cannot be accessed by researchers.⁷⁵ Happily, there are accessible archives left by fabric manufacturers, dyers and finishers. The Calico Printers’ Association Ltd [CPA] was not only one of the

⁷⁴ Fine, Bayliss and Robertson, “The Systems of Provision Approach to Understanding Consumption”, p. 27.

⁷⁵ The Courtaulds archives are held by Essex Record Office in Chelmsford, but they are unavailable without the consent of the Courtaulds legacy company. The Record Office and I attempted to contact the PO Box which is the only remaining trace of this once large company, but to no avail. The British Celanese archives are held by AzkoNobel, the legacy company of British Celanese but their Legacy Manager states they “do not have the facilities or resources to permit access to researchers” (email received by the author in November 2018).

largest textile printers and finishers, their archives are also expansive, and provide an exceptional insight into textile production in this period; other fabric manufacturers, printers and finishers who have left records include Ferguson Bros Ltd, Hind Robinson and Son Ltd, Tootal Broadhurst Lee Ltd and Horrockses, Crewdson & Co, although none of these are as complete as the CPA archives. In terms of retailing, the Marks and Spencer archive offers the best material about retailing in the interwar period, and there are also small fragments which can be gleaned from the Hodson Shop archive, held at the Black Country Living Museum. The advantage of business records is that many simply record the progress (or otherwise) of a business in terms of spending, production or other results, and they lack much of the bias or specific positioning which many other sources possess. However, it is important to note that whilst these records can demonstrate the actions of a business, they do not give us any insight into the reception of their goods (with the exception of quantities, perhaps) or any detailed perspective of the consumer environment. Information about consumer culture is by far the most accessible and widely available aspect of this research, with newspapers and women's consumer magazines (both weeklies and monthlies) being excellent sources for how rayon manufacturers presented themselves to the public; how women were exposed to fashions and notions of femininity; and how they were being persuaded into becoming active and engaged consumers. As I have used these sources extensively, it is worth noting that newspapers and magazines are also those sources which need to be treated most critically: there is always an unspoken agenda in any publication; and what they have to say cannot be taken as expressions of public opinion.⁷⁶ Furthermore, although the glamour and extravagance which often appears in these records is beguiling, it is also highly stylised, and was unobtainable for the vast majority of women in "Little England".⁷⁷ As such, though these sources provide an excellent view of consumer *culture*, they do not give any insight into consumption itself, nor of the views of consumers themselves. The consumer remains highly elusive in this period: small insights can occasionally be gleaned from memoirs or even novels, and the most extensive

⁷⁶ Zeldin (1980) quoted in Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, p. 95.

⁷⁷ Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 207.

source relating to clothing comes from the Mass Observation Archives. This dates to very late in the period (1937-1939) and it is largely the views expressed by a middle-class respondents to Directives. In the absence of other sources, this source becomes invaluable, but it must also be used extremely carefully. Items of clothing and fabrics from the period, from museums and my own collection, and sewing patterns also lend their voice to hearing the consumers voice, offering the historian a glimpse of what the consumer would have seen when entering a shop or considering making a garment. It only through a measured use of all these sources that a holistic view of how the production of rayon expanded and how this helped revolutionise the clothing habits of women can be achieved. Lastly, it should be noted that many of the sources mentioned above are used to give this thesis, like fashion itself, a strong visual element. Without this I feel the reader would be left with an incomplete understanding of the reasons for, and the nature of, the consumption of this fabric.

Each of the chapters in this thesis will consider a different part of the fashion system as it relates to rayon. Chapter One will look at how the rayon fibre industry itself began to grow and went through a boom-and-bust cycle in the mid-1920s. Entrepreneurs and investors were keen to profit from a fibre which promised to transform the existing textile market, but they failed to understand the complexities and costs involved in the manufacture and onward sales of the product. Examining the business model used by successful manufacturers, that of high-volume low-cost production, will give a sound base from which to explore how the other businesses in the fashion system also had to adopt this practice when dealing with rayon.

The second chapter will examine how rayon was used by the weaving and hosiery trades to create desirable fabrics and garments which British women would want to purchase. The introduction of rayon came at a particularly desperate time for the British textile industry: cotton weavers were facing the catastrophic collapse of export markets; and hosiery manufacturers were dealing with the end of a boom-and-bust cycle which had followed the First World War. This chapter will examine how cotton

weavers, printers and finishers familiarised themselves with rayon, and how they modified and invented new processes and practices which allowed them to mitigate some of their losses and develop a greater presence in the British market. Sample books will demonstrate how the weaving of rayon fabrics developed, and business records can show what was sold. Additionally, there is the question of costs and price: rayon was a more expensive raw material than cotton, and it was initially more difficult to weave making manufacture more expensive, but prices needed to be kept low to encourage consumption. Weaving businesses needed to navigate this issue carefully to avoid alienating employees or customers. Turning to the hosiery trade, although it only used around a third of the rayon by volume that the weaving trade did, the impact upon the industry and fashion is no less remarkable. “Hosiery” in British terms encompasses both the production of hose, that is, socks and stockings, but also any goods which are knitted, including fabrics and clothing.⁷⁸ The chapter will look at how the hosiery trade adapted to a new type of fibre, with particular focus on how this was driven by the extraordinary changes in fashions, including short skirts, skin-coloured stockings and knitted clothing. Unlike the weaving trade, the hosiery trade did not control the vast majority of the British market for much of this period (see Appendix III). Imports of cheap stockings and knitwear were of huge concern to hosiery firms and the chapter will examine how this affected both businesses and consumers.

The third chapter will focus on the technical developments which took place in the interwar period to turn rayon into a fibre and fabric which could compete effectively with traditional textiles on both quality and price. In a period when the majority of the population had limited funds for clothing, durability was a key factor in choosing a fabric: unless there was considerable disposable income available, women would adapt and mend clothing when it began to wear out, and a garment would only be disposed of and replaced when it was finally worn out. Initially rayon entirely lacked this

⁷⁸ This differs from the more widely used American definition which is only the manufacture of hose, ie. socks, stockings and tights.

robustness, wearing out quickly and laundering badly, and it would be necessary to remove this trait in order to make sales. There was also significant amounts of work done to create fabrics which looked appealing: rayon did not dye or print well initially, and textile companies increasingly looked to scientific methods to solve these problems, with the establishment of laboratories and the employment of university-educated scientists. The emergence of rayon also drove the British dye industry to make rapid developments, and as such it bolstered this trade which was still in its infancy. As scientific research advanced and technological developments took place, other properties were added to fibres and fabrics which would either benefit the consumer, or which would add to the desirability of the product. These aspects of the rayon industry reflected the wider tendency for collaboration between business and science: science could not longer be viewed as a hobby for gifted amateurs, it had become professionalised and commodified.

Chapter Four will examine how the design of rayon fabrics encouraged consumers to see it as a fashion fabric, and how this fitted into the increasing fashion-awareness which women possessed. Middle-class women with income, and younger, single working women of all classes had increased spending power and they increasingly wanted “beauty of design and beauty of function before durability”.⁷⁹ Confidence in British textile design was extremely low with consumers believing that the British industry could make serviceable but not beautiful fabrics, and as such many looked to buy materials which could boast they were designed (if not made) abroad, with French designs being particularly desirable. British printing businesses had to prove that they could produce and manufacture designs which were as good as, if not better, than these foreign imports. At the same time, they needed to adapt their way of working as the speed of fashion increased: women, influenced by consumer magazines, clamoured for the latest styles to be available in a shorter time frame. Without market research textile companies found guessing the desires of women months or even years ahead an extremely difficult task. The chapter will investigate how rayon fabric producers engaged with high-

⁷⁹ “Who Creates Fashions”, *DO*, July 1933 p. 81.

end fashion and design emerging from Europe, selected ideas which they believed would be commercially appealing, and interpreted them for a mass market. It will also show how the trade and consumer press were involved in presenting these fabrics as the latest trends.

Chapter Five will examine how the rayon trade promoted their products through large trade exhibitions, which although international by design, were also extremely influential on home trade in Britain. Trade fairs had developed from their early Victorian beginnings to become events which were held by most industries at frequent intervals, and often in custom-built exhibition venues. The *ne plus ultra* of this was the British Industries Fair which was reaching its apogee in the 1930s, and at which the rayon industry would exhibit as part of the British Textiles Exhibition. Looking at a selection of fairs, from the first national rayon trade fair in 1926 through to participation at the British Industries Fairs, I will use the notion of spatial, temporal and functional frames, as described by Brian Moeran to elucidate the way in which these fairs progressed; how the trade as a whole, and individual businesses, portrayed their goods; and how these representations were successfully disseminated to the public.⁸⁰ I will show that these trade exhibitions were important as centres of modernity and for showing off the fashion credentials of rayon. Themes such as these were received positively and they were often translated into the advertising and retailing strategies for rayon, and they helped create a unique identity for the fibre which helped establish it as a major textile product. However, despite the grand spectacle of these events, there were also decidedly ambiguous feelings from many rayon manufacturers about the government-run British Textiles Exhibition; studying these attitudes will show the scepticism businesses had about whether the cost and effort involved were worth the supposed rewards, particularly in a challenging economy.

⁸⁰ Brian Moeran, "Trade Fairs, Markets and Fields: Framing Imagined as Real Communities", *Historical Social Research*, Vol. 36 No. 3 (2011), pp. 79-98.

Chapter Six will examine trade and consumer advertising of rayon, particularly the way that rayon advertisers were trying, like all advertisers, to discern what successful marketing looked like. In chasing consumers' extra income, manufacturers experimented and produced a huge variety of promotional material in this period. Inspiration was taken from numerous sources, without producers knowing which would be the most well-received or successful, and with no data or information collected about marketing campaigns. Whilst rayon adverts in this period suggest an undisciplined approach by manufacturers, there are in fact broader themes which they were successful in utilising, particularly when it came to art, fashion and economic trends. Glamour and art deco were seized upon as key themes to demonstrate femininity, fashion and modernity.⁸¹ There is also a distinct pattern of rayon producers attempting to mould these themes to suit a British audience and temperament; patriotic or historical tropes were commonly used and this helped produce a uniquely British form of advertising. Finally, rayon adverts quite literally illustrate the perennial issue which faced the fabric and its producers: the question of utility and durability versus fashion and price, and which aspect would appeal more to the consumer.

The penultimate chapter will explore the final stage of the commercial side of rayon consumption: retailing. Mass consumer goods were increasing in their popularity, and retail models were continually changing not only as production and advertising themselves developed, but also in order to cater for the parallel changes in consumer expenditure and desires. The mass manufacture of rayon, with its business model of high volumes of sales at low prices meant that mass retailing was a necessity. Although traditional textiles had long been successfully retailed (many of the great department stores grew from small drapery establishments), the retailing of a brand new fibre required manufacturers and retailers to price and exhibit their wares in a manner which would draw in a potentially sceptical

⁸¹ Although I used the term "art deco" in my thesis, this was not in use in the interwar period. It was a term coined in 1968. I make use of the term as it is the best and easiest way to encapsulate the modern style of the era.

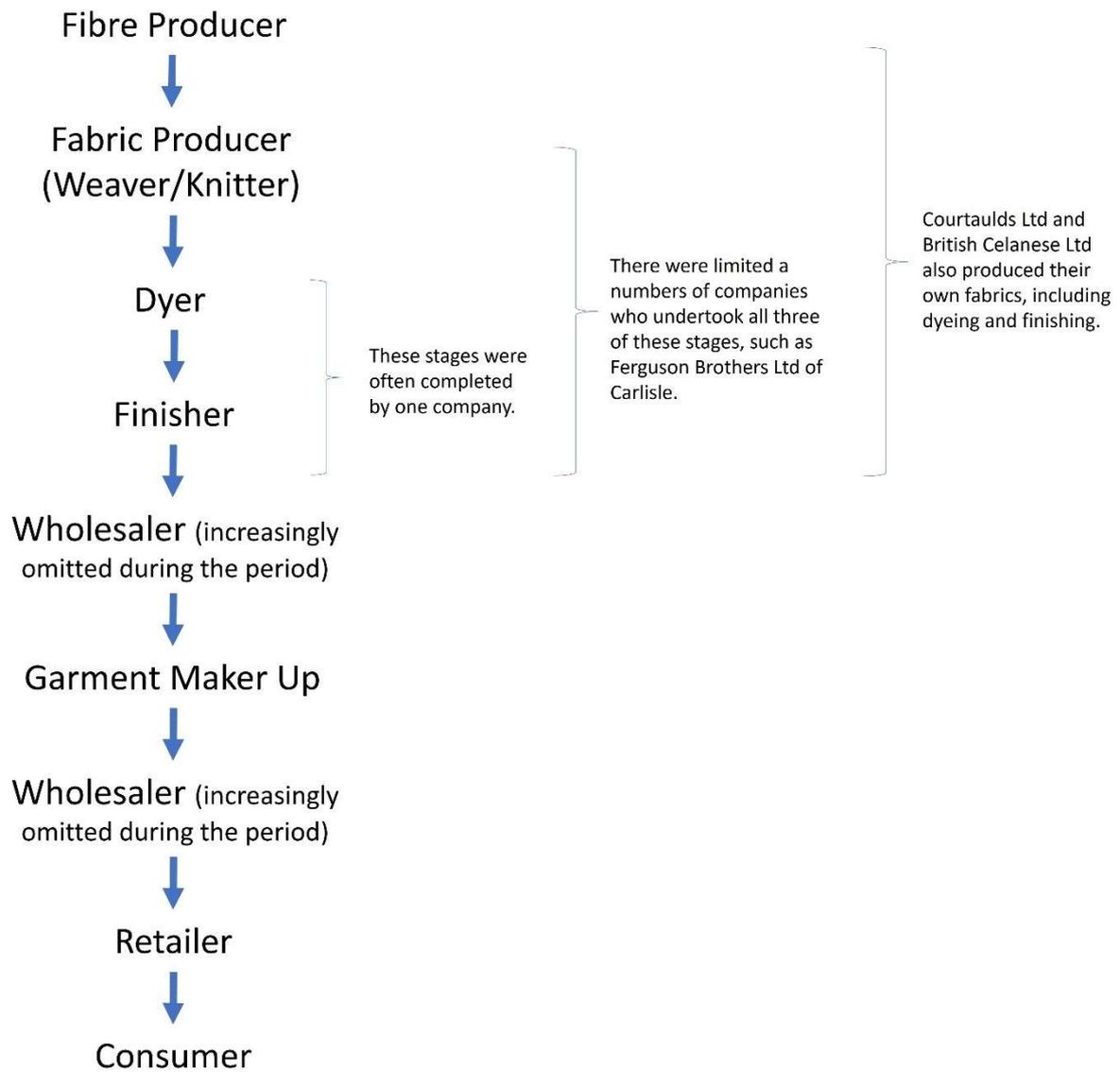
customer. As with advertising, the retailing of rayon goods emphasised the fashionability of these items, and the idea that with low prices women could make further garment purchases as soon as her frock was outmoded, rather than when it was worn out. Rayon manufacturers also played a key role in the disruption of traditional wholesale to retail models: “direct-to-retail” practices were pioneered and expanded by the textile industry, and as a branch of the trade who had proved themselves to be innovative and adaptable, rayon businesses were well placed to challenge prevailing norms.

In the final chapter, I will attempt to draw out how female consumers experienced the acts of shopping for, and purchase of, rayon fabrics and garments. After starting with a broad overview of clothing purchases and spending across Britain in these years, I will attempt to gain an insight into the prices of individual rayon garments and what women could spend; what they expected to spend; and how this fit into their budgets. This examination is largely data driven, and the information will be gathered from various sources and compiled to try to produce a more detailed view of spending on rayon. As well as the financial side of buying, I will reveal how women made decisions about what to buy, and how this was linked with notions of self-esteem, femininity and wider social-sartorial norms and rules. Given the lack of original sources on this topic, it is a necessarily proscribed analysis and evaluation, but I hope to shed light on some broad themes, and highlight the fact that women were not compulsive or uneducated fashion consumers, they had sophisticated understandings and techniques for budgeting and appraising goods, and a keen sense of value, style and their own self-worth.

This thesis will be a broad ranging study over a relatively small time period and geographic area, and I anticipate bringing together various facets of social, economic, cultural and design history, to build a detailed understanding of how rayon fibre, fabric and garments emerged in the early twentieth century as an economic and fashion phenomenon. This subject has failed to elicit attention from historians thus far, but I believe it to be an important part of understanding how and why consumer culture and women’s dress changed in the interwar period. I also firmly believe that the impact of

rayon can be seen in the textile, fashion and retail industries to this day, as it set the precedent for later synthetic fibres and it laid the early foundations of cheap, mass produced, fast fashion.

Plate I The Interwar Rayon Supply Chain



*In the midst of [a] changing world new industries have
come into being to meet new requirements, and among them the manufacture
of artificial silk takes a conspicuous place.*

The Times, 17 March 1928

1. The Manufacture of Rayon

In the twenty years between the wars, the rayon industry grew from being a largely experimental enterprise into a global phenomenon worth millions of pounds. At the end of the period, Britain was the world's fourth largest producer of rayon, with around 110 million lbs of the fibre being used in the home market.¹ Investigating the complexities of the businesses and business decisions in the British rayon industry is absolutely critical to understanding how this product became so successful with consumers in a relatively short period of time. No business stands apart from its wider environs: it both influences, and is influenced by, external factors. The history of the rayon manufacturing industry can help establish the broader conditions in which the trade operated, not only economic ones, but those related to fashions, consumer desire and retailing. This chapter owes much to the extensive work of David Coleman on Courtaulds Ltd, but it also looks beyond these bounds to establish the ups and downs of the budding rayon industry; the aspirations which entrepreneurs had for this new fibre; and why it was Courtaulds Ltd and British Celanese Ltd who came to dominate the yarn making business. The weaving, printing and finishing trades have received scant attention regarding the introduction of rayon: this is a particularly notable absence when we consider that the British textile trade was beginning its terminal decline, and when it is estimated that rayon helped fill some 20% of British looms, many of which would have been left unused otherwise.² Not only this, without the acceptance of rayon by knitters, weavers and finishers, the yarn manufacturing businesses would have been doomed to failure: it was their determination to produce new fabrics which ultimately led to rayon becoming a commercial success. Beginning at the start of the rayon supply chain, each stage

¹ D.C. Coleman, *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 329.

² "Lancashire's Debt to Rayon", *Manchester Guardian*, 19 May 1936, p. 21.

of the production process will be examined from a business perspective, moving from the manufacture of the filament, to grey cloth, and finally to the consumer-ready fabric.

The interwar rayon industry in Britain was dominated by just two companies: Courtaulds Ltd and British Celanese Ltd.³ Courtaulds had evolved from a silk manufacturer, specialising in that particular Victorian convention, mourning crepe, into a viscose rayon producer which controlled around 61% of the total British rayon market, and 75% of the viscose rayon market by 1928.⁴ British Celanese were a much newer company having been established in the First World War by the Dreyfus brothers to produce an acetate coating for airplane wings. After the war, they turned their attention to other acetate-based technologies, including camera film. Success came with producing artificial fibres from acetate and cellulose: although British Celanese held only 10% of the total rayon market in 1928, for consumers it was the most visible of the rayon companies, with their fashionable advertising and forward-looking branding.⁵ Courtaulds' spectacular financial success was entirely bound up with their venture into rayon: gross profit from their viscose products was already £1.65m in 1921, before rayon had become a widely-accepted fibre in the textile industry. By 1924, when rayon was just beginning its meteoric rise in consumers consciousness and wardrobes, the gross profit realised from viscose was £3.32m. British Celanese also produced impressive profits of £1.6m in 1927/8 up from £193,000 in 1923/4.⁶ These remarkable figures clearly inspired enterprising businessmen who wished to emulate this success. Fuelled by the imposition of import duties in 1925, which gave home producers a distinct advantage over importers of rayon, there was a rush of investments and company registrations for rayon filament and yarn manufacturing ventures.

³ Until 1923, British Celanese Ltd was known as the British Cellulose and Chemical Manufacturing Co Ltd: the company was renamed to align the name with their main product

⁴ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 266.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Company Results", *The Times*, 15 July 1925, p. 24; and "British Celanese Ltd", *The Times*, 25 July 1929, p. 22.

Both contemporary writers and historians have endeavoured to establish the exact number of rayon producing firms established during this period of enterprise. *The Drapers' Organiser* reported in December 1925 that twenty-four new rayon producing companies had been registered in Britain in the previous twelve months.⁷ However, a special "Artificial Silk" supplement by *The Times* in 1926 had contradictory figures even across a few pages: one article claimed there were eleven companies producing rayon; whilst another stated there were eight, with a further eight ready to go into production.⁸ Donald Coleman believed that between 1916 and 1928, thirty rayon factories were established, whilst the 1930 Census of Production showed there were twenty-four establishments involved in rayon production.⁹ In the course of my own research, using contemporary newspaper articles and secondary sources, I have counted thirty-eight companies which either produced or intended to produce rayon in the interwar period (See Table I). Between them, these companies raised a vast amount of capital: in the five years between 1925-30, around £26m was invested, the smallest amount being just £100 and the largest being £2.7m.¹⁰ Yet it is worth noting that Courtaulds overshadowed them all. In 1926, the nominal capital of that company was estimated to be around £20m; but with the share price rising, their full market capitalisation stood closer to £88m.¹¹

From the outset, new firms established during this boom had the odds of success heavily stacked against them. In November 1925, *The Drapers' Organiser* sounded a warning that

As technical advice, supply of ordinary labour and equipment become more easily available the industry will become less exclusive and consequently more highly competitive... [C]apital, brains, and patience are needed in large measure if successful operation is to be achieved.¹²

⁷ Editorial, *The Drapers' Organiser*, December 1925.

⁸ *The Times*, Artificial Silk Supplement, 9 March 1926. Eleven companies are listed in "World's Capital Investment"; "Factories of the World", puts the figure as eight, but no companies are named, in *ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁹ Donald Coleman, "Man-made fibres before 1945" in *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles: Volume II*, ed. Jenkins, David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 933-947 (p. 944); H.A. Silverman, "The Artificial Textile Industry", in *Studies in Industrial Development*, ed. H.A. Silverman, (London: Methuen, 1946), pp. 302-355 (p. 321).

¹⁰ Sum of capital invested from 1925-30 as per Table 1.

¹¹ "World's Capital Investment", Artificial Silk Supplement, *The Times*, 9 March 1926, p. xvi.

¹² "The Silken Revolution", *The Drapers' Organiser*, November 1925, p. 20.

The largest obstacle facing these companies was the capital which was needed to set up and run what was essentially a chemical plant, as opposed to a textile mill. Some businesses looked to reduce these costs by buying existing factories and retro-fitting them. British Enka Ltd bought the National Aircraft Factory at Aintree in October 1925; Harben's Ltd refitted an old cotton mill; and the British Netherlands Artificial Silk Co set about converting a jam factory in Cumberland in 1929.¹³ *The Silk Journal* warned in March 1928 that:

the suitability of a particular works that has been previously utilised for an entirely different purpose should be given the gravest consideration. Just because an existing building is cheap and has been serviceable for one class of... work, it does not follow that it can be adapted to the difficult processes of artificial silk manufacture.¹⁴

However, it was not just the cost of the buildings which had to be borne: rayon manufacturing equipment was specialist and expensive. In 1926, the Treasury guaranteed £85,000 (£4.1m in 2023) for plant at Raysheen Ltd in County Antrim; and Kirklees Ltd bought additional equipment in 1928 for £120,000 (£6m in 2023).¹⁵ Equipment was not only specialist, it quickly reached obsolescence as manufacturing innovations took place, and heavy chemical wear on the machinery also took its toll. Indeed, by the 1930s *Silk and Rayon* was publishing articles on how to best maintain machinery. Silverman states that most equipment was not expected to last beyond twenty years, and that companies often depreciated these assets at 1/15th per annum.¹⁶ When The British Netherlands Artificial Silk Co was forced to sell the converted factory at Wigton, without ever producing any rayon, the building was valued at £50,000; they had spent £20,000 on alterations and £300,000 on machinery (a total of £19.5m in 2023).¹⁷ Despite this huge sum, the company had still not finished equipping the factory when it was voluntarily liquidated.¹⁸ Similarly, Bulmer Rayon Ltd was forced to sell its assets

¹³ "City's New Factory", *Liverpool Echo*, 23 October 1925, p. 7; Silverman, "The Artificial Textile Industry", p. 327; "New Art. Silk Works", *Manchester Guardian*, 31 January 1929, p. 12.

¹⁴ *The Silk Journal*, 12 March 1928, no. 45, p. 35.

¹⁵ Conversion at <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>, converted 20 June 2023. "Treasury Guarantees", *Western Daily Press*, 18 February 1926, p. 3; conversion from the Bank of England on 16 October 2019; *The Silk Journal*, 20 June 1928, no. 49, p.44.

¹⁶ Silverman, "The Artificial Textile Industry", pp. 311-12.

¹⁷ "New Art. Silk Works", *Manchester Guardian*, 31 January 1929, p.12.

¹⁸ "Opening an Unused Factory", *Manchester Guardian*, 7 November 1931, p. 13.

to the British Acetate Silk Co without ever reaching full production: the weight of the capital expenditure required was too much to bear.¹⁹ The scale of investment required is more fully shown in the amount spent by Courtaulds: between 1919 and 1928, investments of nearly £10 million were made on plant and buildings for rayon manufacture, dwarfing all the other companies combined.²⁰

The scale of production was another key aspect in the failure of many companies. As late as 1935 when there had been significant improvements in the rayon production process, an individual spindle produced just 3.5 oz (90 grams) of yarn in eight hours, and washing, bleaching and winding took as long again.²¹ H.A. Silverman calculated that a factory in the interwar years had to produce a minimum of 30,000lbs (thirteen tons) of rayon per week for the full fifty-two weeks of the year in order to be financially viable as a business. Producing these quantities required not only an enormous number of spindles, but also twenty-four-hour production, using three shifts of workers; according to Silverman, this is the equivalent of four hundred operatives. He does note, however, that some experts put these figures higher at 40,000lbs and five hundred workers respectively.²² This working, however, may be entirely academic: in 1929, the British Acetate Silk Co was producing 56,000lbs (twenty five tons) per week, but the Board felt it would need to produce at least 224,000lbs (one hundred tons) per week to make production “fully economical”.²³ The volumes of rayon required for profitability were already high, but prices also fell continuously throughout this period: Courtaulds had always been clear that they viewed rayon as a cheap fibre which would be available to all. In 1924 before any major price drops, they foresaw that by being a “well-established business, with a very strong financial position” they would be in a position to reap the benefits of a high volume, low margin product.²⁴

¹⁹ “Financial Notes”, *The Artificial Silk World*, 13 July 1928.

²⁰ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 250.

²¹ “Staple Fibre Rayon: The Future Textile Raw Material” *S&R*, March 1935, p. 125.

²² Silverman, “The Artificial Textile Industry”, p. 326.

²³ “Rayon Production: Progress at Stowmarket”, *Manchester Guardian*, 19 September 1929, p. 18.

²⁴ “Courtaulds, Ltd”, *The Times*, 7 March 1924, p. 21.

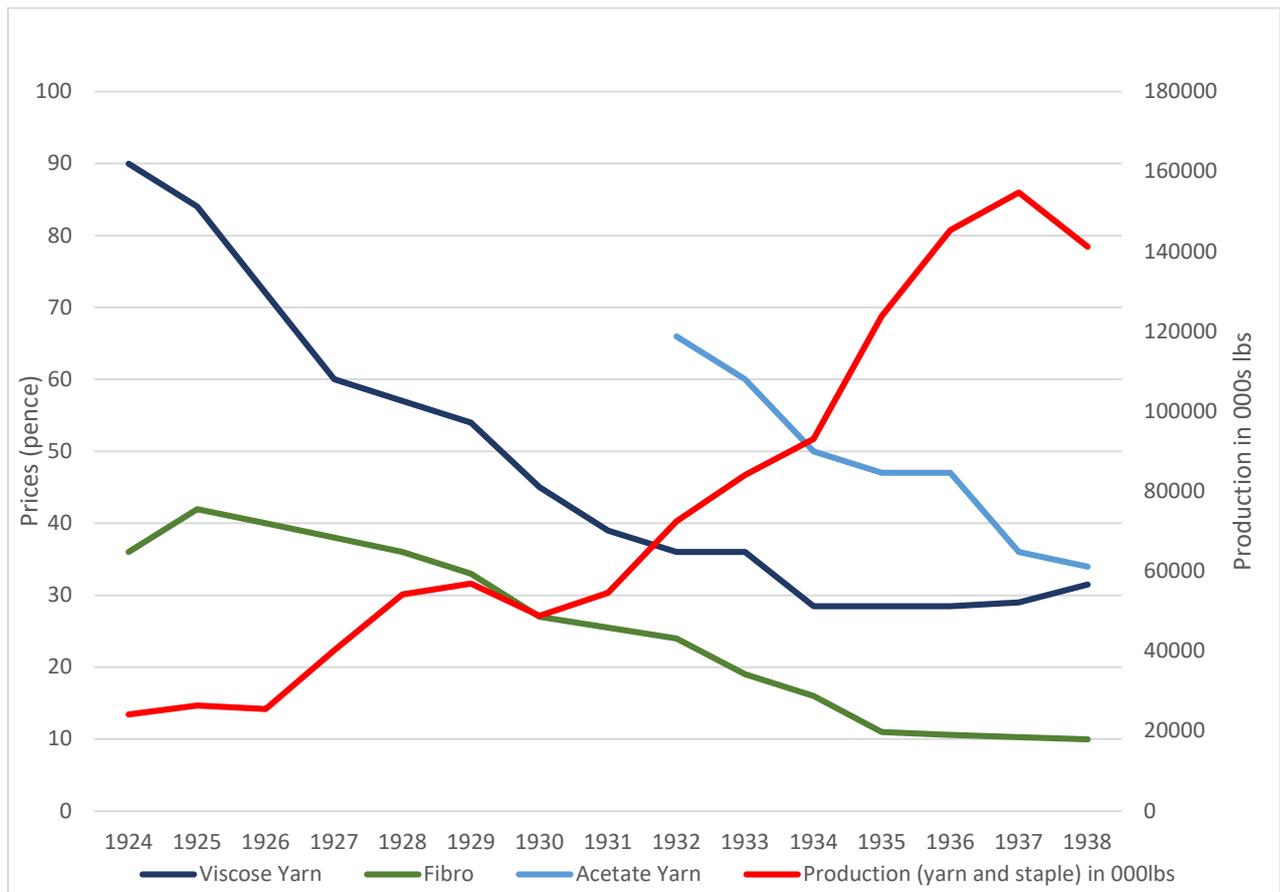
Chart I – Total Rayon Production Quantities and Prices²⁵

Chart I shows how as volumes increased, the sales price also fell, meaning that for companies to break even the production of high volumes of product were necessary. By comparing production volumes across various manufacturers, it is easy to see how Courtaulds was able to make use of economies of scale. In 1928, they produced a total of 31.8m lbs of rayon, equivalent to 611,000lbs per week.²⁶ British Visada and Western Viscose Silk Mills each aimed to make just 27,500lbs per week.²⁷ These large volumes also allowed Courtaulds to absorb price cuts, and the size of the company meant that

²⁵ This data is taken from *The Silk and Rayon Buyer's Directory 1938-9*, Appendix II, and adjusted for inflation using ONS data. From mid-1925 to mid-1934, all prices include 1 shilling Excise duty; from July 1934 6d Excise duty is included. Viscose yarn pricing was collated by the *Handbooks* and includes all producers; *Fibro* and acetate yarn figures are from Courtaulds only, as other data is not available, this information comes from Coleman. Acetate was only produced by Courtaulds from 1932. The production figures are for all forms of rayon, both yarn and staple.

²⁶ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 266.

²⁷ See "Artificial Silk", *Manchester Guardian*, 16 July 1926, p. 12 for British Visada figures, and "Artificial Silk", *Manchester Guardian*, 14 November 1926, p. 4 for Western Viscose Silk Mills figures.

any price changes they made were copied across in the industry by other firms who wanted to remain competitive. There were a series of small price cuts in the late 1920s and early 1930s, where Courtaulds hoped to maintain their share of the market and a loyal customer base as the economic outlook began to dim, and rayon supply outstripped demand.²⁸ The primary example of this was following the introduction of excise duties on rayon: Courtaulds reduced the price of their products “by the amount of Excise duty, which meant that the price paid by consumers remained as before [in the home market]”.²⁹ Six months after this price drop, Courtaulds again moved to reduce prices by around 15% on various types of yarn. *The Observer* noted that even at the previous price drop “[o]ther manufacturers had to follow suit, and there is little doubt that a general readjustment of prices will ensue on this occasion also.”³⁰ The effect of these cuts was that Courtaulds’ gross profit on rayon was reduced to less than £2m in 1926, down from over £3m in 1925. Unlike their smaller competitors though, they were able to bear this temporary reduction in income.³¹ *The Silk Journal and Rayon World* noted that many of the newer businesses had exacerbated the precarity of their financial position by selling their yarns at low prices in order to establish themselves in the market.³² Ever deepening price cuts, combined with high set up costs put an unbearable pressure on the majority of the new rayon manufacturing businesses: Coleman suggests that nineteen rayon businesses had failed by 1932; my research suggests that this number may be as high as twenty-five, taking into account those businesses which were registered but which never even managed to establish a factory.³³ Following the boom at the end of the 1920s, the number of businesses producing rayon settled. Courtaulds and British Celanese continued to dominate, but there were eleven other firms which remained active beyond 1939. Despite the almost continual demand for rayon, their success was mixed: some, such as the North British Rayon Company were still selling rayon below cost price in

²⁸ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 331; “The Rayon Industry in 1929”, *SJRW*, 20 January 1930, p.49.

²⁹ “Courtaulds, Ltd”, *The Times*, 6 March 1926, p. 21.

³⁰ “Artificial Silk Prices”, *The Observer*, 4 July 1926, p. 20.

³¹ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 252.

³² “The Rayon Industry in 1929”, *SJRW*, 20 January 1930, p.49.

³³ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 334.

1939, and Harben's remained loss-making; whereas others, like Lansil Ltd, were managing to turn a small profit.³⁴ Rayon production clearly remained a precarious industry for those who did not possess the scale or capacity of Courtaulds and British Celanese, and it is interesting that despite all the hype and investments of the late 1920s, not one of the new companies came close to rivalling the two giants of the industry.

It is clear that the production of rayon filaments required a huge amount of resource in terms of capital, technical skill and size of the production unit. Rayon offered entrepreneurs and investors the promise of a global demand, driven by clothing, which would lead to seemingly endless riches if their ventures were successful. Alas, their optimism was misplaced and they failed to consider the skills and size of operations required. The firms who did survive this boom-and-bust period would remain small producers, while the behemoths of the industry, Courtaulds Ltd and British Celanese Ltd, forged ahead realising ever-larger profits whilst pushing down consumer prices to make their product even more appealing. These two firms would help shape the entire rayon trade, and also ensure that viscose and acetate rayons were the most visible and popular forms of this new material.

³⁴ "London City Notes", *The Scotsman*, 9 November 1939, p. 2; "Harben's (Viscose Silk Manufacturers) Limited: Ordinary General Meeting", *Manchester Guardian*, 20 July 1939, p. 18; "Lansil, Limited", *Manchester Guardian*, 7 July 1939, p. 20.

Table I – British Rayon Producers 1919-1939 ¹

Name	Location	Type of Rayon	Date Established	Date of Closure (if n/a closure took place after 1939)	Capital (at start up or at date given below)	Notes
Courtaulds Ltd	Processing factories at Coventry, Nuneaton, Flint and Leigh. Spinning of staple on cotton machinery in Rochdale; spinning of staple on worsted machinery at Bradford. Chemical manufacturing at Trafford Park. Skein-dyeing at Droylsden, and piece dyeing and finishing at Bocking. Silk and rayon winding and throwing at Braintree. Weaving of dress goods at Halstead, Braintree and Leigh. Weaving of furnishing goods at Halifax.	Viscose, Cellulose Acetate (from 1927)	1794, with viscose rights first bought in 1904.	n/a	£20,000,000 (1926)	By far the largest producer of rayon in the UK in this period. Their pricing policies and scale of production directed the market throughout the interwar period. They produced increasing amounts of fabric and garments from the mid-1930s.

¹ This table draws from a number of sources, mainly newspapers from the British Newspaper Archive <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>>. Other sources: *The Silk and Rayon Directory and Buyer's Guide of Great Britain 1931* (Manchester: John Heywood, 1931); *TSJ* March, May, and July 1928; *S&R*, March 1934; D.C. Coleman, *Courtaulds*.

British Celanese Ltd (formerly British Cellulose and Chemical Manufacturing Co Ltd)	Spondon, Derbyshire. Manufacture, weaving and processing all took place in one location.	Cellulose Acetate	Renamed British Celanese Ltd in 1923.	n/a	£6,685,000 (1926)	British Celanese began focusing on cellulose acetate immediately post-war. They were the second largest rayon producer in the UK. In addition to selling rayon yarn, they were a vertically integrated manufacturer completing all processing from rayon manufacture to garments themselves.
Kirklees Ltd	Tottington, Lancashire	Viscose	1925	n/a	£100,000 (1925) £500,000 (1938)	In 1928, £100,000 of new equipment was bought. Production stopped around 1929 and then restarted mid-1930.
British Enka Ltd	Aintree, Liverpool	Viscose	1925	n/a	£1,000,000 (1926) £1,900,000 (1939)	Enka was already established in the Netherlands, and girls were sent to Holland to train prior to the opening of the Aintree works. The British factory expected to make 18,000lbs per day. 1500 people were employed in 1938, prior to a 20% reduction in production and staff.
British Bemberg Ltd	Doncaster, Yorkshire	Cuprammonium	1928	n/a	£1,250,000 (1928) £486,000 (1939)	Bemberg AG was already established in Germany. The factory was finished in 1929, but production only began in 1931. Thirty of the first employees were sent to Germany for six weeks in 1931 for training.

Harben's (Viscose Silk Manufacturers) Ltd	Golbourne, Lancashire	Viscose	Unknown. The works were purchased by J. Mandleberg & Co Ltd of Manchester in 1923 following the death of the original owner.	n/a	£160,000 (prior to 1923) £371,000 (1926) £682,000 (1939)	The Branston Artificial Silk Company bought £140,000 of shares in exchange for ongoing technical collaboration in 1927.
North British Rayon Co Ltd	Jedburgh, Roxburghshire (now Scottish Borders)	Viscose	1927	n/a	£365,000 (1927) £435,000 (1939)	In 1932, half its capital was written off. The only dividend paid to shareholders in this period was in 1936, and even in 1939 rayon was being sold below cost price.
Cellulose Acetate Silk Ltd	Lancaster, Lancashire	Cellulose Acetate	1928	n/a	£1,250,000 (1928)	Employed 2,000 people in 1937, when the name changed to Lansil Ltd in order to align the business and product names.
British Visada Ltd	Littleborough, Lancashire	Viscose	1925	Assets sold to British Breda in 1928, in exchange for £120,000 in shares.	£360,000 (1926)	The amalgamation of British Visada and British Breda became Breda Visada, and which continued production beyond 1939.

British Breda Ltd (Breda Visada Ltd from 1928)	Derby, Derbyshire	Viscose	1928	n/a	£275,000 (1931)	Became Breda Visada upon purchasing British Visada in 1928. Production moved to Littleborough, and the business continued production past 1939.
Scottish Artificial Silk Ltd	Kircudbright, Scotland	Viscose	1926	1928 – bought by Scottish Amalgamated Silks Co	£250,000 (1926)	See below.
Scottish Amalgamated Silks Ltd	Kircudbright, Scotland	Viscose	1928	1930	£2,000,000 (1928)	The directors of this company were tried for overvaluing their investments when they purchased Scottish Artificial Silk Ltd; they were later acquitted. In 1934 liquidation was still ongoing.
Western Viscose Silk Mills	Bristol	Viscose	1925	1929	£400,000	Production commenced in 1927. The factory was put up for sale in 1929, but had still not been sold by 1933.

Yorkshire Artificial Silk Company	Lancaster, Lancashire	Viscose	1928	1929	£325,000	This was a fraudulent company, set up by three individuals taking advantage of the boom in artificial silk. The intention was to sell shares in a non-existent company. Two of the individuals were found guilty in 1932, and sentenced to a three year prison sentence.
Raysheen Ltd (renamed Sunsheen Ltd in 1927)	Antrim, Northern Ireland	Viscose	1925	1929	£300,000	In 1926, Raysheen Ltd received a Treasury guarantee for £85,000 for the installation of rayon producing machinery. A lack of working capital forced Sunsheen Ltd into liquidation. The factory and plant were put up for auction in 1931.
Branston Artificial Silk Co	Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire	Viscose	1927	1930	£1,400,000 (1927)	The firm was so called because it had purchased the Crosse and Blackwell factory which was converted to a rayon production plant. It closed in 1930, and five years later the company restructured their capital and invested in a preserves company. The factory was eventually bought by the War Office in 1937.

Nuera Artificial Silk Co. Ltd	St Helens, Lancashire	Viscose	1925	1930	£42,000	Nuera signed an agreement with VGF AG and Courtaulds to use the Lilienfeld process which would increase capacity by five times. Courtaulds had exclusive selling rights of Nuera silk until July 1929, when Nuera took this aspect back in house. One of the reasons for liquidation was that Lilienfeld rayon was more expensive to produce than anticipated.
Apex (British) Artificial Silk Ltd	Edmonton, Middlesex	Unknown	1925	1930	£400,000 (1925)	Never entered commercial production. An amalgamation with Alliance Artificial Silk was hoped to save the business, but this fell through; liquidation occurred a year later.
Alliance Artificial Silk Ltd	Lowestoft, Suffolk	Acetate	1928	1931	£1,550,000	Set up under the auspices of International Artificial Silk Co, to buy acetate processing rights for the British Empire from a Swiss manufacturer. When business did not take off as expected, an amalgamation with Apex Artificial Silk was hoped to save the company, but this fell through.

British Netherlands Artificial Silk Co. Ltd	Derby, Derbyshire and Wigton, Cumberland	Unknown	1928	1930	£855,000 (1928)	Work began on converting a factory in Cumberland in 1929; land was also bought in Derby. The company failed before entering production, owing to a lack of working capital after setting up the factory.
Brysilka Ltd	Apperley Bridge, Yorkshire	Cuprammonium	1920	1931	Unknown	Despite going into liquidation in 1931, by 1934 their assets had still not been sold. In the late 1920s, the factory and machinery had been valued at £451,000; it failed to reach the opening price of £53,000 at auction in 1934.
Bulmer Rayon Ltd	Stowmarket, Suffolk	Cellulose Acetate	1925	Sells assets to British Acetate Silk Corporation in 1928	£600,000 (1926)	In 1925, Bulmer Rayon Co Ltd was registered to take over the artificial silk branch of Smith, Bulmer and Co Ltd.
British Acetate Silk Corporation	Stowmarket, Suffolk	Cellulose Acetate	1928	1931	£2,700,000	Set up to acquire the assets of Bulmer Rayon Ltd. Sir William Bulmer of the Bulmer Rayon Co Ltd remained as managing director.
Rayon Manufacturing Co Ltd	Ashtead, Surrey	Viscose	1925	1932	£300,000 (1925) £330,000 (1927)	The original business was liquidated and relaunched in 1927, under the name The Rayon Manufacturing Co (1927) Ltd. The management of the business blamed the imposition of excise duties on the company's failure.

Atlas Artificial Silk Processes Ltd	Littleborough, Lancashire	Viscose	1928	1933	£1,000,000 (1929)	Set up to acquire the exclusive rights of the Brandwood Process of rayon production from the International Artificial Silk Co. The factory cost £250,000 to erect, and when it was auctioned at liquidation some machinery was still in the manufacturer's packaging.
Nelson Silks Ltd	Lancaster, Lancashire	Cellulose Acetate	1923	n/a	£100,000	Established by James Nelson & Sons, a weaving company that realised that the future of textiles would likely include rayon.
Lustrafil Ltd	Nelson, Lancashire	Viscose	1927	n/a	£80,000	Like Nelson Silks, Ltd this was established by James Nelson & Sons, a weaving company that realised that the future of textiles would likely include rayon.
Artificial Filaments Syndicate Ltd	Runcorn, Cheshire	Staple fibre	1924	Unknown	Unknown	This company planned to produce staple fibre. In 1926 they entered into discussions to buy a factory in Lancaster, but this failed to proceed.
British Snia Viscosa Ltd	Unknown	Viscose	1925	Unknown	£1000	No capital flotation took place, and no factory was built. Courtaulds took a stake in the Italian Snia Viscosa in 1927.

International Artificial Silk Co. Ltd	London and Colwick, Nottingham	Unknown	1927	Unknown	£660,000	Set up to acquire two artificial silk mills in France, and later set up the Alliance Artificial Silk Co (see below). In 1928, it acquired land at Colwick, Nottinghamshire to erect a factory, but this did not go ahead.
Union Artificial Silk Co. Ltd	Nottingham, Nottinghamshire	Cellulose Acetate	1928	Unknown	Unknown	This company is only mentioned once in the newspapers. It may have never issued shares or bought a site.
Cuprammonium Artificial Silk Ltd	Unknown	Cuprammonium	1928	Unknown	£100	Registered on 3 rd July 1928.
Willesden Cuprammonium Silk Company	Willesden, London	Cuprammonium	1928	Unknown	£100	Associated with the Willesden Paper and Canvas company, and by 1929 had been using the cuprammonium process for “a few years”.
Midland Artificial Silk Manufacturers Ltd	Unknown	Unknown	1928	Unknown	£1000	Registered in February 1928.
British Cuprammonium Corporation	Kendal	Cuprammonium	1929	Unknown	£1,100,000	A site of eighty-three acres was acquired in Kendal in 1928. Nothing further is reported.

Eros Company	Unknown	Cuprammonium	1929	Unknown	Unknown	Reported to be looking for a factory in Yorkshire in 1929.
Bravisco Ltd	Leatherhead, Surrey	Viscose	1933	Unknown	£125,000	Acquired the rights for the Ruth-Albo viscose process in the Great Britain and Ireland. It bought the factory previously belonging to the Rayon Manufacturing Co. Ltd at Leatherhead.

All the accumulated experience of the textile world...

[was] at the disposal of the new fabric.

Arthur Cousins (Horrockses, Crewdson & Co Ltd), March 1925

2. From Filament to Fabric

Very early rayon was made in such small quantities and was so lacking in strength that it the only use it could really find was in the production of braids and trimmings. As developments took place though, rayon manufacturers realised that to make their product profitable, it would need to be taken up by the weaving and knitting trades in large volumes. The textile trade in Britain was long established and heavily industrialised, and providing that rayon manufacturers could convince businesses of the benefits of working with this fibre, it was an ideal outlet for the product. It was in the knitting, or hosiery trade, where rayon made its first successful breakthrough. The First World War had allowed knitwear manufacturers to profit from government contracts, and much of this profit was re-invested in new machinery and improving factories. The initial post-war boom in the demand for commodities also benefitted the trade, with people finally having the opportunity to buy goods after the privations of the war. Like other trades though, this boom period was not to last and by 1921, workers were being laid off. Happily for the hosiery trade, fashions were changing to suit their product and by 1924, things were looking brighter. Shorter skirts meant women wanted stockings to cover bare legs; finer, more supple underwear was wanted for underneath thinner clothing, and knitted outerwear was beginning to make its way into people's wardrobes. It was in the manufacture of stockings that rayon first made its mark. In 1920, Howard Ford imported a novelty from the United States: skin coloured stockings. Prior to this, stockings had been dyed a whole range of colours, but these new stockings were a huge success and they began to be manufactured by many British hosiery companies. The ideal fibre for this was silk, but this was expensive and quantities were limited; "artificial silk" seemed to provide the ideal solution. These new rayon stockings were also cheaper than the silk version (even allowing for the relatively high price of rayon at this early stage), and this provided the encouragement needed for women to buy them. By 1925, the hosiery industry was using an estimated 40% of the

total output of British rayon, overtaking the use in the trimmings and braiding industries usage, and far outstripping the 25% which weavers used.¹ Rayon could also be used successfully in knitted rayon fabrics which were usually used in “cut-and-sew” garments, where fabric was cut into pattern pieces and seamed together to make underwear, or blouses. Hosiery manufacturers saw rayon as a valuable and useful fibre, which by imitating expensive wool and silk goods at a lower price, increased their ranges and their sales. However, whilst knitters responded in a positive manner to rayon, their fellow fabric producers in the weaving trade were not initially as enamoured with the new fibre.

The well-established weaving trade, concentrated mainly in Lancashire, provided the ideal opportunity for rayon to be turned into textiles, if weavers could be convinced that the fibre was suitable and was not a threat to their traditional material, cotton. Following the First World War, the British cotton trade went through a period of intense disruption, and it was the beginning of its terminal decline: by value, prior to 1914 nearly two-thirds of Britain’s cotton production was exported, but the war kick started self-sufficiency in many of their export markets, particularly China and India, and post-war exports from Britain slumped.² In 1913, Britain had exported 7,075 million linear yards of cotton, this had dropped to 1,426 million linear yards by 1939. This decline did not only affect the weavers: much of the cloth which was exported was dyed and printed in Lancashire too. As production slowed, unemployment peaked at 45%, compared to a national average of 17%, and weaving sheds and printworks were abandoned.³ It was against this background that rayon was introduced, and given their already declining fortunes, some weavers saw it as a threat to their trade, believing it would take market share. Yet there were other weavers who saw the new fibre in a different light: it could

¹ “Artificial Silk”, *Manchester Guardian*, 4 April 1925, p. 13.

² Douglas Farnie, “Cotton, 1780-1913”, in *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles, Volume II*, ed. David Jenkins, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 721-760 (p. 760); Lars Sandberg, *Lancashire in Decline: a Study in Entrepreneurship, Technology and International Trade*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974), p. 4.

³ Lars Sandberg “Cotton after 1914”, in *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, p. 983.

prove to be a saviour which could fill the looms which were standing idle.⁴ As producers, both British Celanese and Courtaulds wanted to promote the use of their product, although their methods for doing this were almost completely opposite. British Celanese anticipated selling small amounts of yarn to outside manufacturers in the beginning, but they believed that British weavers and knitters were “conservative” and did not expect them to be “early pioneers” of the material. As such, they set up their own fabric mill at Spondon in 1923, and began to weave, knit and dye their own branded goods.⁵ From this base, they were able to demonstrate the use of the material, and also make some key developments, particularly around the dyeing of goods. Their success meant that the manufacture of fabrics and garments remained an important part of the British Celanese business, but its visible success also worked to encourage the textile trade to experiment with acetate rayon themselves. By 1929 British Celanese reported that an “ever increasing number of...weavers, dyers and printers” were using their yarn.⁶

In contrast to this model, Courtaulds had never anticipated producing fabrics themselves: they wanted to supply rayon yarns to the weaving and knitting trades. This was a surprising move, as Courtaulds had established themselves as weavers of silk fabrics, and had a number of mills in Essex capable of weaving and knitting, however, during the 1920s they used only about 4% of their rayon yarn in their own fabric manufacture. Samuel Courtauld in particular believed that it was better to act as a supplier to the textile trade, and to remain on a friendly rather than competitive base with them.⁷ If Courtaulds was to produce rayon in the quantities they anticipated, they would need a huge number of looms and knitting machines to be used in fabric manufacture: relying on their own machinery would never

⁴ “Artificial Silk Mills”, *Manchester Guardian*, 3 July 1924, p. 15; “Artificial Silk: Attitude of Cotton Industry”, *Manchester Guardian*, 23 March 1925, p. 15; “New Textile Era” *Manchester Guardian*, 24 February 1926, p. 16; *The Drapers’ Organiser*, December 1925, p. 83; “Artificial Silk and its Future”, *Manchester Guardian*, 1 November 1923, p. 15.

⁵ “Company Meetings”, *The Times*, 28 September 1923, p. 18

⁶ “Company Meetings”, *The Times*, 19 September 1929, p. 20.

⁷ D.C. Coleman, *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 251.

have provided the capacity needed, and external production of fabric was the only way in which the projected volumes of rayon could be consumed.

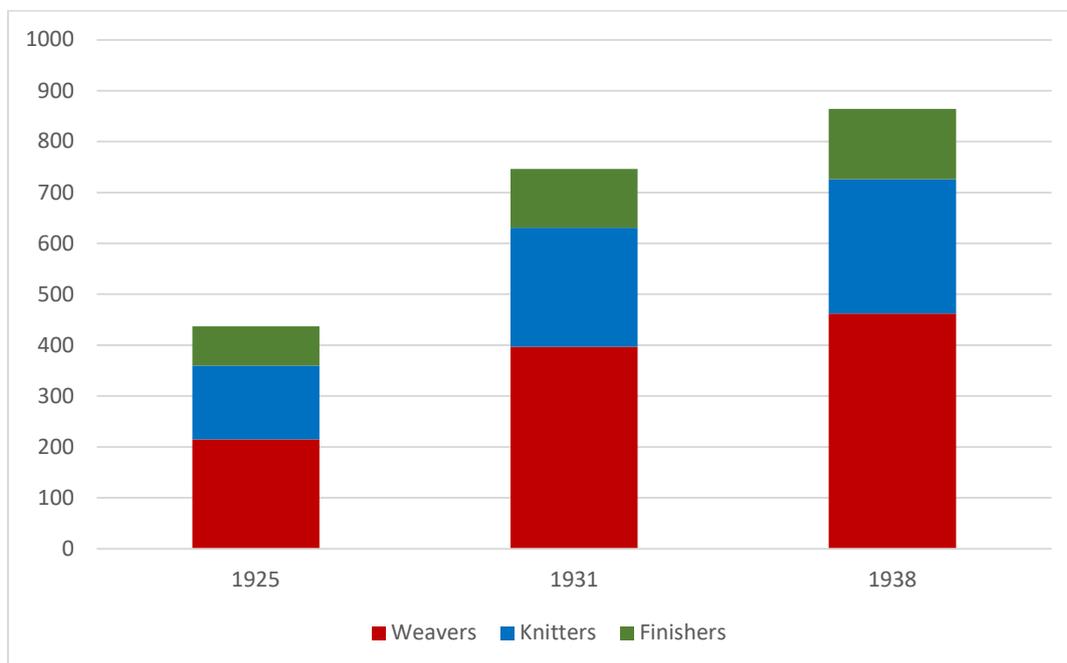
In order to get a sense of how rayon was taken up by the British textile industry we can look at *The Silk and Rayon Directory and Buyer's Guide of Great Britain* which was published annually from 1925 throughout the interwar period. Here the historian gets an indication of how many businesses were involved in this industry, and what roles they played. The first Guide proclaimed that it aimed to be a "comprehensive" and "accurate" volume which businessmen could use to "keep acquainted" with the rapidly growing number of firms using rayon.⁸ Starting as a relatively slim volume, the editions grew in size as the listings section expanded to include the increasing number of businesses working with rayon. In 1925, 443 businesses were listed as being connected with the rayon fabric trade; in 1931, this number had risen dramatically to 855; followed by a more modest rise to 1,042 businesses listed in 1938-9 (see Chart II).⁹ These businesses included weavers, knitters, finishers, dyers and makers-up of garments, and all were connected directly to the rayon fabric industry. It could be argued that these numbers rose so rapidly from 1925 because the first edition was a new venture: however, the publishers appear to have collated the information themselves, rather than the publication merely being an advertising tool where businesses requested or paid to be listed. The introduction notes that any suggestions where there have been errors or omissions would be welcomed, but the overwhelming sense is of a well-researched directory which makes use of the author's extensive knowledge of the sector.¹⁰

⁸ Preface from *The Silk and Rayon (Artificial Silk) Directory and Buyer's Guide of Great Britain 1925*, (Manchester: John Heywood, 1925), p. 9.

⁹ Figures from *The Silk and Rayon Directory and Buyer's Guide of Great Britain 1925*; *The Silk and Rayon Directory and Buyer's Guide 1931* (Manchester: John Heywood, 1931), and *The Rayon and Silk Directory and Buyer's Guide of Great Britain 1938-9*, (Manchester: Harlequin Press, 1939). The author has compiled a complete digital list of rayon businesses from these years, including address, goods produced and size of factory (where given).

¹⁰ The author, A.H. Hard, was also the author of specialist books on rayon.

Chart II – Types of Businesses working with rayon in 1925, 1931 and 1938.¹¹



In the Directories, businesses are listed by area, and it is immediately apparent that the geographical specialities of production remained firmly in place when rayon was introduced: weaving remained in Lancashire and Yorkshire; knitting took place in the Midlands; and associated industries such as dyeing and finishing remained close to these centres (see Table II). The fact there was no geographical movement when rayon began to be used suggests that existing businesses were adapting themselves to deal with this new material, whilst also making use of the specialist skills which had developed in particular regions. Until this point, the weaving of natural textiles was largely split by location too: Lancashire worked with cotton, Yorkshire with wool, Derbyshire and Cheshire were more concerned with silk. It was only the knitting trade who worked with all three of these fibres, which perhaps explains why they were the first to take up rayon, as they were already used to working with a variety of materials. Rayon was utilised across all geographic locations, and in this sense, it was the first textile to have a broad spectrum (in terms of both skill and location) of users. It was the collective abilities, work and resourcefulness of those in the textile trades which allowed rayon to establish itself so

¹¹ Data taken from the *Silk and Rayon Buyer's Directories 1925, 1931 and 1938*.

quickly, and we can see from the locations in which it was used how widely it was accepted by all sectors of the industry.

Table II - Location and number of rayon weavers, knitters and finishers in 1931, from *The Silk and Rayon Directory and Buyer's Guide 1931*

Location	Weavers	Location ¹²	Knitters	Location	Finishers
Lancashire	188	Leicestershire	37	Manchester	21
Yorkshire	105	Nottinghamshire	27	Cheshire	16
Cheshire	7	Staffordshire	20	Nottinghamshire	15
Nottinghamshire	5	Cheshire	16	Lancashire	14
Leicestershire	2	London	15	Yorkshire	14
Norfolk	2	Cornwall	9	Scotland ¹³	11
Cumberland	2	Lancashire	8	Staffordshire	6
Derbyshire	1	Derbyshire	6	London	5
Warwickshire	1	Surrey	6	Derbyshire	5
Oxfordshire	1	Yorkshire	4	Leicestershire	4
Hampshire	1	Manchester	4		
Wiltshire	1	Middlesex	3		
		Hertfordshire	3		
		Norfolk	2		
		Isle of Man	2		

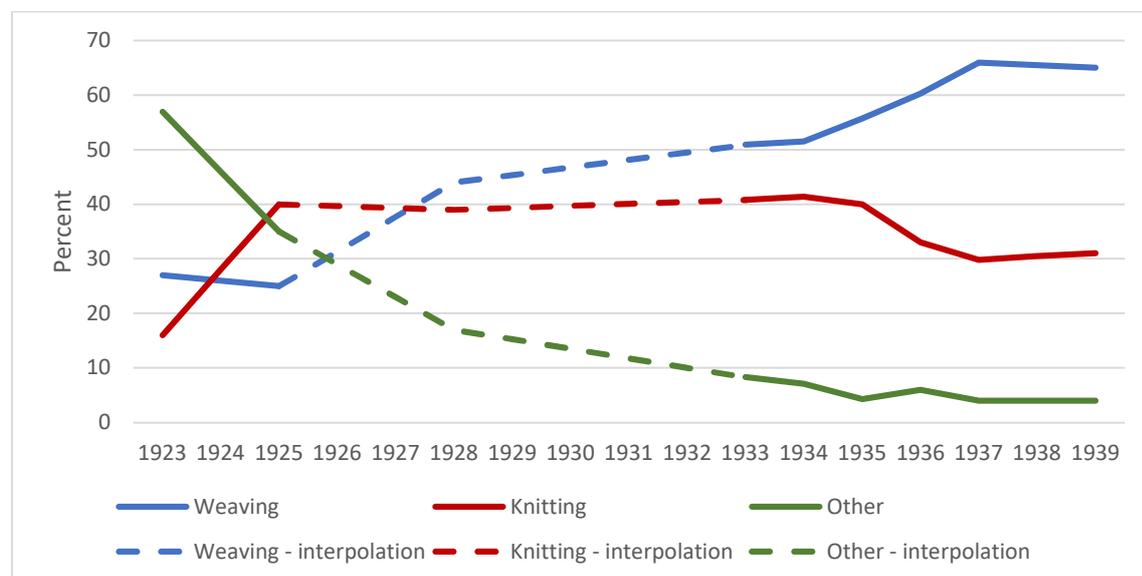
Although the above information shows us geographically where rayon was being used, understanding the utilisation of rayon across the various industries is also essential, particularly as this changed over the period: this evidence also informs our understanding of how the public were consuming their rayon. In 1923, the smallware and trimmings trade used the majority of rayon being produced, but

¹² Scotland had 47 companies in this period, however, I have excluded them from this list as they only made up around 10% of the total employment in the industry, and they focused largely on exporting high quality woollen and woollen mixture items overseas.

¹³ As above.

this was a limited market, never reaching high volumes, so we can effectively ignore this. It was the hosiery trade which was the first of the two large textile trades which embarked on the serious use of rayon, but as the weaving of rayon took off, owing to better rayon yarns and more skilled operators, it was this sector where the majority of rayon would be employed. To some extent, this is not surprising, as if we consider the difference in the products the knitting and weaving trades manufacture, they are very different in terms of size and weight. Even in 1935 when knitted fabrics had become an established part of women's wardrobes, stockings were still the mainstay of the hosiery trade's productions: stockings are small and lightweight, requiring only small amounts of rayon for each pair. Even comparing it to a yard of the thinnest rayon fabric they would use less of the raw material. It was clear that weaving would be the industry which would ultimately use the largest volumes of rayon.

Chart III – Uses of Rayon in the British Textile Trade in the 1930s¹⁴



¹⁴ "Artificial Silk", *Manchester Guardian*, 4 March 1925, p. 13; "Weavers Use More Rayon", *SJRW*, June 1936, p. 33; "UK Rayon Consumption", *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 3 March 1938, p. 15; "UK Statistics", Appendix I, *Rayon and Silk Directory and Buyer's Guide 1940-41*, n.p.; D. C. Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 200. The dashed lines on the chart are interpolations, as data for 1924, 1926, and 1929-32 is not available.

Weaving Rayon

In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, cotton weavers flourished as consumers demanded fabrics they had not been able to get hold of during the hostilities. However, there was criticism that the profits from this boom were not reinvested in re-equipping ageing factories, and once business started to decline in the 1920s, it became far harder to undertake the investment required for new looms.¹⁵ Bowden and Higgins note that by in the 1930s:

Much of the industry's technology was of nineteenth-century vintage; 26.7 per cent of looms had been installed before 1890, 31 per cent of looms between 1890 and 1910, 26.6 per cent of looms between 1910 and 1920, and only 5.5 per cent between 1920 and 1930.¹⁶

When we also consider that by 1939 the Joint Committee of Cotton Trade Organisations believed that 85% of rayon woven in Britain was woven on cotton looms as opposed to specialist rayon looms, it is clear to see that the weaving industry was rapidly stagnating in terms of capital investment.¹⁷ Articles in the press in the early 1920s suggested that Lancashire was “lag[g]ing behind [while] rapid strides were being made in Yorkshire” with regards to the use of mixing rayon with cotton [Lancashire] and wool [Yorkshire].¹⁸ Cotton textile producers defended themselves for not being bolder in their use of rayon by saying it was still too expensive to use in the cheap fabrics they produced, and that the production of rayon fibres had not yet reached a stage where a mass market outlet could be considered.¹⁹ However, despite using old cotton looms, viable fabrics were clearly being produced. In 1928 in a speech to the Oldham Mill Managers Association, William Kenyon claimed that:

Lancashire [was] producing artificial silk fabrics of a high standard...The ordinary Lancashire loom, well-tuned up... would make an artificial silk warp weave as easily as a good class cotton, while if the shuttle was properly prepared very little trouble was experienced with art silk weft.²⁰

¹⁵ Sue Bowden & David M. Higgins, “Productivity on the Cheap? The ‘More Looms’ Experiment and the Lancashire Weaving Industry during the Inter-War Years”, *Business History*, Vol 41, No. 3 (1999), pp. 21-41 (p. 25).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Cotton and Rayon: Lancashire’s Part”, *The Manchester Guardian*, 2 May 1939, p. 14.

¹⁸ “Artificial Silk and its Future”, *Manchester Guardian*, 1 November 1923, p. 15.

¹⁹ “The Ultimate Place of Rayon in the Cotton Industry”, *TSJ*, April 1925, p. 51.

²⁰ “Lancashire’s Art Silk Trade”, *Manchester Guardian*, 17 November 1928, p.15. Warp is the thread which runs across the fabric; weft is the thread which runs the length of it.

Although many cotton weavers chose to simply incorporate rayon into their existing productions, there are examples of companies choosing to move wholly away from cotton and into the production of rayon. Following an extremely difficult period during the Depression, during which one of their mills closed and the Chairman was forced to resign, John Binns & Sons Ltd of Keighley decided to turn entirely to woven rayon fabric production. The machinery they owned was either “rehabilitated” or replaced in an extensive programme in 1933, and a year later they had more looms working at Croft Mill than ever before. By 1935, they were able to reopen Carr Mill which had been closed since 1930.²¹ This turnaround in just four years shows how quickly the rayon market was growing, and the benefits companies could reap by using this fibre. Another business which had suffered from market changes was Ashworth, Hadwen & Co: the loss of the Chinese cotton market meant they changed their business model to produce “high quality cotton and artificial silk goods for the home market” at their Droylsden Mill. By 1934, this business had been promising enough for new looms to be installed, and for an extra sixty workers to be employed.²² These instances are particularly noteworthy because they demonstrate that focusing on rayon fabrics for the home market could return a company to success, even whilst vast spare capacity remained across the weaving industry.²³

Production records from another weaving firm also indicate the increasing amounts of rayon being woven into fabrics during the 1920s. Ferguson Brothers Ltd was a Carlisle based firm which had been weaving since 1824. A snapshot of their production from 1924-28 has been preserved, and it clearly shows how they had been able to adapt to the new fibre, and how it affected their other lines of production.²⁴

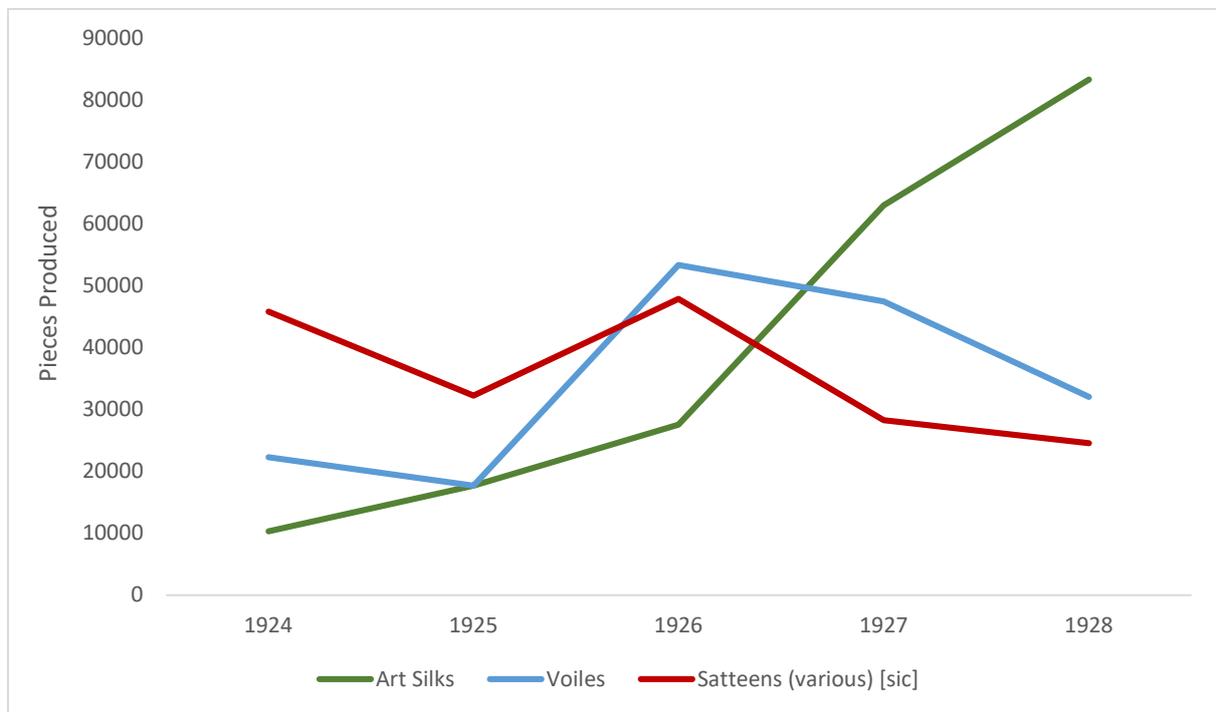
²¹ Unnamed author, *Weaving a Century: Binns 1852-1952*, (printed privately, 1952), pp. 18-21.

²² Ibid.

²³ “Textile Trade Problems”, *Manchester Guardian*, 6 March 1936, p. 18.

²⁴ Analysis of Production, Ferguson Brothers, Textile Manufacturers and Printers of Holme Head, Carlisle, Cumbria Archives, Carlisle, DB 110/63.

Chart IV – Home Trade Analysis taken from Ferguson Bros Ltd records, 1924-1928.²⁵



Alongside rayon fabrics, voile and sateen were the other main products made by Ferguson Bros, and they declined seemingly as a result of the increasing amount of rayon produced. This seems to very neatly validate the argument made by a writer in *The Manchester Guardian* in 1924: the trade in mercerised and sateen cloths would suffer as rayon became more popular with consumers. However, Ferguson’s overall production figures increased by 78% over these four years, so trade was certainly not suffering. It is also important to note that these figures do not indicate the fibres being used in the voiles and sateens, and some of these may also have been mixed cotton and rayon fabrics. The 1925 *Silk and Rayon Directory* lists Fergusons simply as manufacturers of “A.S. and cotton dress goods. Linings. Etc [sic]”.²⁶ By 1929 Ferguson Bros were advertising branded mixed cotton and rayon fabrics,

²⁵ Data taken from Analysis of Production, Ferguson Brothers,, Cumbria Archives, DB110/63.

²⁶ *The Silk and Rayon (Artificial Silk) Directory and Buyer’s Guide 1925*, p. 30.

such as *Juliette*, *Suzette* and *Fergochene*, and *Eden* and *Solent* rayon satins.²⁷ The 1931 *Silk and Rayon Directory* listing provides us with even more comprehensive detail:

Manufacturers of printed and dyed rayon and cotton Dress Goods and Linings, including Rayon and Cotton Crepe-de-Chine, Marocains, Brocades, Satins, Twills, 54in., Italians and Venetians, etc.²⁸

This expanded list, running to fabrics which are more complex than a simple plain weave, suggests that the rayon production figures at Ferguson Bros continued to increase, and it supports the argument made in *Silk Journal and Rayon World* four years earlier that customers were no longer satisfied with “the facetiously termed ‘bread and cheese’ lines.”²⁹

Although evidence such as the above, plus trade and newspaper articles, tell us that rayon weaving was becoming more common, it is far harder to examine how weavers used the fibre, particularly in the 1920s. By the 1930s, trade journals were frequently running articles which not only presented the latest rayon fabrics, but also identified the composite fibre(s) and construction qualities. Trade journals in the 1920s were far more focused on the “how to” side of production, rather than focusing on the output. To understand how weavers used rayon, the historian must instead rely on pattern books produced by the mills themselves, and these are often incomplete, or come with very limited annotations. The best example of pattern books which show how rayon was integrated into manufacturing over these years are those left by Hind, Robinson & Son Ltd, a weaving business which was based in Halifax. Dating mainly from the 1920s, the books contain samples of cloth, and list their component fibres, often including the brand of rayon (see Figure 2). Unfortunately, most of the books contain fabrics probably intended to be used for furnishings rather than garments, with the exception of one book which contains very lightweight dress fabrics. However, in the absence of any other information these sample books give some insight into how weavers were working with rayon. The very earliest mixed cotton and rayon sample is dated 1919, but is marked as “SPECIAL”, and just thirty-

²⁷ Ferguson Bros advert, *The Drapers' Record*, 9 March 1929.

²⁸ *The Silk and Rayon Directory and Buyer's Guide 1931*, p. 123.

²⁹ “Milanese Cloth in Artificial Silk”, *SJRW*, June 1927, p. 56.

two yards were ordered. The fabric was made of 74% cotton, and 26% rayon.³⁰ Another two years then elapses before rayon makes another appearance, when in April 1921 a fabric is woven with Courtaulds 150 denier artificial silk. There are a further nine examples of rayon mixture fabrics in this book in 1922, including one where it is woven with real silk.³¹ Another sample book which appears to date from the years 1923 to 1926 contains mostly loose woven ratiné style fabrics: this style of fabric is more conducive to the use of rayon as it is often used for decorative rather than practical purposes.³² Of the 1,680 fabric samples in the book, 174 contain some proportion of rayon, although this is mostly as a decorative feature in the textile. It is also apparent that the use of rayon as a decorative element develops in complexity over these years, as the weavers become more used to the material.³³ The first example of a 100% rayon fabric appears in 1924, and it is a fairly heavy weight furnishing-type fabric. At this point, rayon lacked the durability and strength to make it a mass produced item, and this sample corroborates this: just 66 yards were produced on commission for another textile company.

³⁰ Sample Book, Hind Robinson & Son Ltd, Calderdale Museums Service, Bankfield Museum, Halifax, 1980.22.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Sample Book, Hind Robinson & Son Ltd, Bankfield Museum, 1980.21.

³³ Ibid.

Quality	Width in Slay.	Width in Grey.	Width Finished.	Yards Wp.	Date
666	39		36	40	Mar 21/24
Harness 92	Warp	150 Denier	Celanese	2 9/16 on beam	
72 Sett	Warp				
4 Rows t. 4 Rows	Warp				
Slay 7 1/2	Becks	140 Denier	Celanese	2 9/16 8/-	
Wheel 50	14 1/2	West			
Wp. 3 1/2	Ends 7	lbs. 12	ozs. @ 9/-	69 9.	Finishing 33-3
Wp. 18	Ends	lbs.	ozs. @		1-0
Wp.	Ends	lbs.	ozs. @	60	Costs 2 = 11 1/2 = 36 1-0
Decom. & Twisting	8 Can	Colours	cuts	1 0	4 1/2 52-0
West	140 Denier	Celanese	6 10/16	57 0	3 = 4 Remarks: 31-3
West					3 31-3
Weaving	3 1/2 - 10 1/2	Expenses	7 10 1/2	31 3	3 2 39 27-0
66 Yds. Finishing	1 Denier	5 1/2 lbs	1 1/2 %	29 0	6 6
Commission	Beckley	10 1/2		6 6	100% net 3 20 1/2 2-0
Price	for	inches		19 1/2 6	

Figure 2 The first extant example from Hind, Robinson & Son Ltd of a 100% rayon fabric, dated March 1924. Interestingly, it was woven from two varieties of rayon: Celanese acetate and Courtaulds' viscose. Bankfield Museum, Halifax.

In the sample book dated 1928-31, the majority of the fabrics are made of cotton and rayon mixtures, and by now the weavers' tickets also note the type of rayon being used. The choice of rayons available had increased substantially, not only from different manufacturers but also different types of rayon yarn which had a variety of properties. There was also a range of different weights, or deniers available. Hind, Robinson & Son were making use of the Courtaulds products *Tudenza*, *Aber*, *Escourto Viscose Crepe*, *C875*, "M" and "MK"; along with *Celanese*, *Syncela*, and "xB" made by British Celanese; and yarns by Bemberg and British Enka. The deniers also range from a relatively fine 75 denier, up to 300 denier, with by far the most common weight being 150 denier which would produce a medium weight fabric.

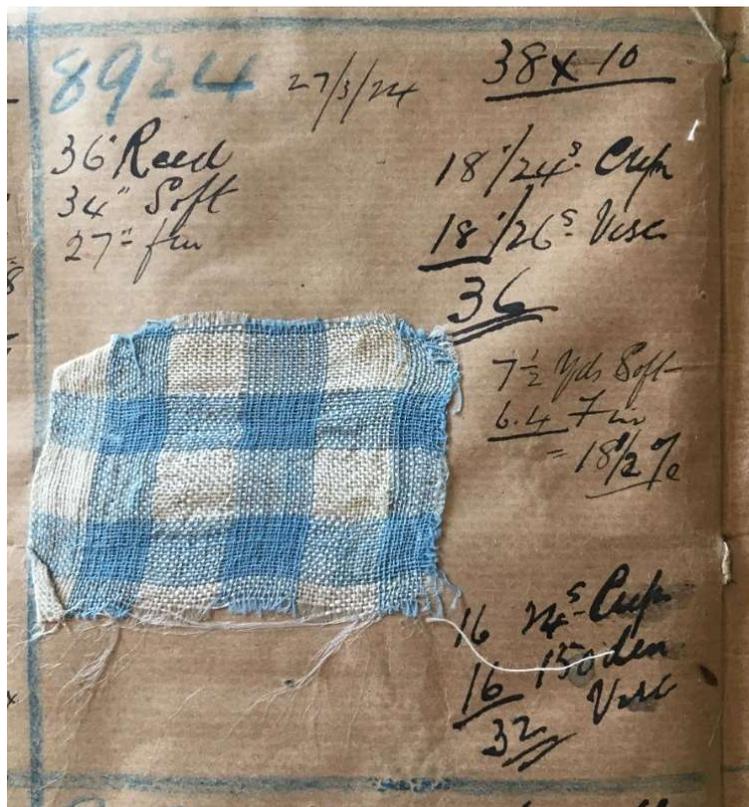


Figure 3 An example from a Hind, Robinson & Son Ltd sample book dated 1924 showing a woven ratine fabric composed of cotton and viscose. Bankfield Museum, Halifax.

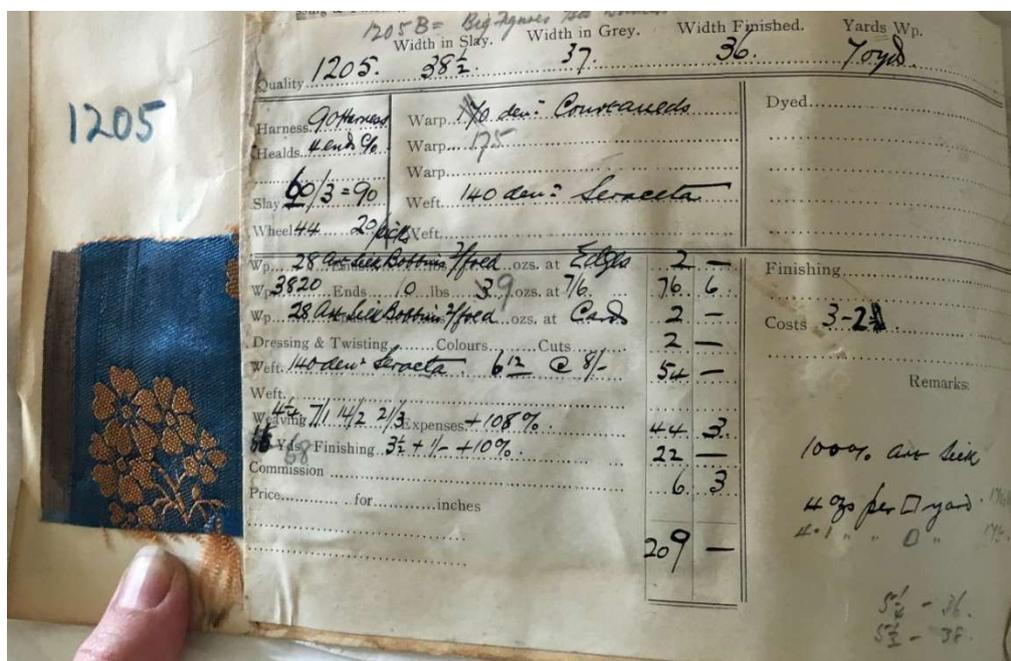


Figure 4 A later example of a Hind, Robinson sample, dated c. 1928-31. Interestingly it is woven from a mix of acetate (Seraceta) and viscose (Courtaulds) yarns. Bankfield Museum, Halifax.

The Hind, Robinson & Son sample books demonstrate how the weaving of rayon developed over time, as weavers gained more skill in using it. Experts noted that rayon was more similar to silk in its properties: cotton weavers were not used to working with such a slippery material, and some claimed that the weaving industry faced “more difficulties in the handling of artificial silk than any other branch of the trade.”³⁴ From its introduction, the weaving of rayon had been viewed as requiring a higher skill level than cotton weaving, and consequently higher rates were paid to employees working with rayon. The Cotton Spinners and Manufacturers Association [CSMA] and the Amalgamated Weavers’ Association [AWA] had produced guidelines for piece rate payments, known as The Uniform List, since 1892.³⁵ By 1924, these guidelines had grown to include rayon piece rates, stating that “Artificial Silk Stripes in any cloth” should be paid at 10% above a normal rate, and that when used in the weft of the fabric

looms up to and including 45 inches, [would receive] 30 per cent. extra, and in looms over 45 inches 35 per cent. extra³⁶

These were significant uplifts in a depressed industry, and they rose to 50% for a 100% rayon fabric by 1934.³⁷ However, these rates were not legally enforceable, and *The Silk Journal and Rayon World* argued in 1935 that this did not

represent the normal wages paid during the last few years, as these rates had been rejected as impracticable and restrictive [by weaving businesses].³⁸

Ignoring the suggested pay rates allowed fabric manufacturers to keep their costs low, and thus keep prices for consumers as keen as possible. However, statutory intervention came in July 1935, when the Cotton Manufacturing Industry (Temporary Provisions) Act 1934 set out legally enforceable piece rates for weaving. The new rates were set at a 22.5% uplift from a basic cotton piece rate for a rayon

³⁴ “Cotton trade and Art. Silk”, *Manchester Guardian*, 28 March 1928, p. 28.

³⁵ “Cotton worker unions”, The Working Class Movement Library, <<https://www.wcml.org.uk/our-collections/working-lives/cotton-workers/cotton-worker-unions/>> [accessed March 2024].

³⁶ *Uniform List of Prices for weaving plains, fancies, coloured clothes etc 1924*, Joint Prices Committee of The Cotton Spinners & Manufacturers' Association and the Amalgamated Weavers Association, North East Lancashire Textile Manufacturers' Association, Lancashire Archive, Preston, DDX 1145/5/15.

³⁷ “The British Rayon Position”, *SJRW*, 20 July 1935, p. 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

warp fabric, and 17.5% uplift on a rayon weft fabric. On a 100% rayon fabric, these rates were combined to make a 40% increase on the standard cotton piece rate.³⁹ There were also additional increments added for very fine or very coarse deniers of rayon. Unsurprisingly, the rayon industry was not enthused by these additional costs. Samuel Courtauld wrote to *The Manchester Guardian* on the day the Act came into force:

My company has a long experience of weaving all-rayon cloths and mixtures. In the early days rayon was very imperfect, and most of the additional percentages for weaving it were fair and necessary. To-day, however, the position is quite different and in many classes of fabric it weaves at least as well as cotton, and should not be penalised by higher weaving rates.⁴⁰

He argued that if manufacturers had to spend more paying labourers, they would have little incentive to upgrade their equipment to deal with rayon more efficiently, as any increase in production would lead to even higher labour costs. He feared that implementing these pay rates would leave the “whole industry permanently handicapped.”⁴¹ *Silk and Rayon* recorded that Carrington & Dewhurst Ltd lodged a protest with the AWA and CSMA “along similar lines [to that of Courtaulds]”.⁴² The changes were also discussed at the annual meeting of Tootal, Broadhurst Lee Co Ltd in August of that year with the chairman, Sir Kenneth Lee saying that

production costs would have to be brought down to a minimum if the manufacturers wish to...retain their hold on the home market.⁴³

However, following the initial uproar in the trade press, the issue was quickly dropped and wage rates barely made an appearance for the rest of the period, even though they remained at this higher level. It is also clear that although the introduction of these rates could have led to higher prices for fabrics, this did not happen: a combination of excise duty being cut, plus an additional price cut from filament

³⁹ *Uniform List of Prices to be Paid to Weavers in the Cotton Manufacturing Industry*, (Manchester: Hunter & Bardsley Ltd, 1937), pp. 31-2.

⁴⁰ Samuel Courtauld, Letters to the Editor, *Manchester Guardian*, 2 July 1935, p. 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² “Rayon Weaving Wages”, *S&R*, May 1935, p. 273.

⁴³ “Weavers Wages’ and Rayon”, *SJRW*, 20 August 1935, p. 15.

manufacturers meant that in 1935 grey (unfinished) fabric prices actually fell by as much as 1½d per yard.⁴⁴

Finishing Woven Fabric (with specific reference to The Calico Printers Association Ltd)

The final stage of creating a rayon or rayon mixture fabric was arguably the most difficult in technical terms: printing, dyeing and finishing had always taken place on natural fibres to this point, and the development of a completely new fibre with different properties proved both something of a trial and an opportunity for the industry. In 1926, C.M. Whittaker of the CPA noted in *The Times* that there were “special problems” when it came to dyeing rayon but,

the brilliant sheen of artificial silk provides an ideal groundwork upon which the dyer is able to produce all the beautiful shades which modern colour chemistry has placed at his disposal.⁴⁵

Set up in 1899 from an amalgamation of some forty six printing firms and thirteen merchant businesses, the CPA was well established by the 1920s and in 1922-3 made a profit of over £800,000.⁴⁶ Their archives are preserved at Manchester Libraries, and they offer an insight into how the company not only began working with rayon, but also how they wholly embraced it and developed it into a major line of products, which were both innovative and reliable. By the point C.M. Whittaker was writing his article for *The Times*, the CPA in Manchester had been working with rayon for at least four years. The first mention of rayon in their archives is In November 1922 when it was reported by the Research Committee that

there was plenty of work going on in the Association in dyeing, printing and finishing of artificial silk.⁴⁷

The CPA’s structure meant that individual printworks remained fairly autonomous, and the centrally-based Research Committee was not involved in all of the developments the mills themselves made.

⁴⁴ “Rayon Staple Fibre in Dress Fabrics: Yarn Prices Reduced by 20%”, *S&R*, October 1935, p. 601. Grey fabric is that which has been woven, but has not yet been dyed, printed or finished.

⁴⁵ “Dyeing the yarn”, *Artificial Silk Supplement, The Times*, 9 March 1926, p. x.

⁴⁶ “Calico Printers Big Dividend”, *Manchester Guardian*, 18 August 1925, p.5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Thus, although rayon was being used, it appears that there was no centralised research into working with the fabric at this point, and any rayon material which came in to be printed and finished was dealt with by the chemists, print managers and technicians at local mills on an ad hoc basis, with very little knowledge shared across the wider CPA. Given the difficulties of dyeing rayon in these early years, it is not surprising that information was not shared, as the inherent problems with it may have suggested it would not be widely used in the future, and the results may not have been satisfactory.

However, by 1923 some customers

were very interested in the sample of artificial silk shewn [sic] to them, and hoped the Association would develop in this direction.⁴⁸

After this date, the archives show that there were more concerted efforts to research and produce rayon fabrics: the CPA was invited to visit to British Celanese laboratories to learn about working with their product; and the company was also an early subscriber to the artificial silk section of the British Cotton Industry Research Association in 1926. The commitment the CPA had to using scientific research to improve their products is shown by the fact that in 1933 alone twenty one new scientists were employed across the CPA, with an average salary of £450. The number of men employed, and the salaries they commanded reinforces the fact that scientific research was becoming evermore critical to both working with fabrics in the mills, and producing reliable results for the consumer. The employment of these scientists meant that not only could the CPA develop new techniques, dye and print effects, but that these standard processes could be shared and utilised across all branches. In addition, this more formal way of working in a laboratory meant the CPA could easily patent new practices: a total of sixteen patents were issued to the CPA in the interwar years for processes relating to rayon.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ CPA Research Committee Minutes No. 2, 15 January 1923, Calico Printers Association Ltd GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, Manchester, M75/7/1/2 [Green 1382].

⁴⁹ Espacenet Patent Search for "Calico Printers Association"
<<https://worldwide.espacenet.com/patent/search?q=%22Calico%20Printers%27%20Association%22>>, [accessed 24 June 2023].

The CPA minutes also show the need for printers and finishers to make capital investments in order to work with rayon efficiently. As early as 1925 £3,500 was spent on equipment specifically for rayon printing.⁵⁰ In March 1934, a spend of £14,000 was approved to convert the Gemmell & Harter works at Radcliffe into a branch dealing with “Middle Class Home Trade Cotton Goods and cheaper Art. Silks”.⁵¹ Later the same year, discussions took place at Board Level about spending £30,000 to convert a printworks at Hayfield which had been producing export fabrics, into a printer of high class rayon, silk and wool fabrics.⁵² These investments were made despite the fact the CPA, and the wider industry, were running well below their capacity. Just like weavers, printers were suffering from the collapse of the export market, as most cottons were finished in Britain before they were sent overseas. Indeed, the Hayfield printworks were under the threat of closure unless they were converted to printing rayon, silk and wool for the home market. There was such concern over the amount of spare capacity in the industry that in 1934, a group of printers came together to form the Artificial Silk Dyers Federation (ASDF) which wanted to persuade the Board of Trade to implement statutory price maintenance for dyeing yarns and textiles, and to implement a quota system for print works.⁵³ The argument was that

Today there is only 50 per cent to 60 per cent of work available for the dyeing plant of the country. Keen competition naturally results, developing into a war of attrition and work is now generally being produced below cost price. This forces dangerous economies, research is being restricted and plant is not being reconditioned.⁵⁴

The planned quotas would allow for a financial levy to be placed on printers deemed to be overproducing, which would be used to support those businesses not filling their own capacity. However, the CPA were concerned that a combination of price maintenance and quotas would

⁵⁰ CPA Research Committee Minutes, 15 January 1923, M75/7/1/2 [Green 1382]; Minutes of Meetings of Directors, 15 June 1925, M75/2/2/6-8 [Green 881], both Calico Printers Association Ltd GB127.M75, Manchester Archives.

⁵¹ CPA Minutes of Meetings of Directors, 27 March 1934,]; Calico Printers Association Ltd GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, M75/2/2/15-17 [Green 884].

⁵² CPA Minutes of Meetings of Directors, 14 August 1934, Calico Printers Association Ltd GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, M75/2/2/15-17 [Green 884].

⁵³ “A Cotton Control Scheme”, *Manchester Guardian*, 23 February 1934, p. 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

maintain in the trade inefficient firms who would under a moveable quota system secure a vested interest in the [rayon] trade.⁵⁵

They were also extremely unhappy that the quota system suggested was based upon the 1932 output of their Chadkirk works, which had not been fully operational at that time, producing only 150,000 pieces.⁵⁶ The CPA repeatedly pushed for a quota of 300,000 pieces, but the Federation prevaricated.⁵⁷ Extended wrangling took over a year and left the ASDF partly collapsed, and by this point the CPA had firmly decided it wanted no part of a quota and price maintenance system. Even within the industry, there was no consensus about the best way to save the British printing and finishing industry: some believed that the industry could be saved by government intervention, and others who believed that increased consumption and customer choice would help the dyeing and finishing industry settle into a new form. Despite the efforts of the Federations, statutory prices were never implemented in the dyeing and finishing industry. Given that the number of printing, dyeing and finishing businesses remained fairly static between 1931 and 1938 (see Chart II earlier in this chapter) it does suggest that the increasing amount of rayon being produced filled some of the spare capacity, and helped stop the closure of some businesses.

Knitting Rayon

In July 1930, a commentator in the *Hosiery Times* declared that “Knitwear is the wear of the twentieth century”.⁵⁸ This was an extremely bold claim, considering that knitwear had only announced itself as a fashionable choice in the previous decade. Nevertheless, in the years between 1924 and 1937, the British trade’s output in terms of volume increase by 50%, lending some weight to this statement. Of course, not all of this was rayon, but as indicated the amount of rayon used did increase in these years.

Unlike the weaving trade, there appeared to be little resistance to using rayon: *The Times* noted that

⁵⁵ CPA Minutes of Meetings of Directors, 10 July 1934, Calico Printers Association Ltd GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, M75/2/2/15-17 [Green 84].

⁵⁶ CPA Minutes of Meetings of Directors, 27 November 1934, Calico Printers Association Ltd GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, M75/2/2/15-17 [Green 84].

⁵⁷ CPA Minutes of Meetings of Directors, 15 May 1934, 27 November 1934 and 11 December 1934, Calico Printers Association Ltd GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, M75/2/2/15-17 [Green 884].

⁵⁸ “Progress of the World’s Knitwear Industry”, *HT*, July 1930, p. 30.

the pioneers and greatest users of this new fibre were those which had been previously, and in many cases still are, engaged with the production of real silk yarns and fabrics.⁵⁹

Silk was akin enough to rayon for it to be easily substituted in the knitted manufacturing process, and businesses in Leek, and then Macclesfield, began working with rayon. Later, as these manufacturers proved that it could be worked into successful products, knitting production spread to the Midlands, where wool and cotton were the primary materials. One of the reasons why the hosiery trade may have taken up rayon with such enthusiasm was that it was largely used in stockings when it was first introduced. Unlike woven textiles, stockings were not expected to have a long life: they were fragile and laddered easily, even when made of wool and cotton. Rayon could easily substitute for these materials with no real impact on the durability of the product. Women usually bought a few pairs of stockings a year, as opposed to a dress or dress fabric which would often be an annual purchase, and which was expected to last for a number of years. A further reason that rayon may have been accepted so readily is that the hosiery industry had only just made the move from being either home-based or located in small workshops, into factories: this gave it less of a history, and fewer ties with tradition. The knitting trade was also more flexible in terms of the materials used: unlike the weaving industry which had fairly rigid boundaries when it came to raw materials, hosiery companies had traditionally made use of mixtures of all three natural fibres, albeit with a particular focus upon just one of them. Again, unlike the weaving trade whose machinery did not often change and improve (as evidenced by the huge number of old looms in use at this point), the machinery which was used for knitting was constantly being improved and updated meaning businesses had to be adaptable. It is hard to say exactly why the trade accepted rayon so readily, and it was likely that a combination of all of these factors played a role, but by the early 1920s the main use for rayon was in the hosiery sector.

Of course, there were varying degrees of acceptance of this fibre in the hosiery trade, but as we saw with some businesses in the weaving sector, there were some companies who changed their entire

⁵⁹ "The Industry in Gt. Britain", *The Times*, Artificial Silk Supplement, 9 March 1926, p. xi.

business model to work with rayon based on the assumption that it would become a profitable mass consumer good. Wardle & Davenport Ltd were a Leek based business and claimed to be the first users of rayon in Britain: they diversified their business so that they not only produced silk and wool threads and yarns, and trimmings, but also knitted garments from silk, wool and rayon. There is no evidence as to when they started working with rayon, but it could have been as early as the 1910s. Certainly by 1923, they had been working with it for some time, as they felt the need to correct the Stock Market and press for saying they only manufactured “artificial silk and silk sewing threads”: not so, the Chairman insisted, they also produced knitted outerwear made of rayon, wool and real silk.⁶⁰ They were proud to be in the vanguard of the artificial silk industry, with adverts throughout the 1920s stating that they were “The First English Makers of Artificial Silk Hosiery” (see Figure 5). The company also had their own dyeworks, presumably this was because there were so few rayon dyes and dyers at this point. This made them an early example of a vertically integrated rayon business, where both yarns and knitted materials could be produced and then dyed.⁶¹ Their “Three Knots” branded stockings were marketed heavily in the press in the 1920s, and it would have been a recognisable name to anyone who regularly read a newspaper. In 1928, another hosiery manufacturer, Wolsey Ltd, who had always worked with wool, decided to divert some of their attention to silk and rayon knitting. They launched this move with a mannequin parade to their shareholders, and anticipated that “by keeping fully abreast of the times” they could build a “large business in artificial silk”. They also invested heavily in new machinery to allow the knitting of rayon and to move into the production of knitted outerwear, and like Wardle & Davenport, they boasted a dyeing and finishing plant.⁶² Unfortunately, it is not possible to establish how much rayon itself had an impact on their production, but the volumes of production off the back of these improvements were impressive: it rose by 14% from 1929 to 1930, which equated to an extra 1.7 million garments being knitted.⁶³

⁶⁰ “Wardle & Davenport”, *The Times*, 1 October 1923, p. 22.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² “Wolsey Ltd”, *FT*, 12 March 1929, p. 3.

⁶³ Figures given in a competition run by Wolsey Ltd in the *Daily Mail* November 1930.

You can pay 8/11 and more
—but why should you?

AMONGST the fashionably dressed, "THREE KNOTS" Quality Hosiery reigns supreme for very good reasons. It possesses an extraordinarily rich lustre. The resistance it offers to wear and wash is exceptionally great. The "THREE KNOTS" price is much below what you are asked to pay for stockings, in many respects, well below the famous "THREE KNOTS" standard of excellence.

Obtainable in all the usual standard colours (33 shades), including black and white. In five sizes. From all GOOD drapers and many PROGRESSIVE footwear shops.

IN 33 SHADES
PRICE
4/11
PER PAIR
CAUTION. See the stamp "Three Knots" stamped at the top of each stocking.

"Three Knots"
REGD
HOSIERY of QUALITY

Wardle & Davenport,
Ltd., Leek, Staffs.

BRITISH THROUGHOUT
Wear them always and keep 2500
of your countrymen at work

(First English Makers of
Artificial Silk Hosiery.)

H-7•

Before

Figure 5 Wardle & Davenport advert for Three Knots artificial silk stockings, October 1925. Note the price comparison with silk stockings, and that they were the first to produce rayon hosiery in England (bottom right). *Good Housekeeping*, October 1925. © Hearst 2023.

The main use for rayon in the hosiery industry in these early years was in the production of stockings. There is a reason for all the 1920s references to "cheap artificial silk stockings" in novels and memoirs: they appeared suddenly and were extremely popular.⁶⁴ As "flesh-coloured" stockings captured the imagination of women, so the cotton stocking trade declined: the ideal material for the new, fashionable type of stocking was silk, but this was prohibitively expensive for the many women who wanted to follow the trend. Rayon proved to be the closest substitute, and it could be used to produce a similar effect for a much lower price: for example, in the 1925 Wardle & Davenport advert in Figure 5, we see that silk stockings cost 8 shillings or more, whereas rayon ones were 4s 11d. Seeing a shift

⁶⁴ Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole*, (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 42.

in demand, by 1928 many of the cotton stocking manufacturers who produced for the lower end of the market had turned to using rayon.⁶⁵

In the interwar period, there were two main forms of stocking: a traditional stocking was known as a “full-fashioned stocking”; and a relatively new invention, the seamless stocking. A full-fashioned stocking was produced using a flat but shaped piece of knitted fabric, which was then sewn together to produce the three dimensional shape of the ankle and foot. In the 1920s, the most popular variety was the French or Cuban heeled type, where a single seam on the bottom of the foot gave way to a reinforced heel, and then a seam up the back of the leg. These were made on flat framed knitting machines, which could produce up to 28 individual legs at one time and were then sewn together by a worker.⁶⁶ Silk versions of these were expensive, and while rayon offered a cheaper alternative, they were still relatively expensive: the flat frame knitting machine was expensive to purchase and was slow and cumbersome, requiring a lot of input from the operator. In addition, the fabric had to be sewn together by another employee.⁶⁷ To offer a larger number of consumers cheaper stockings, manufacturers looked to the circular knitting machine, which had become popular in the United States during the First World War for making socks, and which offered faster, more efficient knitting. When used for stockings, they could produce a seamless stocking which had some shaping in the foot and ankle and they could also be produced quickly and cheaply. A full pair of seamless stockings could be produced within five to ten minutes on one machine with one operator looking after six or eight machines: this meant that production levels could be up to four times higher than if making full-fashioned stockings. However, there were also disadvantages: the narrowness of the ankle was not formed by making fewer stitches as in a flat-framed stocking, instead the stitches were simply tightened, leaving the ankle section “as stiff as a board”; they were not as hard wearing because the

⁶⁵ “Hosiery Developments in 1928”, *HT*, April 1929, p. 21.

⁶⁶ A. Wells, *The British Hosiery and Knitwear Industry: Its History and Organisation*, ([S.l.] : David & Charles, 1972), p. 172.

⁶⁷ Flat frame knitting machines cost between £2000 and £3000 each.

heel was stretched when they were worn; and the shape was all but washed out when they were laundered.⁶⁸ All of these defects were exaggerated when rayon was used rather than natural fibres, with the additional issues of the metallic lustre and an uncomfortable “hard” wear. Despite this, they still sold in their millions. Wells summarised this type of stocking fairly when he wrote

[they] could not compete with full-fashioned article...[but their] great merit was cheapness and for many consumers this was the main consideration.⁶⁹

As well as low prices, manufacturers ensured these seamless stockings were appealing to women by adding mock-seaming and fashioning, which were details found on a full-fashioned stocking. As fashions for fish-net, ribbed and patterned stockings came and went, the circular knitting machines could be adapted to produce seamless hose in these varieties too.⁷⁰ With the improvement in rayon yarns, stockings were also enhanced: their lustre was diminished, they lost their hard feeling, and advances in knitting machinery meant that “fine gauge 300 needle hose – formerly considered as extremely fine – are now standard.”⁷¹ By the end of the 1930s, women were able to buy themselves a greatly improved pair of rayon stockings often for less than half of the price of a pair of silk ones.

After stockings, the next major area in which rayon made inroads was in underwear and lingerie production. It was the introduction of interlock and locknit forms of knitting which proved to be crucial to this growth.⁷² Interlock knits are a form of ribbed knit which produce a “double knit”, which gives more firmness than a traditional single knit: this made the resulting fabric ideal for swimwear, knickers and bras. Machinery to produce this type of knitwear had been introduced in Britain from the United States in 1911 by Meridian Ltd: this company held exclusive rights over production until 1929 when the patent on the machines expired and other businesses were able to acquire interlock machinery of their own. Once off patent, there was an “enormously increased demand, and consequently,

⁶⁸ “Seamless Hosiery”, *HT*, July 1928, p. 229.

⁶⁹ Wells, *The British Hosiery and Knitwear Industry*, p. 175.

⁷⁰ “Seamless Silk and Rayon Hosiery”, *SJRW*, July 1932, p. 22.

⁷¹ “Our Enterprising Machine Builders”, *HT*, February 1935, p. 21.

⁷² “Rayon Knitted Fabrics”, *RR*, 7 February 1930, p. 139.

increased output” for this type of knitwear, and it began to replace the traditional rib knit which had been used for underwear.⁷³ The other growing variety of knit was locknit. This is a fabric which is knitted in the warp, rather than the weft; this gives it a flexibility and suppleness that other knits do not possess, and it is also less likely to ladder. The locknit stitch and machinery to produce this type of fabric had actually been developed in the early nineteenth century, but it was not particularly suitable for cottons and wools which were too stiff to use in this format, and it was the introduction of rayon which “really popularised” it.⁷⁴ The use of these two types of fabric meant that by the end of 1931 rayon was seen to have been “an unparalleled boon” to the underwear and lingerie trade, and its presence would continue to grow through the remaining interwar years (see Appendix II).⁷⁵ Knitted rayons largely displaced traditional woven cotton underwear, not only because of the comfort they offered, but also because outerwear fashions were so sleek and slimline, women demanded underwear and lingerie that was “more subtle...than ever.”⁷⁶ As ever, there was also the question of cost: the senior partner of a large hosiery manufacturer stated that “knitting could beat weaving to a frazzle for cheapness in production.”⁷⁷ Machinery played a crucial role in keeping production costs low: the machines which produced locknit had a “monster output” producing fabrics up to 160 inches wide (400cm) with minimum input from operatives. This fabric could be cut up and sewn with increasingly sophisticated cutting and seaming machines and these huge volumes of fabric were rapidly turned into underwear and lingerie.⁷⁸ Various forms of seaming machines could run at up to 4,000 stitches per minute, and many were “specially suitable for artificial silk”. For example, the “flatlock” seaming machine produced a completely flat seam which enhanced the look and comfort of knitted underwear and lingerie, and hosiery manufacturers used it “extensively for seaming artificial silk underwear, etc” from the late 1920s.⁷⁹ By the mid 1930s, circular rib knitting machinery had been

⁷³ “Interlock Fabrics”, *SJRW*, June 1932, p. 41.

⁷⁴ “The Hosiery Trade”, *Journal of the Textile Institute Proceedings*, (Vol 25, 1934) p. 349.

⁷⁵ “The Latest Triumphs in British Artificial Silk”, *DO*, November 1931, p. 53.

⁷⁶ “Rayon Underwear”, *SJRW*, June 1932, p. 49.

⁷⁷ “Knitwear Challenge to Woven Goods”, *HT*, March 1932, p. 25.

⁷⁸ “The Present Position in Britain’s Knitting Industry”, *HT*, October 1930, p. 29.

⁷⁹ “Hosiery Machinery Exhibition”, *TSJ*, October 1928, p. 102.

developed which could produce shaped knitted garments in a “string” formation, so the machinery could run continuously and the garments simply needed to be separated by an employee. All of these developments had an impact on the speed and scale of manufacture, and thus the cost of production, ultimately making the final products cheaper for the consumer.

Not all of the rayon knitwear that was for sale in Britain was produced by British manufacturers. In the 1920s, around 25% of the total volume of rayon underwear and stockings was imported from Europe and the United States (see Appendix III). The main culprit as far as the British hosiery trade was concerned was Germany, which could produce large volumes of high quality rayon stockings, which could undercut the prices of British manufactured goods, even when shipping costs and 33.3% import duties were added. The British hosiery trade felt their livelihoods were threatened by the sheer scale of the importations of knitwear made from all fibres, not just rayon. In 1926, a delegation approached the government seeking to implement additional import duties on hosiery under the Safeguarding Act (1925) which could increase tariffs if it was felt that British industry and employment was under threat. Unfortunately for the industry, the Board of Trade found against them, showing that some 65% of the home market (for hosiery made of all materials) was still held by British manufacturers.⁸⁰ Whilst the sector and the *Hosiery Times* continued to gripe, and overall trade revenues fell, there was little that could be done. In terms of rayon knitwear, in the 1920s, both British production and imports continued to increase at the same rate, with the percentage of imports remaining at a fairly steady 25% of the total market in this period. This information suggests that these imports brought the levels of goods up to the volumes the market required. There is not sufficient evidence to reveal if there was enough rayon filament in being produced in Britain, or indeed capacity to make it, at this point for the hosiery trade to increase production to fulfil market

⁸⁰ Wells, *The British Hosiery and Knitwear Industry*, p. 176.

demands.⁸¹ The closest we can get is taking data from 1928 which suggests that 21 million lbs was used in the knitting industry; a 25% increase in hosiery production that year would have required 7m lbs of rayon. In 1928, this was equivalent to six or seven weeks worth of filament production, and if rayon manufacturers were already close to capacity, this would have been an impossible amount to produce.⁸² Within the hosiery trade itself, workers were often put on short time so there may have been sufficient manufacturing capacity to increase production. Regardless of any conjectures we can make with hindsight, the British market demanded rayon stockings, and consumers clearly thought imported goods offered them value and quality. It was only in 1931 during the depths of the depression that the British government stepped in to prevent imports of hosiery coming into the country. The Abnormal Importations (Customs Duties) Act 1931 added an extra 50% on to the existing 33.3% duties set on hosiery imports, taking the total tariff to over 80%. These exceptional measures lasted for a period of six months, after which the Import Duties Act set the level tariff at 43.5%. To this figure also has to be added the monetary impact of moving off the Gold Standard, which added on around 15% to the cost of foreign goods: the effect on hosiery imports was dramatic. By 1933, rayon stocking imports had fallen by over 50%, and the rayon underwear import trade became negligible, falling from 20% of total goods to just 1%, and decreasing further thereafter.⁸³ By this time, rayon manufacturers were producing ever larger quantities of yarn, and British hosiery manufacturers were able to increase their production to meet consumer demand. Aside from the significant increase in volume created by an absence of rayon imported goods, there were other changes in demand. As the popularity of cotton stockings waned even further in the late 1930s, so the volume of their production also dropped; but the quantities of rayon stockings produced increased by roughly the same amount, suggesting consumers were making a simple exchange from one fibre to another. In

⁸¹ Importing rayon to use for making these items would not have made financial sense: taking into account shipping and import duties the manufacturers would not have been able to compete price-wise with foreign made stockings.

⁸² Despite there being many small rayon manufacturing companies at this point, they were simply not capable of producing the volumes required at the right price.

⁸³ See Appendix III.

terms of underwear, the volumes of rayon knitted goods consumed increased by 3000% between 1930 and 1933, the huge increase largely being down to the widening use of interlock and locknit machinery once it came off patent. Unlike stockings, it was not the decline in the sales of cotton underwear which saw rayon volumes increase, in fact total consumption of all types of knitted underwear increased by 15% in these years, as consumers did away with the idea of patching and mending clothing, and bought increasing numbers of items.⁸⁴ Needless to say, British manufacturers were delighted with this boost in trade: it offered “fairer margins of profit” and “greater continuity of employment”.⁸⁵ When combined with the knowledge that “higher spending power [was coming]” and that the home market was far from reaching saturation point, prospects for the hosiery trade, and the use of rayon in it, looked very bright indeed.⁸⁶

Evaluation

It is beyond doubt that rayon could not have become as successful as it was without the rapid and wide-ranging uptake of the fibre in the textile sector. We have seen that there were different patterns of acceptance across the different areas of the trade. On the whole the knitting industry accepted rayon far more rapidly than the weaving industry, which was due to a combination of many of them having experience with working with silk, and the fact that they were producing stockings which were not regarded as having a long lifespan. This meant that the durability of rayon was not such a major concern as it was in the weaving industry, where traditional textiles were expected to last for many years. The introduction of new knitting techniques provided the impetus for massive growth in underwear and lingerie, and rayon was an ideal yarn to use for these purposes as it offered a flexibility and silkiness that was both suitable for wearing underneath clothing and was desirable. In many

⁸⁴ All figures calculated from the Final Report on the Census of Production for 1930 Volume 1, General Report on Textiles, Leather and Clothing Trades; and the Census of Production for 1933 Volume 1, General Report on Textiles Leather and Clothing Trades; and the Report on the Import Duties Act Inquiry (Board of Trade, HMSO: 1933). See Appendix II.

⁸⁵ “New Opportunities for the Hosiery Trade”, *HT*, October 1931, p. 23.

⁸⁶ “Leicester M.P.’s Advice to Industry”, *HT*, September 1935, p. 20.

respects, the weaving industry can be seen as more traditional, as many of the mills had been established for far longer than the knitting factories. Despite this, when rayon was introduced it was used successfully by many businesses as an adjunct fibre, and it was only a few years before 100% rayon fabrics were being produced. Many mills were probably forced to experiment with rayon in the face of the loss of their massive export market, but in some cases rayon would play a role in helping businesses survive, and occasionally thrive. Like the weaving industry, the dyeing, printing and finishing trades were plagued with vast amounts of spare capacity, and like the weavers, they realised that rayon could become a product with enough demand in the home market to help them stem the losses from the faltering export market. Once again, the speed with which these trades learnt to contend with rayon was striking. It is particularly notable when we consider that these companies faced the biggest technical challenges in working with this material, because it was so different to natural fibres. The combined efforts, investments and conviction of all the manufacturers in this chain, from filament to fabric, meant that rayon was able to progress from being a novelty used for trimmings to a material which was worn by millions of Britons in just twenty years.

Research in artificial silk is desirable at every stage of processing from the manufacture of the raw material to the production of the finished texture, or tissue.

Artificial Silk World, July 1928

3. Making Rayon Appealing: Practicality

Early rayon filament manufacturers may have had faith that their product would become a mass-produced textile which could hold its own against traditional fibres, but faith alone could not turn these flimsy strands into an appealing consumer product with viable commercial prospects. Early rayons, in both filament and fabric form, were burdened with myriad issues: filaments broke in manufacture; it was difficult to weave; it wouldn't hold dyes; the fabrics felt thin, cold and harsh; its lack of strength made it liable to rip, tear or shrink. It was not only filament manufacturers who had to make improvements to rayon, businesses across the textiles trade, from weavers and knitters, to dyers and finishers had to work continuously to make improvements to this new material. Whilst some businesses, particularly filament manufacturers were happy to share their expertise in order to make their product easier to use, those further down the supply chain such as dyers and finishers tended to guard their hard won developments closely and patent them. Alongside the work businesses were doing, trade journals, in particular *Silk and Rayon*, provided information gleaned from around the world to help manufacturers at all levels of the industry. In 1928, the British Cotton Industry Research Association (BCIRA), received sufficient funding via subscriptions from businesses to set up a specific rayon research department. Their laboratories undertook testing and research on behalf of those manufacturers who paid a subscription, and their knowledge was shared amongst all who made a financial contribution. Larger dyeing and finishing firms such as the Calico Printers' Association Ltd and the Bradford Dyers Association Ltd had their own research staff and laboratories undertaking research in a scientific way. However, most companies, finding themselves in a difficult economic environment, did not employ any scientists: salaries for graduates were high, and there was still scepticism about what a laboratory-trained individual could add when they did not have an

understanding of the fundamentals of the work in a dye and finishing works.¹ In 1934, the *Silk and Rayon* journal bemoaned the fact that

[T]here are still too many bleaching, dyeing and finishing establishments which cannot boast a chemist of even moderate qualifications. Many more cannot boast the facilities of any sort of laboratory.²

Despite this, rayon fabrics continued to become more sophisticated and more appealing to the consumer. In this chapter, I will examine how rayon producers and fabric finishers contributed to making rayon a more durable and practical fabric, such that it could compete with natural fibres. For the vast majority of the population in this period, the purchase of clothing was a major outlay, and was not something carried out frequently, so they had to be sure that the fabric or garment which they invested in would be functional for a considerable period of time.

Improvements to Rayon Filaments

Rayon producers knew their businesses would only survive if they were able to sell immense volumes of rayon. As we saw in the previous chapter, capital investment and on-going costs could only be covered by mass production techniques and the resulting sales. The ability to sell goods on a large scale relied on prices being low, but also on the product meeting the expectations of the consumer. The manufacturers of rayon filaments had to make a product which fabric weavers and knitters found useable, and which could then be dyed and finished to create a desirable fabric. At their AGMs the main producers trumpeted their respective technical achievements, boasting of “heavy research expenditure” and “substantial technical progress”.³ These claims not only suggested to fabric manufacturers that the product was continually improving and was becoming more usable, but the reporting of this in the press would have also boosted the public’s perception of rayon.

¹ “The Chemist in Industry”, *Manchester Guardian*, 3 April 1937, p. 14.

² “Works Control”, *S&R*, January 1934, p. 7.

³ “British Celanese Limited”, *Manchester Guardian*, 26 Oct 1934, p. 17; “Courtaulds Ltd”, *Manchester Guardian*, 7 March 1930, p. 20.

The biggest issue which filament producers had to face was the strength of the fibre. Early rayons suffered from a low tensile strength, meaning that clothing was prone to tearing, and it became even weaker when wet, making laundering particularly problematic. These issues were widely known about, and articles in the press advised consumers how to wash their rayon garments without stretching, shrinking or damaging them. Initially, issues over laundering and the strength of the fibre could be overlooked, because as *The Drapers' Organiser* noted “[rayon] started with a silver spoon in its mouth – lustre”.⁴ Fashion in the 1920s called for shiny, shimmering fabrics, something rayon provided in its natural state, and its lack of strength could easily be ignored when it was still used predominantly for trimmings and for cheap, imitation-silk garments. However, fashion is fickle, and producers knew that once this characteristic was no longer desirable, strength would become a far more important factor to consumers who were able to choose from garments made of more substantial textile fibres. The makers of all varieties of rayon filament claimed theirs possessed the greatest tensile strength, but testing was in its infancy, and their claims were rather subjective. Archived notes show that the CPA were scientifically testing the strength of rayon from very early on in the 1920s, and by the end of 1926, the British Cotton Industry Research Association [BCIRA] had produced a machine that could also test this property. The scientists who had worked on it believed it would be “of greatest utility to the trade”, and it certainly would have helped fabric manufacturers and finishers to decide which rayon filament best suited their purposes.⁵ Knowing that sales would depend on weavers and knitters wanting to use their material, manufacturers not only carried out their own research into tensile strength, but also looked beyond the confines of their own laboratories to other researchers. Having bought the rights to viscose in 1904, Courtaulds was no stranger to acquiring technical expertise from outside. In 1929, they bought the rights to the Lilienfeld process.⁶ This method of manufacture produced stronger filaments, and Courtaulds marketed it as *Durafil*, a

⁴ “Lancashire’s Attitude to Rayon Success”, *Drapers’ Organiser*, April 1925, p. 43.

⁵ CPA Research Committee Minutes No. 2, 17 December 1924, Calico Printers Association Ltd GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, M75/7/1/1/ [Green 1382]; Progress at the Shirley Institute”, *Manchester Guardian*, 8 December 1926, p. 11.

⁶ D.C. Coleman, *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 267.

name which clearly declared the benefits to the buyer.⁷ However, the strength of this product came at a cost: it felt harsh, shrank and could not be reliably dyed.⁸ In 1931, it appears that the negatives of the Lilienfeld process were deemed to outweigh the positive, and *Durafil* was removed from Courtaulds' range.⁹

In fact, it would not be a scientific discovery or process which eventually led to stronger filaments, it was simply the "increasing experience" in manufacturing which allowed the production of finer filaments.¹⁰ Whilst the individual rayon filaments were no stronger, a larger number of filaments twisted together made a yarn which was the same weight, but possessed considerably more tensile strength. This advance was of particular benefit to weavers: when rayon was first introduced, weavers knew that the market would not accept weak fabrics, and so rayon was only used in the cross-weave (weft) of a fabric, often as a decorative feature, with a natural fibre making up the rest of the textile (warp).¹¹ The development of the finer filament yarns in the late 1920s opened up the possibility of using rayon for the warp of the fabric too, and by 1930, 100% rayon fabrics formed one of the "principal lines of progress in the rayon industry".¹² This progress meant that a much broader selection of types of fabric could be offered to consumers, and *The Rayon Record* noted that

all-rayon voiles, crepes, georgettes, ninons, satins etc... [are now available] in widely varying finishes and of very different appearances.¹³

Despite these advances, both Courtaulds and British Celanese continued in their search to create stronger filaments, which would further improve the final fabrics. British Celanese promised a yarn that would be stronger than silk in 1934, although I cannot find any evidence of them launching any such product onto the market.¹⁴ A year later, Courtaulds announced that their factories and

⁷ "Courtaulds Ltd", *Manchester Guardian*, 8 March 1929, p. 20.

⁸ "Trends of Research", *RR*, 4 April 1930, p. 365.

⁹ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 268.

¹⁰ "Fine Filament Rayon", *RR*, 17 October 1930, p. 1085.

¹¹ The weft is the crossways part of a woven fabric, as opposed to the warp, which runs the length of it.

¹² "Woven Fabrics", *RR*, 7 February 1930, p. 130.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "British Celanese Limited", *Manchester Guardian*, 26 October 1934, p. 17.

equipment had been “further perfected” to produce rayon which was the “very finest [ie. thinnest] obtainable”.¹⁵ By the mid-1930s finer filaments meant that 100% rayon fabrics were becoming more and more common, with problems around strength largely disappearing.

The development of finer filaments had another benefit: early rayon felt cold to wear because there were relatively few air pockets in the yarn to hold heat.¹⁶ When the new finer filaments were twisted together, they created a larger number of smaller air pockets which produced a warmer feeling fabric. In the mid-1920s, a typical 150 denier viscose yarn contained only 24 filaments, by 1930 there were 36, and by 1939 up to 72, which suggests a distinct improvement in warmth.¹⁷ Prior to this, the only company in Britain claiming to create a “warm” rayon was Kemil Ltd, who manufactured a hollow filament viscose, which the company claimed circumvented the need of air pockets in the yarn itself. Although Kemil tried to distinguish themselves from competitors by advertising that their hollow filament rayon had “warmth without the weight”, their product never found a firm footing in the British market, and other manufacturers could make the same claim by the mid-1930s.¹⁸ The importance of a fabric which felt warm cannot be over-estimated: the British climate meant warm clothing was a necessity, not only for outdoors, but also indoors when central heating was a rarity and many rooms would not have been heated at all.

Alongside any physical properties of a product, the purchase price of a commodity is vitally important in both creating and maintaining a consumer base. Rayon filament was relatively expensive in its early days and when the cost of turning into a finished fabric was added on, the total cost put it into a cost bracket which essentially made it a luxury product; indeed excise duty was levied on it at the same

¹⁵ Advertisement for Courtaulds Ltd, *SJRW*, June 1935, p. 11.

¹⁶ This cold feeling can still be found in some garments today, particularly polyester satins.

¹⁷ “Fine Filament Rayon”, *RR*, 17 October 1930, p. 1085; *The Cotton Year Book 1939* (Manchester: Marsden, 1940), p. 656.

¹⁸ Advertisement for Celta yarn (produced by Kemil Ltd), *SJRW*, 20 June 1934.

level as silk in 1925.¹⁹ Lowering costs to overcome this 1s per lb duty and to bring rayon prices in line with natural fibre costs was critical to helping manufacturers appeal to the mass market and sell the required volumes. Throughout the interwar period, rayon of all types declined in cost and price, and much of this was due to technical advances which affected volumes, operations and labour. In the 1920s and early 1930s, the main methods of production remained broadly similar to those first used, with the rationalisation of processes and small scale improvements responsible for the most of the declining costs.²⁰ Courtaulds improved their ability to recover acid from the viscose process and re-use it, and from 1930 they were also operating a soda recovery plant, both of which reduced the cost of raw materials.²¹ Over the course of this decade, efficiencies in the industry meant the cost of a standard unit of rayon dropped from 10s 6d in 1921 to 4s 6d in 1929. Many of the practices which led to price-cuts were implemented by Courtaulds as they had the scale and capital to invest in the research and technologies behind them. This meant that whilst Courtaulds were able to cut prices and keep a reasonable margin, many other companies were forced to follow their lead, and lowered their prices simply to keep a foothold in the market. This meant many of them were actually making a loss on their products, and this was a key factor in the collapse of many of these ventures. Courtaulds also held their prices low to try to counter another boom in rayon producing companies: it was felt that if the factories which had recently closed were to reopen in order to chase large profits, the market would be flooded with rayon and become “chaotic”. If “fresh and inexperienced” producers entered the market Courtaulds feared that these products would be inferior to their own, and would debase the reputation for quality which they were working so hard to achieve.²² With prices being held so low, producers had to scramble for ways to improve efficiency. It was estimated that when taking into account excise and textile production costs, the average production cost of yarn had to

¹⁹ H.A. Silverman, “The Artificial Textile Industry”, in *Studies in Industrial Development*, ed. H.A. Silverman, (London: Methuen, 1946), pp. 302-355, (p. 330). Excise is duty which is paid on certain goods on the home market at the point of sale; it is distinct from import duties.

²⁰ Arnold Hard, *The Romance of Rayon*, (Manchester: Whittaker and Robinson Ltd, 1933), p. 73.

²¹ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 341.

²² “A Real Trade Policy for Rayon”, *SJRW*, March 1934, p. 13.

come in at below 2s per lb.²³ Removing excess labour costs was the simplest way to reduce costs, and both British Celanese and Courtaulds reduced the number of operators per machine, particularly as demand fell following the 1929 economic crash. As the depression eased and demand began to soar, Courtaulds introduced extra shifts to further increase capacity, going from seventeen shifts per week, which included a weekend break, to twenty-one shifts of continual production. The wage reductions which had been put in place during the depression meant that despite a higher number of employees, wage bills remained largely the same as they had been in the late 1920s. Looking at output per labourer at Courtaulds, it is easy to see how manufacturers were able to keep prices low: in 1930, output per employee was 1,800lbs, this almost doubled to 3,200lbs by 1934. A new factory at Wolverhampton also allowed Courtaulds to increase their production, and benefit from even greater economies of scale, all of which the company continued to pass on to the consumer.²⁴ Alongside these changes to the labour force, there were also some technical advances which affected price in the 1930s, and again, these were largely discovered and implemented by Courtaulds. *Silk & Rayon* noted that

The years 1932 and 1933 have been notable for technical developments of fundamental economic importance to...consumers of rayon.²⁵

The largest single advance was the introduction of a process called cake washing. Prior to this date, each “cake”, or large reel of filament, had to be removed from one machine by hand, and transferred to other machines to be unreeled, washed, bleached, re-reeled and finally dried. These processes were not only extremely labour and time intensive (albeit it was mainly cheap labour in the form of women), but re-reeling the filament caused breakages in the filament which was detrimental to the quality of the yarn, meaning producers had to sell it at a reduced price.²⁶ The solution was “cake washing”, where the washing, bleaching and drying were all carried out while the filament was still in the cake form, and which removed excess handling of the filament. Courtaulds pioneered this process,

²³ “British Rayon Industry is Growing in Efficiency”, *SJRW*, February 1932, p. 37.

²⁴ For more information on labour and labour relations see Coleman.

²⁵ “Tendencies in British Rayon Consumption”, *S&R*, March 1934, p. 34.

²⁶ “A New Form of Rayon Package”, *RR*, 1 May 1931, p. 287.

but they were relatively slow in implementing it: in 1935, only 39% of their rayon yarn was produced using this method, and by 1939 this had only risen to 70%.²⁷ Although the uptake was slow, the introduction of this method not only lessened the issue of broken filaments and lowered labour costs, but also allowed additional filament spinning machines to be installed where the redundant reeling machines had once stood, which could increase overall production volumes, again leading to cost reductions.²⁸ Continuing advances in the spinning process also allowed greater quantities of finer filaments to be produced, which brought down the cost of higher quality rayon encouraging users to recognise the benefits of using the product. Pricing data shows the drop in prices for the highest quality viscose between 1933 and 1934 was from 3s to 2s 4d for a standard 150 denier hank, a decrease of over 26%. Data from Coleman suggests that much of this decrease was down to a lowering of raw material and wage costs, but there is certainly a case to be made that the continual improvements that Courtaulds made to their manufacturing processes had a considerable impact on viscose prices in Britain.²⁹ Samuel Courtauld certainly believed this: at their General Meeting in 1934, he praised the company's "experts" for

devising improved methods of production [thus] passing onto our customers an all-round reduction in prices, the savings in cost which we had recently effected.³⁰

Staple Fibre

With the exception of silk, all natural fibres are staple fibres. This means that the natural product comes in short lengths and has to be spun into a yarn before it can be used. This gives the yarn volume and texture, which when woven or knitted creates a comfortable, warm fabric which is matt in appearance. In contrast, silk and rayon are filament based fibres: the individual fibres are smooth and glossy, which gives the resulting fabric a shine and slipperiness (see Figure 6). Silk was renowned for these properties and it was sold on the basis that the fabrics it produced had lustre and glossiness; its

²⁷ "Tendencies in British Rayon Consumption", *S&R*, March 1934, p. 106 and Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 187.

²⁸ "Progress of the British Rayon Trade", *SJRW*, January 1935, p. 20.

²⁹ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 341.

³⁰ "Company Meeting Courtaulds Ltd.", *Manchester Guardian*, 9 March 1934, p. 16.

exclusivity and high consumer demand means that means it has never really had to deviate from its basic properties. However, rayon producers were seeking to create a fibre which could grow exponentially, not merely replicate silk, and for this they needed their filament based yarns to take on alternative qualities. As we shall see later, these properties could sometimes be added in the finishing process, but to achieve a light-feeling, warm fabric a rayon staple fibre was required.

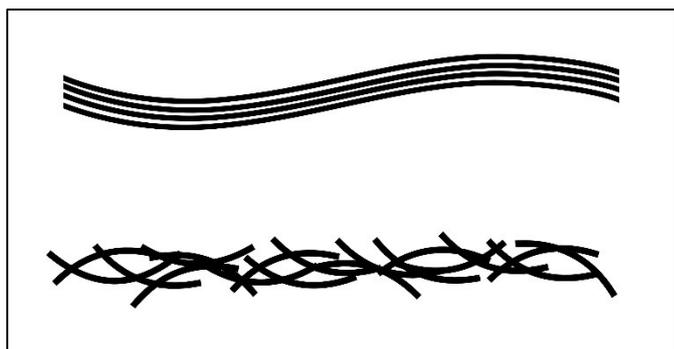


Figure 6 Diagram of Filament Yarn (top) and Staple Yarn (bottom). Image by author.

Staple fibre made of rayon had been used in continental Europe since the First World War, particularly in Germany where the supply of raw materials had been an issue, and economic conditions were especially harsh. Initially, this was waste or low grade rayon fibre which was spun into a coarse yarn on silk machinery, but it possessed few appealing qualities. It was harsh to wear and fragile. But as spinning techniques slowly improved, some commentators did begin to notice that staple fibre fabrics could possess some attractive properties: in 1926, *The Times* noted that when staple rayon yarn was mixed with cotton and wool the resultant fabric felt “pleasant to touch” and “exhibit[ed] a peculiar, sparkling lustre”.³¹ However, at this point, British staple fibre production was on a very small scale, and was limited to that which could be produced from the broken waste filaments produced in the course of manufacture. Coleman’s research suggests that even in 1928, when the total amount of staple fibre produced in the UK was 2m lbs, 95% of this was exported, as there was no demand from spinners in the UK, because the resulting fabrics simply would not sell. The remaining 120,000lbs

³¹ *The Times*, Artificial Silk Supplement, 9 March 1926, p. viii.

consumed in the UK was spun with cotton, wool, or silk, and was most likely used in the hosiery industry.³² However, *The Drapers' Organiser* had suggested in 1926 that the staple fibre market would eventually "outstrip" the filament market given that it could be mixed with natural fibres, and because the cost was relatively stable given the raw material was wood, as opposed to cotton which was a weather dependent crop.³³ In 1927, Courtaulds, always looking to improve and expand, invested in the Italian rayon company, Snia Viscosa. This company had invented a machine which could cut filaments into regular lengths to allow them to be spun more efficiently, this produced a better spun yarn, as opposed to that created by the rather dishevelled staple that was produced from waste. Courtaulds realised the products which Snia produced might become "a big thing", and in 1929 they commissioned their own machines to create staple fibre, along the lines of those which Snia Viscosa used.³⁴ The resulting spun yarn was branded *Fibro* and whilst its initial reception was less than enthusiastic, it was this initially unprepossessing material which would revolutionise the viscose industry in the mid-1930s. Initial users of *Fibro* found that whilst the yarn itself did not cause any real difficulties when being woven or knitted, the real problem was that it was "like tissue paper when wet". Unable to find a willing market for their goods, fabric manufacturers had to dispose of stock well below cost.³⁵ With such negative responses from the textile industry and consumers, it might be seen as provident that Courtaulds were forced to slow the production of *Fibro* when the Depression hit and staple fibre all but disappeared from the British market until 1933.

In March 1934, as the depression eased, Courtaulds determined that their *Fibro* business should grow, and that this was where the future of rayon lay. A new factory was to be established in North Wales for the production of staple fibre on an unheard of scale. To ensure there was a ready market for this planned production, Courtaulds needed to show spinners that *Fibro* could not only be spun on existing

³² Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 269.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 270

³⁵ "Spun Rayons in Manchester", *RR*, November 1930, p. 1209.

machinery, but also that it produced a commercially viable yarn and fabric.³⁶ To this end, Courtaulds purchased Arrow Mill in Rochdale where it set up its own spinning mill with cotton spinning machinery: spinners could visit the mill to learn about using the product. Courtaulds also printed a booklet in 1935 advising cotton spinners on how to work with *Fibro*, based upon their own experience.³⁷ Spinning staple fibre came with certain advantages too: unlike cotton there was no cleaning or sorting of the material before it could be used, and there was no waste. One visitor to Arrow Mill was the General Manager of Horrockses, Crewdson & Co who

acquainted [himself] with several new features in the processing of *Fibro* that we [HCC] shall probably be able to exploit.³⁸

This visit was clearly as success as the Horrockses archives show that staple fibre spinning began in October 1936, and that by December of that year “several thousand pounds” of *Fibro* had been spun “without undue trouble”.³⁹ Horrockses, Crewdson & Co were not the only company who found a use for *Fibro*: Tootal Broadhurst Lee signed a contract with Courtaulds for the purchase of 1.5m lbs of *Fibro*, with deliveries of 100,000lbs per month being made from January 1936; and the increased appearance of staple fibre fabrics in the trade and consumer press shows it was growing in popularity.⁴⁰

Seeing the success of spinning rayon on cotton machinery, there was an increasing interest in staple fibre from the wool trade in 1936 and 1937. Based on the achievements at Arrow Mill, Courtaulds once again bought a mill, this time in Yorkshire, to demonstrate how *Fibro* could be used in wool blends. The wool trade was more fragmented than the cotton trade, as it used different techniques to produce different types of wool fabric, therefore Courtaulds tried to “process their material under

³⁶ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 363.

³⁷ “*Fibro*”, *S&R*, June 1935.

³⁸ General Manager’s Reports to the Managing Director for the Year 1936, Horrockses, Crewdson & Co archives, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford, Yorkshire, DDVC/acc7340/box 5/2/1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Mill Management Committee Notes, 22 October 1935, Tootal Broadhurst Lee Ltd GB127.M461, Manchester Archives, Manchester, GB127.M461/Box 13.

every conceivable condition existent in the trade” at Westcroft Mill.⁴¹ As with the staple fibre experiment in Lancashire, Courtaulds ensured that the machinery used was identical to that already used by the wool industry. Unlike cotton spinners, wool spinners did not want to produce 100% rayon yarns: rather, staple fibre was an addition to wool which would augment the properties of their products.⁴² As with the cotton industry, there were benefits to using *Fibro* yarns: fabrics bulked out with cheaper *Fibro* meant there could be “greater [volumes of] production and a corresponding reduction in costs [compared with 100% wool]”.⁴³ Courtaulds had successfully demonstrated to the two arms of the weaving trade that staple fibre was a useable and saleable product. From a mere 3m lbs being produced in 1933, 26m lbs of *Fibro* was used in the British market in 1939.⁴⁴

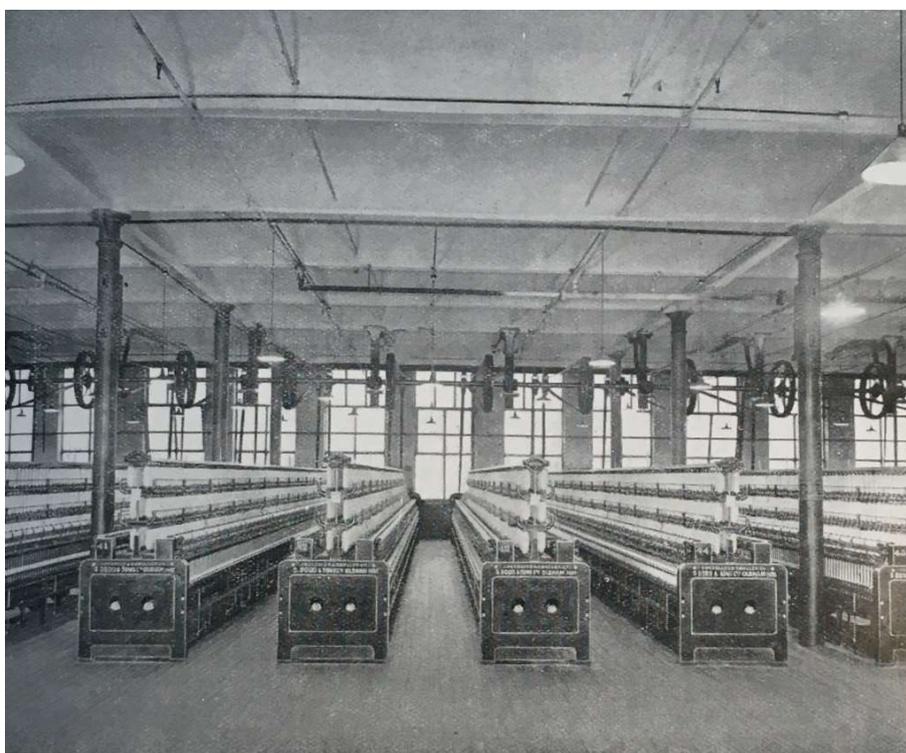


Figure 7 Reconditioned cotton spinning machinery at Courtaulds' Arrow Mill for spinning staple fibre. S. Dodd & Sons advertisement, *Silk & Rayon*, March 1936. © British Library.

⁴¹ “The Spinning of *Fibro* on the Worsted Principle”, *SJRW*, 20 February 1937, p. 30.

⁴² “Converting Yorkshire to Staple Fibre”, *Manchester Guardian*, 11 February 1938, p. 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 31.

⁴⁴ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 360.

Whilst Courtaulds were taking the lead in the production of rayon staple fibre, British Celanese did not seem as enamoured with making a similar product. This may have been partly because they had developed a market for their acetate rayon in stockings, underwear and glossy fabrics, all of which were suited to the use of a filament-based yarn. British Celanese's version of staple fibre, *Celafil*, was introduced on a small scale in 1934, mainly for use by cotton spinners. Even in 1935 when the scale of *Celafil* production was due to increase, the Chairman of British Celanese could still not quite hide his scepticism: "Why...destroy a fibre only to build it up again in a complicated manner and yet get no advantage?" and noted that the product would have relatively little importance in his business.⁴⁵ Given that British Celanese were the second largest rayon producer in Britain, his view meant that Courtaulds controlled almost all of the staple fibre market.

Alongside wider understanding of how to use staple fibre, and its improved properties, there was an additional factor which helped boost its use: the removal of excise duty. The excise duties which had been imposed in 1925 on all types of rayon had long been a point of disquiet in the industry: rayon was grouped with silk, and was subject to excise owing to its status as a "luxury good". However, rayon producers did not see their good as a luxury one: it was intended to be produced on a scale which made it for the "masses not the classes".⁴⁶ A review of excise by the government in 1935 led to the excise duties being removed from staple fibre completely, and halved on filament rayon. This reduction of 3d per pound on staple was immediately passed on to the spinners and the users of the yarn. Courtaulds actually reduced their staple prices by far more than the removal of excise alone: short staple fibre, used by the cotton industry was lowered by 4 ½d per lb; and long staple fibre, used in the woollen industry, was lowered by over a third from 18 ½d to 11d per lb.⁴⁷ These reductions acted as a huge stimulus to the industry: it had been clear for some time prior to 1935 that spinners would only work with staple if prices were lowered substantially as there was simply not the demand

⁴⁵ "British Celanese Ltd", *Manchester Guardian*, 1 November 1935, p. 16.

⁴⁶ "Round the Shops", *The Times*, 14 February 1936, p. 9.

⁴⁷ "Position of Staple Fibre", *HT*, September 1935, p. 17.

for high-end staple yarns and fabrics. Staple fibre was now in a position where it could compete on price with natural fibres: it was lower than the average price of wool, and it was approaching the levels of Egyptian cotton, which was one of the more expensive varieties of this fibre. Courtaulds immediately increased production, and 1936 production volumes were 260% higher than 1935, at some 24m lbs. We can see the impact these volumes had on the textile business by looking at *The Silk and Rayon Buyer's Directories*. In 1931 just eight firms advertised themselves as staple fibre spinners; by 1938-9 this number had risen to sixty-two. Taking all forms of staple fibre, the total used in Britain in that year was around 30m lbs.⁴⁸

The use of staple fibre yarns in the weaving and knitting trades opened up entirely new markets for rayon, and introduced the idea that a fabric does not necessarily have the properties one would expect based on its constituent fibre. *Silk Journal and Rayon World* summarised the effect of staple fibre in the textile industry in November 1938:

[S]pun rayon fabrics have been introduced into all markets where filament rayon is used and into new markets in which filament rayon could never get a foothold.⁴⁹

Staple fibre promised to “exert a profound influence on the knitting industry” and a “rush” for spun yarn was expected.⁵⁰ The yarn could be used on both interlock and circular knitting machines with a “total absence...of the troubles previously encountered”.⁵¹ In 1934, viscose staple yarns had already begun to be used by “several well-known houses” for producing “attractive and economical underwear garments”.⁵² The price reductions of 1935 encouraged this trend and rayon was increasingly used in the manufacture of cheap goods which had previously been made from cotton, offering more people the perceived luxury of rayon. The industry was also keen to use wool and staple

⁴⁸ Coleman, *Courtaulds*, p. 365; *The Rayon and Silk Directory and Buyers Guide 1940-1* (Manchester: Harlequin Press, 1941).

⁴⁹ “Wither Rayon?”, *SJRW*, November 1938, p. 12.

⁵⁰ “Knitters Turn to Staple Fibres”, *SJRW*, December 1935, p. 26; “Staple Fibre and Rayon Waste”, *SJRW*, September 1935, p. 23.

⁵¹ “Possibilities of Staple Fibre Yarns”, *SJRW*, November 1935, p. 27.

⁵² “Progress in the British Rayon Trade”, *SJRW*, January 1935, p. 20.

mixtures which offered the warmth of wool, but with a slight sheen and a smoother feel.⁵³ The outerwear industry also got a boost from the introduction of staple fibre: fancy yarns could be produced by either mixing it with natural fibres or combining different staple fibres, twisting it to various degrees, or adding texture to the yarn. Added to the array of knitting stitches available, this made for an almost inexhaustible supply of novelty fabrics.

The weaving trade also took up the production of staple fibre fabrics with surprising rapidity once the excise duty had been removed. As with the knitting trade, they could make use of a wide variety of yarns which produced a large range of different fabrics, and commentators promised that the use of staple would “make modern dress materials more attractive than ever”.⁵⁴ Weaving spun rayon yarns was easy for those fabric manufacturers who were used to using rayon filament yarn, as its inherent slipperiness was removed during the spinning process, particularly when mixed with another fibre. Fabrics produced using staple fibre rayons also possessed a middle-tone lustre, which was neither the bright, metallic gleam of early rayons, nor a flat, matte effect which was common in de-lustred filament yarns. The handle was much softer too, giving better draping qualities and a higher degree of comfort when worn. The difference in the fabrics which could now be produced was such that the *Silk & Rayon* journal decided to include two samples of fabric with their April 1935 edition as they did not feel they could amply demonstrate the “textural” properties of fabrics woven with staple fibre otherwise.⁵⁵ In the woollen trade, which took up rayon staple fibre slightly later than the cotton industry, the use of staple fibre also extended their product range: the addition of the fibre lightened heavy wool fabrics, and broadened the appeal for wool beyond the traditional coating and suiting market. These lighter fabrics also helped deal with issues around pre-empting the colours which would be fashionable in a particular season: 100% wool had to be dyed in yarn form as woollen and

⁵³ “Knitters Turn to Staple Fibres”, *SJRW*, December 1935, p. 26.

⁵⁴ “Fabrics from Staple Fibre Yarns”, *S&R*, January 1935, p. 25.

⁵⁵ “New Staple Fibre Fabrics”, *S&R*, April 1935, p. 296.

worsted fabrics were simply too heavy to dye in piece form. With staple fibre added, the fabrics were lightweight enough for materials to be made up in the grey and then dyed to meet demand.⁵⁶ The take-up of staple fibre across the industry provided a huge boost for rayon manufacturing volumes, and the markets it opened up for fabric producers in terms of style and price was a pivotal point in the history of rayon. Without this advance, rayon may simply have been confined to being an imitation silk fibre, whose merits lay not in its properties, but in its price. Instead, as we shall see later, it provided consumers with an almost “illimitable” choice of goods.⁵⁷

Colour, Lustre and Handle

While the rayon filament manufacturers and weavers were working to improve the basic fibre and grey fabric, the task of dyers and finishers was to create textiles which were not only desirable, but which also offered tangible benefits to the consumer. Textile dyeing and finishing was where the main value addition in the textile supply chain took place: an undyed and unfinished rayon had little value other than its raw materials and labour costs. Adding aesthetically pleasing and serviceable colours and effects greatly enhanced a fabric’s value and saleability. Finishing firms had traditionally relied on their long experience in their work with natural fibres to create new effects, and developments had often been pioneered on the mill floor itself. A different approach was required for rayon: the quantity of rayon on the market was increasing rapidly, and consumers already had certain expectations of fabrics based on their experience of natural fibres. In order for rayon to break into the market place and find a permanent place there, organised scientific research was required. Many felt this was lacking in the finishing industries, and *The Artificial Silk Journal* lamented in 1928 that “research in all but the early stages of the artificial silk industry has been woefully neglected.”⁵⁸ Yet advertisements and articles in the trade press demonstrate the continual implementation of new processes and technologies by dyers and finishers. The number of patents registered by dyeing and finishing firms

⁵⁶ “Converting Yorkshire to Staple Fibre”, *Manchester Guardian*, 11 February 1938, p. 5.

⁵⁷ “Fabrics made from Staple Fibre”, *S&R*, May 1935, p. 254.

⁵⁸ “Editorial Comment”, *ASW*, 7 July 1928, p. 151.

with regards to rayon processing also suggests there was considerable scientific work happening, and the CPA archives certainly show that the company was committed to scientific research to improve their products. When investigated though, many of the chemical advances in finishing and dyeing did not come solely from the finishing firms: chemical companies and the filament manufacturers themselves often provided the innovative products and instructions required. The achievement of the finishing firms was adapting their traditional processes and adopting new chemical products so that their work with rayon was fruitful. The success of a finisher in these years was dependent on having “an exceedingly flexible mind” and “progressive spirit”, all based on “a vast fund of experience”.⁵⁹ The creation of novel and practical effects gave one firm a competitive advantage over another, offered consumers a wider choice of better fabrics, and most importantly, it ensured that rayon would become an established textile.

Turning to look at how rayon could be made attractive to the consumer, we must first digress from the finishing companies and look briefly at the British dye industry. The colour of a fabric is possibly its most important facet: colour makes an immediate impact before the design is appreciated, the fabric type understood, and its handle and feel felt. Indeed, producers felt it was the colour of fabrics “that makes them speak” to consumers.⁶⁰ Creating tones and hues which appealed to the customer was (and is) of paramount importance. Fortuitously, the mass production of rayon coincided with the huge expansion and technical advances in the British dyestuffs industry. Until the First World War, the majority of dyestuffs used in the textile industry came from overseas, in particular Germany and Switzerland. During the war, some dyes continued to come from Switzerland, but the British dye industry was forced to innovate quickly in order to make up those colourants which were no longer imported from Germany. By the 1920s, the industry had blossomed and its successes had a major

⁵⁹ “Fultons of Paisley”, *S&R*, February 1935, p. 89.

⁶⁰ James Morton, *To Young Weavers: Being Some Practical Dreams on the Future of Textiles*, (London: Baynard Press, 1927); “Print Designs for Rayon Fabrics XII”, *S&R*, January 1938, p. 26.

impact on the rayon industry.⁶¹ Rayon was a particularly difficult fibre to dye, as it did not absorb pigments in the same way as natural fibres, and each one of the three types of rayon reacted to colourants differently (see Figure 8). Early rayons had to be dyed using products which had been designed for natural fibres, but this was not particularly satisfactory as the dyes did not always produce the intended colour. Acetate rayons proved the most problematic to dye, and they also required additional chemical fixatives which increased the complexity and cost of production, and it was these rayons which were the immediate focus of attention. In 1922, the British Dyestuffs Corporation (later ICI) launched the first dyes created specifically for rayon, in this case, acetate rayon. Viscose specific dyes were created in the mid-1920s by the same company. However, even with these specially created dyes, rayon still proved problematic for dyers: variations in the filament itself could create uneven colours and other processes in the finishing process could affect how well the dye was absorbed.⁶² In 1930, *The Rayon Record* complained that

Even after...continuous efforts in both fields, neither the dyes, nor the methods of dyeing used for the various types of rayon can be regarded as satisfactory.⁶³

Towards the end of the period, many of the issues around dyeing and printing had been eradicated, as rayon filaments themselves improved and new dyes were released. In addition to solving practical problems, one of the most important progressions was the augmented range of colours available from numerous dyestuff manufacturers. Initially, the number of colours created for rayon had been extremely limited, but in the decade following the release of these early colourants, their numbers grew exponentially as chemical companies sought to appeal to the dyers and the public. This success had caused a somewhat cyclical practice to emerge by the end of the period:

The discovery of new dyes and bright colours has been exploited because they are available, and the colours have been discovered because of the demand for brighter colours.⁶⁴

⁶¹ See James Morton, *History of Fast Dyes and Dyeing*, (London: Royal Society of Arts, 1929) and *Dyes and Textiles in Britain: 1930*, (Edinburgh: University Press, 1930).

⁶² This was a particular problem with acetate rayons which had been saponified (washed with soap) to remove impurities in the fabric.

⁶³ "New Rayon Dyes: 1929 in Review", *RR*, 7 February 1930, p. 145.

⁶⁴ "Print Designs for Rayon Fabrics IX", *S&R*, October 1937, p. 896.

This demand was fed by the fashion for fabrics with bright colours on dark backgrounds, which were particularly popular for dresses. Fashion editors in trade journals were quick to praise the “vivid tones” and “brilliant colourings” which could now be easily produced on a variety of rayon fabrics.⁶⁵

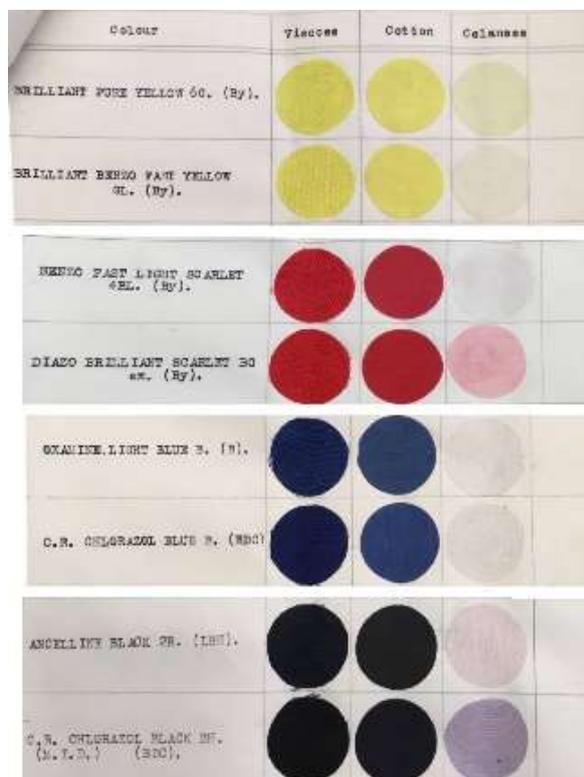


Figure 8 A selection of dye and fabric samples showing how the same dye reacts differently on different rayons, 1925. Calico Printers' Association archive, Manchester Central Library.

Whilst dye and filament manufacturers provided finishing firms with information about how to work with their fabrics and dyes, either through booklets or offering visits to their own laboratories, the onus of creating new colour and dye effects still largely lay with the dyers and finishers.⁶⁶ The CPA's extant scientific reports show the research which scientists undertook to establish out how best to deal with different rayons and rayon-mixture fabrics. In the twelve months from October 1924 the

⁶⁵ “Brilliant New Fabrics”, *DO*, November 1938, p. 43; “These Fabrics Makes Fashion News”, *DO*, September 1938, p. 51.

⁶⁶ For example, Courtaulds Ltd, *The Preparing, Dulling, Dyeing and Finishing of Seraceta Fabric and Yarn*, 1930; a booklet by British Bemberg Ltd, 1931 and Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd, *Solid Shades on Viscose-Cotton Mixtures*, c. 1930. Calico Printers Association GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, Manchester, M75/7/4/3 [Green 1388].

research team issued four different reports detailing the outcome of different dyes on various rayons and cottons, and methods of best practice.⁶⁷ These practices were never static: the Central Laboratory continually experimented and reported on different ways of using rayon colourants, for example, by changing the temperature of the dye solution (see Figure 9).



Figure 9 Test card showing the effect of different temperature dye baths on Courtaulds rayon c. 1930. Calico Printers' Association archive, Manchester Central Library.

Although the chemists were in no way designers, their work was important in terms of working out what designs could be achieved effectively. For example, discharge printing is a method where certain areas of dye are destroyed so a white design appears: this can be left white, or re-dyed (see Figure 10). Work on creating effective discharge prints on rayon began in the late 1920s at the CPA, but work was slow as there was little demand from wholesalers and consumers. By 1930 the growing popularity of these fabrics saw the Research Committee request this work be “speeded up”. The benefits of a well funded research team are clear: just six weeks later, the CPA were ready to lodge a patent

⁶⁷ Chemists reports, Calico Printers Association GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, Manchester, M75/7/4/3 [Green 1388].

application, and three months later they could offer an entire range of colours which rivalled those sold by British Celanese.⁶⁸

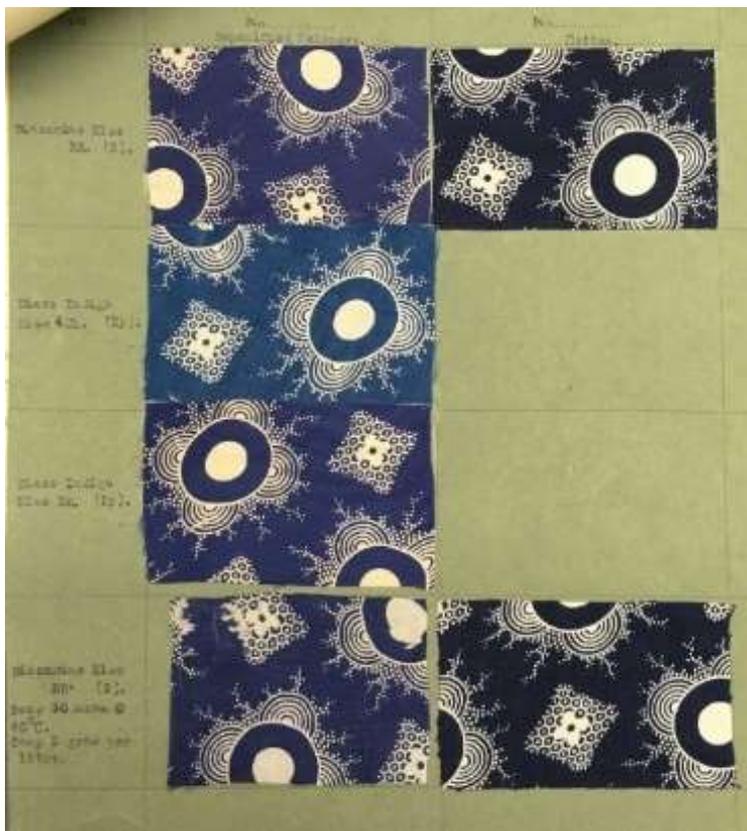


Figure 10 CPA test card showing discharge dyeing on acetate rayon and cotton, March 1927. Calico Printers' Association archive, Manchester Central Library.

Coloured fabrics did not just have to look good on the shop floor and for the first wear, they need to last as well. In 1929, colour-fastness was becoming a “vogue”, which *The Drapers' Organiser* blamed on “modern hygiene, with its cult of the open window, free sunshine and washable fabric”.⁶⁹ It would be unfair to say that until this point dyers and finishers were not concerned with fastness: fadeless fabrics made of other fibres had been advertised before rayon became widely accepted, and there were some basic procedures in place to try to establish what this meant for the consumer. In 1921, the CPA had worked with the National Federation of Launderers to establish a “standard” washing procedure, and determine what could be classed as a fast colour; by 1923 they were testing rayons

⁶⁸ CPA Research Committee Minutes, 28 January 1930, 7 April 1930, and 4 June 1930, Calico Printers Association GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, Manchester, M75/7/1/1 [Green 1382].

⁶⁹ “The Search for New Colours and Finishes”, *DO*, March 1929, p. 51.

for colour fastness during the laundering process, and light-fastness was being tested in 1924. However, there was debate across the industry about whether a standard procedure should be put in place to determine how colour-fast fabrics really were, as testing procedures varied across finishing firms. The 1930s saw dye manufacturers improving their dyes so that they were increasingly fast on various types of rayons, and there were also a number of auxiliaries which aided absorption and fastness.⁷⁰ Although it was agreed that there was no such thing as a “fadeless” fabric, chemical companies still

vie[d] with one another to reach the highest perfection and increase still further the fastness of their colours.⁷¹

This competition gave finishers a greater range of colours and additives than ever before, and they were able to experiment in their own laboratories to discover which combination of products worked best.

The fashions in the 1920s often required fabrics which had a shiny or satin finish, and in this respect, the launch of rayon coincided perfectly with this trend. However, the sheen which rayon possessed was criticised as being hard and metallic, compared to the soft lustre of real silk. The fabric was often simply seen as “the glistening stuff cheap frocks are made of” and given the fact that it was still an expensive fabric in the 1920s, the majority of women able to afford it would have simply chosen to buy silk instead.⁷² Rayon manufacturers knew lustre was a problem which would need addressing, but the question was how it could best be achieved. With no significant developments by filament producers in creating a matte product for most of the 1920s, finishers started experimenting with removing lustre on woven fabrics at their stage of the production process. Various chemical treatments were tried in order to remove the lustre from the three forms of rayon, but many of them produced either uneven results or ‘blooming’ on the fabric where the additives from the de-lustring

⁷⁰ “Rayon Research at a Crossroads”, *SJRW*, 20 January 1938, p. 47.

⁷¹ “Increasing Dye Fastness”, *S&R*, June 1936, p. 462.

⁷² “The New Fabric”, *Manchester Guardian*, 10 March 1925, p. 6.

process settled. CPA reports show that de-lustring also caused shrinkage of up to 5%, and the fabric could become “exceedingly harsh” to the touch.⁷³ The greatest disadvantage for the consumer was that the dull finish was often removed on first laundering their garment, turning it back to its original shiny state.⁷⁴ Despite endless work and repeated articles on the problem in the trade press, there were no adequate solutions. Adding further complications to the de-lustring process was the fact that finishers had to produce their own chemical agents to carry it out: these were always open to variations and inconsistencies, as many were simply produced in the mill, often without scientific input or equipment. In 1932 specific products for finishers to dull rayon fabrics became available from chemical manufacturers and these did help create more uniform results on fabrics. ICI produced Dullit W which removed lustre from viscose and cuprammonium, and a year later the German company Chemnitz launched Gardinol W for use on acetate. However, this development alone was not sufficient to deal with the increasing demand for matte goods: the volumes of fabrics now being produced were getting too large to de-lustre in piece form. It had been clear for some years that it was the filament itself that needed to be dulled, not the fabric. This had become more urgent when it was clear that fashions coming from Paris in the late 1920s did “not favour highly lustrous materials”.⁷⁵ The inherent problems with de-lustred rayon fabrics meant that they simply would not have been able to hold their own in the market, particularly when cotton could be used for dull finishes at an extremely low cost. As the firm most able to invest in research, it is not surprising that Courtaulds was the first to launch a matte filament product, *Dulesco*, in 1928. Their solution to removing the lustre was an elegant one: a paraffin emulsion was introduced into the viscose solution; when the filaments were spun, tiny oil droplets suspended in the filament diffused the light in a softer way compared to earlier filaments. The resultant yarn was designed primarily for the hosiery trade to use

⁷³ CPA Interbranch memo, 11 August 1930, Calico Printers Association GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, Manchester, M75/7/5/28 [Green 1432].

⁷⁴ “The Lustre of Rayon”, *SJRW*, April 1933, p. 18.

⁷⁵ “Courtaulds Ltd”, *Manchester Guardian*, 9 March 1927, p. 18.

in stockings: the “pearl-like lustre” it offered was popular with knitters and consumers. It was said there was

hardly an important hosiery manufacturer who was not producing at least one line made of “Dulesco”...scarcely a girl who does not know and ask for “Dulesco” hose.⁷⁶

As fashions and consumers demanded increasing quantities and varieties of matte fabrics with permanent finishes, other rayon producers developed their own solutions: in 1931 there was an “enormous output of patents” by filament producers.⁷⁷ These patents were largely based, like Courtaulds, on the addition of “every conceivable liquid” which could be emulsified in viscose to disperse the light reflecting from the filament.⁷⁸ The 1931 *Rayon and Silk Directory* shows that by this date Courtaulds was producing no less than seven products containing the words “dul” or “matte” in their tradename, along with offering their staple fibre in a matte or lustrous effect.⁷⁹ Unlike Courtaulds, British Celanese long maintained that the best way of de-lustring goods was in the fabric form. This was despite the fact that finishers found acetate the most difficult of the rayons to deal with – the huge volume of work undertaken by the CPA and the endless articles in the trade press about how to deal with acetate are testament to this. It also added an extra stage of processing to fabric production, which slowed production and increased costs, something which had been removed from viscose fabrics for some time. In late 1933 the company finally launched a matte yarn, *Blanche*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was immediately taken up by the knitting and weaving trades as by this point the fashion for any sort of sheen fabrics for daywear had firmly receded, and it removed the problematic issue of finishing the fabric to meet these requirements. With the availability of matte and glossy yarns, rayon was in a unique position where it could be used for fabric with both finishes: the only other pure textile which came close to this was cotton which could be mercerised to give it a sheen, but this did not create the same glamorous effect as a shiny rayon. In overcoming the issue of lustre, rayon filament manufacturers had emphatically broadened the market for their products.

⁷⁶ “Courtaulds Ltd”, *TSJ*, October 1928, p. 103.

⁷⁷ “The Manufacture of Rayon in 1931”, *RR*, 4 March 1932, p. 111.

⁷⁸ “The Lustre of Rayon”, *SJRW*, April 1933, p. 18.

⁷⁹ *The Silk and Rayon Directory and Buyer’s Guide of Great Britain, 1931* (Manchester: John Heywood Ltd, 1931).

While the visual facets of a fabric make the first impression, they are closely followed by the “response to the sense of touch”.⁸⁰ The feel, drape and handle of a fabric produces a sensual, and often subconscious, response in the consumer, which alongside the visual aspects can determine whether a purchase is made or not.⁸¹ Prior to the introduction of rayon, most consumers would have only worn and known the feel of cotton, linen and wool fabrics, with a smaller, wealthier number also wearing silk. Early rayons, despite being called “artificial silk” were stiff and harsh, a complete antithesis to silk. To a certain extent the fashions of the 1920s with their boxy, straight lines were more forgiving to the lack of softness in rayon, but by the 1930s

The fashion trend towards longer and more flowing lines...set a demand for fabrics with improved draping qualities.⁸²

The development of finer filament and staple fibre yarns did not only increase the strength of fabrics as we saw above, but also allowed materials to be woven which no longer had a “harsh paper-like handle” and which draped as fashion decreed.⁸³ However, some of the dyeing and finishing processes which rayon went through to make it look attractive meant that these fabrics could lose the drape they had possessed as grey cloth. For example, In the 1930s, darker colours such as blues, browns and blacks became more fashionable: dark dyes were renowned for creating stiff rayon fabrics, as the individual filaments had to absorb a lot of colourant to achieve a well-toned cloth. The stretching or stentering of rayon to give it an even width also made the fabric “quite board-like”. To re-soften the fabric it was calendared, whereby it was passed through various rollers: “considerable care” was required to prevent the fabric re-gaining its lustre.⁸⁴ As with the de-lustring agents, chemical manufacturers saw a gap in the market and extended their product range to include finishing products which would soften fabrics using chemical rather than mechanical means: ICI and Sandoz both

⁸⁰ “Handle in Rayon Fabrics”, *SJRW*, 20 October 1934, p. 16.

⁸¹ Sophie Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p. 3.

⁸² “Successes in Finishing”, *DO*, August 1934, p. 45.

⁸³ “Staple Fibre Development”, *S&R*, February 1935, p. 69.

⁸⁴ “Handle in Rayon Fabrics”, *SJRW*, 20 October 1934, p. 18.

released products in 1934.⁸⁵ Although these commercial products were available, creating a good finish on a fabric remained “largely dependent on the judgement of the finisher”.⁸⁶ As experience with rayon cloths increased, so finishers were able to improve on their results: one commentator thought that rayon manufacturers had “consolidated their position [in the market] by adding a beautiful feel [to rayon fabrics].”⁸⁷ By the late 1930s, advertisements were far more likely to boast of the feel of fabrics: “remarkable soft finish and handle” and “particularly soft draping qualities” being just two such examples.⁸⁸

Serviceability

As the basic properties of rayon fabrics improved, manufacturers began to research the application of effects which would make the fabric more durable and serviceable. Bringing rayon up to the levels of durability which natural fibres had was a key aspect in terms of winning over consumers. Once its novelty had worn off, questions about its ability to launder and wear well came to the fore. As already mentioned, laundering rayon was a fraught process: there were articles in the popular press about how to avoid damaging rayon clothing, and there were also debates in the trade press about the best way for it to be managed. Even dry cleaning rayon proved problematic in the early 1920s. The main advice throughout the 1920s and early 1930s remained the same: gentle washing in soapy water (Lux advertised widely through retailers that their soap was the best for rayon), rinsing, and rolling the item in a towel until damp, and then ironing with a warm, never hot, iron. However, much of this advice depended on the nature of the fabric: flat woven rayons had a propensity to stretch when wet, hence rolling them in a towel rather than hanging them to dry, whilst crepes (which became enormously popular in the 1930s) shrank and needed pulling back into shape whilst damp. This left garments with uneven hems and necklines, it ruined the shape of the garment, and seams could easily be ripped.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ “Successes in Finishing”, *DO*, August 1934, p. 45.

⁸⁶ “Handle in Rayon Fabrics”, *SJRW*, 20 October 1934, p. 18.

⁸⁷ “Advice to the Home Trade”, *RR*, 4 September 1931, p. 486.

⁸⁸ Wemco advert, *DO*, February 1936; CPA advert, *Film Fashionland*, March 1934, p. 49.

⁸⁹ “A Boon to Rayons”, *SJRW*, November 1938, p. 17.

Shrinkage of crepes was so common that women bought extra fabric for making up into garments, or bought a larger size dress to compensate.⁹⁰ In March 1938 the CPA patented their anti-shrink process for rayon crepes. Clearly expecting it to be a big seller, they immediately invested £20,000 in new equipment to begin production (£1.1m in 2023).⁹¹ By August they were producing 9,000 yards of this crepe per day, with capacity due to double; “nearly all the large stores had placed orders” by October and the “best makers-up” had contracts to start making up garments out of the fabrics.⁹² Sales had reached £40,000 just three months after its launch into the market place, which was around 10% of the CPA’s annual sales making it an astonishing success (£2.2m in 2023).⁹³

Ironing rayons also caused problems for consumers: rayons creased when they were worn and when they had been washed. Unfortunately, if subject to a hot iron, rayon fabrics would “dissolve and smell as of glue”, and even if they didn’t melt fully, a hot iron could leave fabrics with a “glaze” or shine.⁹⁴ The idea of creating an anti-crush or anti-crease process had “exercised the minds of research workers for several years”, and after fourteen years of research in 1932 Tootal Broadhurst Lee [TBL] announced a they had created a process which would reduce creasing.⁹⁵ Production started immediately, but the first large scale commercial use was in 1934 when they launched a striking campaign in the consumer press advertising their “inexpensive uncrumple materials” (see Figure 11).⁹⁶ By 1936 TBL offered the finish on “practically all” of their fabrics”, including rayon.⁹⁷ The anti-crease process worked by impregnating the woven fabric with a resin solution, and not only was it praised for preventing fabrics creasing when they were worn and easing ironing, it also made viscose up to 50% stronger when wet

⁹⁰ “Non Shrinking Fabrics”, *Manchester Guardian*, 16 February 1939, p. 8.

⁹¹ Minutes of the Meeting of Directors, 24 May 1938, Calico Printers Association GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, Manchester, M75/2/2/23 [Green 886].

⁹² *Ibid.*, 25 October 1938.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 20 December 1938. In the ten weeks from the end of October to the end of December £40,000 sales were made. In the first 18 weeks of 1939 sales of £744,000 were made. Using these figures, although not identical time frames, the sales of unshrinkable crepe are approximately 10% of the total bookings.

⁹⁴ “Artificial Silk: Modern Varieties”, *Manchester Guardian*, 13 September 1927, p. 6.

⁹⁵ “Non Creasing Rayon Yarns and Fabrics”, *SJRW*, September 1933, p. 22.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ “British Manufacturers Adopt Staple Fibre for Next Spring’s Fabrics”, *SJRW*, 20 November 1935, p. 25.

and reduced shrinkage. However, as much as it was publicised, it remained an imperfect process as it could not be used on acetate rayons, and some dyes were adversely affected by the synthetic resin which was used in the process.⁹⁸ The TBL process was patented, and it was only when I.G. Farben launched a synthetic resin onto the market that other companies were able to offer anti-crease fabrics.⁹⁹ Unfortunately for TBL who had worked so hard on developing this process, advances in other areas would ultimately mean that synthetic resins were not required to the extent they had anticipated. The finer filaments and staple fibres which were being produced meant that fabrics were inherently less likely to crease than early rayon textiles. Alongside this, there was a huge vogue for crepe fabrics, which, with their twisted yarn construction, did not crease in the same way as a plain woven fabric.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ The CPA wanted to use a synthetic resin to produce an anti-crease effect, but TBL argued this was too similar to their patent. Other methods the CPA tried were not as successful. I.G. Farben patented their synthetic resin in 1937.

MODERN WOMAN

WHY BE A SLAVE TO YOUR IRONING BOARD?



There's not the slightest need. Make use of Tootal Crease-Resisting fabrics, and then your frocks won't need pressing every time you wear them. These wonderful materials—which range from filmy Robia voiles to Toutaline, cotton tweed—crush as little as costly silks and wools. How much smarter we can look now with this magnificent choice of inexpensive uncrumple materials! Washed like silk, they come up beautifully fresh with their crease-resisting power intact. Go and see them. Each is sold by its brand name given below—with the Tootal Guarantee of satisfaction. Look for these names on the selvedge. If you have any difficulty in getting the one you want, write to Tootal (Dept. 25a), 56 Oxford Street, Manchester.

TOOTAL CREASE-RESISTING FABRICS

ROBIA cotton voiles	TOOTAL FOULARD 100% rayon	TOOTRESS rayon and cotton
TOOTAL CHIFFON 100% rayon	TOUTALINE cotton tweeds	TOOTAL TAFFETA 100% rayon

35

Figure 11 Tootal Broadhurst Lee crease-resisting fabric advertisement from 1934. *Modern Woman*, March 1934, © British Library.

The final finishing development which received a lot of attention in the trade press in the late 1930s was the waterproofing and stain-proofing of rayon fabrics. Waterproof clothing to this point had consisted of tightly woven fabric which was rubberised or waxed: both treatments had been used for nearly one hundred years, and made heavy fabrics which were suitable only for outdoor wear. Furthermore, neither treatment was permanent. British Celanese had created raincoats which had been successfully treated with traditional methods, but these were only guaranteed for two years. In 1937, in a “remarkable chemical achievement”, ICI launched a new product: Velan. This was a permanent waterproofing treatment, which lasted even when a garment was washed or dry-cleaned, and it did not impair the look or feel of the fabric itself.¹⁰⁰ *Silk & Rayon* was immediately convinced

¹⁰⁰ “Imperial Chemical Industries”, *Manchester Guardian*, 22 April 1938, p. 18.

that “Velan is superior in several ways to the waterproofing processes that have been on the market for generations”.¹⁰¹ However, the market for waterproof fabrics was limited to those designed for outdoor wear, and to avoid being limited by this, ICI suggested Velan could be used a stain-proofer too. As it was resistant to all liquids, not just water, delicate fabrics such as chiffons and velvets which were difficult to launder could be treated, a distinct advantage for the consumer. Brown & Adam Ltd who offered a Velanised finish on their fabrics also claimed it improved the strength and drape of the fabric, with commentators agreeing that materials treated in this way had a “wonderful suppleness”.¹⁰² The BDA had developed their own version of a water- and stain-proof finish, and it launched in mid-1937. Marketed under the name Dukbak the BDA claimed it was answering “growing customer demand for water repellent, spot-resistant fabrics.”¹⁰³ Eschewing the idea of a housewife scrubbing away at stained clothing, the advertising of Dukbak caught the glamorous mood of the era, advising that treated fabrics were repellent to “cocktails, dinner wine, whisky and soda”.¹⁰⁴

The effect of the various advances which took place in the manufacture of rayon was that consumer advertisements increasingly offered fabrics which were “hard washing and hard wearing”; “smart and serviceable” and which had “wearing properties no other fabric can give”.¹⁰⁵ By the late 1930s, not only were fabrics able to be advertised as having certain properties, they also began to be guaranteed. Courtaulds had guaranteed “wear and colour” from 1930, at the same time as they introduced a House Mark to identify their goods; the only other company I have been able to find offering a guarantee on rayon this early is Duro fabrics, who offered it on cotton and rayon mix printed fabrics.¹⁰⁶ In 1933, the CPA offered a colour fastness guarantee on some of their fabrics, but by no means all: they were still

¹⁰¹ “The Development of the Velan Water Repellant Process”, *SJRW*, Dec 1937, p. 24.

¹⁰² “The New Crease-Resisting and Velanised Finish”, *S&R*, January 1938, p. 28.

¹⁰³ Advertisement for Dukbak by the BDA, *S&R*, September 1937.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Tricoline advert, *W&H*, May 1935, p. 118; Duro advert, *WF*, May 1937, p. 63; Sparva advert, *WGT*, April 1936, p. 39.

¹⁰⁶ Courtaulds advert, *GH*, April 1930, p. 177; “Rayon Fabrics for Spring”, *SJRW*, December 1929, p. 58. I will be looking at the Courtaulds House Mark in further detail in Chapter 8.

struggling with fastness on some rayons, an issue that was still being worked on at the end of the period. In 1937, Courtaulds Ltd launched a Quality Control Plan which guaranteed all of their products in relation to durability and fastness. TBL rapidly followed Courtaulds and offered the same guarantee on all their other fabrics, offering a replacement or refund for “dissatisfaction arising from any defect whatsoever in the material”. Under pressure, archives show that the CPA pushed through research on the colour fastness all of the rayons produced by the Grafton’s branch: this allowed them to follow with an open guarantee on this range of rayon fabrics.¹⁰⁷ The speed with which TBL and the CPA followed Courtaulds in providing extensive guarantees on their products shows how the producers saw guarantees as a big attraction for consumers, and, as we shall see later, they helped bolster reputations and brands.

Evaluation

Early rayons were harsh, shiny and fragile, and whilst the fibre could exist for a short period based on its novelty value, major advances needed to take place before it could prove itself to be a functional textile and find a place in women’s wardrobes across Britain. Today we take it for granted that product developments occur in laboratories or in controlled environments, but this was not the case in the 1920s and it was the growing phenomenon of science in industry which formalised much of the research into rayon. The entire rayon supply chain engaged in this progress, and without the combined efforts rayon of all of these parties, rayon would not have become a durable and attractive fabric. Once the issue of durability had been tackled, additional attributes which appealed to consumers became the next target for researchers. However, times were changing, and although guarantees of quality and wearability were important, the lowering of fabric prices (in real and nominal terms) and women’s growing interest in fashion meant that progressively women were buying

¹⁰⁷ Minutes of the Meeting of Directors, 25 October 1938, Calico Printers Association GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, M75/2/2/23 [Green 886].

a fabric because [they] like it and because it is fashionable, and [they do] not care two hoots whether it will wear or not.¹⁰⁸

This shift in consumer habits meant that whilst creating dependable fabrics was still important, it was design which was becoming paramount in the rayon industry, as we shall see in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁸ "The Development of the 'Velan' Water Repellent Process", *SJRW*, 20 December 1937, p. 24.

*The public, whose purse is limited, is impatient
for a varied assortment of styles.*

L. Neal, *The Times*, May 1935

4. Making Rayon Appealing: Fashionability and Design

Although the previous section indicates that rayon manufacturers were attempting to create fabrics which had a longer lifespan, there was a major dichotomy at play in the business model of rayon companies. Economic, social and technological changes meant that the latest fashions were progressively more visible to women, and this, combined with a growing perception that a woman should wear the latest trends meant that trade journals noticed a shift towards purchasers “want[ing] beauty of design... *before durability*” [my italics].¹ Fashion is defined by ceaseless changes of style and design, and the constant novelties are what makes it appeal to the consumer, and potentially profitable for the manufacturer. In this sense, rayon was an ideal canvas for fashion fabrics: to produce an ever-changing range of fashion fabrics for a mass audience required large volumes of cheap textiles, and rayon manufacturers could provide this. An increased number of sales of fashionable rayon fabrics to repeat purchasers was an ideal business model for mass manufacturers, assuming that designs could be imitated, created and delivered to the retailer in a timely manner. Thus far, it sounds simple: create a fashionable fabric, and women will buy it. However, creating a fashion which is acceptable to the many is fraught with difficulties. In 1927, a textile designer warned the Manchester trade that “the haphazard methods of choosing designs in the belief that *any cloth would sell*, would no longer serve” [my italics] as fashion was becoming more widely embedded in culture and society than at any previous time.² This commentator was not the only one in the interwar period to be concerned about the state of British design. Many observers feared that British manufacturers were producing “average” fabrics of no artistic merit, and because of this they faced losing ground to foreign competitors.³ This reached its apogee in 1935 when a government commission was set up to explore the quality of British fabric design, and to try to improve it. Textile manufacturers retorted that the creation of design was more

¹ “Who Creates Fashions”, *DO*, July 1933 p. 81.

² “Art and the Textile Industry”, *Manchester Guardian*, 7 December 1927, p. 14.

³ This would reach its peak in 1935 when a government commission was set up to explore the quality of British fabric design. This will be explored later in the chapter.

complex than these critics realised, and that cost pressures in particular meant that creating unique and ultra-fashionable designs was simply not possible in a mass market. This chapter will examine how rayon manufacturers engaged with fashion and design, and how high-end textile design was reinterpreted for a mass market audience at minimal cost. I will also explore how, for the first time in its history, the hosiery trade needed to follow trends more closely as knitted outerwear began to become more mainstream, and how rayon was used to create these new fashion-led garments. The design of a fabric was a critical part in tempting consumers to use their increased spending power to buy fashionable clothing, and in keeping the machinery of mass production in motion.

Mass Fashion and “Fashionocracy”

British manufacturers had always felt confident that the quality of their fabrics was one of their greatest assets, and their “international reputation” was based on producing “‘functionally’ perfect” materials.⁴ Despite the Industrial Revolution allowing the mass production of textiles in the nineteenth century, fabric and clothing were still significant items of expenditure for the majority of consumers. New textiles and clothes were bought only when necessary, and items were usually patched up, repaired and repurposed until they were rags. Indeed some women never bought new clothing or textiles at all, relying on the second hand market. Even for those who could afford new goods, it was a point of feminine pride to be “prudent” and “economical”. Textiles needed to be durable and long-lasting, as “rational” motives dominated purchasing decisions, and British manufacturers excelled at this, having a foundation in the dependable fibres of cotton and wool.⁵ For most nineteenth century women, household economics and durability mattered far more than following the latest trends, which amongst the fashionable elite lasted just a few months. It was only in the aftermath of the First World War, when increased purchasing power and a larger number of women in employment meant that some consumers had the opportunity to purchase more fabrics and garments

⁴ “British vs Foreign Designs”, *SJRW*, May 1933, p. 35.

⁵ Jennifer Robson, “The Role of Clothing and Fashion in the Household Budget 1919-1947”, PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1998, p. 12; and Ya-Lei Yen “Clothing Middle-Class Women: Dress, Gender and Identity in Mid-Victorian England c. 1851-1875”, PhD thesis, Royal Holloway University of London, 2014, p. 210.

than previously, that more women began to have occasion to see fashion as aspirational. Women became more *fashion conscious* and increasingly aware of the latest trends. In 1916, Condé Nast had launched *British Vogue*, and its success led to a proliferation of other women's journals aimed at readers of all budgets, and which almost always included fashion news and advice.⁶ "Paris Fashions" appeared in almost all magazines and were extensively detailed, and "the fullest use of telephony and photography" transmitted fashions from Paris to editors in London, vastly increasing the speed at which this information was distributed.⁷ The cinema gave further stimulus to the demand for fashion, as women admired and sought to emulate the film stars they saw on screen. Capitalising on the success of the cinema, women's magazines ran features on "Hollywood fashions" and advised women how to re-create this ultra-glamorous look. Crucially, both the cinema and women's magazines were an affordable "treat", with prices being as low as 2d: thus the number of women who had easy access to information about the latest trends soared. Whilst elite fashion remained (as it does today), these trends were being more rapidly disseminated and recreated for more consumers than at any previous time. By the mid-1930s, this seemingly insatiable desire to be up-to-the-minute had reached a point that the Chairman of a government report on the British textile industry noted rather gloomily, "[T]he public will not look at anything which is out of fashion, however good."⁸

One of those at the forefront of recognising that a wider group of women wanted to purchase more aesthetically desirable goods and that this could be a profitable enterprise for businesses was Edward H. Symonds. Symonds was the Managing Director and Chairman of the Court dressmaker Reville Ltd, and was also President of the British Fashion and Fabrics Bureau.⁹ It was in this latter role, supporting the country's textile and garment trades, that he championed the idea that the production of "fabrics of beauty and

⁶ See Brian Braithwaite, *Women's Magazines: The First 300 Years*, (London: Peter Owen, 1995) for more details.

⁷ "Quicker Fashion News", *DO*, March 1927, p. 26.

⁸ Committee on the Training of Textile Designers for the Cotton and Rayon Weaving and Printing Trade, Chairman's Statement 13 November 1935, Board of Trade: Council for Art and Industry, Minutes and Papers, The National Archives, Kew, BT 57/10.

⁹ Court Dressmakers were usually based in central London and produced clothes for the upper classes at a lower cost than charged by French couturiers. Although the bulk of their work was for court clothes, they also supplied most other types of garments. They were not fashion designers, per se, as they mostly copied Paris fashions.

attractive novelty appearance” would return the British textile industry to its previous prosperity.¹⁰ The majority of women, he argued, “will not pay the price for a quality that will outlast several fashion changes” and this issue was something that “all who are connected with the either the manufacture or distribution of textiles...must seriously face”.¹¹ *The Drapers’ Record* also sounded a warning note that if manufacturers advertised that their dress goods as

so good that they would last for years [this is] the quickest and surest road to the bankruptcy court. All that most women now required was a *reasonably good standard of quality* that would not outlast the lifetime of modern fashion.¹² [my italics]

Symonds created the term “fashionocracy” to describe a new way of trading which was based on selling fast-moving, cheap fashion goods. His overriding concern was that mass production would outstrip consumer demand, and economic catastrophe would follow. To this end, he believed that more frequent changes in fashions were “an absolute necessity”.¹³ He pushed for fabric manufacturers to keep abreast of the latest trends coming from Paris and Hollywood, particularly as the “percolation” of these fashions to the public was accelerating. But Symonds recognised that fashion alone would not be enough to sell vast quantities of goods: they also had to be priced appealingly. Happily, the British public “generally want[ed] to buy cheap”, but the aim was to encourage the consumer to make more frequent purchases of these cheap goods.¹⁴ By providing a variety of fashionable, affordable fabrics each season, manufacturers were more likely to garner sales from the increased number of women who were “seekers [of] style”.¹⁵ Whilst the term “fashionocracy” never took off, by the late 1930s, British rayon producers remained as cost and price conscious as ever, but were also far more engaged in creating and publicising fabrics which imitated or were inspired by the latest trends.¹⁶

¹⁰ “Modern Fabric for Women’s Wear”, *SJRW*, January 1935, p. 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Fashion Dictates Fabric Trend”, *DR*, 10 January 1931, p. 18.

¹³ “Fashionocracy”, *DO*, April 1933, p. 81.

¹⁴ Committee on the Training of Textile Designers, Chairman’s Statement 13 November 1935, p. 2. Board of Trade: Council for Art and Industry, Minutes and Papers, The National Archives, BT 57/10.

¹⁵ “Commentary on Fashion”, *S&R*, October 1935, p. 475.

¹⁶ One of the fundamental issues with Symonds suggestion of “fashionocracy” is that it was aimed solely at the manufacturers, and omitted the role that the media had to play in disseminating and promoting the latest fashions. A trend from say, Paris or Hollywood, could not simply be copied and retailed, it relied on the press to turn it into “fashion”, that is, to be accepted and desired by the consumer. Whilst I recognise the role the media plays, I have decided to exclude it from this chapter due to the constraints of the word limit.

Design and Rayon Knitwear

The use of rayon in the hosiery trade was, as we have seen, largely in underwear and stockings and in these areas, although there were small tweaks made to designs in the interwar period there were no standout changes in design. It was the knitted outerwear market where the hosiery trade had its steepest learning curve. Knitted outerwear was almost an entirely new concept: in the mid-nineteenth century, handknitted woollen sweaters ('ganseys') for fishermen were a practical solution to the cold and wet they faced when working. The rational dress movement saw the benefits of knitted clothing (for men) in the latter part of the century, and knitted vests began to be worn for sports. However, it was only when Chanel introduced outerwear based on a fine knit jersey that knitted fabric was taken up with enthusiasm at all levels of society, and by both sexes. By the end of the First World War, knitting companies were making their first forays into the world of knitted outerwear, mainly in the form of men's ties and jumpers for women. Knitwear manufacturers recognised that outerwear had potential for huge growth and it was said that there was a "keenness in competition" which had led to knitted garment design becoming a "fine art".¹⁷ It is important to note that wool was by far the most used fibre in outerwear in the interwar period, but rayon was used in growing volumes, particularly with the advent of more advanced staple fibre, and the subsequent lowering of its price. Manufacturers had used rayon as a sole fibre in knitwear as soon as it came on the market, and blouses, jumpers and scarves had been available since the war. However, rayon was still the second most expensive fibre after silk at this point, and these garments were very much aimed at the top end of the market (see Figure 12). The predominant use for rayon in knitted outerwear for most of the interwar period was as an adjunct fibre. It was seen as particularly valuable for "embellish[ing] the design and lift[ing] it from the commonplace" when used against wools which were extremely matt. Using a combination of wool and rayon

¹⁷ "Art in Knitwear Design", *HT*, January 1932, p. 28.

ensured that the quality of the garment was not negatively affected, and the cost was lower than if using silk as a decorative fibre.



Figure 12 (L) A very early example of an all rayon knitted blouse. This was sold by Rose & Blairman, who made clothes for the higher end of the market, *The Drapers' Organiser*, January 1921 © British Library. (R) A rayon and tinsel knitted dress by Debenham & Freebody reduced to 94/6 in 1926, *The Times*, 12 July 1926.

Design in knitwear is intricately bound up with the evolution of knitting machinery. In 1931, the *Hosiery Times* noted how quickly plant was changing:

In a cycle of ten years stitches, fabrics and gauges of machines alter considerably owing to the developments and advances in engineering science.¹⁸

It was this constant change which allowed the knitwear producers to create a wide variety of novelties which appealed to the fashion conscious consumer. Many of the developments in design can be directly traced back to the introduction of new or improved knitting machinery. Without the continued innovation in this type of engineering, the knitting industry would probably have completely stalled, and remained producing basic underwear and hosiery. There was concern from some corners that mechanical, mass fabrication of

¹⁸ "Progress in Machine Construction", *HT*, November 1931, p. 28.

goods would lead to a loss of artistic awareness and knowledge, but trade journals such as *The Draper's Organiser* argued that in fact, mechanical means of production may mean “uniformity...but [products] need not lack beauty”.¹⁹ Within the knitwear trade, this was certainly the case, as throughout the period we see the construction of fabrics (and thus their design) evolve considerably (see Figure 13). Improvements and new inventions allowed the variety of stitches and forms of knit to proliferate; more needles meant finer gauges of fabric could be made; complex jacquard designs could be produced; and multiple colours of yarn used at the same time. These options opened up the ability to create a wide variety of distinct fabrics, perfect for the burgeoning knitted outerwear trade. Manufacturers recognised that the latest designs had enormous potential value, but to create them meant expensive machinery had to be installed. The head of the Leicester Textile Society said that with regard to new plant

The manufacturer should not say to himself ‘Can I afford to buy such-and-such machinery but... ‘Can I afford not to buy it?’²⁰

Many machinery manufacturers and sellers had to offer “various guises of easy payments” so knitwear companies could afford new equipment, and high depreciation was an extra issue as obsolescence could occur so quickly.²¹ The huge costs of this machinery added extra impetus to expand the volumes of goods produced and to sell large volumes at low margins. Luckily for the manufacturers, the machinery allowed them to create “a wide range of weights and patterns which are...suited to every purse”.²²



¹⁹ “Tune into Taste and Quality”, *DO*, April 1937, p. 43.

²⁰ “Manufacturers must be ready for the forward movement”, *HT*, October 1930, p. 27.

²¹ “Our Enterprising Machine Builders”, *HT*, February 1935, p. 21.

²² “New Prospects for Rayon in Knitted Goods”, *SJRW*, February 1932, p. 34.



Figure 13 Knitted “openwork” design progression. *Silk Journal and Rayon World*, January 1933, April 1934 and January 1938
© British Library.

Away from knitting machinery, another important step in the creation of variety was the introduction of textured yarns. The mid-1930s saw a craze for textured fabrics which looked “hand-knitted or crocheted”; “tweed-like designs” had a “remarkable run of success”; and “richer textures” were desirable.²³ Rayon was ideally suited to knitted fabrics of this type: many of the textured yarns made from natural fibres were simply too stiff and large to knit with, and manufacturers were reluctant to use them as they damaged their plant.²⁴ Rayon staple fibre yarns were fine enough to use in the knitting machinery, but could still provide the requisite texture without being bulky or rigid. Knops, slubs and bouclés could now all be added into knitwear to produce a variety of different finishes. Many of the yarns that knitters used had been developed by spinners for the weaving trade, but the growth in the knitted outerwear industry and the demand for textured fabrics encouraged knitters to experiment.²⁵ In the early 1930s the market for these rayon textured knits was still a relatively small and exclusive one, as staple fibre was still expensive and the fabrics produced

²³ “Fabrics that Bloom”, *GH*, March 1934, p. 66; “Design and Colour for Every Type of Wearing Apparel”, *HT*, October 1933, p.19; “Fashion Fabrics in Cotton, Rayon and Wool”, *DO*, November 1933, p. 92.

²⁴ “New Feature Yarns in Knitted Fabric for Outerwear and Underwear”, *HT*, February 1935, p. 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

tended to imitate particularly high class materials such as tweed. When the price of staple fibre was reduced in 1936, knitters already had experience with using these fancy yarns, meaning production could easily be stepped up, allowing them to provide lower-cost fabrics for a wider market.

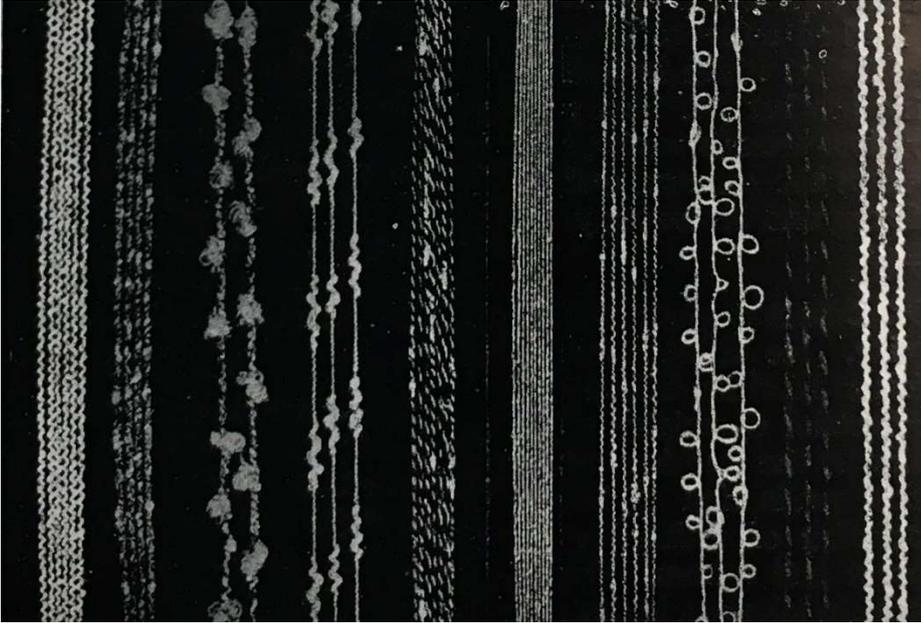


Figure 14 Various types of spun rayon yarns which could be used to create texture in woven and knitted fabric. The Silk Journal, October 1926 © British Library.

One of the biggest advantages hosiery designers had over woven textile designers was that very often manufacturers would create entire garments in house. Designers of knitted fabrics were able to ensure that the design of the fabric matched the style of the clothing: in the weaving trade manufacturers had to anticipate the needs and whims of wholesale, bespoke and home dressmakers. As we have already seen, the popularity of knitted outerwear grew in the interwar period, with garments not only being fashionable, but also providing wearers with a level of comfort that was not possible in a world before the development of elastic. The range of garments on offer grew steadily: the simple blouses, jumpers and scarves of the early years diversified into dresses, two- and three-piece suits and evening gowns, all using fabric which just a few short years before was used almost entirely for underwear. Many of these fabrics and garments needed to be fashion-led and whilst commentators such as Holbrook Jackson suggested that “the alert business man will range himself on the side of novelty”, design in the knitwear industry had traditionally played a minor

role.²⁶ In 1925 it was said that the larger houses had “their own designers who are constantly in touch with the latest fashion ideas”, but for most companies, the role of designer was usually undertaken by a foreman or mechanic who was able to adapt machinery to create new designs, patterns or shapes.²⁷ This was sufficient for the basic construction of stockings and underwear, but there was a growing feeling that where outerwear was concerned

[T]he majority of these persons are of little use [when the trade demands that] every design must be original, striking, and at the same time pleasing, in order to find a market.²⁸

There is certainly a sense that hosiery design was coming to be seen as more professional and that these employees were moving away from the factory floor: a design vacancy being advertised in 1930 notes that the position is “solely for designing and *not for workroom supervision*” [my italics].²⁹ The fact that the hosiery trade could produce entire garments on their machinery meant that dress designers were also needed in addition to fabric designers. Understanding cut and style, and construction, along with how to trim and ornament garments required completely different skills to being a knitted fabric designer. In 1935 when knitted outerwear was showing no signs of waning in popularity, there were calls for more “competent...dress designers” to be employed in hosiery businesses as there was a fear that without such people “the volume of trade will decline rapidly”.³⁰ Wolsey Ltd certainly employed a number of designers: in 1938 they were recruiting for a knitwear designer to work in their Ladies’ Jumper and Cardigan department, suggesting that there were already other designers at work in other departments.³¹ Wolsey were not alone, and some firms had clearly been employing professional designers for some time. A job advert in 1930 noted that applicants

must be capable of taking charge of the entire making up, designing, costing and the productive side of getting out garments at competitive prices.³²

From around this date, both Nottingham and Leicester which were centres of the hosiery trade had colleges where knitwear design for both fabrics and garments could be studied. A newspaper report about

²⁶ “Creating Demand by Novelty in Design”, *HT*, September 1931, p. 26.

²⁷ “Trade Conditions and Progress in Leek”, *DO*, Leek Supplement, July 1925.

²⁸ “Importance of Design in the Knitwear Trade”, *HT*, June 1930 p. 32.

²⁹ “Work Girls Wanted”, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 9 January 1930, p. 2.

³⁰ “Our Enterprising Machine Builders”, *HT*, February 1935.

³¹ “Situations Vacant”, *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 23 July 1938, p. 2.

³² “Late Advertisements Designer and Cutter”, *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 1 January 1930, p. 15.

Nottingham College of Art in 1937 records that students received “practical as well as theoretical instruction” including how to design and cost goods to ensure they would be a “commercial proposition”.³³

Hosiery manufacturers recognised that theirs was a market which had immense potential for growth, with knitwear becoming an important part of people’s wardrobe. Not all of this growth came from selling into new areas of the market: in some cases, such as underwear, knitwear had made enormous inroads into the existing woven fabric market as consumers turned away from stiff fabrics towards more comfortable, sleeker materials. In the interwar period, for the first time we can see knitted and woven fabrics coming into competition with each other as they sought to increase their share of the home market. As early as 1923, *The Textile Manufacturer* contained an article which debated the relative merits of knitted versus woven fabrics.³⁴ In the 1930s competition with woven fabrics reached a new level with the huge growth of warp knitting. Warp knitting is a technique which produces a fabric which it is less likely to ladder and has more stability than a lateral (traditional) knit, whilst maintaining flexibility and stretch. The extensive use of warp knitting came about because of rayon: wool and cotton yarns were simply too fibrous to be used effectively on the warp loom, but rayon, with its smooth filaments was ideal. Warp knit fabrics could not only be made quickly and cheaply, but were deemed to be “extremely elegant” with a drape and handle which suited the slim silhouette of the era.³⁵ It was these properties which made rayon warp knits eminently suitable not only for underwear, but also for dresses, a mainstay of the 1930s female wardrobe. The appearance of these fabrics could also be varied relatively easily. Simply changing the denier of yarn used created a finer or coarser texture; stripes and herringbone patterns could be incorporated using different coloured yarns; and patterns could be created with different needle configurations (see Figure 15). Perhaps most importantly though, a warp knit was smooth enough to have a design printed upon it. The printing of warp loom rayon fabrics was an innovation itself: traditional knits usually possessed a good deal of texture so it was extremely rare that they were printed; coloured effects were largely achieved through the use of pre-dyed yarns or by

³³ “Exhibition by Nottm Art Students”, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 29 January 1937, p. 6.

³⁴ “Knitted v Woven Fabrics”, *TM*, July 1923, p. 197.

³⁵ “Knitted Outerwear Manufacturers Following Woven Dress Goods Trend”, *HT*, December 1933, p. 23.

dyeing at the end of production. Whilst this could provide interesting effects, there was an overriding trend for printed dress fabrics in the 1930s, and the ability to print on rayon warp knits opened up the dress fabric market to knitters. This put them in direct competition with the weaving trade, and by 1936 the popularity of these fabrics was becoming a distinct concern to weavers. One expert warned,

It is well known that all knitted fabrics come up extremely well when rayon yarn is used and ...it is of great importance that the manufacturer of woven fabrics should do all possible to compete with knitted fabrics.³⁶

Despite these fears, knitwear did not offer a serious level of competition to the weaving industry in the interwar years, but the use of rayon and the design developments which took place to ensure constant novelties and attractiveness were certainly important in bringing knitted fabric to the fore.



Figure 15 Example of different warp knitted rayon designs from 1931-32. *Silk Journal and Rayon World*, January 1931, April 1932 and June 1932. © British Library.

³⁶ "Commercial Rayon Fabrics for Lancashire Looms", *S&R*, November 1936, p. 854.

Woven Design and Rayon Fabrics

As with knitwear, woven fabrics have a textural element which makes up part of the overall design, and just as with knitwear it is the different combinations of yarns and methods of construction which provide the ability to create a huge array of fabrics. The weave and yarn alone make the difference between super-smooth satins, flexible twills, nubby bouclés and figured jacquards. Colour and decoration can also be added to designs by utilising various different colours or types of yarn, and it was this form of woven design where rayon first began to make its mark. Samuel Courtauld wrote in 1926 that the “superior lustre” of rayon made it ideal as an ornamental yarn in cotton weaves, and we have already seen how the weavers Hind, Robinson & Co integrated rayon threads into their fabrics in the 1920s.³⁷ Experts writing for trade journals also suggested that rayon should be used mainly as a decorative feature, stating that rayon

can be employed with success in the weaving trade only when in combination or reinforced with [natural fibres]³⁸

Articles in the trade press of the late 1920s which showed how rayon could be used illustrated and explained progressively more advanced designs, but the quantity of rayon included in each fabric remained low. There were exceptions, and examples of 100% rayon fabrics in slightly more complicated weaves can be found in various trade journals, but these often seem to have been made to show off the textile at trade shows, rather than realising any commercial success. For example, at the Leicester Textile Exhibition, the importer of Italian staple fibre showed a range of fabrics whose “primary objective” was “attracting the attention and admirations of visitors”. One of the fabrics shown was a 100% rayon figured fabric which had been woven on a jacquard loom, which results in a raised design on the fabric. The reviewer praised the “very beautiful” fabric, but noted that it was a “plain calico weave” with a “simple” design with “simple” figuring (see Figure 16).³⁹ Fabrics such as this were designed to be aesthetically pleasing and gain attention at trade shows, but in reality they had little commercial value as they were difficult to produce and lacked any form of durability. The majority of rayon fabrics at this time were made of very simple weaves, particularly when the fibre was

³⁷ “The New Textile”, *The Times*, Artificial Silk Supplement, 9 March 1926, p. vii.

³⁸ “The Decorative Value of Artificial Silk in Textile Fabrics”, *TSJ*, July 1926, p. 61.

³⁹ “The Decorative Value of Artificial Silk in Textile Fabrics”, *TSJ*, April 1927, pp. 53-4.

being used for more than simply decorative effect. By 1925, rayon satins, taffetas and Jappes (an almost textureless fabric) were being produced successfully, all of which had simple woven constructions.⁴⁰ The fashion for plain fabrics meant that at this point creating woven designs and textures was not a major concern for weavers, and the fact that these textiles could be cross-dyed to create a two-tone effect meant that they were not entirely without novelty.⁴¹



Figure 16 A 1927 rayon jacquard, made predominantly for display and promotion. *The Silk Journal*, April 1927 © British Library.

In 1929, crepe fabrics began to come to the forefront of fashion. This fabric is produced with a plain weave, but it uses a tightly twisted ('creped') yarn, which gives the finished material a textured or crinkled effect. Weavers had been able to produce rayon crepes for some time but it was only in the 1930s that these fabrics began their move to a "commanding position" in the market.⁴² The early rayon crepes were simple ripple affairs where the creped yarn was used in just one direction of the weave. One particular achievement was a brand new fabric which had never been created using natural fibres: crepe suede. This used a combination of silk and viscose, which when woven together created a suede like appearance. The use of silk made this

⁴⁰ "The Triumph of Artificial Silk", *DO*, March 1925, p. 30; "New Crepe Fabrics", *SJRW*, November 1932, p. 31.

⁴¹ A fabric can be "cross-dyed" when it is made of two or more different fibres which take up dye differently: the difference in this uptake on each fibre creates a multi-tone effect.

⁴² "New Crepe Fabrics", *SJRW*, November 1932, p. 31.

a relatively expensive fabric, and in order to offer a cheaper version to a wider market, manufacturers began to use de-lustred rayon to replace the silk.⁴³ This fabric was no a flash-in-the-pan, or a gimmick produced for a trade show, and it continued to appear in fashion pages throughout the 1930s. The success of these early crepes in terms of production and sales was such that weavers began to use creped yarns in both the warp and the weft to create pebble crepes, which possessed even greater texture. The demand for crepe fabrics continued through to the late 1930s, by which point ever more sophisticated rayon crepes were being woven using not just simple weaves, but also using dobby and jacquard looms, where a design could be incorporated into the weave itself.⁴⁴ Writing in the 1940s, a textile designer called this period the “beginning of the emancipation of rayon fabric design and construction”: it was serendipitous that experimentation and experience in rayon weaving coincided with fashions for highly textured fabrics, as it forced manufacturers to continue to innovate.⁴⁵ In 1934 *Silk Journal and Rayon World* reported that “interest in connection with rayon fabrics is reverting to cloth rather than to the printed design” [ie. the texture of the fabric].⁴⁶ Paris, as always, had set this trend and *Vogue* of 1933 and 1934 is full of fabrics which have interesting weaves and textures, these of course were expensive to produce as they were made from wool or silk. However, fabric manufacturers now had an ace up their sleeve to recreate these textured fabrics for a mass market: staple fibre. Even before the price drop of 1935 (see above), weavers were using textured yarns made of staple fibre to produce a variety of fashionable dress fabrics: trade journals show that weavers were producing shantung, slubs, cord weaves, moss crepes and chenilles. When the excise duty was removed from staple fibre, even more textured rayons were created including ribs, brocades, cloqués, sharkskin and piqués. Linen effect weaves became incredibly popular for summer wear and there were also advances made in creating mixed fibre suiting fabrics, particularly Celanese and wool combinations (see Figure 17). These were not mere experiments, they were all marketable, fashion-driven fabrics which received positive reviews in trade journals. The low prices of staple fibre had encouraged “a positive epidemic of imitation fabrics”: women

⁴³ “Manchester’s Part in the Evolution of Rayon Fabrics”, *RR*, 3 April 1931, p. 245.

⁴⁴ “Crepes”, *SJRW*, 20 September 1937, p. 38.

⁴⁵ A.T.C. Robinson, *Rayon Fabric Construction*, (Manchester: Thomas Skinner, 1950), p. 2.

⁴⁶ “Woven and Printed Designs in Rayon Fabrics”, *SJRW*, May 1934, p. 27.

could choose from rayon textured fabrics which had they been made in wool, silk or linen would have been unaffordable.⁴⁷ These were still not ‘day-to-day’ materials which were affordable for all, but they did open up a new market of slightly less affluent customers. This relative cheapness encouraged fashion-based rather than “rational” purchases because many of these textured fabrics would have been a fairly short-lived trend. This was precisely the outcome Edmond Symonds had wanted to realise when he had been selling his idea of Fashionocracy in the early 1930s.



Figure 17 A Celanese and wool suiting fabric from March 1939. *Silk Journal and Rayon World*, April 1939 © British Library.

When rayon was first introduced, there had been concerns that the cotton looms of Lancashire simply were not suitable for the fibre and that the workers would struggle with the slippery yarns. Trade journals published articles with hints and tips on how to set up looms to achieve the best results. We saw above that an early articles instructed weavers on how to include rayon in their work: these were often illustrated and the authors provided detailed information on how the fabrics were created. Using these instructive articles, it is possible to see how the weaving of rayon developed in complexity over the years, as both the skills of weavers increased and the properties of rayon were improved (see Figure 18). In 1936, a series of articles was run in *Silk and Rayon* instructing weavers on how to not only copy existing forms of weave and texture, but also how to create “new styles of fabrics”.⁴⁸ Instructions such as this meant that in an environment where there was a progressively faster introduction of new woven styles, mills both could keep up-to-date with the

⁴⁷ “Whither Rayon?”, *SJRW*, November 1938, p. 12.

⁴⁸ “Commercial Rayon Fabrics for Lancashire Looms”, *S&R*, November 1936, p. 856.

latest developments, and implement them. Alongside information from trade journals, weavers could learn from books such as one printed in 1931, *Textile Design and Colour*, which included a dedicated section on the weaving of rayon.⁴⁹ The mid 1930s saw increasing criticism of all forms of ‘public art and design’, with the feeling that the British public were not educated enough to know what good taste was, and that consumerism was degrading this further. Combined with the worries about the future of the British textile trade, fabric designers came in for particular disparagement. The 1935 Council for Art and Industry criticised the abilities and training of woven fabrics designers, with suggestions that current textile design courses were “inadequate” with too much focus on the “drawing of flowers” and not enough on actual design, costing or pattern drafting. There was also concern that the teaching staff were not able to keep “up-to-date” with the latest market trends, with the result there was a lot of “staleness” in woven design.⁵⁰ Much of this disapproval appears to have been misplaced (as we shall see below), and whatever the criticisms of teaching there was certainly innovation happening in the rayon industry, and the fibre was being woven such that it had undeniable “*fashion appeal*” [sic].⁵¹

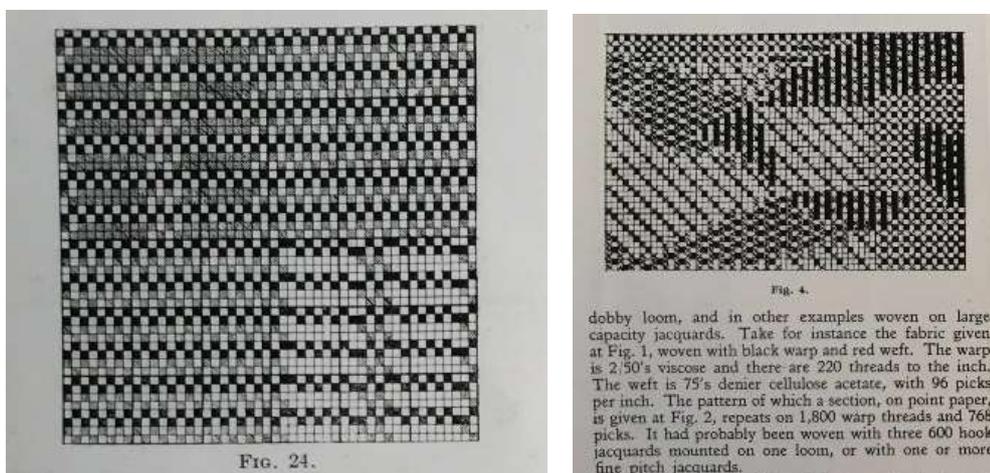


Figure 18 Examples of point papers showing how designs should be woven dating from 1926 (L) and 1936 (R). Note how the complexity had increased. *The Silk Journal*, October 1926 and *Silk Journal and Rayon World*, November 1936 © British Library.

⁴⁹ William Watson, *Textile Design and Colour: Elementary Weaves and Figured Fabrics*, (London: Longmans, 1931).

⁵⁰ Committee on the Training of Designers in the Cotton and Rayon Weaving and Printing Industries, Memo by H.A. Wright, November 1935, Board of Trade: Council for Art and Industry, Minutes and Papers, The National Archives, BT 57/10.

⁵¹ “The Case for Rayon Staple Fibres”, *S&R*, May 1935, p. 251.

By 1939, rayon was no longer simply a cheap alternative to silk, the work and skill of the weaving and knitting trade had ensured that it could be used to imitate any number of natural fabrics, and it could also be used to create completely new effects. Had this progress not been made, rayon would have remained a fibre which was used to create simple imitation silks, and its market and product lifecycle would have been restricted. Instead, rayon products included all manner of textiles in different weights, constructions, and properties, many of which, if made purely of wool, silk or linen, would have been beyond the means of many. The developments which took place meant that rayon offered the consumer well-priced, novel fabrics which offered “luxury itself at prices within reach”.⁵²

Printed Design and Rayon Fabrics

Since the nineteenth century France, and Paris in particular, had been renowned for its textile and dress industries, and it was revered as the capital of fashion.⁵³ For those in the textile trade, keeping up with the latest developments was a crucial part of their work, particularly in an era when fashion “trickled down” from the elite dressmakers and their clients.⁵⁴ Once the press started reporting more widely and in more detail about elite fashions, and at an accelerated pace, being well-informed was even more critical. Many female consumers were drawn to fabrics which were designed on the Continent: “‘the latest French creations’ are chosen by the feminine public every time” remarked a letter in *The Times*.⁵⁵ Not only was this bias present, but in the case of rayon, designs had traditionally been inspired, if not sourced from France. This was owing to the fact that initially the fibre was used to imitate real, high-end silks, and Lyons and Paris were the international centres for these designs. English designers were sent to learn from the French, but their output was never deemed to be as good as that coming from France: a columnist in *Silk & Rayon* said that a “lack of confidence” meant British designs were “inferior and lacking originality”.⁵⁶ In order to satisfy the

⁵² “Commentary on Fashion”, *S&R*, October 1934, p. 475.

⁵³ For a history of how Paris fashions became so internationally dominant, see Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998).

⁵⁴ Fashions largely remained “top down” in this period, with lower classes copying their social superiors. “Trickle up” fashion would only really emerge in the 1960s.

⁵⁵ “Textile Fabrics”, *The Times*, 4 January 1932, p. 8.

⁵⁶ “Print Designs for Rayon Fabrics – V”, *S&R*, June 1937, p. 494.

demand for French designs and the demand for “a varied assortment of styles” some printers bought designs directly from Paris, where there was a multitude of companies specialised in working with overseas producers. For example, Lassalle Frères was a firm with offices in Manchester, Paris and Lyon; they advertised their “exclusive designs” in *The Rayon Record*. Marks and Spencer Ltd also understood this bias, and from 1938 their Design Department bought print designs (for all types of textile) from Paris, “because business could be much stimulated by the introduction of really *genuine* [Parisian] designs”.⁵⁷ For those who did not want to buy complete designs from the Continent, some rayon fabric producers used “information bureaux” such as J. Claude Frères, who sold cuttings of new French fabrics and fashion information to British textile companies.⁵⁸ This intelligence gave manufacturers an overview of what was being produced on the Continent, and provided inspiration for their in-house designers (see below). The CPA made use of services like this: in 1924 they paid £880 for what was termed “French Subscription Patterns” to J. Claudes Frères; the Société De Nouveautés, and Bilbille Baudre.⁵⁹ Board Minutes show that the company spent anywhere from £652 to £940 on these services in the interwar years.⁶⁰ In addition to sourcing information from these bureaux the CPA also ran a “French atelier” in Paris: there is very little information remaining about this office, but it was a sufficiently large operation for it to be rearranged in 1933 to make savings of £4000 a year.⁶¹ Another source of designs for the CPA was a designer named Miss Bohn who was employed in New York for an annual salary of £575, plus extra for any designs purchased from her.⁶² All this information seems to have been collated in Manchester where one hundred and fifty employees in the CPA’s main studio reinterpreted designs to make them “conform” to the current trend, which was based on successes from the previous season.⁶³ By the CPA Chairman’s own admission, the jobs of these so-called “designers” did “not

⁵⁷ Rachel Worth *Fashion for the People: A History of Clothing at Marks and Spencer*, (Oxford: Berg, 2007) p. 70.

⁵⁸ Lawrence E. Neal, *Retailing and the Public*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932), p. 47; Committee on the Training of Textile Designers etc, Chairman’s Statement 13 November 1935, BT 57/10.

⁵⁹ Minutes of the Meeting of Directors 29 July 1924, Calico Printers Association, Manchester Archives, Manchester, M75/2/2/7 [Green 881].

⁶⁰ This ranges from around £37,000 to £47,000 in 2023.

⁶¹ Minutes of the Meeting of Directors 26 September 1933, Calico Printers Association, Manchester Archives, M75/2/2/15 [Green 884]. £4000 is £236,000 in 2023.

⁶² Minutes of the Accounts Committee, 15 May 1934, Calico Printers Association, Manchester Archives, M75/2/2/16 [Green 884] £575 is £34,000 in 2023.

⁶³ Committee for the Training of Textile Designers, Minutes 17 November 1935, Board of Trade: Council for Art and Industry, Minutes and Papers, The National Archives, BT 57/10.

call for originality”, rather they had to have the ability to create a commercially appealing product.⁶⁴ Ferguson Brothers Ltd, whose tagline was “Fashion Fabrics”, also “*adapt[ed]...the latest designs from Paris*” [my italics], and Pevsner noted in his survey of textile design in Britain that the “mill designer does not always find as much...creative work as he would like.”⁶⁵ The approach taken by fabric manufacturers suggests they were making efforts to create continuity of design across the fashion seasons, and avoid too much rapid change or any avantgarde designs which may have alienated the consumer. For many women, being *too* fashionable would not have been in “good taste” and would have made them feel too conspicuous in public.⁶⁶ However, for those critical of British design it simply suggested a lack of originality and confidence on the part of producers.

The main critics of the state of design in the British textile industry were the trade journals devoted to the drapery trade. In the early 1930s these journals constantly derided British textile companies for not being as innovative or successful as their French counterparts. “Our manufacturers must be less afraid of originality and imagination” was a typical criticism, and one which was repeated over and over again.⁶⁷ Various authors believed that the way to save the British textile trade was to produce high quality designs, such as those which came from France, which would not only encourage more textile purchases, but would also elevate the status of British design. However well intentioned, this criticism was particularly unfair: the British textile industry had been shaped by its focus on quality rather than design, and, in fact, there were frequent complaints by British textile companies that their designs had been copied by overseas manufacturers.⁶⁸ The French designs which were so often held up in comparison had often been created specifically for use in high-end garments, in direct collaboration with a couturier, as opposed to being made for a mass market. These

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Charles Thurnam, “Centenary: Ferguson Bros, Holme Head Works, Carlisle 1824-1924”, (printed privately, 1924), p. 62; Nikolaus Pevsner, *Industrial Art in England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), p. 49.

⁶⁶ Catherine Horwood, *Keeping Up Appearances: Fashion and Class Between the Wars*, (Stroud: Sutton, 2005), p. 63, and Topic Collection 18_1_B, Mass Observation Archive, Brighton, Sussex.

⁶⁷ “What Makes Fabrics for Women’s Wear Popular?”, *SJRW*, January 1935, p. 29.

⁶⁸ The CPA claimed there had been over 1000 design infringed in 1934 and 1935 see “Calico Printers’ Association”, *The Times*, 19 September 1935, p. 18.

textiles were often at the forefront of textile design, and the high production costs could be covered because they were created for, and sold to, a very niche audience: it was not unusual for these fabrics to be used in garments which sold for £100 or more and which would last for only a season.⁶⁹ For the vast majority of consumers, paying this much for a garment which would be worn for a matter of months until it went out of fashion was simply an impossibility. Understanding that this was not their audience, British manufacturers and designers rightly concentrated on producing high volume products at a reasonable cost. Tight cost controls were essential in this business model, particularly as the prices consumers paid for rayon fabrics continued to fall throughout the 1930s. The Chairman of the CPA estimated that the design and printing of a fabric made up less than 2 ½d per yard of the retail price.⁷⁰ The average retail price of a CPA rayon fabric at this time was 2s 10d, so this is less than 9% of the cost of the fabric.⁷¹ Even when multiplied up to the vast volumes of rayon produced, and given economies of scale, this was a tight budget to work with.

Whilst some larger companies employed their own designers and spent significant amounts on subscription pattern services, both they and other companies bought in textile designs from outside sources, such as freelancers and specialist design companies.⁷² The cost of an individual design from these sources was remarkably low. In the mid-1930s there were various estimates about what a pattern cost to purchase: according to the Board of Trade commission it ranged from £1 to £10; Pevsner noted that the average textile design was £4; and Thomas Barlow, reckoned that his company, Barlow and Jones Ltd, paid around £1s 12d for designs.⁷³ Although the designs themselves may not have been expensive, the cost of turning them into a textile product involved a considerable capital outlay. Engraving the design on a roller was £50 to £100

⁶⁹ "Advice to Textile Buyers", *The Guardian*, 14 February 1930, p. 21.

⁷⁰ Committee on the Training of Designers in the Cotton and Rayon Weaving and Printing Industries, Memo by Lennox Lee 28 February 1936, Board of Trade: Council for Art and Industry, Minutes and Papers, The National Archives, BT 57/10.

⁷¹ Figures taken from CPA advert *DO*, January 1936.

⁷² Examples of external designers in this period are Headon Designs Ltd, W.N. Hall, Walbank and Parkin Ltd, and Lasalle Frères, all of whom advertised in trade journals.

⁷³ Committee on the Training of Designers in the Cotton and Rayon Weaving and Printing Industries, Board of Trade: Council for Art and Industry, Minutes and Papers, The National Archives, BT 57/10; Pevsner, *Industrial Art In England*, p. 49.

dependent upon complexity, and each colour used in a design required its own roller. Rollers were also expensive items: they were often made of copper and in 1936, the CPA had an incredible £723,000 on their balance sheet for them.⁷⁴ To create an initial print run it was usual to spend around £400 on materials.⁷⁵ Thomas Barlow provides us with another insight into printing costs: he noted that at his company, for each colour used on a fabric a minimum of 600 yards needed to be printed and sold to cover their initial costs; so a two colour design needed a 1,200 yards minimum, or three colours 1,800 yards and so on.⁷⁶ The same company typically produced one hundred designs per year for their main dress fabric range, and each one could be produced in a variety of different colourways; Barlow estimated that this meant they produced 600 unique fabrics per annum, meaning their total initial outlay was sizeable.⁷⁷ Pevsner's survey of industrial art undertaken in 1937 also gives us some indication of the scale of designs and recovering costs. He suggested that a mass producer of dress goods needed to produce around 450 different designs per year, and that that for a middle range fabric, up to 10,000 yards needed to be sold of one design for it to be profitable. In the "cheaper Manchester trade", which some rayon producers were certainly part of, some 30,000 to 50,000 yards were needed.⁷⁸ What is most remarkable about this is that most of the designs were chosen and developed by a relatively small number of individuals, with very little market research or contact with the consumer. It was realised that the choice of designs "involve[d] a great deal of responsibility", but advice on how to realise success was limited. One trade journal merely suggested that the selection of designs should "not be based on personal taste, but on artistic, commercial taste."⁷⁹ Some companies selected designs, and then let their female employees "give a guide as to the feminine outlook."⁸⁰ Larger companies were aware that they needed to be in closer contact with the consumer: in 1936 Horrockses, Crewdson and Co Ltd began

⁷⁴ "The Calico Printers Association", *Manchester Guardian*, 17 September 1936, p. 18. £42m in 2023.

⁷⁵ Committee on the Training of Designers in the Cotton and Rayon Weaving and Printing Industries, Board of Trade: Council for Art and Industry, Minutes and Papers, The National Archives, BT 57/10

⁷⁶ 13 November 1935 Minutes in *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Pevsner, *Industrial Art In England* p. 48 and p. 62. This presumably includes all business overheads, not just the cost of goods.

⁷⁹ "Print Designs for Dress Fabrics", *S&R*, March 1935, p. 140; "Print Design for Rayon Dress Fabrics – II", March 1937, p. 208.

⁸⁰ "Print Designs for Rayon Dress Fabrics", *S&R*, March 1935, p. 140.

to implement basic market research in the form of “additional statistics [for] the analysis of the trends of the trade...in the various classes of goods”, but these were the actions of a large and successful company, and certainly not the norm.⁸¹ It was when wholesalers decided to buy their stock that textile manufacturers had some idea of whether a fabric would be successful, and even then, it was only if the wholesaler returned for more of the same design that they would have known it was a success with makers-up or consumers.

From Paris to the Public: an examination of the dissemination of rayon designs

Designers and textile manufacturers had always relied on changes in fashion to maintain relevance and profitability, but as mass production methods improved, profitability required women to not only frequently change their clothing to follow fashions, but also to purchase and own more outfits than they had before. Manufacturers needed to produce a wider range of designs, and ensure that these were fashionable, and thus, would become obsolete relatively quickly. As we have already seen many of the trends which rayon manufacturers imitated originated in Paris. The reproduction of these trends was not instantaneous though: it took time for manufacturers to establish what the most popular Parisian fashions were, and then it was estimated that it took around a year for a newly designed fabric to move from concept to being stocked by makers-up or retailers. This means the total time it took for Parisian designs to reach the British consumer was something close to a year and a half. This time lag was significant when women were becoming used to fashion news being flown by plane and then appearing in the following day's newspaper. Manufacturers worked to hasten this process, and by the late 1930s some could “rush-through” a limited number of novelty fabrics in around four months.⁸² Using French *Vogue*, trade journals and the consumer press, it is possible to demonstrate how designs were translated from Paris into rayon fabrics for the British public, and gain a sense of the timescales involved (see Table III at end of Chapter). *Vogue* specialised in reporting the absolute latest fashion news to readers in France; its pages are replete with the newest creations of *haute couture* designers and textiles from high-end manufacturers. I have chosen to use French *Vogue* as so many British textile

⁸¹ “Horrockses, Crewdson & Co, Limited”, *Manchester Guardian*, 22 December 1936, p. 18.

⁸² “Print Designs for Rayon Dress Fabrics – VII”, *S&R*, August 1937, p. 699.

manufacturers used French sources for their work. In terms of the drapery trade journals, the focus of those publications had altered in the interwar years: in the early years they looked mainly at the production and functionality of the fibre and fabric, but as the product improved and fashion became ever more important, attention shifted to reporting the latest trends and fabrics. As printing techniques improved, most of these reports were accompanied by photographs, this gave a far more visual immersion in trends, and encouraged the trade to be more fashion conscious, something which the trade journals had long argued was necessary.⁸³ This provides the historian with an excellent visual reference for rayon fabrics, albeit they are printed in greyscale. Concurrently, the women's consumer press began to offer even more up-to-the minute fashion news, and provide information about how readers could buy into this trend by either purchasing garments or making their own. For example, *Weldon's Good Taste* and *Modern Woman* kept up a constant stream of ideas and inspiration for garments, often including details of the latest fabrics being produced by manufacturers. Many fashion illustrations at this date were still hand drawn, but the fabric designs on the garments were illustrated from actual materials which means they could be used by women to determine what the latest pattern releases were, and what would be in fashion.⁸⁴ Unfortunately, the fabrics were rarely identified by the magazines, so in Table III I have used illustrations which indicate the trend, rather than those which are specifically rayon. However, this does confirm that rayon manufacturers able to produce fabrics which were perceived as on-trend by the fashion editors who were making the decisions about what should appear in their publications. The wider appearance of these fabrics shows that novelty fashion fabrics were no longer the preserve of elite fashion houses and their wealthy clientele. The readers of consumer magazines were all potential purchasers of lower cost, trend-driven rayon fabrics.

The consumer press was an important way for manufacturers to tell potential customers that their fabrics were based on the latest trends. Although I will look at advertising in more depth later, the way in which companies disseminated their fashion credentials is worth looking at briefly. Some businesses actively

⁸³ For example "Good Taste is Good Policy", *DO*, June 1929, p. 1; "Styling Fabrics for British Dress Designers", *GMFR*, June 1930, p. 6; "British versus Foreign Designs", *SJRW*, 20 May 1933 amongst many more.

⁸⁴ See *GH*, October 1938, p. 43.

marketed themselves as producing “fashion” fabrics, for example, Ferguson Bros Ltd or Wilemba; others simply designated certain lines or brands as always being in the latest vogue, such as Cepea Fabrics by the CPA. Ferguson’s referenced “style”, “design” and the fact that many of their designs came from France in a sizeable proportion of their adverts. Their main claim was that their fabrics offered the “unmistakeable, expensive Paris look...for just a few shillings”.⁸⁵ Their credentials (or negotiating power) were sufficient for the company to do a tie-up with Chanel in 1933, where they produced fabrics with her name on them, and these fabrics were advertised in British *Vogue*.⁸⁶ Even their lower range fabrics, which retailed as low 1s 11d were marketed as having “new designs and colourings [and] modernist effects” and “with all the modish charm of French printed crepe-de-chine.”⁸⁷ Courtaulds’ range of SanToy printed fabrics offered “the widest range” of fabrics which “smart women” would be seen wearing; Duro Fabrics also claimed to have “a wide range of printed designs.”⁸⁸ The suggestion that there was a wide range of desirable patterns encourages the idea that even if the fabric illustrated in the advert was not to your taste, there would be something in a fabric range which would be suitable, and of course, it would be “in the prevailing mode”.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ “That Paris Look”, undated Ferguson’s advert, Ferguson Brothers; Textile Manufacturers and Printers of Holme Head, Carlisle; Cumbria Archives, Carlisle, DB110/224.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ “Special Display”, *Gloucester Citizen*, 29 April 1931, p. 11.

⁸⁸ Courtaulds advert, *GH*, December 1932, p. 97; Duro advert, *MW*, March 1930, p. 9.

⁸⁹ CPA advert, *MW*, May 1930, p. 4.

An examination of Rayon Fabric Design in the late 1930s

For most of the 1930s, “the printed frock [was] an absolute necessity” in women’s wardrobes, and it was the prevailing style of the 1930s.⁹⁰ As such, fabric with printed designs made up “the bulk of the dress trade”.⁹¹ The fashion for prints was suited to rayons: creating a single colour fabric relying on texture and weave for its design could be costly, but printing allowed “the artistry of the design [to compensate] for anything that may be lacking in the fabric itself.”⁹² Furthermore, the lack of consumer research could also be partly overcome, because as one commentator noted,

It is still a moot point as to whether colour or design makes the strongest appeal [to buyers], but in printed designs the artist has the best of both worlds at his command.⁹³

Extant garments, manufacturers print books, images in trade journals and items in women’s magazines show that printed fabrics with small to medium motifs, either floral or geometric, were prevalent during the decade. These fabrics often had dark backgrounds, with black, brown and navy the most popular, although summer fabrics were often on lighter grounds. The preference for dark colours was seen in a Mass Observation survey in 1939: of the 97 women questioned 76 women stated their preferred dress colour was a dark one; just two said they preferred pastels, and only one said white.⁹⁴ One fashion commentator believed this was partly based on the “serviceability” of these fabrics as they were less likely to show dirt and marks.⁹⁵ This aspect was important to women when they did not own many clothes, and when washing was still largely undertaken as a once-weekly chore.⁹⁶ Dark backgrounds provided the perfect foil for brightly coloured designs, and producing this effect was possible because of more advanced dyes and continuously developing roller-printing techniques. As we have seen, dyes and printing techniques for rayon had developed rapidly: in the 1920s, any designs created on rayon fabrics tended to be due to a dyeing technique such as cross-dyeing or resist effects, but by the 1930s dyeing firms were successfully printing rayon fabrics

⁹⁰ “A Little Wardrobe”, *Manchester Guardian* 3 June 1935, p. 6.

⁹¹ “Print Designs for Dress Fabrics”, *S&R*, March 1935, p. 140.

⁹² “Design again important”, *S&R*, January 1934, p. 34.

⁹³ “Print Designs for Dress Fabrics”, *S&R*, March 1935, p. 140.

⁹⁴ MOA, Topic Collection 18_1_B.

⁹⁵ “Flowers are Prominent”, *SJRW*, December 1936, p. 14.

⁹⁶ For more information on washing in middle class homes, see Jennifer Robson, “The Role of Clothing and Fashion in the Household Budget 1919-1947” PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 1998, pp. 108-113.

using engraved rollers.⁹⁷ The improving quality of these roller printed designs can be seen in sample books in the Ferguson Brothers Ltd archive. The 1930 book contains much simpler designs, and the colours are distinctly muted but by 1938, the colours printed on dark backgrounds are noticeably more intense, and the patterns are more complex in character (see Figure 19). As the decade progressed, fashion dictated that colours used on dress fabrics should be brighter and more vibrant: for example, the British Colour Council's Spring-Summer 1938 Colour Card decreed some of the latest colours to be "Hyacinth...Poker Red...Tangerine...Mayfair Green", while Paris had selected "startling cyclamen...cherry red...acid green...bright tan [and] violet".⁹⁸ These stronger tones were quickly worked into rayon designs with *The Drapers' Organiser* noting that there had been a

sudden burst of colour...[There are] new vivid tones and clear printing that introduces difficult mixed colours such as cyclamen, petunia, Edwardian green and sunshine yellow.⁹⁹



Figure 19 Fabric samples from Ferguson Bros Ltd (L) 1930 (R) 1938. Ferguson Bros Ltd archive, DB 110/208A and DB 110/208, Cumbria Archive Centre, Carlisle.

Floral and geometric prints were ideal for these bright shades and often called for a number of colours in each design. Printers were able to use up to eight tones on a fabric, although this was very much at the limits

⁹⁷ One of the largest producers of rayon, British Celanese Ltd only introduced "a small line of printed fabrics" in late 1928.

⁹⁸ "Colour Bouquet", *DO*, February 1938, p. 71; "Résumé of the Paris Openings", *DO*, September 1938, p. 62.

⁹⁹ "Brilliant New Fabrics", *DO*, November 1938, p. 43.

of practicability and would have been restricted to more expensive lines.¹⁰⁰ The example in Figure 20 was produced by the CPA and uses six colours, with individual colours being used for the petals, and re-used for other parts of the design on different rows. This gives the whole design a coherency in tone, but also tricks the eye into thinking that more than six colours have been used.



Figure 20 Rayon crepe fabric printed by the CPA, 1938. Courtesy of the V&A.

A single design was often reproduced in different colourways to form a range or collection of materials which could be marketed together. In the above illustrations showing Ferguson's rayon fabrics from 1938 (see Figure 19) the designs appear on black backgrounds with the motifs being printed in variations of the same five colours to produce four similar but distinct fabrics. This allowed consumers to choose from a variety of colourways, and broadened the appeal of a fabric without having to create an entirely new design. Similarly in Figure 21 we see that Ferguson Bros produced fabrics which used the same design but different backgrounds as well as different coloured motifs: this meant the same design could be used across seasons,

¹⁰⁰ "Print Designs for Rayon Dress Fabrics II", *S&R*, March 1937, p. 208.

extending its lifetime. Furthermore, it meant changes were “not radical but more evolutionary”, something necessary to avoid any sense of “sartorial revolution” that so many women were wary of.¹⁰¹



Figure 21 Ferguson Bros Ltd fabrics in different colourways, 1938. Ferguson Bros Ltd archive, DB 110/208A and DB 110 /208, Cumbria Archive Centre, Carlisle.

The use of colour was often linked to wider events: in the late 1930s there was an explosion in the number of red, white and blue fabrics being printed and advertised, starting in the year of the Coronation and continuing afterwards. The British Colour Council suggested that whilst the bright reds and blues used for public decor would be too potent for day-to-day wear, “delicate, subdued tones [of red and blue]” would be ideal for dress fabrics particularly as “few people can afford to buy clothes simply to wear on one particular

¹⁰¹ “Print Designs for Rayon Dress Fabrics XII”, *S&R*, January 1938, p. 26; “Paris in the Looking-Glass”, *Leicester Chronicle*, 11 January 1930, p. 9.

occasion.”¹⁰² By the time of the 1937 British Textiles Exhibition, the Coronation was having a “very noticeable effect on colour [and] design” and this quickly filtered through to the presentation of garments in women’s magazines.¹⁰³ In 1937 and 1938, *Woman and Home* used red, white and blue tones for the majority of the colour-printed pages which were interspersed throughout the publications.¹⁰⁴ Reds, blue and whites also appear in an incredible number of front covers of women’s magazines in these two years, which undoubtedly influenced their readers in their choice of garments or fabrics.¹⁰⁵ The information garnered from the Mass Observation survey on clothing colours certainly seems to bear this out: of the 97 women questioned in 1939, 43 of them said that some form of blue was their preferred choice.¹⁰⁶

Colour was not the only consideration when it came to designing: the choice of fabric type and the prevailing style of garments also played a role in determining what a design would look like. Some manufacturers and commentators correctly argued that “design [could] not be isolated from the cutting up of dresses” and that textile designers needed a knowledge of “dressmaking [and] cutting”.¹⁰⁷ The fabrics produced in the 1930s, with their dark backgrounds and small motifs were ideally suited to the slimline garments which dominated fashion in these years. Fabrics with stripes, lines and plaids were also popular as they either emphasised the long slim shape of the garments or imitated the bias cuts of fashionable dresses; they could also be used to highlight details of garment construction (see Figure 22). When producing designs such as this, the direction of the print on the fabric also had to be taken into consideration: it was deemed best practice on mainstream

¹⁰² “Cocoon and Spinneret”, *SJRW*, March 1936, p. 12.

¹⁰³ “The British Industries Fair 1937”, *S&R*, March 1937, p. 193.

¹⁰⁴ *W&H*, 1937 and 1938.

¹⁰⁵

Magazine and Year	Number of Covers featuring predominant reds, whites and blues
<i>Weldon’s Good Taste 1937</i>	12 of 12
<i>Woman and Home 1937</i>	11 of 12
<i>Woman’s Fair 1938</i>	5 of 12
<i>Modern Woman 1938</i>	11 of 12

¹⁰⁶ MOA, Topic Collection 18_1_B. I have included “blue”, “dark blue”, “navy” and “light blue” in my count.

¹⁰⁷ Committee on the Training of Designers in the Cotton and Rayon Weaving and Printing Industries, Thomas Barlow, Committee Minutes, 13th November 1935, Board of Trade: Council for Art and Industry, Minutes and Papers, The National Archives, BT57/10; “Print Design for Rayon Dress Fabrics V”, *S&R*, June 1937, p. 494.

fabrics to ensure designs were not “one-way”, that is, the material could be cut out and used the right way, or upside down.¹⁰⁸ This was so that garment makers, either professional or at home, could avoid wastage when they cut out a pattern, thus requiring less fabric. Although this sounds counter intuitive for a fabric manufacturer trying to sell large volumes, buyers could be swayed by the requirement for more material if it could only be but one way. For commercial makers-up, often working to tight costing limits, multiway fabrics were essential. With “popular” or “psychological” price points being used to appeal to customers and retail buyers, the cost of materials was necessarily constrained. For example, Wilkinson and Riddell, a wholesaler, sold many of their dresses at 8s 11d or 12s 11d: these low prices meant that every inch of fabric counted. Similarly, for the home dressmaker, the amount of fabric purchased mattered: even an extra metre of fabric would cost an average of 2s 11d an amount which could easily sway them towards another, more economical, fabric.¹⁰⁹



Figure 22 Dresses showing how stripes, plaids and lines could be used to accentuate design details on garments, 1937. *Weldon's Good Taste*, March, July and September 1937 © British Library.

¹⁰⁸ “Print Design for Rayon Dress Fabrics V”, *S&R*, June 1937, p. 494.

¹⁰⁹ Sewing patterns for home dressmakers of include the meterage of a fabric required if the design is plain, or does not need matching. If a fabric can only be used in one direction, then they note that “extra” fabric will be needed, although this is rarely quantified as it will depend on the design of the fabric. Average fabric costs will be looked at in more detail in Chapter 9.

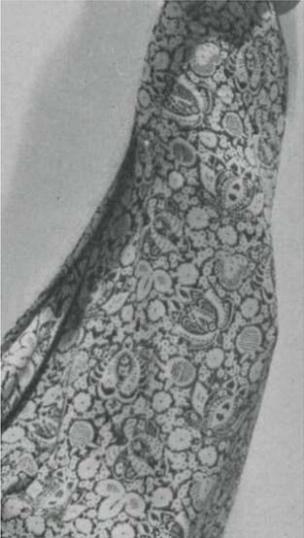
Evaluation

“Novelty coupled with quality” was imperative for rayon producers in the interwar period.¹¹⁰ Whilst in the early years of the fabric, there were myriad issues with quality and functionality, many of these problems were overcome by the 1930s. Whilst the “glamour [and lustre] of the all-rayon fabrics hypnotised the public” in the 1920s, like any trend, this did not last. The matte fabrics of the 1930s used design rather than sheen to appeal to their audience, and the developments which allowed better designs to be created were largely in place by the early 1930s. Stronger and duller yarns allowed knitted and woven designs to be produced: the trend for textured fabrics saw rayon utilised in myriad ways, and these novelties broadened the market for the fibre. Similarly, the development of printing techniques which allowed designs to be put onto fabrics more effectively proved to be fortuitously timed, and again allowed this fashion to be fully exploited by fabric printers and finishers. The fashion consciousness of the manufacturer and consumer increased vastly: it was said that “a desire for change [had] become one of the dominant needs of modern life” and manufacturers realised that by imitating trends they could tap into this desire and increase their sales.¹¹¹ Using France as their main source, manufacturers were able to create low cost versions and interpretations of high-end fabrics, and although it took a long time for these designs to appear in Britain, they were reaching the lower end of the market much faster than previously. Rayon proved itself to be a fabric which was suitable for both woven and printed designs, and ideal for the garment styles of the 1930s. As so often, rayon proved to be in the right place at the right time, but as we shall see, design and quality also needed to be combined with publicity and showmanship in order for rayon to become a successful consumer product.

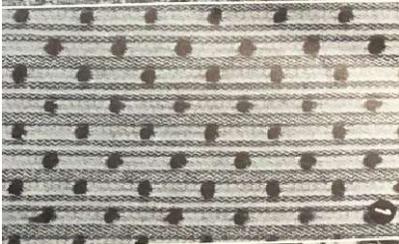
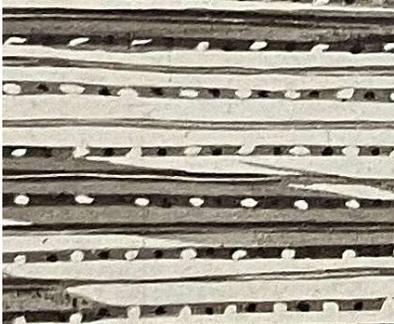
¹¹⁰ “Textile Designs”, *Manchester Guardian*, 8 November 1930, p. 13.

¹¹¹ “Good Taste is Good Policy”, *DO*, June 1929, p. 1.

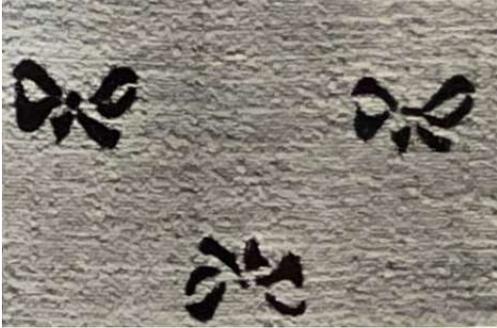
Table III – Tracking Designs from Paris to the British Consumer

<i>Vogue</i> (Paris)	<i>Silk Journal and Rayon World</i>	British Consumer Magazine	Time taken from <i>Vogue</i> to British consumer magazines
 <p>May 1937 Dress by Francevramont</p>	 <p>April 1938 British Celanese “[in] the Paris <i>haute couture</i>...occasional dress prints had [these] strange floral conception as their leading motif”¹</p>	 <p>May 1938, <i>Good Housekeeping</i></p>	12 months

¹ “Searchlights on New Fabrics”, *SJRW*, April 1938, p. 14.

 <p>February 1937 Dash-striped blouse (maker unknown)</p>	 <p>May 1938 Courtaulds “there are a range of fancy jerseys with dots embroidered on striped grounds”</p>	 <p>June 1938, <i>Weldon’s Good Taste</i></p>	<p>17 months</p>
 <p>July 1937 “Les Tenues de Plage” [Beach Outfits]</p>	 <p>April 1938 British Celanese “the Celanese stylists are wisely recommending [this fabric] for beach wear”²</p>	 <p>July 1938, <i>Woman and Home</i></p>	<p>12 months</p>

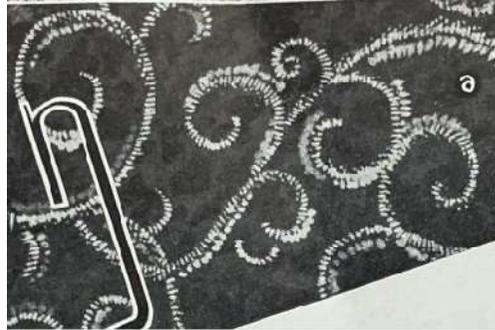
² Ibid.

 <p>July 1937 Mainbocher floral satin gown</p>	 <p>August 1938 Courtaulds "This number is printed on a very bright satin"³</p>	 <p>December 1938, <i>Weldon's Good Taste</i></p>	<p>18 months</p>
 <p>June 1937 Paquin gown with bows – one of many outfits to include bows and ribbons in this season.</p>	 <p>January 1938 British Celanese Crepe fabric printed with bows.</p>	 <p>August 1938, <i>Modern Woman</i></p>	<p>14 months</p>

³ "Newcomers for Autumn", *SJRW*, August 1938, p. 11



February 1937
Satin by Chatillon Mouly Roussel



May 1938
Courtaulds
Broché fabric



July 1938, *Woman*

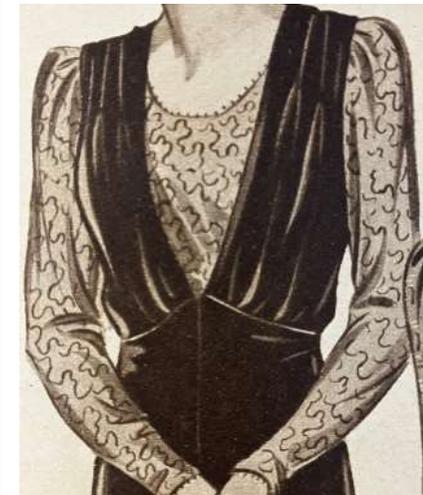
17 months



Left - March 1937
Design by Ducharne

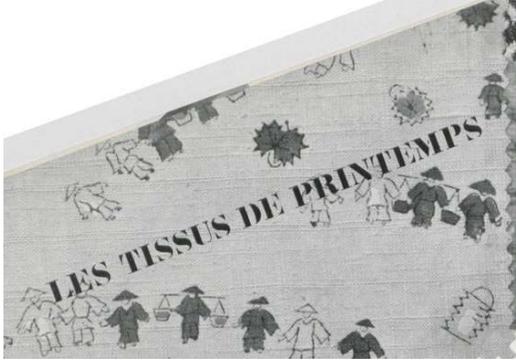


May 1938
Driver Hartley & Co

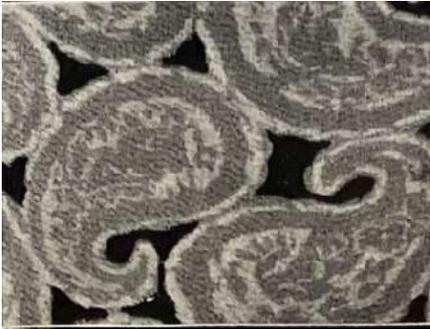


September 1938, *Woman and Home*

18 months

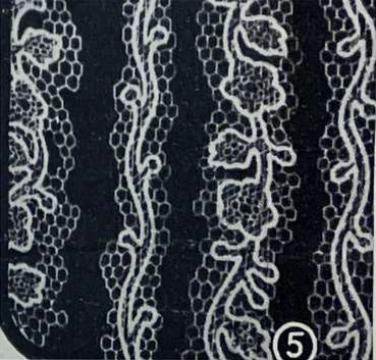
 <p>February 1937 Fabric by Ducharne</p>	 <p>January 1938 Courtaulds</p>	  <p>(T) May 1938, <i>Modern Woman</i>. Courtaulds advert for the fabric in central column. (B) July 1938, <i>Woman</i></p>	<p>15 months</p>
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 <p>May 1937 Lace blouse by Lucile Paray on a coloured background</p>	 <p>May 1938, Cepea Fabrics Heavy lace over printed with blue</p>	 <p>August 1938, <i>Weldon's Good Taste</i> Lace was a significant trend seen in all Magazines in the latter part of 1938.</p>	<p>15 months</p>
 <p>April 1937 Blouse by Rochas. Appliqued lace circles</p>	 <p>January 1938 Fraser Hinde & Hardy Patterned polka dots</p>	 <p>August 1938, <i>Woman and Home</i></p>	<p>17 months</p>

 <p>April 1937 Jacket by Germaine Lecomte</p>	 <p>June 1938, Cepea Fabrics</p> <p>“Graftons [part of the CPA], which is always quick off the mark...have brought [this type of fabric] across the Channel”⁴</p>	 <p>November 1938, <i>Weldon's Good Taste</i></p>	<p>19 months</p>
 <p>February 1937 From a dress by Piguet. White outlines on a blue background.</p>	 <p>January 1938 Rose and Hubble</p> <p>“White outline and white details” on a blue background.⁵</p>	 <p>June 1938, <i>Woman</i></p>	<p>17 months</p>

⁴ “Advance Guard of Dress Fabrics”, *SJRW*, June 1938, p. 13.

⁵ “More Beautiful than Ever”, *SJRW*, January 1938, p. 24.

 <p>February 1938 Fabric by Chatillon Mouly Roussel</p>	 <p>August 1938 Beales, Powner & Plowright Lace design on a black background</p>	 <p>December 1938, <i>Woman and Home</i></p>	<p>10 months</p>
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When an industry reaches exhibition point it may be said to have come of age.

The Times Artificial Silk Supplement, March 1926

5. Rayon and Trade Exhibitions: “An Effective Means of Propaganda”¹

During the period that rayon was emerging into the market in the 1920s, modern trade fairs and exhibitions were becoming a acknowledged part of national and international commercial activity. In this chapter I will set out how rayon was able to capitalise on this new form of business meeting, and the effect which trade fairs had upon the perception and consumption of rayon in Britain. It is not surprising that rayon should make use of fairs as a form of selling, after all, textile manufacture has a long history of using markets for selling goods. Historically, fairs were intended for “the purpose of depositing and *exposing [goods] to sale*” [my italics], however, cloths were taken in bulk, sold, and then transported to a finisher by the buyer.² Yet as industrialization increased the quantity of goods being produced, trading at fairs began to decline: increasingly manufacturers would show examples of their work to buyers at their large new factories. It seemed that selling at fairs would become a thing of the past.

However, at the same time as manufacturers were retreating to their factories to buy and sell cloth, Britain was developing what Tony Bennett has termed an “exhibitionary complex”: this was comprised of a growing movement of “opening up of objects to more public contexts of inspection and visibility”, through museums, shows and exhibitions.³ The success of the 1851 Great Exhibition showed the extent to which the public and manufacturers had come to embrace this type of event, and an

¹ “Britain’s First Artificial Silk Show”, *DO*, January 1926, p. 31.

² For example in Leeds, the first cloth hall was built in 1711 for merchants to sell cloth, but prior to this there had been an open air market. “First Leeds Cloth Hall”, <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1375042>>, accessed 12 June 2020; the extant Piece Hall in Halifax was built in 1779 woollen and worsted goods from the surrounding area, and the scale and architecture of the building demonstrate the importance of this type of trading; see also Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Fashionability: Abraham Moon and the Creation of British Cloth for the Global Market*, (Manchester: University of Manchester) pp. 13-15.

³ Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex”, *new formations*, (4:1) 1988, at <http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/newformations/04_73.pdf>, accessed 15 October 2020, pp. 73-102 (p. 85)

“Exhibition Culture” sprang up in Britain. Large commercial exhibitions combining both spectacle and displays of objects to the public, used purpose built venues such as Earls Court, Olympia and the Crystal Palace and attracted millions of visitors.⁴ It was the display of manufactured goods at these events which led to the development of a *trade* exhibition culture, where goods were displayed for the expressed purpose of selling them. Albert Carreras and Lidia Torra’s 2005 article expounds the theory that while there is a long global history of markets and fairs for trading, the Modern Trade Fair (MTF) only properly emerged in the First World War and after. One of the important precedents for the MTF was set at Leipzig in 1894 where exhibitors provided samples rather than showing all their stock.⁵ The increasing sophistication of mass production meant that customers could rely on goods being of a particular standard, and seeing just a sample was sufficient before placing an order. Businesses no longer needed to transport and display their entire stock at a fair: goods could remain in warehouses until required, or be manufactured on demand. For textile manufacturers, the ability to show samples of their products at a fair was a significant benefit. Cloth is bulky, heavy and unwieldy to transport and display, which is partly why fabric manufacture and trading historically took place in such close geographical proximity. The Sample Fair meant that the heavy transport costs were avoided, and a wider range of fabrics could be shown to appeal to a wider number of buyers, and these could be displayed in a more attractive way. In the years following the First World War, closed international borders and the economic consequences of war meant that nations began to develop MTFs to promote both economic growth and international commercial relationships.⁶ Rayon’s development coincided with this post-war rise of MTFs and producers were able to take advantage of

⁴ I have borrowed the term “Exhibition Culture” from Deborah Sugg-Ryan’s PhD thesis, *The Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition and Suburban Modernity*, University of East London, 1995. See Jeffrey Auerback, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), and John Glanfield, *Earls Court and Olympia: From Buffalo Bill to the Brits* (Stroud: Sutton, 2003) for an introduction to Earls Court and Olympia.

⁵ Albert Carreras and Lidia Torra, “Why Did Modern Trade Fairs Appear?”, Department of Economics and Business, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Economics Working Papers, 2005 available at <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/6591584.pdf>>, accessed 11 June 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

them to sell their goods and to build a more cohesive industry, and to create displays and spectacles which would promote rayon as a textile for the masses.

Exhibiting Rayon: A Moveable Feast

In January 1926, *The Drapers' Organiser* trade journal proudly announced that they were hosting the first exhibition dedicated solely to rayon.⁷ Named The British Artificial Silk Exhibition (BASE) and to be held at Holland Park Hall in London from 19th to 24th April of that year, the editor of *The Drapers' Organiser* claimed it was "one of the most important [enterprises] we have yet undertaken" and hoped it would prove to be "the greatest advertisement that British artificial silk has ever secured".⁸ In holding the BASE, *The Drapers' Organiser* was following an established pattern of exhibitions in the textile trade: cotton fairs had been held in both London and Manchester since the start of the century; The Drapery Exhibition had been held annually since 1908, and a Silk Exhibition had been held since 1894.⁹ Covering all aspects of the drapery and textile trade, *The Drapers' Organiser* had been a vocal supporter of the rayon industry since the early 1920s. Even so, the decision to hold a national trade fair in such a large exhibition space when rayon made up only a small percentage of the textile trade at this time was a bold one. The aim was to create "an effective means of propaganda" which would raise the profile of rayon, and promote the fibre to home and overseas buyers.¹⁰

The success of the initial exhibition meant that *The Drapers' Organiser* ran increasingly large rayon exhibitions at Holland Park Hall until 1928 when it was forced to move owing to the sale of the Hall. The 1929 Exhibition was held at Olympia's New Hall, but the 1930 Fair had to be cancelled due to a lack of suitable accommodation.¹¹ In 1931 the BASE returned, this time at the Royal Albert Hall: it was the first time the Hall had been used for exhibition purposes, but making use of this space allowed the

⁷ "A Colour Forecast and an Exhibition", *DO*, January 1926, p. 30.

⁸ *Ibid* and "Britain's First Artificial Silk Show", *DO*, January 1926, p. 31.

⁹ Numerous examples can be found advertised and reported on in the national press.

¹⁰ "Britain's First Artificial Silk Show", *DO*, January 1926, p. 31.

¹¹ "Artificial Silk", *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 22 October 1929, p. 19.

rayon trade to exhibit in conjunction with the British Industries Fair (BIF) which was organised by the Department of Overseas Trade.¹² Although still run by *The Drapers' Organiser*, the BASE now had a "direct association" with the BIF.¹³ This was made clear in the advertising for the event (see Figure 23), and "a continuous service of motor-coaches" linked the Albert Hall with Olympia and White City.¹⁴ The rayon industry was now part of an Exhibition which was on a truly grand scale: the cotton industry had decided to combine their fair with the BIF too, and it was claimed that the combination of cotton, artificial silk and other fabrics would form the largest display of textiles ever organised.¹⁵



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At no other time or place can the trade buyer see the manufactures of the Empire so quickly or in such comfort. Trade Buyers should also visit the BRITISH COTTON TEXTILE Section of the Fair at the White City, London (Feb. 16th—28th), and the EXHIBITION OF BRITISH ARTIFICIAL SILK GOODS at the Albert Hall, London (Feb. 16th—to 21st), which is being held in direct association with the Fair.

For full particulars apply to:
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or to
THE SECRETARY, CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, BIRMINGHAM

C.F.H.

Figure 23 An advertisement for the BIF showing the connection with the Exhibition of British Artificial Silk Goods.

In 1932, the BASE was fully subsumed into the BIF, becoming part of the British Textiles Exhibition (BTE). This was welcomed by the BIF committee as it was felt that in previous years "the various

¹² "Artificial Silk", *Manchester Guardian*, 16 August 1930, p. 21.

¹³ BIF Advertisement, *Daily Mail*, 9 February 1931, p. 12.

¹⁴ "Where to go and what to see while in England", *Daily Mail*, 22 January 1931, p. 10.

¹⁵ "Miles of Ideas", *Sunday Times*, 4 January 1931, p. 16.

branches of the [textile] industry were approaching the consumer, not as partners, but as rivals.”¹⁶ Although the different parts of the textile industry would still be divided into sections at the BTE, it was hoped that promoting them as one would strengthen their home and overseas position. The rayon trade would exhibit at White City as part of the BTE until the entire BIF moved under one roof at Earls Court in 1938.¹⁷ Alas, after just two years in this new home, the BIF fell victim to the war, when the exhibiting and consumption of superfluous consumer goods came grinding to a halt.

Examining Trade Fairs: a Methodology

Although the MTF has a fairly basic overriding function, to support industry and facilitate economic growth, there are many other purposes for trade fairs and many of these are dependent upon the role of the participant i.e. a business, trade buyer, the public or the press. The creation and workings of an MTF are also heavily influenced by external factors, from the political and economic, to the social and cultural. The fair in turn synthesizes and projects these influences onto their participants and visitors, and in this instance, as the interwar years progressed, onto those viewing the fair through newspapers or film. We can see the MTF as a particular spatial and temporal moment where many of the forces which are brought to bear on the consumer converge. As such, studying them can crystallise how various external circumstances led to particular representations of rayon; how British manufacturers wanted rayon to be perceived by the trade and the consumer; and how the influence of these fairs rippled out into wider consumer society. Evaluating the complex nature of an MTF can be difficult, and in order to attempt this for the BASE and BTE I will employ a system of “frames”, which anthropologist Brian Moeran has identified as being present at trade fairs.¹⁸ These frames offer a mechanism through which to view a fair, its goods and its participants; they can help show the

¹⁶ “Textiles at the British Industries Fair”, *SJRW*, March 1932, p. 26.

¹⁷ This move had been planned for 1937, but with the increasing threat of war, the government prioritised rearmament over trade. Steel was reallocated to munitions production, and the completion of Earls Court was delayed by a year.

¹⁸ Brian Moeran, “Trade Fairs, Markets and Fields: Framing Imagined as Real Communities”, *Historical Social Research*, Vol. 36 No. 3 (2011), pp. 79-98.

objectives, inspiration and influences on a fair, and show the effects an exhibition has on both the industry and across a wider sphere. Although Moeran identifies five frames, I am going to focus on the three listed below:

- i) The *spatial frame*, or rather, the specific place in which an exhibition takes place. Historically fairs and markets had been open air, but by the nineteenth century specific large-scale venues such as the Crystal Palace and the White City were being established. This frame also includes the temporary architecture, such as stands and displays in specific exhibitions.
- ii) The *temporal frame*: trade fairs and exhibitions are by their nature short-term events, lasting only a few days; but they are also events which are (usually) repeated on an annual basis. The timing of the event helps to denote seasons of trading, and the subsequent retailing of goods - this is especially the case in areas such as fashion where styles are seasonal. I am also including external events in this framework, as the coincidental timing of a specific occasion can have a significant impact upon the trade fair.
- iii) The *functional frame* captures the many events and activities which take place at an Exhibition. This not only includes display, trade and business undertakings but also activities such as news reporting, advertising or trend gathering. This frame can be used to explore how specific functions express the broader aims of the organisers and exhibitors.¹⁹

The Spatial Frame

The 1926 BASE was held at Holland Park Hall, which was a well-established exhibition space, having hosted events since around 1913, and based in central London.²⁰ However, it was the interior of the hall which was of more importance to the organisers. An “eminent firm of architects” had been

¹⁹ Moeran also identifies the social and symbolic frames, which I have decided to exclude on the grounds that they are not as relevant to my thesis as those listed above.

²⁰ “New companies registered”, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 September 1913, p. 2.

retained, with one of the main designers being Joseph Emberton who was renowned for his modern work.²¹ The stated aim of *The Drapers' Organiser* was to produce the first Exhibition in Britain which had been designed as a “harmonious architectural composition”, with stands and stages all designed around one theme to give a sense of “harmony” and of the unity of the industry.²² To this end, the rayon industry would have to submit to “individual interests [being] welded into a general and appropriate design” [my italics].²³ The resulting all-white stands were art-deco inspired, some claiming their design went to the point of “austerity”, but *The Drapers' Organiser* argued that this simple style showed off “the great beauty of rayon” (see Figure 24).²⁴ A correspondent from *The Times* agreed, writing,

Artificial silks lend themselves admirably to the art of display. The Exhibition is being arranged in such a way to give this property its full value.²⁵



Figure 24 Various stands at the first BASE in 1926. *The Drapers' Organiser*, May 1926 © British Library.

²¹ “The First Exhibition of British Artificial Silk Goods”, *DO*, February 1926, p. 39.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “Revelation of British Textile Genius”, *DO*, May 1926, p. 25.

²⁴ See *DO*, May 1926 for various photographs.

²⁵ “First All-British Exhibition”, *The Times Artificial Silk Supplement*, 9 March 1926, p. vii.

The advertising of the rayon trade fairs often made use of either the hall itself, or the innovative interior, and the illustrations (illustrations rather than photographs were used) were created in a modern style. In Figure 25 a spotlight is quite literally being shone on the new industry. Whilst the depiction of Holland Park Hall is stylised it shows the size of the exhibition and it reinforces to the reader that this is a London based, and therefore nationally important, fair. The wholly black background would have been particularly striking when printed amongst other advertisements which were usually black on white.

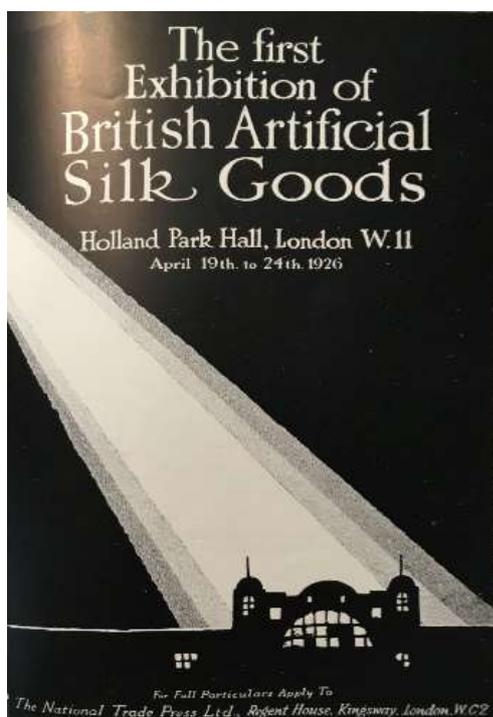


Figure 25 Advertisement for the rayon exhibitions in 1926 (L) and 1933 (R). *The Silk Journal*, March, 1926; *The Drapers' Organiser*, November 1933. Both © British Library.

There are also occasions where manufacturers used the venue as part of their advertisements for the event, such as the one above by British Celanese which makes use of the unique and easily identifiable architecture of the White City. The minimalist style of this advert also references the streamlined interior, something which had been kept white and unadorned since the inception of the BASE, and which marked the aspirations of rayon manufacturers such as British Celanese to appear modern. It was not only the exterior of the venue which was made use of in previews and adverts. When *The Drapers' Organiser* was organising the BASE, they used illustrations of the planned layout in features

written in advance of the event. These stylised drawings of the architecture of the fashion theatres evoke a glamour which was not usually associated with a trade fair, and of a grand spectacle – note the audiences in both images below (see Figure 26). To attract the desired audience of retailers and makers-up the rayon industry needed to ensure that potential visitors knew that the primary focus would be on fashions and fabrics, not on the manufacture of filaments and yarns. This is achieved with these modern illustrations which show planned events, whilst offering nothing more than a glimpse of what might be on display to help build a sense of anticipation.

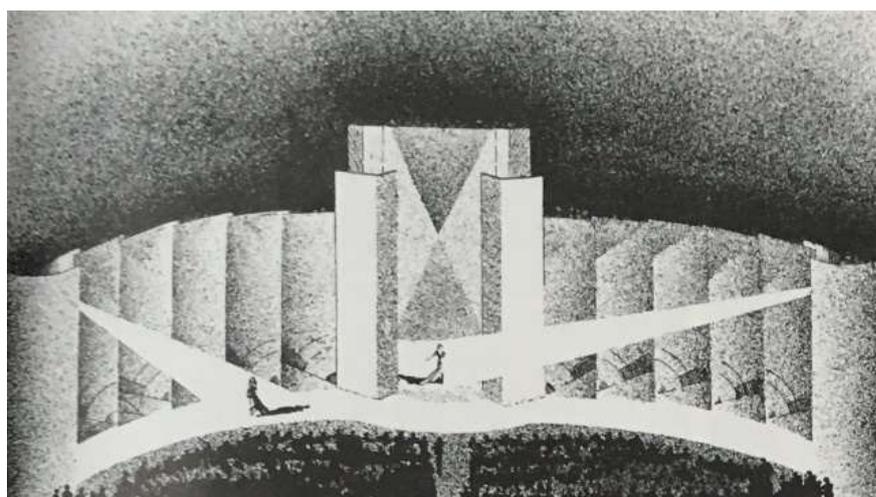
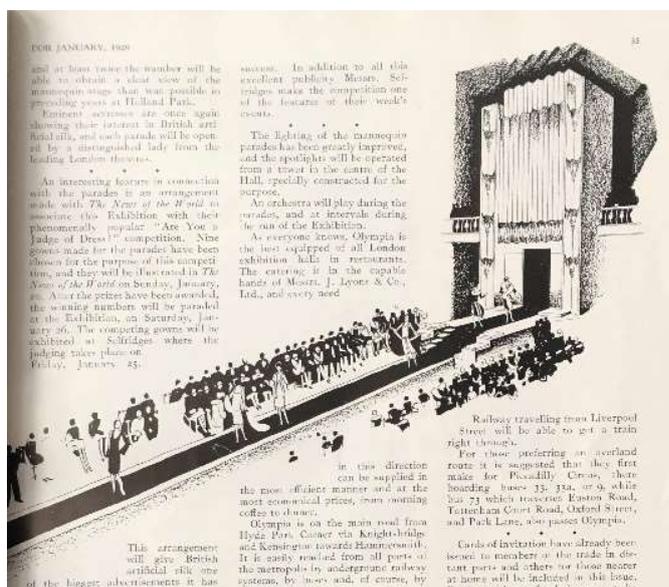


Figure 26 Illustrations of the anticipated fashion 1929 (T) and 1931 (B). *The Drapers' Organiser* February 1929 and February 1931 © British Library.

Even when the BTE had moved beyond the remit of *The Drapers' Organiser* the publication remained a firm supporter of the event. In 1934, it issued a souvenir supplement, the cover of which reinforced all of the aspects they had emphasised during their years running the BASE. In a bright, modern style, the entrance to the White City is portrayed rather like the entrance to a cinema or theatre (see Plate II). The strong colours are suggestive of bright electric lighting, and the high ceilings and modern, curved architecture make it feel spacious and welcoming. People populate the scene and they are shown as busy: either networking or engaged with the exhibits. The perspective also draws the viewer in, suggesting that there is a lot more to be seen beyond this entrance. It is worth noting that this presentation of the White City could not be further from the truth: it was a building that was rapidly reaching the end of its useable life and which had had structural works and facilities added to it in recent years to make it functional; it was also eminently unsuitable for exhibitions, being made up of a series of long corridors rather than large halls. None of this can be gleaned from this illustration, which is designed to promote pleasant memories for those who visited, and to make those that did not wonder what they might be missing out on.

A key feature of the design of the BASE was a space for mannequin parades where the latest garments made of rayon could be presented. In 1926, the architects provided a centrally located, raised platform which was lit by spotlights and had space for an orchestra to accompany the show (see Figure 27). In the early days of rayon, it was rarely de-lustred and the spectacle of fashionable garments shimmering under electric lights as the models moved proved to be a huge success with visitors. Five hundred people watched each show, and seats were reportedly filled half an hour before the start.²⁶ For trade buyers, seeing potential fabric purchases made up into garments would have been novel, but it also demonstrated to them how the fabric could be turned into a consumer product. Indeed *The Drapers' Organiser* believed it was the "superb fashion qualities" of the fabrics on display which

²⁶ "Artificial Silk Marvels", *Manchester Guardian*, 21 April 1926, p. 12.

had provided the impetus for many of the sales at the exhibition.²⁷ The success of the mannequin parade meant it became an established feature of the Fair, and grew in scale and sophistication as the years passed. Alongside the fashion parades, other spectacles and working exhibits were used to provide interest and novelty. The CPA and British Dyestuffs Company Ltd (BDC) both showed off their scientific credentials: the CPA demonstrated a Mutachrome machine which was used to view colours on designs before they were printed; whilst the BDC's stand was of "unique educational importance" and included demonstrations of dyeing processes and examples of machinery used in their factories.²⁸ Exhibits such as these emphasised the research and technical developments which were being undertaken to improve rayon. Meanwhile, Lever Brothers concentrated on more practical consumer matters, by showing how rayon should be correctly laundered to avoid damage. Both the BDC and the Lever Brothers displays proved such a success that they were moved to department stores after the exhibition, with the BDC stand going to Selfridges, and Lever Brothers' touring a number of provincial stores.²⁹

²⁷ "Revelation of British Textile Genius", *DO*, May 1926, p. 25.

²⁸ "Exhibition Notes and Comments", *DO*, May 1926, p. 30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

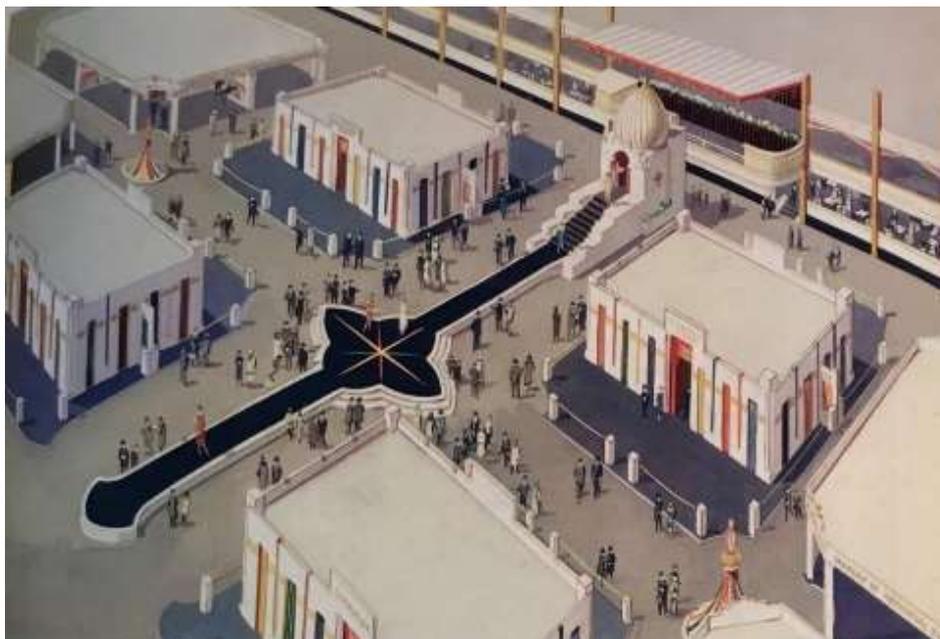


Figure 27 An Overview of the BASE 1926 at Holland Park Hall, with a central catwalk. *The Drapers' Organiser*, February 1926 © British Library.

When the BASE was combined with the BIF in 1932, it became part of an Exhibition on a grand scale. Textiles alone had been allocated 100,000 square feet of space, nearly one-quarter of the total available area, indicating the status of the trade in the British economy.³⁰ Joseph Emberton continued to design the stands and theatre in the early 1930s, and his work set the tone for the rest of the decade. As the BASE, the BTE made use of a modern style with clean lines, geometric shapes and plain white backgrounds. A Pathé film from 1932 shows that the design of the catwalk drew from the art deco glamour of cruise ships, with white decks edged with chrome railings. Sweeping staircases for the mannequin parade also echoed those seen in Hollywood film sets designed by the *art moderne* authority Cedric Gibbons.³¹ The aim was to provide a “modern, functional design...to meet the exact requirements of both exhibitors and buyers.”³²

³⁰ “British Industries Fair”, *The Times*, 13 November 1936, p. 21.

³¹ “The Duchess of York visits the British Industries Fair”, 1932, <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/165316/> accessed 16 August 2023.

³² “Commentary”, *SJRW*, February 1932, p. 21.

It was not only the organisers who realised the importance of the spatial frame, and the visual impact they wanted to create. Since the first Exhibition, rayon manufacturers had worked to create “distinctive exhibits”, and had often employed specialists to style their stands for them.³³ Fabrics lent themselves to display, because of their colour and design, but they also needed to be presented in novel ways. The skills on display appear to have continued to develop, not least because the exhibitors and their stylists had been influenced by the “latest craze” for window dressing on the Continent which had initiated new forms of display.³⁴ By 1935, the trade journal *Silk and Rayon* noted that “it costs a fair amount of money to stage exhibits...in the gorgeous manner now practised”, suggesting that the exhibits had become more sophisticated over the preceding decade.³⁵ British Celanese and Courtaulds in particular presented large and inventive stands, usually on a central island, befitting the nature of their position in the industry. In 1936, the trade press raved over an “imposing fountain” of “majestic proportions” which sprayed *Fibro* rather than water, and upon which slowly changing coloured lights played.³⁶ A year later Courtaulds told “The Story of Colour”, complete with a miniature laboratory, and displayed dresses by the couturier house of Paquin which were specially designed to be made up in Courtaulds’ rayon.³⁷ The “impressive exhibits” put on by both firms were always highlights and “so far as the public were concerned [these stands] emphasise[d] the great progress that is being made with rayon materials in Great Britain.”³⁸ The architecture of the Courtaulds stands also indicated that the company had the latest technologies and fashions on show. The bold, art deco style used curves and bold shapes to announce their modern credentials, whilst the sheer scale of the stands (the *Fibro* fountain was “taller than a house”) proclaimed their success.³⁹

³³ “Distinctive Exhibits”, *DO*, May 1926, p. 31.

³⁴ “Textiles at the British Industries Fair”, *SJRW*, March 1932, p. 27.

³⁵ “Rayon at the BIF”, *S&R*, March 1935, p. 121.

³⁶ “Silk and Rayon Textiles at the British Industries Fair”, *S&R*, March 1936, p. 206; “Round the Fair”, *SJRW*, 20 March 1936, p. 17.

³⁷ By this point, not all of the garments were British designed, although the House of Paquin did have a London store/atelier.

³⁸ “Silk and Rayon Textiles at the British Industries Fair”, *S&R*, March 1936, p. 206; “Textiles at the British Industries Fair”, *SJRW*, March 1935, p. 20.

³⁹ “Silk and Rayon Textiles at the British Industries Fair”, *S&R*, March 1936, p. 206.



Figure 28 The Courtaulds Ltd stand with its fountain of Fibro at the BTE in 1936. *The Drapers' Organiser*, March 1936 © British Library.

The Temporal Frame

The BASE was introduced at a time when MTFs had normalised the practice of presenting and selling goods in one location over a specific time period. Most trade shows ran for one or two weeks, much like the BASE: this short time frame brings a large number of participants together for networking and for the forging of new relationships. It also has an impact upon the way in which trading is done: for example, rayon companies appear to have taken a higher number of orders in these weeks, and it was common to launch new fabrics and designs. Bringing the trade and its respective spectacles and novelties under one roof for a specific 'event' meant it was more likely to be reported on by the press. *When fairs are held* is also critical: as an experimental new venture the 1926 BASE was organised so that it coincided with the Drapery Exhibition, which was a more established trade fair. This alignment

encouraged buyers to visit the BASE when they were in London for the Drapery Exhibition. However, the BASE never ran at a consistent time of year: exhibitions fell anywhere between late January and early April. The lack of available exhibition space may have forced the organisers to be more flexible with their dates; indeed as we have seen, the 1930 exhibition was cancelled because there was no venue available. Despite the variable timing, manufacturers and buyers continued to attend the BASE, with the event growing in size each year.⁴⁰ It would only be in 1932, when the BASE merged into the BTE that it would be guaranteed a date in the international trade fair calendar: the sheer scale of this event and the fact it was government-organised effectively guaranteed the Exhibition accommodation at the largest venues the nation could offer.

As the rayon industry adjusted into the much larger BTE in the 1930s, the manufacturers of womenswear fabrics began to show increasing discontent over the timing of the Fair. The BIF had always taken place in February, with the date “well known throughout the world”.⁴¹ February was also the “greatest buying month of the year”, with London hosting not only the BTE, but also West End and wholesale fashion shows, and the Fashion Exhibition in the same few weeks.⁴² However, textile manufacture was a seasonally based industry and traditionally new designs were put into production late in the year and then released to wholesale buyers in November. For rayon manufacturers their issues with the timing of the BTE were twofold: they did not want to change the traditional release date of fabrics, and nor did they want the expense of exhibiting fabrics they had already launched into the marketplace, particularly at an event which was no longer solely promoting their new industry.⁴³ Discontent was clear in 1933, just a year after the BASE joined the BTE, with some businesses cancelling their stands.⁴⁴ There was even talk of a complete boycott: Whitworth & Mitchell Ltd approached the large and influential CPA, asking them to “call a meeting of principal

⁴⁰ There were forty exhibitors in 1926, this rose to fifty-five in 1929.

⁴¹ Lord Derby, quoted in “The British Industries Fair 1937”, *S&R*, March 1937, p. 193.

⁴² “Come to London”, *DO*, February 1934, p. 23.

⁴³ “Cotton and Rayon Dress Fabrics”, *The Times*, 27 February 1933, p. 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Firms with a view to no participation [at the Fair] in 1934.”⁴⁵ With an increasing number of firms reluctant to bear the expense of exhibiting at the ‘wrong’ time of year, the number of rayon exhibitors collapsed. The nadir was in 1936 when just five companies took part. *Silk Journal and Rayon World* were disparaging, noting that any objections to the date of the Fair were negligible as businesses

are constantly at work bringing out novelties, and these can be put through in February as well as at any other time.⁴⁶

This inflexibility on the part of the rayon firms and their clinging to traditional timings seems astonishing, particularly when we consider that these were the very businesses who had diversified into rayon just a few short years before: then, they had demonstrated their ability to change and develop manufacturing techniques, to make scientific advances, and (as we shall see) experiment with advertising. However, whilst these businesses argued that the sales they made on ‘old’ stock would not cover their expenses, what they failed to recognise was that there were intangible benefits of taking part in an Exhibition. Often there were “a hundred fashion writers” present at fashion parades; extensive coverage appeared in trade journals and newspapers; there were opportunities for networking and meeting new customers, and to discover new ideas for products, amongst many others.⁴⁷ When Lord Derby began an enormous offensive to get rayon firms exhibiting at the Fair again in 1937, he was consistent in his message that “out of sight is out of mind” and that the BTE provided “enormous propaganda” for the British rayon industry.⁴⁸

In the event, Lord Derby was aided in his campaign to lure rayon manufacturers back to the BTE in 1937 by an event of national importance: the Coronation. The CPA Board noted that because of the

efforts of Lord Derby, and 1937 being the Coronation year, Lancashire firms might be unable to resist the pressure brought on them to exhibit.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Minutes of Meeting of Directors, 13 December 1932, Calico Printers Association, Manchester Archives, Manchester, M75/2/2/15 [Green 884].

⁴⁶ “Round the Fair”, *SJRW*, March 1936, p. 16.

⁴⁷ “The Textiles Exhibition: A Question for Lancashire”, *Manchester Guardian*, 15 February 1936, p. 18.

⁴⁸ “Lancashire Textiles”, *Manchester Guardian*, 18 April 1936, p. 15; “British Industries Fair 1937”, *S&R*, March 1937, p. 193.

⁴⁹ Minutes of Meeting of Directors, 9 June 1936, Calico Printers Association, Manchester Archives, M75/2/2/19 [Green 885]

The 1937 BTE turned out to be on a “scale not seen since 1933” and was “the most magnificent that [had] ever been seen”.⁵⁰ However, it was widely recognised in the industry that firms would not exhibit on a scale like this every year and that it was a “special Coronation display”.⁵¹ Not only did the Coronation act as a stimulus to increase the number of exhibitors, it was “naturally the key note of the Exhibition”: in textiles, this showed in the “magnificent selection of designs specially created for the Coronation year”.⁵² The CPA showed a “cream rayon...printed with red guardsmen”; British Celanese had a “series of Coronation prints” strewn with crowns, heraldic lions, and the national flowers; and the colours red, white and blue dominated across numerous producers.⁵³ The substantial effort by Lord Derby to encourage firms to exhibit again, and positive press coverage in 1937 seems to have prompted businesses to return to the BTE in 1938: it was reported that “many of the most important producers in rayon...took larger stands than in previous years”.⁵⁴ *Silk and Rayon* also claimed that the increase exhibiting at the Fair was due to Britain being “in a strong position, owing to the rearmament programme”: even a small increase in individual prosperity could have a major influence on a consumer’s willingness and ability to buy clothing, something the rayon trade could capitalise on.⁵⁵ The Coronation and rearmament demonstrate that national events, particularly when they had an economic impact, also played a role in determining the size and bearing of a trade fair. The temporal frame therefore is not solely about those few, intense days of a trade exhibition, but also how the Exhibition fits into much broader circumstances occurring at the same time. Businesses and trade fair organisers needed to assess these events in order to evaluate how they would affect the mindset and financial position of perspective consumers, and to adapt their exhibits to the prevailing zeitgeist.

⁵⁰ “Textiles at the British Industries Fair”, *Manchester Guardian*, 15 February 1937, p. 14; “British Industries Fair 1937”, *S&R*, March 1937, p. 193.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² “Textiles at White City”, *The Times*, 15 February 1937, p. 9; “The White City”, *The Observer*, 14 February 1937, p. 20.

⁵³ “British Industries Fair Opened”, *The Times*, 16 February 1937, p. 11; “Textiles at White City”, *The Times*, 15 February 1937, p. 9.

⁵⁴ “Industrial Fairs, 1938”, *S&R*, March 1938, p. 217.

⁵⁵ “Seventh British Textiles Exhibition Earls Court, 1938”, *S&R*, March 1938, p. 218.

The Functional Frame

The activities which take place at a Fair can inform us of the intentions, whether conscious or not, of those involved. The myriad functions which occurred at the BASE and BIF are too numerous to examine here; instead I will focus upon how the exhibitors at the Fair perceived their function; the ways in which rayon was given its own 'character' which turned it from a simple fabric into a fashionable and desirable commodity; and how information about rayon was disseminated out from the Fair. The combination of these functions by manufacturers, organisers of the Exhibition, and the press helped to create and communicate a positive and cohesive image of rayon.

The overt focus of all the businesses at any of the Fairs through this period was to sell their yarns or fabrics. In 1936, when trying to encourage businesses to take part in the 1937 BTE, the Comptroller-General of the Department of Overseas Trade claimed that the businesses who took stands year after year did not do so "from pure philanthropy but for the very sound reason that it paid them to do so."⁵⁶ Whilst in the days of the BASE, reported orders were strong (in 1928, orders for around £2m were made at, or owing to, the Exhibition), by the early 1930s the situation had changed with some businesses sounding their "healthy dissatisfaction" with results, and others doubting whether the sales generated would cover the expenses involved in exhibiting.⁵⁷ However, this was not a view shared by all: another businessman said that even if he did not sell more, he was "satisfied" with the opportunity to display his products; and an internal memo from Horrockses, Crewdson & Co Ltd in 1936 suggested that whilst the cost of displaying at the BTE was extremely high, displaying there would help build their "Prestige" [sic].⁵⁸ This suggests that some businesses were starting to move away

⁵⁶ "British Industries Fair", *The Times*, 3 October 1936, p. 9.

⁵⁷ "Sales at Artificial Silk Exhibition", *Manchester Guardian*, 24 March 1928, p. 22; "British Industries Fair", *Manchester Guardian*, 22 February 1933, p. 13.

⁵⁸ "British Industries Fair", *Manchester Guardian*, 22 February 1933, p. 13; memorandum from the Advertising Department, 1 September 1936, Horrockses, Crewdson & Co Ltd Archives, West Yorkshire Archives, Bradford, Yorkshire, DDVC acc 7340.

from the idea that the main function of a fair was wholly about selling, as had been the case in preceding centuries, but rather towards the creation of an image of a product and brand, which would last well beyond the few days of the fair, and hopefully extend into the public consciousness. If we consider the roles of Courtaulds and British Celanese at these trade shows, their presence was not driven by the opportunity to take orders there and then, but to promote the use of their yarns by other manufacturers. This was achieved by showing the range of goods which could be produced, and their displays usually covered “almost all phases of dress, underwear as well as outerwear, and for ladies, men, and children.”⁵⁹ The spectacles these two companies put on were designed to receive press coverage, and to captivate or educate the visitor. British Celanese paid homage to the Silver Jubilee in 1935 by creating twenty-five garments using Celanese fabric, each of which dated from a year of the reign of George and Mary; and the *Fibro* stand by Courtaulds took an educational ‘story-telling’ approach by showing how and where the yarn was made. It is also clear that the scale and inventiveness of their stands was representative of their standing in the industry, and their determination to make sure that this was understood by the visitor.



Figure 29 The Colour Laboratory on the Courtaulds Ltd stand at the BTE in 1937. *Silk & Rayon*, March 1927 © British Library.

⁵⁹ “Silk and Rayon Textiles at the British Industries Fair”, *S&R*, March 1936, p. 206.

Although the organisers of the BASE and BTE were ostensibly providing a space where firms could display and sell their wares, in fact their overarching aim was to promote trade as a whole and for it to support the national economy. The depressed economic conditions of the 1920s and 1930s had politicised the consumer economy. To support the lacklustre finances of the nation, successive governments encouraged Britons to become “consumer citizens”, who would buy products which had been made in Britain or the Empire: the idea of this was that consumer support would enable businesses to survive, and money would remain within the Empire.⁶⁰ The Empire Marketing Board (EMB) had been formed in 1926 with government funding, and as part of its remit began to encourage the purchase of British and Empire goods across a vast range of products. With textiles being a mainstay of the British economy these goods clearly had an important role to play. Entering into the spirit of supporting British manufacturers wholeheartedly, the editorial announcing the first BASE in *The Drapers’ Organiser* declared,

We have heard a great deal in the past few months of the “Buy British Goods” movement. [The BASE will show] buyers in both the home, the imperial, and foreign markets of the determination of our manufacturers to make our goods universally acceptable.⁶¹

The BASE and the BTE would provide important platforms for British rayon manufacturers to display their prowess at creating functional and fashionable fabrics, and to reinforce the fact that they held a strong position in the global marketplace.⁶² The early Exhibitions drew on the fact that viscose rayon had been a British invention, and that Britain had been the first nation to produce any form of rayon on a profitable basis. *The Drapers’ Organiser* promoted this aspect heavily in the lead up to their Fair, and they wanted the exhibition to reinforce the idea that “Britain leads, and has always led, in this newest branch of the textile trade.”⁶³ Their notion of “British Textile Genius” was reinforced through the mannequin parades which showed wholly-British designed and made garments, and gimmicks

⁶⁰ Erika Rappaport, *The Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 234.

⁶¹ “A Colour Forecast and an Exhibition”, *DO*, January 1926, p. 29.

⁶² In the interwar period, Britain was always in the top five producers of viscose globally, and was the second largest producer of acetate rayon.

⁶³ “Artificial Silk War”, *Manchester Guardian*, 30 January 1926, p. 7.

such as creating a coat which went from weaver to wearer (in the Fashion Parade) in just twenty-two hours, showing that Britain possessed the expertise and facilities to manage end-to-end rayon production.⁶⁴ As the Depression increased its hold on the economy, the National Government set about supporting the economy in a number of ways, one of which was the enormous “Buy British” campaign.⁶⁵ This campaign reached its zenith in the weeks of the BTE where the “British shop window” was put out for all to see. The expectations resting on a combined textile fair are apparent when we consider that *The Drapers’ Organiser* was praised for the “public spirited action” which would see them relinquish the organisation of the BASE when it merged into the BTE. It was hoped that this event would be “many times more forceful” in terms of supporting the national economy than individual textile fairs.⁶⁶ By the 1930s, the promotion of the British rayon trade that had taken place at the exhibitions of the 1920s was subsumed by the much grander notion of “British Prosperity” at the BTE.⁶⁷

As part of the BIF, the rayon industry was able to benefit from royal patronage as members of the Royal Family had offered “unstinted support” to the Fair since its inception.⁶⁸ In the early twentieth-century, royalty still had a “cultural centrality in British life” and their presence gave a sense of occasion to proceedings, and buttressed the notion of Britishness which the organisers sought to portray.⁶⁹ The excitement which occurred at a royal visit was palpable, with “crowds...held back by cordons of police”, and in 1936 the Secretary to the Department of Overseas Trade claimed that “no factor had contributed so much to the success of the Fair as the interest the Royal family had taken in it.”⁷⁰ In particular, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth appeared to show great interest in the textile

⁶⁴ “Loom to Wearer in 22 Hours”, *Manchester Guardian*, 23 April 1926, p. 14.

⁶⁵ This was the largest peacetime propaganda exercise that had ever been seen in Britain.

⁶⁶ “A Message from the President of the Board of Trade”, *DO*, February 1932, p. 119; “British Textiles Exhibition”, *DO*, June 1932, p. 73.

⁶⁷ “A Message from the President of the Board of Trade”, *DO*, February 1932, p. 119.

⁶⁸ “Flashlights from the White City”, *DO*, March 1933, p. 89.

⁶⁹ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 7.

⁷⁰ “Queen Inspects the Textiles at Industries Fair”, *Manchester Guardian*, 16 February 1937, p. 12; “Market Place of Empire”, *The Times*, 18 February 1936, p. 11.

section, and they always attended the fashion shows. The fabrics they admired were widely reported on in the trade journals and newspapers, and what they chose helped “set the trend of fashion”.⁷¹ Encouraged by Lord Derby it also became customary for the Royal Family to ‘order’ fabrics which they liked. The cost of this was born by the manufacturer (it cost Horrockses, Crewdson & Co £4 in 1938), but the benefits were clear: the fabrics which the royals picked out led to “large trade orders”, and in 1932 one exhibitor had to withdraw one of the fabrics the Queen chose from his stand as the factory could not meet any further demand.⁷² On rare occasions manufacturers could also benefit in other ways: in 1933, Queen Mary declared that the Whitworth & Mitchell stand was “just like a summer’s day”. Permission was requested (and granted) to use this phrase for advertising Wemco branded goods: in July 1933 an advertising brochure for retailers was released showing the latest fashionable fabrics. Entitled “Just like a Summer’s Day”, the importance attached to this royal phrase is apparent as the booklet was entirely printed in colour and photogravure.⁷³



Figure 30 The Duchess of York at the Courtaulds stand at the BTE 1935. *Silk Journal and Rayon World*, March 1935 © British Library.

⁷¹ “British Industries Fair’s Royal Visitors”, *Daily Mail*, 28 February 1938, p. 16.

⁷² British Industries Fair costs, Horrockses, Crewdson & Co Ltd Archives, DDVC acc 7340; “50,000 Beach Pyjamas Deal”, *Daily Mail*, 2 March 1932, p. 7.

⁷³ “Flashlights from the White City”, *DO*, March 1933, p. 89; “Letterpress and Pictures”, *DO*, July 1933, p. 82.

From the outset, the organisers of the BASE and the BTE had recognised that “fashion dominates the artificial silk trade”.⁷⁴ Without recourse to the most recent modes rayon would simply not have been a competitive product. As shown above, from the design of the stands to the innovation of mannequin parades, the entire spectacle of the exhibitions was arranged to demonstrate how up-to-date and fashionable the fabrics on display were. Manufacturers recognised that showing their most recently designed and developed fabrics would give them an advantage over other firms, and in many of the advertisements around the time of the Exhibitions firms stated that their newest and most fashionable goods would be (or had been) available to view and buy during the Fair. Whitworth & Mitchell boasted a display of fabrics which met “the requirements of every modern fashion”; Burgess Ledward & Co Ltd announced they had “the latest and smartest fabrics”; and British Celanese promised “new weaves, new colours, new designs [and] new finishes” (see Plates III to V). There was extensive coverage in the trade press of the latest fabrics which had been on display too, especially when printing and photography allowed much improved images to appear. This coverage provided valuable extra publicity for firms, and exposed their fabrics to those who had not been to the fairs.

One of the continued successes of the BASE and BTE was the mannequin parades: they not only offered an interesting spectacle, but also revealed what high-end designers and wholesale houses were predicting would come into fashion next. In terms of setting British trends, it is hard to qualify how much of an impact these specific shows had on the garments that were made for mass consumption. *The Drapers' Organiser* claimed that the BASE was the first trade fair to have a fashion parade, and they proved “exceptionally popular” with visitors: in 1926 there were 300 “frocks and gowns” shown, and by 1931 the range of clothing on display had expanded to include “outdoor wear... sportswear...pyjamas...[and] beach suits”.⁷⁵ This wide variety of garments demonstrated not only that

⁷⁴ “A Brilliant Show of British Artificial Silk”, *DO*, February 1931, p. 144.

⁷⁵ “The Mannequin Parades”, *DO*, March 1931, p. 60; “Revelation of British Textile Genius”, *DO*, May 1926, p. 25.

rayon had advanced enough to be used for multiple clothing purposes, but also that it could be used for some of the most fashionable garments of the day. The success of these fashion shows was such that when the BASE was incorporated into the BTE, they continued in almost exactly the same format, with a very similar programme and appearance (see Plate VI) . As I have already noted, as part of their visits, the Queen and Duchess of York (later Queen Elizabeth) would attend the fashion parade, their presence on the front row cementing it as an important feature, much like celebrities and fashion editors are used on the front row today. From 1927, popular actresses modelled the clothes alongside professional mannequins, and they would “say a few words in favour of the beauty and utility of British artificial silk”.⁷⁶ The combination of royalty, glamorous actresses and mannequins, along with up-to-the-minute fabrics and designs was powerful: for the first time there was a national platform for the presentation of clothing and theoretically, with members of the public able to buy admission to the exhibition, it was accessible to all. For visiting members of the public or for those seeing it on film or in newspapers, it provided a glimpse of next year’s fashions and a potent form of aspirational glamour, while for retail buyers it presented a tangible sense of how fabrics could be made up into consumable garments.

Despite extensive efforts to promote London as a leading fashion centre by numerous groups, individuals and businesses, it was still Paris that consumers looked to for the latest trendFashions.⁷⁷ At the BASE and the BTE, huge efforts were made to show that British fabrics and garments could hold their own against French fashions. While the designers of the clothes on show may have been predominantly British, the influence of French trends was hard to avoid. Designs from *haute couture* houses in Paris had long been copied by manufacturers posing as buyers and private clients, and British women seemed to show a preference for anything which was labelled as French or Parisian. This,

⁷⁶ “The Triumph of British Artificial Silk”, *DO*, April 1927, p. 42.

⁷⁷ For example, the British Colour Council was established to determine which colours would be fashionable, rather than being led by Paris, trade journals wrote regular articles on the improvements in British fashion, fifty leading fashion houses joined forces to promote London fashions in 1932, and there was extensive government research into how the training of textile specialists and artists could be improved.

combined with the increasing speed with which journalists reported on the latest French trends, meant that British fashions closely followed the French. The garments shown at the BASE and the BTE indicate how British manufacturers were able to interpret *haute couture* designs for the purpose of showing rayon as a highly fashionable product. Using images from high-end French fashion magazines *Vogue* and *Femina*, which reported the newest innovations almost as they happened, and comparing them to images from the Exhibitions, it is possible to show how British manufacturers adapted designs for their own purposes. This comparison shows that whilst in the mid 1920s, French inspired styles took over year to reach the British Exhibitions, by the mid 1930s this lag had reduced to around nine months (see Tables IV and V). Whilst this seems like a long turnaround for a copied style (it can take mere days in today's fashion system), in this period it typically took two years for a trend to trickle down from its *haute couture* origins to being seen on the street in Britain.⁷⁸ This 'short' nine month lead time meant that manufacturers at the exhibitions in the 1930s were showing garments which were at the very forefront of fashion. Additionally, because the designs were not direct copies, the programme for the mannequin parade was able to announce that the garments showed the "creative genius of British fashion designers".⁷⁹ The power of the popular press and the buyers attending the trade shows meant that it was these fashions, carefully chosen by the trade from *la haute couture*, which would be likely to "trickle down" to the British consumer.⁸⁰ The clothes which appeared at Exhibitions also seem to have had an impact on the sales of high-end clothing. In 1934 the Chairman of the Wholesale Gown Manufacturers Committee which had organised a display at the BTE revealed

It is at the great social functions which take place during the London Season in the early summer months that the London fashions created for the British Industries Fairs are worn by "society." February has been found to be the ideal time to show the latest styles to those keen judges, the buyers.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Madge Garland, "The Twenties: Sport and Art", in *Paris Fashion* ed. Lynam, Ruth (London: Michael Joseph, 1972), p.86.

⁷⁹ Programme for the British Textiles Exhibition at the British Industries Fair, 1934.

⁸⁰ M. Solomon and N. Rabolt, *Consumer Behaviour in Fashion*, (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, c. 2004), p. 20

⁸¹ "Fashions at the B.T.E", *DO*, January 1934, p. 103.

Additionally, the so-called “provincial” department stores often took their lead from what had appeared at the BTE. By 1937, the fair had become “the focussing point for [these] stores at the start of their season”, and the purchase of entire displays to be recreated in their shops was not uncommon. In 1933, over forty textile exhibits were sold to stores across the country including Swan & Edgar, Kennards, Lewises and Bentalls.⁸² The “trickle down” effect from stores like this was important: not only did they tend to set the fashions for the middle and upper classes in their own towns, but many of them also ran “bargain basements” or regular sales which were used to entice customers with lower budgets into stores. The knowledge the buyers gained at the BTE would have helped direct purchasing decisions at all levels of the store, so consumers with any level of income would have access to trend-led fabrics and garments.

⁸² “Mr W. Thow Munro”, *DO*, March 1937, p. 109.

Table IV – Fashions appearing in Paris and at the British Artificial Silk Exhibition 1927.

Fabrics and Garments illustrated in <i>Vogue</i> (Paris) and <i>Femina</i>	Fabrics and Garments from the BASE 1927 All illustrations taken from <i>The Drapers' Organiser</i> , May 1927.
 <p>Scalloped detail on gown by Madeleine Vionnet, <i>Vogue</i>, January 1926, p. 15.</p>	 <p>Scallop-skirted rayon dress by Glyn & Co, in fabric by Whitworth and Mitchell Ltd.</p>
 <p>Spotted dress by Yvonne Carette, <i>Vogue</i>, April 1926, p. 37.</p>	 <p>Spot print dress by Glyn & Co in Whitworth & Mitchell rayon fabric.</p>



Pleated plaid skirt by Lucien Lelong, *Vogue*, April 1926, p. 14.



Checked dress by Jean Patou, *Vogue* January 1926, p. 25.



Dress made by F S & D Coates, in checked rayon fabric by Horrockses, Crewdson & Co.



Striped skirt by Lucien Lelong, *Vogue*, April 1926, p. 46.



Striped skirt by Roy Pritchard made of L. Copley-Smith & Co rayon yarn



Striped sweater by Chanel, *Vogue*, January 1926, p. 4.



Capes by Premet and Chantelle, *Vogue*, April 1926, p. 46.



Rayon cape in fabric finished by Samuel Heap & Son Ltd.



Suggested bow detailing for necklines in *Vogue*, February 1926, p. 44.



Bow detailing on neckline on a dress by an unknown designer, in Whitworth & Mitchell rayon.



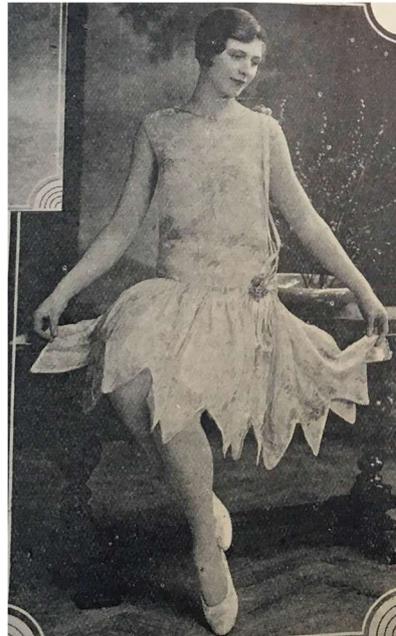
Layered, flounced dress in printed fabric by Ducharne, *Femina*, February 1926, p. 27.



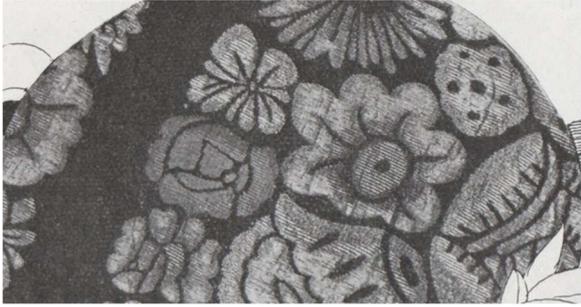
Layered, flounced dress by C.R. Child & Co in printed rayon fabric Horrockses, Crewdson & Co.



White gown with uneven hem and waist tie by Irfe, *Vogue*, June 1926, p. 6.



Pale or white gown with uneven hem and waist detailing, made up by H.S. Higgins in Simpson & Godlee Ltd rayon



Floral fabric by Bianchini-Ferrier, *Vogue* March 1926, p. 13.



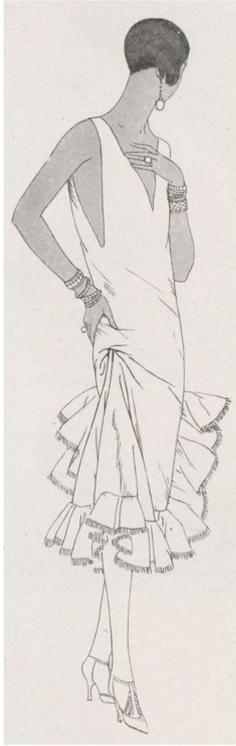
Detail from a dress by Blunden & Banyard made of floral rayon fabric by Richard Goodair Ltd



Day dress by Germaine Lecomte, *Vogue*, March 1926, p. 44.



Yeldoar brand knitted dress by Roadleys Ltd



Draped asymmetric dress with flounced hem by Cheruit, *Vogue*, January 1926, p. 25.



Draping asymmetric dress with zig-zag hem made by Troika in Adam Murray Ltd rayon.



Skirt with layered ruffle skirt by Lady Victor Paget, *Vogue* May 1926, p. 32.



Layered ruffle skirt by H. Vos made of Sedashene rayon by Laurence Sugden & Co Ltd.



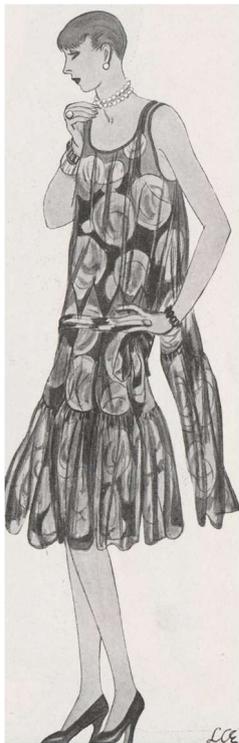
“Le Veste Smoking” by Amy Linker, *Vogue*, May 1926, p. 40. Note also the hands in the pockets, which was still seen as “racy”.



A separate jacket and skirt, made from Raychic rayon by A. T. Dyer & Co Ltd.



Separate jacket and skirt, designed by Glyn & Co in Whitworth & Mitchell Rayon. The models hands are also in her pockets, echoing the pose seen in *Vogue*.

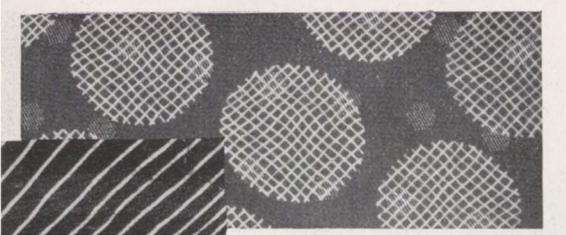
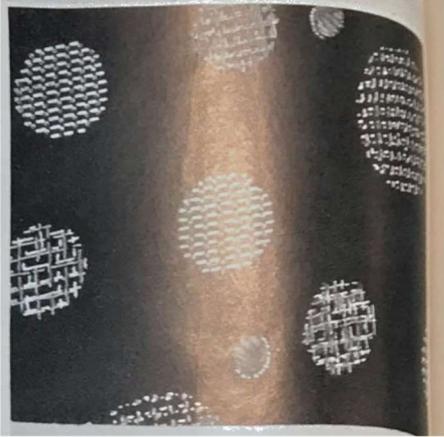


Evening dress printed with exaggerated petals by Molyneux, *Vogue*, February 1926, p. 11.



Dress by unknown designer, in a rayon fabric with exaggerated flower motifs, by Whitworth & Mitchell.

Table V – Fashions appearing in Paris and at the British Textiles Exhibition 1933

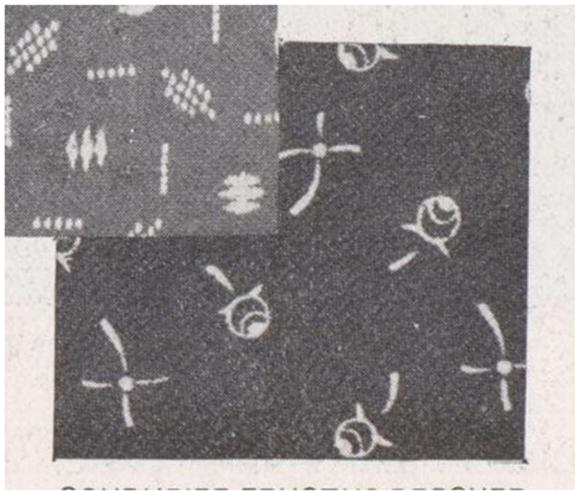
Fabrics and Garments illustrated in <i>Vogue</i>	Fabrics and Garments from the BTE 1933 All illustrations from <i>The Drapers' Organiser</i> February 1933
 <p>Fabric by Chatillon, <i>Vogue</i> June 1932, p. 57.</p>	 <p>Printed rayon by Spero Fabrics</p>



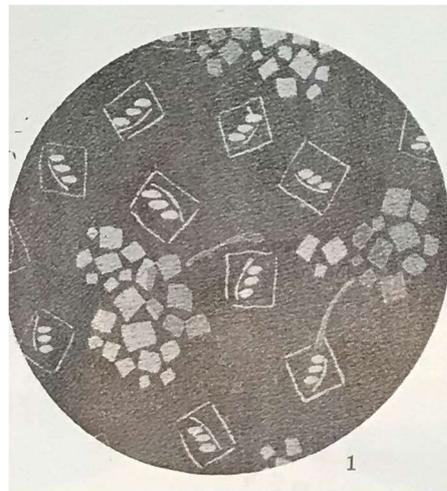
Fabric by Bianchini-Ferier, *Vogue* June 1932, p. 56



Printed rayon by Spero Fabrics



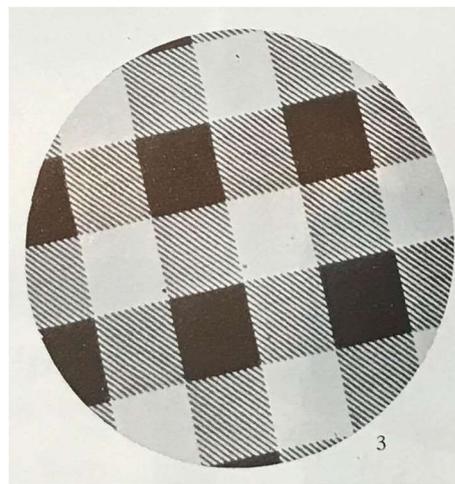
Fabrics by Fructus Descher, *Vogue* June 1932, p. 56.



Santoy Fabric by Courtaulds Ltd



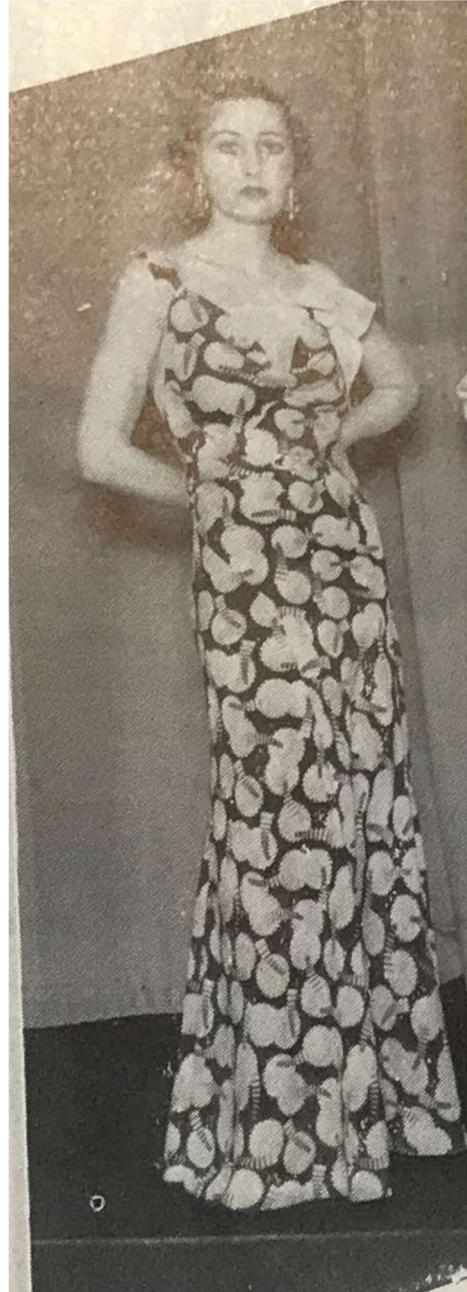
Checked outfit by Lanvin, *Vogue* July 1932 p. 47.



Shepherds' Plaid in rayon by Beales, Powner & Plowright Ltd



Gown by Jean Patou, *Vogue*, July 1932, p. 25.



Silk and acetate evening dress: fabric by F. Steiner & Co Ltd, dress design by Marcelle.



Floral printed dress by Suzanne Talbot in *Vogue*, September 1932, p. 41.



Floral design printed rayon by Sparrow, Hardwick & Co Ltd



Black and white dress by Madeleine Vionnet, *Vogue* June 1932, p. 38.



Black and white evening gown by Baroque Ltd, in rayon fabric by Marshall & Aston Ltd.



Outfit by Maggie Rouff, *Vogue* June 1932, p. 31.
The scarf has been wrapped to form a crossover neckline



Afternoon gown designed by Peter Russell, made in Wemcolesse fabric by Whitworth & Mitchell Ltd.
Note the crossover detailing on the bodice.



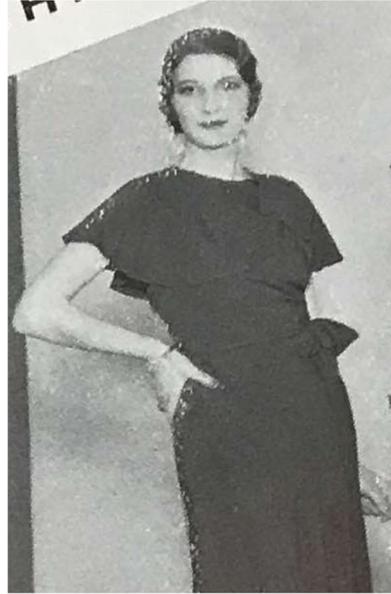
Gown with extravagantly ruffled shoulders by Mainbocher, *Vogue* June 1932, p. 32.



Evening dress with oversized flounced shoulders by Peter Russell, in Wemcolesse fabric by Whitworth & Mitchell Ltd.



Dress with attached cape by Augusta Bernard,
Vogue, June 1932, p. 30.



Dress with cape detail by Bernard Stapley Ltd,
in rayon by Kessler & Co Ltd.

As well as information trickling down through retail channels, the press played a key role in disseminating information from the exhibition to the public. Press reviews of the exhibitions and the rayon on display during these thirteen years was generally glowing. *The Drapers' Organiser* believed that the first Exhibition "captured the imagination of...the press...[they] realised its importance and treated it as a national event", and this does not appear to have been an idle boast.⁸³ The popular press appear to have been enchanted by an industry which was making "extraordinary progress" at a time of economic upheaval, and the fact that it was visually appealing no doubt added to its appeal.⁸⁴ Editors and journalists understood that rayon was an accessible fashion product, and it would appeal to readers. *The Drapers' Organiser* had printed photographs from the BASE from its inception in 1926, often running to numerous pages. In the early years, the photographs were mainly of the exhibitors stands, but by the 1930s trade journals increasingly showed particular fabrics and garments which had been presented. The expense of colour printing meant that the vast majority of photographs were in black and white. In 1932 the *Silk Journal and Rayon World* lamented

it is a great regret that half-tone illustrations are so inadequate to convey a true idea of the infinite charm of design, colour and texture.⁸⁵

New forms of media were also used to record and publicise these national events. The BBC was slow to realise the importance of fashion to its listeners, perhaps because they saw it as something where visuals were needed, and perhaps because something as frivolous as fashion did not meet Lord Reith's exacting requirements with regards to educating and informing the public. By 1934, Holbrook Jackson, the Editor of *The Drapers' Organiser*, was being openly critical of the BBC for this failure. Jackson reasoned that

As every retail distributor knows, Fashion [sic] is the most popular of all subjects and would have a 100% interest for women listeners...In addition it is key to textile prosperity. For that reason alone it deserves a place in the BBC sun...⁸⁶

⁸³ "Revelation of British Textile Genius", *DO*, May 1926, p. 25.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ "Commentary", *SJRW*, February 1932, p. 21.

⁸⁶ "British Fashions and the B.B.C.", *DO*, May 1934, p. 19.

The trigger for this censure was the fact that the recent BTE had been “all but ignored” by the BBC. Jackson’s editorial “suggested in the friendliest possible manner” that the BBC meet with some figures from the textile trade to see if this omission could be rectified.⁸⁷ Talks were quickly arranged, and in 1935 a programme was broadcast which aimed to show “something of the wonder of the British Industries Fair through the eyes of a countryman up in London for the day”. The BBC even managed to secure a real “farmer from the Peak country who has only once been up in London before, and then [only] for the day” who would offer up his perspective on the fashion parade.⁸⁸ Quite what Holbrook Jackson made of this is not known. In 1937, the BBC finally ran a programme specifically about the fmannequin parade where the “famous fashion expert Alison Settle” described the event.⁸⁹ This was followed by similar broadcasts in 1938 and 1939. There were also television programmes made in these years, for the very few who had sets.⁹⁰ However, the BBC were not the first to film these events. Gaumont had made films of the BIF for some years prior to rayon manufacturers joining the BTE, but they tended to focus on the visits of the Royal Family. The spectacle of the fashion parade was first filmed in 1932 year, and it was given as much air-time as the Duchess of York. From this point forward, both Gaumont and British Pathé produced films which included the fashion shows and which were shown to the millions of cinema goers across the nation within just a few days.⁹¹ These images and radio talks would have reached far wider than any consumer magazine or newspaper, and they helped cement the idea of what would be desirable in the coming season. In 1938, Alison Settle wrote in *The Observer* that the effect of the fairs was that

⁸⁷ Ibid.; “Snapshots from the Fair”, *DO*, March 1934, British Textiles Exhibition Review Supplement, p. xiii.

⁸⁸ “British Industries Fair, 1935”, broadcast 16 February 1935, <<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/aacc78e6405b9c616cc2bd6915515107>>

⁸⁹ Alison Settle was the former Editor of British *Vogue*.

⁹⁰ “British Industries Fair”, broadcast on the BBC Regional Programme on 22 February 1937, <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/a2c7db75ddfc4e9a9be6a07308ea9db2>; “Fashion Parade”, broadcast on the BBC National Programme at 17.45 on 24 February 1938, <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/a1d82adf4b6f4a8c936a5d287509876a> and “Clothed In Britain”, broadcast on BBC Television Service at 21.00 on 25 February 1938, <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/236c47ac42a147cb896b49eca6678734>, all accessed on 16 August 2023.

⁹¹ A full range of these films can be seen online at the British Pathé archive, <https://www.britishpathe.com/>

Only those able to purchase expensive books and pictures used to [be aware of the latest fashions] in the old days. Now every girl and woman in the country knows that this years skirts tend to be shorter, shoulders square or wide, to balance the return of the pinched waist.⁹²

This huge leap forward in presenting images from the exhibitions to the public spread the sense that British rayon was a fashionable and desirable fabric. Long gone were the days when the rayon exhibitions were reported mainly through specialist trade journals; the manufacturers could now reach millions of people in the comfort of their 6d cinema seats.

Evaluation

Like many industries in this period, the rayon trade was able to make use of the emergence and popularity of the Modern Trade Fair. It is clear that being an exhibitor at the BASE or the BTE raised the public profile of a business and allowed businesses to showcase technical and design achievements; alongside the more basic role of making sales and increase turnover. The aim of these fairs was not to foster competition between individual businesses, but to demonstrate the success and modernity of Britain's manufacturing trades. As the years passed, not only did the location of the Exhibitions change, there was also a shift in emphasis away from the technical developments of the new fibre and fabrics, towards their fashion credentials; while the turmoil of the Depression meant that the focus on the British *rayon* trade at the BASE shifted to the wider British *textile* industry under the BTE. Other external events such as the "Buy British" campaign and the Coronation also had an impact on how rayon manufacturers presented themselves at the Fairs in order to demonstrate patriotism and support for the national economy. Throughout the whole period the portrayal of modernity was key for the organisers, whether through the architecture, the advertising, or the focus on new goods and fashions, and this chimed perfectly with the image the rayon trade wanted to project. It would be impossible to judge whether these grand fairs and the associated spectacle had any substantial impact upon the growth and success of the rayon industry, but they certainly made an interesting day out for buyers and visitors. By the end of the 1930s, readers and viewers who had not

⁹² "The Fashionables Tighten in the Waistline", *The Observer*, 27 February 1938, p. 20.

even been to the Exhibitions were also being treated to visions of fashions and fabrics which would soon appear in shops, and which they would be encouraged to buy through increasingly sophisticated means.

Plate II



Cover of the souvenir section about the BTE in *The Drapers' Organiser*, March 1934.

Plate III

see them at olympia!

stands number 41 to 44

extraordinary new designs in artificial silk



Look out for these unusually fascinating designs in the famous ranges Bêlachine, Bêlasyl — Durochine and Durosyl. The delightfully sophisticated patterns in clear flattering colours will make an irresistible appeal to women planning smart summer frocks. They'll welcome these new and lovely materials that look so French and expensive, yet prove so inexpensive in wear.

You'll realise at a glance that you must stock this beautiful range of artificial silks. You owe it to your reputation for the very latest and smartest in fashionable fabrics.

In addition to these, we have other artificial silk novelties which will be shown for the first time at Olympia, Stands No. 41, 42, 43, 44

**come
to
stands
41 to 44
at the
artificial
silk
exhibition,
olympia**

BURGESS LEDWARD & CO LIMITED
10 MAJOR STREET, MANCHESTER

Burgess Ledward & Co Ltd advertisement, *The Drapers' Organiser*, January 1929, p. 23. Note that some of the fabrics will be "shown for the first time" at this event. The fabrics are also described as "look[ing] so French".

Plate IV

The Exhibition 
and after

THE success of the Artificial Silk Exhibition at Olympia and the keen and appreciative interest shown by the Trade in the various displays are further proof of the rapid rise and ever-growing popularity of this important industry.

In the brief history of Artificial Silk, the name of 'Celanese' predominates. It stands out notably above all other fabrics and materials. The position 'Celanese' has gained in the textile world was gained on quality—and is, to-day, upheld on quality.

 'Celanese' quality is backed up by 'Celanese' progressiveness. Not a week goes by without providing further evidence of the unique resources of 'Celanese.' New weaves, new colours, new designs, new finishes are being constantly produced.

The Trade will find it beneficial to keep in closest touch with 'Celanese' developments.

'Celanese'
TRADE-MARK
Fashion Fabrics



British Celanese Ltd advertisement for their Fashion Fabrics, *The Drapers' Organiser*, February 1929, p. 31. Here the advert references the "rapid rise and ever growing popularity" of rayon. Some activities which form part of the Functional Frame are mentioned: "Keeping in closest touch with 'Celanese' developments" i.e. the of forging relationships and keeping up-to-date with fashions and technologies.

Plate V

“Wemco”^{REGD} FABRICS

represented the Outstanding Display at the
Exhibition of British Artificial Silk Goods.

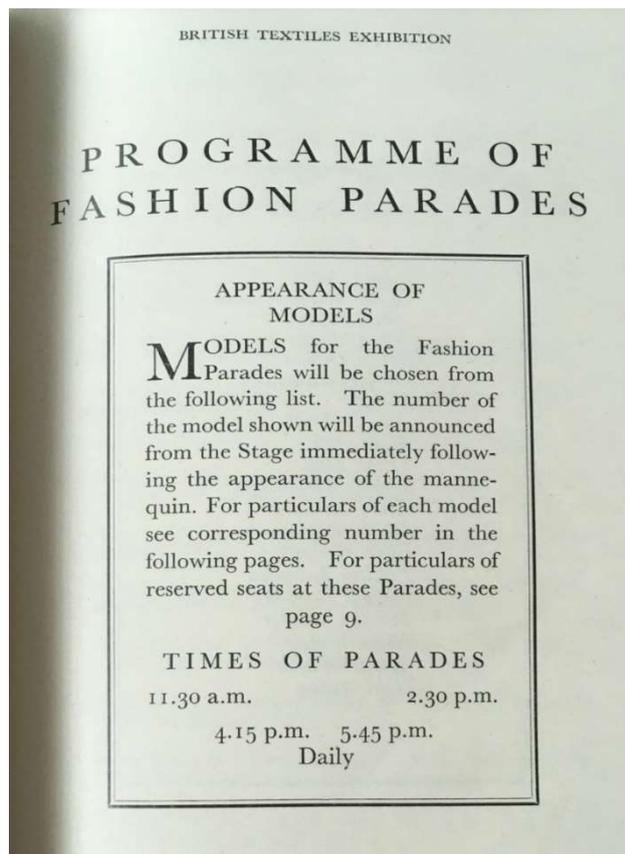
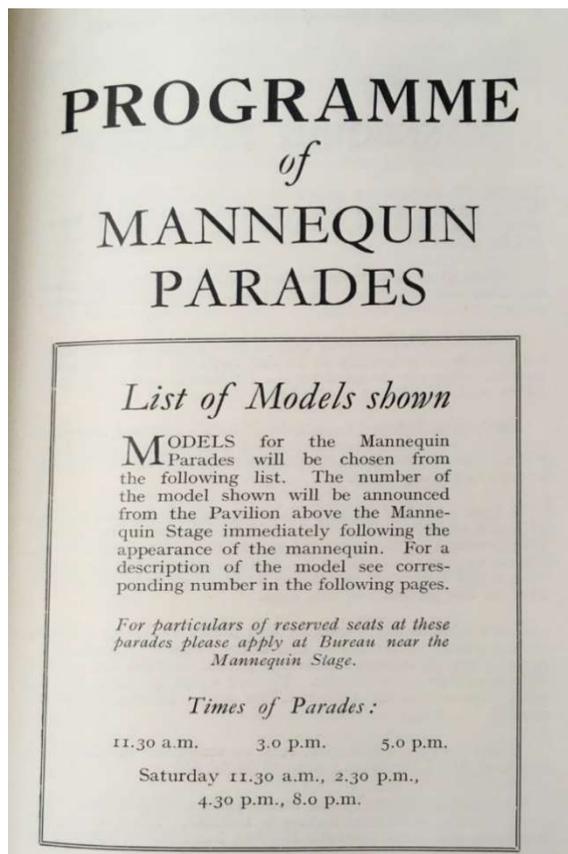


The range includes Dyed and Printed Fabrics to
meet the requirements of every modern fashion.

WHITWORTH & MITCHELL, LTD., AVON MILLS, MALMESBURY
NEW HALL OLYMPIA LONDON

Whitworth & Mitchell advertisement showing their stand at The Exhibition of British Artificial Silk Goods, in *The Drapers' Organiser*, February 1929, p. 67. “Modern Fashion” and modern styling are in evidence here.

Plate VI



Left: Mannequin Parade Programme from the Exhibition of British Artificial Silk Goods 1929. © British Library.

Right: Mannequin Parade Programme from the BTE 1937 © British Library. Note that the format and structure has changed very little since the BASE nearly ten years earlier.

*The chief problem which confronts the businessman
is not how to produce but how to sell.*

F.W. Taylor, *The Economics of Advertising*, 1934

6. Advertising Rayon: Creating a Market and Imagining a Consumer

Whilst exhibitions and trade shows were excellent methods of disseminating high level information to the public and retailers about the possibilities of rayon, the best way to reach a potential purchaser was undoubtedly through the use of print advertising. During the interwar period, advertising was increasingly becoming recognised as a profession, and as a distinct function in the distribution chain. Advertisements themselves also improved in terms of their appearance and presentation, although market research remained sorely lacking. As far as consumer goods were concerned, the increasing importance of advertising becomes clear when we consider that this period saw a 30% decline in the cost of living index, meaning that certain sections of the public now had more to spend on non-essential items.¹ As businesses sought to capitalise on these new spending patterns, there was a corresponding increase of 50% in advertising spending, rising from £31 million in 1920 to £59 million in 1938.² By the end of the period, advertising expenditure in Britain was equivalent to 2% of national income, demonstrating its growing importance in a consumer-led economy.³

In the interwar period, new mass production methods and a faster-paced consumer environment meant that manufacturers had to make adjustments to their traditional modes of selling. In this chapter, I will explore how rayon fibre and fabric manufacturers approached advertising in both the trade and consumer press, and how they attempted to establish a strong position for themselves in a marketplace, which although growing exponentially, was dictated by price and the fickle nature of fashion. In the twenty years following the First World War, rayon companies were, like all other

¹ Stevenson and Cook, *The Slump: Britain in the Great Depression*, (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2010), p. 25.

² T.R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain*, (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 146.

³ It is impossible to make a direct comparison, but in 2022 this figure stood at 1.6%.

advertisers, trying to discern what successful print advertising looked like. The public developed increasing levels of visual literacy in this period as the popular press and cinema-going grew exponentially. Le Mahieu notes that this development meant that for the first time “*mass-produced* images [were] a central part of cultural life in Britain” [my italics]. For manufacturers this meant they had to ensure that the visual messages they used in their advertising were aligned with these advancing skills.⁴ This chapter will show that rayon manufacturers were hindered by their wider lack of knowledge about advertising and an absence of market research. Rayon producers therefore took an unorganised and scattered approach to their advertising and branding, which is reflected in the huge variety of advertisement styles across the period.⁵

Advertising in the interwar period appeared in myriad places: from local and national newspapers, to hoardings, and increasingly, in cinemas. Additionally, there would have been advertisements in shop windows, direct mail advertising, and, as we have seen, large-scale Exhibitions. Extant sources for the majority of these forms of advertising are scarce. The main sources which remain are newspaper and magazine advertisements, and it is for this reason that this study will focus on the advertising that appeared in the trade press and women’s consumer magazines. The number of trade journals had grown steadily since the late Victorian period, and in the interwar period there were an assortment of publications aimed at the textile trade, from broad-ranging publications such as *The Drapers’ Organiser*, to those looking at specific textiles, such as *Silk and Rayon* and *Silk Journal and Rayon World*. These journals provided support to the businesses within an industry, keeping them abreast of technical and economic developments, and often, the latest fashions. They offered a simulated national community which behaved as a marketplace and an educational tool. Much like today, the majority of the population would never have read a trade journal, and to reach the public advertisers

⁴ Le Mahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 80.

⁵ Stefan Schwarzkopf, “Marketing History from Below: towards a paradigm shift in marketing historical research”, *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, Vol. 7 No. 3 (2015) pp. 295-305.

needed to use the consumer press. In the 1920s it became clear to magazine publishers that there was a huge market for publications specifically for female readers, and by the late 1930s there were around fifty titles in this category.⁶ Additionally, publishers were making use of ever more sophisticated design and technology to make magazines more appealing, notably with the introduction of colour and better quality printing. Advertisers had ample reason to make use of both forms of media: trade journals allowed them to appeal directly to those in the trade to make use of their fibres and fabrics; and adverts in women's consumer magazines could encourage retail sales and brand loyalty. Whilst the advertisements themselves still exist in enormous numbers in vast magazine archives, there is extremely little left by the businesses and advertising agencies themselves about how they functioned and created advertisements. This means my work will instead be supported with research from contemporary advertising trade journals in order to ascertain trends and developments which took place in this field; I can thereby gauge how, and if, rayon producers utilised these techniques. It is also worth noting here, that establishing the impact of advertising is fraught with difficulties. The lack of consumer research or any evidence of the reaction of the public to advertisements means that the historian can only view marketing from "the top down", that is, how the manufacturers *wanted* consumers to react when they viewed their adverts. As such, I can make no apologies for neglecting the "voice of the ordinary consumer" in direct response to marketing, as there is simply no voice to be heard.⁷

Quality, Utility and Patriotism: advertising to the textile trade

Textile manufacturers, garment makers-up and retailers could have perused any one of a number of trade magazines in the interwar period. They offered coverage of "Fashions, Fabrics, Novelties and Shopfitting, to Selling and Business organisation", specifically tailored to the textile trade.⁸

⁶ J. Greenfield, & C. Reid, "Women's magazines and the commercial orchestration of femininity in the 1930s: evidence from *Woman's Own*", *Media History*, 4(2) 1998, pp. 161-174 (p. 161).

<<https://doi.org/10.1080/13688809809357942>>

⁷ Schwarzkopf, "Marketing from Below", p. 295.

⁸ *Drapers' Organiser* advert, BIF brochure, 1933, p. 81.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to ascertain readership figures for these publications, and many copies were likely read by more than one individual in the workplace, but the amount of space given over to advertising, and the general quality and longevity of the publications suggests that reading numbers were reasonably high. *The Drapers' Record* which covered all manner of textiles claimed it had the largest global circulation of *any* journal in any field, although it never revealed figures.⁹ More niche publications like *Silk and Rayon* would naturally have had a lower number of readers, although their content and editorials would have found a more specialist and engaged audience. It is also worth noting at this point that aside from any other reasons manufacturers had for advertising in the trade press, there was pressure from the trade journals themselves who believed that businesses “had a duty...to their industry” to send news and advertisements to their publications.¹⁰

As the “connecting link between Manufacturer, Wholesaler and Retail Buyer” the trade press allowed manufacturers to reach their business customers in an efficient manner.¹¹ Poor quality and defective rayon had made many weavers and knitters suspicious of the fibre when it was first introduced. As shown in previous chapters, it was difficult to work with, requiring specialist skills and different loom set-ups compared to working with wool or cotton. As rayon became a far more viable product getting this information out to potential buyers was critical. The fabric and garment-making industries were highly fragmented and made up of many small businesses, all of whom needed information about items available to purchase for use in their manufacturing processes. Although salesmen visited many manufacturers, reaching them all and reaching them frequently would have been either impossible or extremely costly.¹² It was far more efficient to reach out to buyers through the trade press in adverts:

⁹ *Drapers' Record* advert, in *AW*, 17 July 1925, p. 195.

¹⁰ “How the Press can Help the Manufacturer”, *TSJ*, January 1928, p. 54.

¹¹ *Drapers' Record* advert, in *AW*, 21st Anniversary Special Edition, 1935, p. 66.

¹² A particularly extreme example is C. Whitman who was a salesman for Salts (Saltaire) Ltd, between 1936 and 1939 he made sales to one hundred and twenty-nine different companies. See Salts Ltd, West Yorkshire Archives, Bradford, Yorkshire, WYAS 48D87/1/8/87-88.

salient points of a particular product could be portrayed through strong words and images, and these could be backed up with more specific information at a later date by salespeople or upon purchase.

Without exception, rayon fibre manufacturers were keen to stress the high quality of their product. Words like “durability”, “resistance” and “superiority” are found frequently in adverts regardless of manufacturer.¹³ In terms of the adjectives used, there is very little to differentiate the rayons as all the businesses advertised themselves as offering consistency and quality. British Celanese tried to put extra space between themselves and other manufacturers by claiming that their product was completely unique and could not be called rayon. Their refrain that “‘Celanese’ is ‘Celanese’” was a difference that they claimed throughout the interwar period, and their advertising was frequently built around it.¹⁴ British Bemberg Ltd were also able to differentiate their product as it was cuprammonium, but rather than telling purchasers that their product was a different form of rayon, they instead focused on its properties, such as “extra fineness of the filaments”, and that it had “a mild subdued lustre” and “suppleness”.¹⁵ The “unique” properties of Celta yarns were also of value to its manufacturer in advertising: they claimed its hollow fibres offered a warmer, more mellow-lustred fabric, and so it was “of infinite superiority” compared to any of their competitor’s products.¹⁶ Many of these adverts describing the properties of rayon date from the 1920s, when readers of trade journals were still experimenting with the different yarns available, and when manufacturers were still trying to establish their product in the market. It appears that once the fibres were established on the market, rayon manufacturers turned towards advertising the fashion properties and guarantees on their goods instead.

¹³ Bemberg advert, *SJRW*, September 1929, p.7 and Courtaulds advert, *S&R*, February 1934, p. 67.

¹⁴ “British Celanese, Ltd”, *Manchester Guardian*, 26 September 1924, p. 16; Celanese advert *S&R*, June 1936, p. 423, “What’s in a Name?”, *S&R*, June 1936, p. 417.

¹⁵ British Bemberg advert, *SJRW*, September 1929, p. 7.

¹⁶ Celta advert, *T SJ*, January 1929, p. 9.

Manufacturers from all industries had long used images of their factories in advertisements and rayon firms were no different. Factory illustrations were often used by manufacturers where quality was being stressed, as the idea of a factory making mass produced goods often suggested a certain uniformity and standard of goods. British Celanese, Kirklees Ltd and British Visada Ltd all illustrated advertisements with their rather archetypal and dated factory exteriors. However, British Bemberg Ltd pressed home a distinct advantage: their newly built factory at Doncaster, which opened in 1929, was white and clean-lined, with large windows and fewer smoking chimneys making it discernibly modern (see Figure 31). The simplicity of the architecture combined perfectly with the art deco styling and filmic quality of this advert, and this campaign presents a company which was not only making a technologically advanced product, but which is also looking to the future.¹⁷ Courtaulds Ltd also took the approach of showing their factories in advertisements, but they used images of the interior and machinery, rather than showing the exterior of their factory, although like Bemberg, this had also been recently built, and was modern in appearance. In their extensive 1934 and 1935 campaigns created by the agency J. Walter Thompson [JWT], the processes used to produce rayon were illustrated. In 1934, the images were hand drawn, but by 1935, photography had been employed to give a sense of modernity and realism.¹⁸ Many of the images also showed employees at work, emphasising their “skill” and “precision” in using new scientific techniques and machinery: it was this aspect, the adverts proclaimed, which offered the “security” and “profit” which their business purchasers required.¹⁹

¹⁷ See also adverts in *The Drapers' Record*, 3 June 1933, p. 3 and 29 July 1933, p. 8.

¹⁸ John Grierson's Documentary Film Movement emerged from the Empire Marketing Board in around 1930 may have also had an influence of these adverts. The principles of the movement were to show that all classes had their role in society, and the Courtaulds advert certainly suggests this.

¹⁹ See the J.W. Thompson guard book for Courtaulds Ltd, 1933-60, History of Advertising Trust, Suffolk, JWT/GD/341

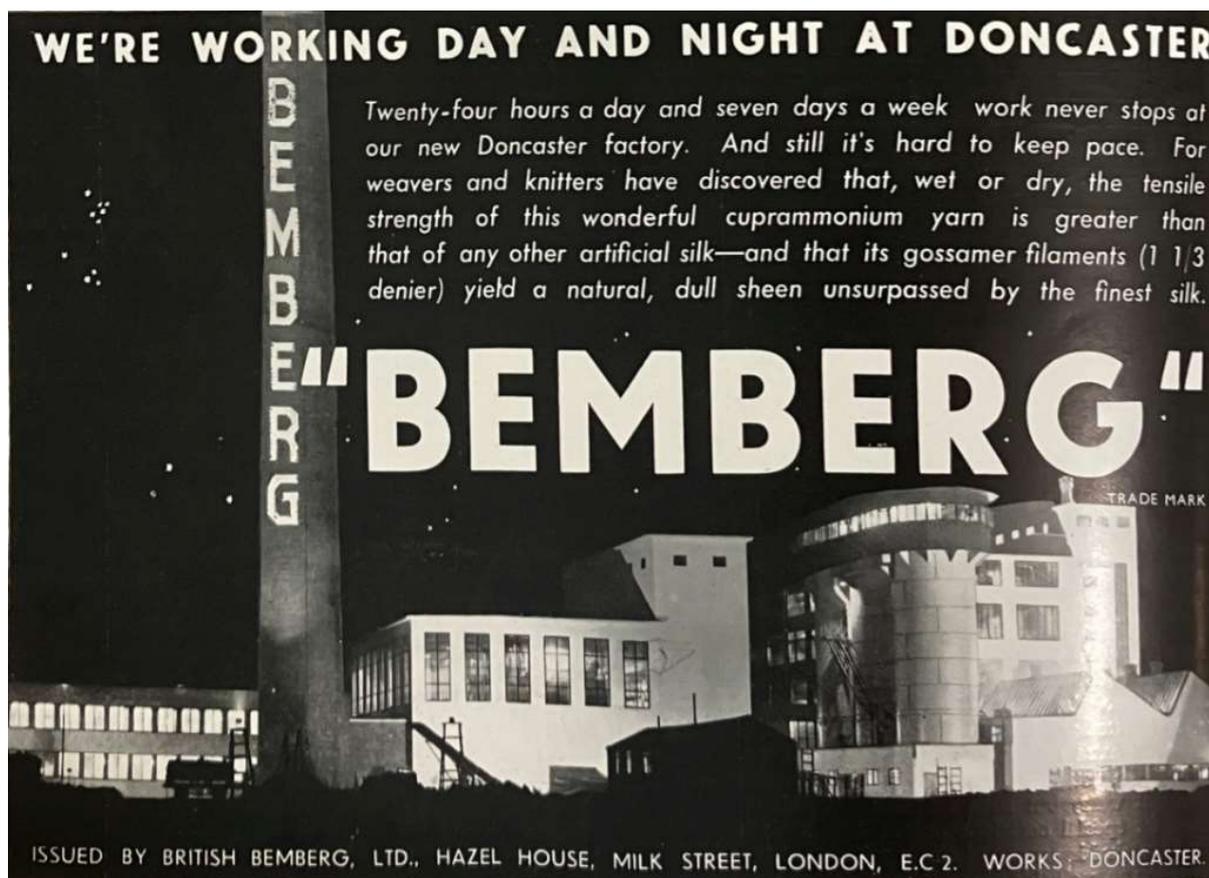


Figure 31 British Bemberg advertisement, 1933. *Silk Journal and Rayon World*, June 1933 © British Library.

Along with the manufacture of rayon, Courtaulds and British Celanese made attempts to illustrate the final filament in their adverts too. From a visual perspective, the product is not a particularly engaging one, and so it was not a common subject. However, one striking example was produced in 1933 by British Celanese: the image is of pirns of rayon positioned in an inverse triangle stretching away from the camera, suggesting a phalanx or army of mass produced product (see Figure 32). Black and white photography is used to its utmost effect, with the bright pirns shining against the long shadows cast by a backlight. The use of directional lighting is reminiscent of that used in Joseph von Sternberg's and Marlene Dietrich's films, such as *Shanghai Express* (1932), giving rayon a glamour not normally associated with a yarn. Not only referencing the latest films, the bold simplicity of the shapes and the font also allude to the *style moderne* which had been prominent since the 1925 *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs* in Paris. This style developed in the 1930s to encompass simplicity and mass production, and this Celanese advert typifies these notions with its clean lines and the identical nature of the pirns.

The text also reaffirms the precision of mass manufacture, noting that Celanese is made to the “perfect standard of exact uniformity”.²⁰ This advert effectively captures both modernity and quality in a single image.

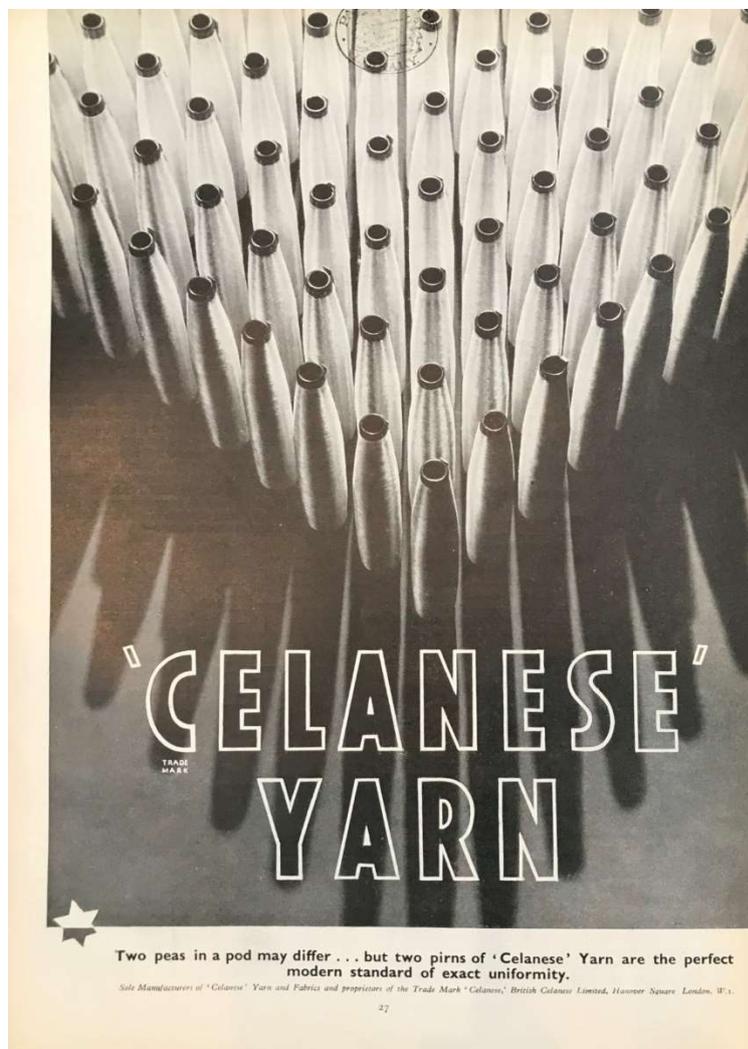


Figure 32 British Celanese advertisement, 1933. *The Drapers' Organiser*, February 1932 © British Library.

While technical skill and quality formed the basis for most advertising in the trade press, in the early 1930s there was a flood of advertising which focused on the British provenance of the product. As we saw in Chapter 5, the global recession led the British government to promote a protectionist and insular stance to help save the economy. In late 1931 the Conservative-majority National Government began the enormous “Buy British” campaign which encouraged trade and consumers to purchase

²⁰ British Celanese advert, *SJRW*, 20 June 1933, p. 27.

goods made within the nation. Rayon producers, presented with a ready-made, government-promoted marketing campaign, quickly began creating advertisements which relied heavily on demonstrating their patriotic credentials. Union Jacks and the word “British” were scattered liberally across rayon advertisements. In these adverts, manufacturers did not rely on selling their skill, expertise, or the quality of goods; rather they relied solely on the fact they were British, and that quality was implicit *because* of its Britishness. In December 1931, Courtaulds boasted in an advert that their rayon was “entirely British and sets the quality standard for the world”; later they employed more subtle means of showing this, such as using images of their employees undertaking various manufacturing processes, showing their implicit support for domestic employment and economy (see Plate VII).²¹ Whitworth & Mitchell Ltd were a company who had been stalwart supporters of the various artificial silk exhibitions which promoted the British industry, and they frequently marketed their fabrics as British made. In one of their adverts published in *The Drapers’ Organiser*, which coincided with the 1932 BTE, the entire background is comprised of Union Jacks and stylised lions’ heads (see Figure 33). Striking because it was printed in colour, which certainly would have grabbed the viewer’s attention, not only did it note their “All British” fabrics, but it directly exhorted the reader to “BUY BRITISH” [sic].²² Harben’s Ltd employed both the Union Jack on their adverts, and the more subtle device of the red Lancashire rose, with their Lancashire address noted underneath.²³ Other businesses went further with their patriotism: S. W. Whaley Ltd questioned “Why Buy Foreign Goods?” and John Brown & Son Ltd appealed to the reader to “Help keep down Unemployment by/Buying and Selling British Goods”.²⁴ This surge of patriotic fervour cooled once the government’s “Buy British” campaign slowed down, but there was often a resurgence in nationalist advertising around the time of the BTE, again, in line with the government-led promotion of British economic interests at the Fair.

²¹ “Rayon”, Courtaulds advert, *DO*, December 1931, p. 18.

²² Wemco advert, *DO*, February 1932, p. 156.

²³ “Rayon Yarns”, Harbens advert, *SJRW*, May 1932, p. 32.

²⁴ “Court Crepe”, S.W. Whaley & Son advert, *DO*, February 1931, p. 11; and “Sonia”, John Brown & Son Ltd advert, *DO British Textile Exhibition Advance Supplement*, January 1931, p. 65.



Figure 33 Whitworth and Mitchell advert displaying their support for British industry, February 1932. *The Drapers' Organiser*, February 1932 © British Library.

Dreams of Glamour and Feminine Modernity

Advertising rayon in women's magazines in the interwar period was an inevitable course taken by manufacturers. The pages of these publications were full of fashion features and they reached an immense female audience. In 1936, twenty-one women's magazines possessed total estimated readership of 3 million women, with the middle-class market, which was critical for rayon sales, accounting for 1.7 million of these readers.²⁵ In advertising trade journals such as *Advertiser's Weekly*, the publishers of women's magazines took out their own adverts noting their sales figures, often along with prices for advertising space, to encourage manufacturers and advertising agencies to choose their publication for advertisements. An advert in just one publication could reach hundreds of thousands of readers: *Women's World* sold 600,000 copies weekly; *Woman's Companion* 300,000 weekly;

²⁵ "How Four Groups of Women's Magazines Cover the Classes", *AW*, 7 March 1936, p. 354.

Picturegoer Weekly expected to sell 100,000 weekly; and *Home Journal's* first issue sold 400,000 copies in thirty-six hours.²⁶ Advertisers were lured in by these readership figures, and as Ellen McCracken has stated, the power and density of advertising within such magazines was (and continues to be) such that a more appropriate name might be "women's advertising magazines."²⁷ The regular issuing of the journals also allowed for repeat advertising, and for campaigns to be developed over a number of weeks or months, so that readers acquired a familiarity with brands and products. Finally, magazines aided manufacturers by reassuring readers that their advertisers produced quality goods: *Good Housekeeping* regularly reminded readers that the "worthwhile and reliable products" which were advertised in their magazine were "guaranteed" by *Good Housekeeping* themselves; while *Woman's Fair* offered a "Cash Refund" on goods advertised in their pages that were not of the quality described.²⁸ A Mass Observation survey of 1937 found that many female readers used advertising for its "informative function", and they would base potential purchases on the information which was given by the advertiser, seemingly regardless of any impartiality.²⁹ For advertisers, not only were women the main purchasers of clothing, but articles in trade journals also extolled the benefits of advertising to women, believing they were particularly susceptible to advertising: it was alleged one could "Capture [a] Woman's Imagination and [then] sell anything".³⁰ With such apparent advantages, advertising in women's magazines was undertaken by all the major manufacturers of rayon fabrics. As the interwar period progressed manufacturers developed their advertising strategies, and combined with improvements in printing techniques the overall impression is one of an increased sophistication and proficiency in the advertising of rayon.

²⁶ Figures taken from adverts for these publications in *Advertiser's Weekly*, 14 August 1925, p. 299; 18 January 1928, p. 51; 3 July 1931, p. 17; and 15 March 1934, p. 353.

²⁷ Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Womens Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.*, (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 4.

²⁸ "Why there are so many adverts in this magazine", *GH*, June 1930, p. 214; "Woman's Fair Guarantee", *WF*, March 1936, p. 4

²⁹ "Typed Report Reaction to Advertising", Mass Observation Archive, Sussex Topic Collection 22_1_A, p. 23.

³⁰ Phillip Massey, "The Expenditure of 1,360 British Middle-Class Households in 1938-39", *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 105: 3 (1942), p. 175; "Capture Woman's Imagination and You can Sell Anything", *AW*, 15 October 1931, p. 94.

Women's consumer magazines are a crucible where contemporary notions of femininity and womanhood come together. These themes are particularly well demonstrated in the illustrations gracing their pages, and in the interwar period we see glamour being depicted as something desirable and achievable by the masses for the first time. To be glamorous in these years was to possess physical beauty, wealth and leisure, but also have a certain magnetism or star quality.³¹ Some younger members of the upper classes embodied this, as did film stars, and they were widely reported on in newspapers. In the novel *Our Spoons Came From Woolworths*, set in the 1930s, it is not the old-fashioned notions of womanhood such as refinement or beauty which the protagonist aspires to, rather she "regret[s] very much she wasn't glamorous".³² Stephen Gundle argues that glamour is so closely affiliated with consumption, that it could not exist before its constituent parts of desirability, novelty and exclusivity became commodified.³³ "The dynamic of envy that was central to glamour" could be played on by manufacturers by offering mass-produced goods for sale which promised to let anyone obtain "It", provided they could spare a few shillings.³⁴ As dress was one of the signifiers of the material ease and beauty of the glamorous, interwar women's magazines and their advertisers used clothing not only to entice women into reading a magazine, but also to persuade them that buying and wearing these items had a transformational effect. Manufacturers realised that garments did not have a value based solely on the materials and labour which went into them: the purported impact on a wearer also possessed a monetary value in a consumer society. Dress also afforded the "dynamism" which was central to the creation of envy necessary for glamour.³⁵ Clothing fashions constantly shifted the parameters for what was desirable, and the frequency with which women's

³¹ Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 146-7.

³² Barbara Comyns, *Our Spoons Came From Woolworths*, (London: Virago Press, 2014), p. 173.

³³ Gundle, *Glamour*, pp. 5-7.

³⁴ Elinor Glyn, *It*, serialised in *Woman's Weekly* from 3 September 1927.

³⁵ Gundle, *Glamour*, pp. 5-7.

magazines were published meant that both editorial features and advertisements could promote glamour endlessly, while it remained eternally and tantalisingly out of reach.

Despite the apparently obvious benefits of advertising, Samuel Courtauld believed that “psychologically, advertisement is a dangerous and insidious stimulant”, and under his early chairmanship spending on advertising remained very limited.³⁶ Nevertheless, by the early 1930s, J. Walter Thompson Ltd had been contracted to begin advertising Courtaulds’ products in earnest, and in 1935 they launched a series of adverts which could be viewed as particularly “insidious”.³⁷ Playing on the concept of glamour and aspiration far more than on the quality of the product, a fictional girl about town, Courtesa, was created to showcase Courtaulds Fashion Studio garments, which was a division of Courtaulds which used their rayon fabrics for a range of fashionable, ready-to-wear clothing. The name itself appears to be an amalgamation of “Courtaulds” and “contessa” (“countess” in Italian), and this unique name creates a sense of the exotic and unusual.³⁸ The idea of Courtesa seems to have developed from an earlier advert dating from 1930, which showed an illustrated woman at three different times of day wearing different outfits created in Courtaulds’ fabrics.³⁹ The Courtesa adverts build on this by using photography and using a model to play the character (see Figure 34). Reviewing this advert, *The Advertiser’s Weekly* commented that “the idea of running a kind of photographic mannequin parade is new to press advertising”, but it was not only the novelty which would have caught the reader’s eye: Courtesa herself is also designed to be engaging.⁴⁰ In the series of adverts, she is always shown looking confident and happy; she has fashionable (but never avantgarde) hair and make-up; she is pretty but is not strikingly beautiful. In the adverts, four

³⁶ Letters to the Editor, *The Times*, 2 August 1933, p. 6. Coleman notes that in 1927, total advertising spend was £3780, a pitiable amount for such a large company; this had risen to £1.35m in 1936, see D.C. Coleman, *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 343.

³⁷ Due to the lack of access to archival records I have been unable to determine why this change in strategy occurred.

³⁸ It is also suspiciously like the word “courtesan”, although this is unlikely to have been Courtaulds’ intention.

³⁹ Courtaulds advert, *MW*, March 1930, p. 1.

⁴⁰ “Photographic Fashion Parade”, *Advertiser’s Weekly*, 18 April 1935, p. 72.

photographs create a pictorial narrative of a day in the life of this girl about town, showing her in four different outfits which reinforce the social etiquette of women's clothing: leisurely morning chats with family members in underclothing or lingerie is acceptable; work clothing should be smart and sober; dresses for leisure can be more vibrant, but should remain smart; full length dresses are *de rigueur* for evening events; and nightwear should be attractive. Photographed in an office setting, Courtessa is portrayed as a modern working woman, who is not only breaking down existing social norms, but is also earning her own money to spend on things she chooses. The photographs also suggest she has a busy and glamorous social life, a fact reinforced by the text: "Courtessa's friends run into simply dozens – she's far the most popular girl in her set."⁴¹ The lexis in the adverts is very much of the middle and upper classes. The use of the adverb "simply" here echoes upper class speech patterns, and the use of the word "set" for a friendship group was rarely used in the lower classes. Courtessa possesses all the accoutrements of a relatively wealthy lifestyle: rich décor and modern furniture form backdrops to many of the photographs; and a telephone is in use in one scene. Readers would have been familiar with this style of backdrop from films and consumer home magazines. The implication of this wealth is that Courtessa's life is "free from care", a necessary characteristic of glamour.⁴² The double page spread of the advert, along with the narrative qualities of the photographs are used to draw the viewer in, there is a large amount of text both reiterating Courtessa's glamour and containing further information. As mentioned previously, Mass Observation surveys suggested that people valued the information which adverts provided, as it helped them decide which purchases to make, so although very modern posters were increasingly eliminating large blocks of text, for some advertisers it seemed prudent to maintain it.⁴³ The text here bolsters the glamour of Courtessa by describing her desirability: "Men love to take [Courtessa] out, to partner her to dance clubs, to tuck her into their two-seaters."⁴⁴ At a time when women were still expected to marry, having lots of

⁴¹ "Courtessa gives a party", JWT Guard book for Courtaulds Ltd 1935, History of Advertising Trust, JWT/JD/021

⁴² James Laver, "Glamour – What is it?", *MW*, February 1938, p. 13

⁴³ "Reactions to Advertising", December 1938, Mass Observation Archive, Brighton, Sussex, Topic Collection 22-1-A.

⁴⁴ "Courtessa gives a party", 1935.

suitors was a distinct advantage, and so much the better if the suitor was wealthy enough to own a car! The courtship taking place in these adverts could have been taken from any one of the numerous fictional short stories which were published (and seemingly devoured) in women's magazines. However, this advert is not merely a fiction: it offers the readers the direct possibility of re-creating these narratives in their own lives simply by making a purchase. The suggestion is clearly stated: women can have "extra fun that well-dressed girls enjoy" by making a purchase of Courtaulds Fashion Studio ready-made clothing "from practically any shop."⁴⁵

★ *meet* **Courtesa** *the smartest and thriftiest girl in town!*

If you've ever wished that someone with a genius for dressing well on your amount of salary could act as a clothes guide for you — then you'll bless the day you meet Courtesa.

For Courtesa — everyone admits — is among the smartest girls in Town. Wherever you see her — at the office in the morning, or at a dance at night — she's always perfectly "turned out." In every gathering, it's Courtesa's clothes that rouse the envy of the women and win the interest of the men.

COURTESA DRESSES TO A PLAN!
It's not through "luck" or by "picking things up cheap" that Courtesa manages to look so smart and spend so little. Every time Courtesa goes shopping, she says firmly: "Show me what you've got in Courtaulds Rayon." *Courtesa has proved it pays on the score of looks and quality and service to buy only the pretty things that carry the Courtaulds Housemark.*

And what a choice there is! Undies that are a dream in fit and gloriously rich in finish. Vogue-ish frocks for just every occasion in fabrics that look fearfully expensive. Stockings you can't tell from pure silk, they're so soft and silky.

But the marvellous thing is clothes made from Courtaulds Rayon are a grand economy. They cost less than you usually pay, despite their tip-top style and quality. And they go on wearing and washing and looking smart long after ordinary clothes are done for.

Dress Courtesa's way! Share in the extra fun well-dressed girls enjoy. Next time — and every time — you're buying clothes, ask to see Styles in Courtaulds Rayon. And look for the Courtaulds Housemark sewn inside every garment.

Look for the Housemark

COURTAULDS
Fashion Studio



1 At Courtesa was dressing for the office on Saturday her mother brought in a letter from Jack. Would she go to a party that night? Courtesa would. (These camikis are of Courtaulds Rayon. Simple, but, my, how they fit!)

2 Do you like this day-frock of Courtesa's? She wears it Saturdays because it's dark and trim for the office but smart enough for "going places" after. Please perceive its "turner" collar. A Courtaulds Fashion Studio success!

3 Jack was very complimentary about Courtesa's white evening dress. It's made of Courtaulds Crêpe Capucine, with little stitched beads of the material forming the only trimming. Of course, you've noticed its streamlines!

4 Tired after the party, Courtesa goes happily to bed. She's wearing a very good line in nighties — with an "Empire" top. It has been washed lots of times but still looks brand new. Another "find" with a Courtaulds tab inside!

© 1935—R. Courtaulds. Made in England. May 1935. 91 x 7

Figure 34 "Meet Courtesa", a Courtaulds' advert, 1935 which appeared in numerous publications. Courtaulds Guardbook, History of Advertising Trust, JWT/GD/341.

⁴⁵ "Courtesa gives a party", 1935.

As the Courtessa advertisement suggests, women could be “smart” even if they had to be “thrifty”. Readers of any social class or income bracket could use information given to them in magazines and adverts to achieve a specific look, and it was allegedly increasingly difficult to tell if someone was a “duchess or a mill girl [as they] wore exactly the same type of clothes”.⁴⁶ A 1938 advert for *Woman’s Fair* said “Being glamorous, beautiful and charming is not a matter of money. It’s “knowing how.”⁴⁷ Glamour offered promises of “a mobile society...[in which] anyone can be transformed”.⁴⁸ Not only could the upper classes be emulated, but there was the suggestion that women could actually enter into different a different strata of society themselves and end “domestic drudgery and chronic want”, just as the glamorous film stars often did in the movies.⁴⁹ The glamour of the upper classes often came from the modern and exclusive clothing which they wore: to reproduce this glamour, women needed to be up-to-date with the latest novelties and fashions. Fabric and garment manufacturers therefore not only had to replicate the latest looks, but also show how they could have a transformative effect. To this end, many manufacturers looked to include new and fashionable items, concepts or behaviours in their adverts to create dreamscapes in which the reader could imagine themselves. In 1928, *Modern Woman* featured an advert for Camrusyl, a rayon manufactured by Law, Russell & Co Ltd (see Figure 35). Set amongst more traditional adverts for cots and soap, and instructions on how to thicken soup and carve poultry, the advert shows an image of a young woman dressed in the “flapper” style, sitting casually on the arm of a chair and smoking a cigarette. The flapper, or *garçonne*, had been a radical break with traditional notions of womanhood: appearing care-free, and with her bold haircut and revolutionary clothes, it was her originality and the suggestion of scandal which made the flapper glamorous. As film stars like Louise Brooks and Clara Bow became internationally famous, so they normalised this iteration of glamour. The Camrusyl advert also draws

⁴⁶ Quoted in A. Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality*, (Batsford, 1986), p. 159.

⁴⁷ “What is this thing called glamour”, *WF* advert, in *Woman*, January 1938, p. 31.

⁴⁸ Gundle, *Glamour*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman: and other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History* (London: Virago, 1994), p. 205.

on the recent fashion for American cocktails, with the main text reading “Frocks for happy hours”.⁵⁰ By 1928, the image of a flapper was not particularly novel, indeed fashionable dress and hairstyles abound in *Modern Woman*, but it is the suggested attitude of this particular character which makes her striking. As Tinkler and Krasnick Warsh have noted, the smoking of a cigarette marks her as a woman who embodies “feminine modernity”, as smoking was still not quite “respectable”.⁵¹ Sitting on the arm of the chair, in a relaxed pose, cigarette dangling from her fingers, the character has an ease and confidence which is necessary to be glamorous. She deviates from the more commonly portrayed woman in adverts who still have a certain meekness in their presentation, and who seem uncomfortable under the gaze of the reader. Camrusyl is a brand which is presenting itself as a product suitable for a woman who wants to embrace a modern femininity and lifestyle, and who expresses this in the way she dresses.

⁵⁰ Camrusyl advert, *MW*, February 1928, p. 76. The beginnings of cocktail hours are obscure, but it is said that the first one was held in America in 1917, and that Alec Waugh hosted the first cocktail hour in Britain in 1924. The term “happy hour” seems to have derived from the American prohibition where people would gather to drink before going for dinner.

⁵¹ Penny Tinkler and Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, “Feminine Modernity in Interwar Britain and North America Corsets, Cars, and Cigarettes”, *Journal of Women’s History*, (20:3) 2008, pp. 113-143 (p. 116).



Figure 35 (L) Camrusyl advert, *Modern Woman*, February 1928; © British Library; (R) illustration of Mistinguett, an almost archetypal flapper, Charles Gesmar, 1922 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_Gesmar_-_Mistinguett_1922.jpg>

The novelties of a modern lifestyle can be seen in a Courtaulds advert published in *Modern Woman* in August 1932 (see Plate VIII). Two young women are shown at the seaside, wearing the latest fashions of beach pyjamas and a swimming costume; both outfits have thin shoulder straps and a low back marking them out as particularly *à la mode*. Foreign beach holidays and sunbathing had become popular amongst the upper classes in the 1920s (sunbathing was literally fashionable as the Parisian *couturier* Chanel was in the vanguard of its growth in popularity). By the 1930s white collar workers had begun to follow suit and were increasingly taking holidays at the British seaside. However, the hat and beach umbrella in this advert suggest warmer climes than a British resort, once again creating aspirations for the middle classes at a time when holidays abroad were not only rare, but also “50% dearer” following the return to the Gold Standard in 1931.⁵² The novelty of undertaking exercise for fun and to create “the body beautiful” is also referenced in the smaller line drawings of women playing

⁵² *Modern Woman* retailed at 6d, placing it squarely in the middle-class reading category.

Thomas Cook quoted in Juliet Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History*, (London: Harper Press, 2010), p. 614.

with a beach ball, and another woman surfing.⁵³ The glamour in this advert comes not only from the attractive women in their fashionable clothes, but also from the suggestion that these characters have a “gilded existence” and “material ease”, which allows them to indulge in these pastimes.⁵⁴

Looking closely at the August 1932 Courtaulds beach advert (Plate VIII), one can see the shadowy figure of a man sitting under the parasol. Men rarely feature in these adverts for fabrics and clothes aimed at women, but when they do they are always in a supporting role, as with the man in this Courtaulds advert. In the “Courtesa gives a party” advertisement, the men photographed only appear as partners, and indeed they are both partly cropped off at the edges of the image, their faces not visible. Two further Courtaulds adverts, one from 1932 and another from 1935, show women in evening clothes with their male partners entirely behind them. While the men in both adverts have enough features drawn in to make them suitably masculine and characteristically handsome, they have been shaded in, a complete contrast to the almost spot-lit figure of the woman/Courtesa.⁵⁵ The text in the adverts also talks of “envy” and “admiring glances”, not for the couple, but solely for the female in her “beautiful” and “elegant” clothing from Courtaulds. Beauty and elegance have long been admired qualities in women, yet the modern illustrations on these adverts with women in the foreground, looking away from their partners also gives an impression of independence, which women increasingly desired. In this period, women over the age of twenty-one gained suffrage; there were increasing numbers of women in white collar jobs who gained some form of financial independence, even if only up until marriage; and traditional notions of how women could behave were being challenged. Yet the male figures in the adverts offer the reader a reassurance that certain traditions remain unchanged – courtship, marriage and eventually the role of a wife. British Celanese takes the

⁵³ Molly Bagot Stack quoted in *ibid*, p. 521; surfing was a small but growing sport amongst those bold and wealthy enough to try it.

⁵⁴ Gundle, *Glamour*, pp. 141 and 147.

⁵⁵ “elegance” [sic], Courtaulds advert, *MW*, February 1932, p. 1 and “Courtesa sees a show in style”, *GH*, November 1935, p. 117.

notion of the man in a supporting role to the extreme in an advert run in *Woman's Fair* in 1937: a statuesque woman in evening dress dominates the page, with a man barely reaching her knees looking up at her, and seemingly trying to propose (see Plate VIII).⁵⁶ The woman's skin and hair are completely black, with features drawn in white – this style was widely used in art deco, drawing inspiration from ancient Egyptian basalt statues – and this effect renders the woman as a goddess. As a worshipped woman-goddess, with a sense of the “mysterious” she offers an unobtainable version of glamour, the opposite of Courtesa.⁵⁷ Although she transcends all notions of meek and compliant femininity, she remains aspirational as she still conforms to the bodily and beauty ideals of the day, and is desirable by men. Another statuesque woman dominates a Wilemba advert in May 1936, and this woman has no man to impress or be deferential to; rather Wilemba fabrics are advertised for “women who dress to please themselves”.⁵⁸ This promotion of “fantasies [of] individual identity” fits perfectly in a world where women were increasingly freeing themselves from Victorian ideals of a submissive and dutiful womanhood.⁵⁹ Instead, British women were offered the opportunity to “express themselves as individuals and not as the appanages of men”.⁶⁰ Yet like the Celanese goddess, the Wilemba woman adheres to contemporary ideas of beauty and femininity, being a tall, slim, hourglass shape: the inference is clear, dressing to please oneself is only glamorous if you remain attractive to others.

The female forms in many illustrations of the period possess such a simplicity that one contemporary critic dubbed them “the Puppet lad[ies]”. In her 1929 critique, Lucy B. Kitchin believed that editors of magazines could not decide what beauty looked like, and artists “did not want to spend too long over the portrayal of the woman wearing the dress”.⁶¹ Kitchin's argument oversimplifies, and overlooks

⁵⁶ Using giant female figures as goddesses or visual metaphors was not new: in 1909 Selfridges used a female figure as the embodiment of London, holding a doll's house sized Selfridge's store.

⁵⁷ Laver, “Glamour – what is it?”, p. 13.

⁵⁸ “New Fabrics”, Wilemba Fashion Group advert, *WGT*, May 1936, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Gundle, *Glamour*, p. 72.

⁶⁰ Ethyle Campbell, *Can I Help You, Madam?*, (first edition 1938, republished London: V&A Publishing, 2017), p. 30.

⁶¹ Lucy B. Kitchin, “Why not a natural woman?”, *Advertising Display*, January 1929, quoted in Steven Heller and Louise Fili, *EuroDeco: Graphic Design Between the Wars*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004)p. 450.

wider artistic trends, but illustrated women of this period do have a mass-produced quality: they were robotic and their features, in particular on faces, were reduced to the bare minimum. This anonymous woman had become so ubiquitous in fashion illustrations in the early 1920s that in the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels* in Paris, fashion designers showed their garments on wax mannequins formed in this style (see Plate IX). Rayon advertisers in Britain did not begin to use this style of woman in earnest until around 1927, although “the Puppet lady” was ubiquitous by the 1930s. Dating from 1927 and 1929 respectively, the Voilasyll and Ferguson adverts below show the dress fabric in great detail, indeed the fabric which is being held in the Voilasyll advert is almost photographic in its detail (see Figure 36). However, the features of the women are pared back, and the simple, clean lines of the illustration offer a version of glamour and beauty which is unobtainable on a real face.



Figure 36 (L) Horrockses, Crewdson & Co Ltd, *The Drapers' Organiser*, February 1927, © British Library; (R) Ferguson Bros Ltd, *The Drapers' Organiser*, August 1929, © British Library. Note that the fabric on both adverts is very detailed.

An advert for British Celanese in *The Draper's Organiser* is an excellent example of the undistinguished, art deco woman, and it mimics the Paquin mannequins from the 1925 Expo very closely, even though it was produced some five years later (see Plate IX).⁶² The fabrics in this advert are almost without exception plain, perhaps because, as the advert notes, fashion changes from day-to-day, and to put a design on the fabric would have dated the advert itself, and restricted its use to a short time frame. The plain fabric and the style of illustration allow the intricate cutting of the dresses to be shown more clearly than in a photograph. This is particularly highlighted in this advert as it forms part of an eight-page spread of adverts for British Celanese: this illustrated page is followed by a photographic one. Although the real-life mannequins have been posed elegantly, and in the latest fashions, they cannot compete in terms of refinement and grace with the stylised illustrations on the previous page, there are simply too many details and features in the photographs. Another benefit of using these “puppet ladies” was their bland anonymity which acted to broaden the appeal of adverts, appealing “to the tastes of a diverse audience.”⁶³ Different social classes, geographical areas and individuals possessed differing notions of beauty, but with their lack of distinct features and simplified but classical good looks, these illustrated women have a wide-ranging appeal. Perhaps more importantly, they are a blank canvas upon which the consumer can “reimagine themselves”.⁶⁴ Their characteristics, situations and poses offer sufficient “mental stimulation” to form a basic narrative: for example many adverts have illustrations which suggest women arriving at an evening event or party, or taking part in leisure activities. Although it was unknown at the time these adverts were made, recent studies have shown

⁶² As the interwar period progressed, rayon advertisers in the trade press began to move away from advertising the utility of their goods, as such many adverts have very similar traits to those in the consumer press which is why I have used this advert here. It is interesting to note that the trade press reader was most likely male, and the heraldry in these adverts would likely have had little appeal to him. However, as aspirational marketing increasingly took hold in the interwar years, glamour and beauty, rather than practicality, became more important to the final consumer. Stressing these aspects of rayon in a trade magazine would have encouraged the message to be passed down the supply chain, and perhaps also set an example of how clothing made from a particular manufacturer's rayon could be advertised to the final consumer.

⁶³ Le Mahieu, *A Culture for Democracy*, p. 19.

⁶⁴ Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett, *Fashioning the Feminine: representation and women's fashion from the fin de siècle to the present*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002)

that readers typically mentally place themselves in narrative advertisements, and the blank canvases of the Puppet Ladies most likely encouraged this effect.⁶⁵ These illustrated narrative fantasies were allowing female consumers to imagine “the graceful and beautiful self... she would like to become”.⁶⁶

One of the ways in which women sought to reimagine themselves and escape from their day-to-day lives was through visits to the cinema. The power of Hollywood and the movies was well established by the 1930s, with millions of cinema tickets sold each week.⁶⁷ The creation of magazines such as *Film Fashionland* and *Picturegoer* illustrates the insatiable demand for everything related to films and film stars. Sarah Berry examines the links between consumption and 1930s Hollywood and shows how important film narratives and costume were in creating the idea that a “social position as ‘ascribed by birth’” could be rejected.⁶⁸ The popularity of this narrative and the film stars themselves was utilised by advertisers to sell affiliated products, for example, Hollywood Fashions Ltd and Marshall Ward sold dresses based on those in films; and actresses were paid to endorse goods like Max Factor and Ponds face cream. There are no examples of rayon producers using stars to endorse their products in advertisements, but as photography and printing techniques improved they did begin to “use cinematic conventions [to] appropriate the cultural prestige and authority of cinema”.⁶⁹ Using simple back drops and mannequins who looked comfortable in front of the camera, British Celanese excelled at producing cinematic glamour in their photographic adverts.⁷⁰ As well as using adverts like this in women’s consumer magazines, British Celanese (and other manufacturers) began to use fashion as a selling point in trade journal advertising too. It is for this reason that we see two particularly striking adverts in *The Draper’s Record* in 1932, where not only were the mannequins dressed and posed in

⁶⁵ Chingching Chang, “‘Being Hooked’ by Editorial Content: The Implications for Processing Narrative Advertising”, *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 38 No. 1, Spring 2009, pp. 21-33.

⁶⁶ Alexander, *Becoming a Woman*, p. 214.

⁶⁷ In Britain 18 to 19 million visits were made to the cinema each week.

⁶⁸ Sarah Berry, *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood*, (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.xvi.

⁶⁹ Helen Wilkinson, “‘The New Heraldry’”, p. 28.

⁷⁰ Prior to the First World War, and even in the early 1920s, many people who were photographed still had a tendency to look uneasy in front of this technology.

an arresting manner, but a strong geometric, black and white backdrop – seen in high-end art deco architecture and interiors, and reinterpreted in film stage sets – give a distinct sense of Hollywood luxury (see Plate X).⁷¹ A further example from the same publication is illustrated in Figure 37: here the mannequins here are posed like film stars in publicity shots, an aesthetic that was increasingly being used across fashion magazines in both advertising and editorial features, as the public increasingly looked to films and their stars for fashion inspiration.

Glamour was a powerful influence in the interwar period, as women had increasing opportunities to dream of escaping their everyday lives, through films, newspapers and advertising. The advertisements for rayon made glamour seem obtainable by anyone who bought their products, be it clothing or fabric. Of course, the problem with glamour is that it is so rarely obtainable, and an innate part of glamour is its envy inducing properties: this meant that women would not, in fact, achieve a look anything like that in the advert, but this merely allowed advertisers to keep promoting glamour, to encourage women to chase for an unrealisable dream, and providing manufacturers with continued sales.

⁷¹ One of Hollywood's top art directors, Cedric Gibbons, had visited the 1925 Paris Exhibition, and his impressions would have a major impact on Hollywood film sets.

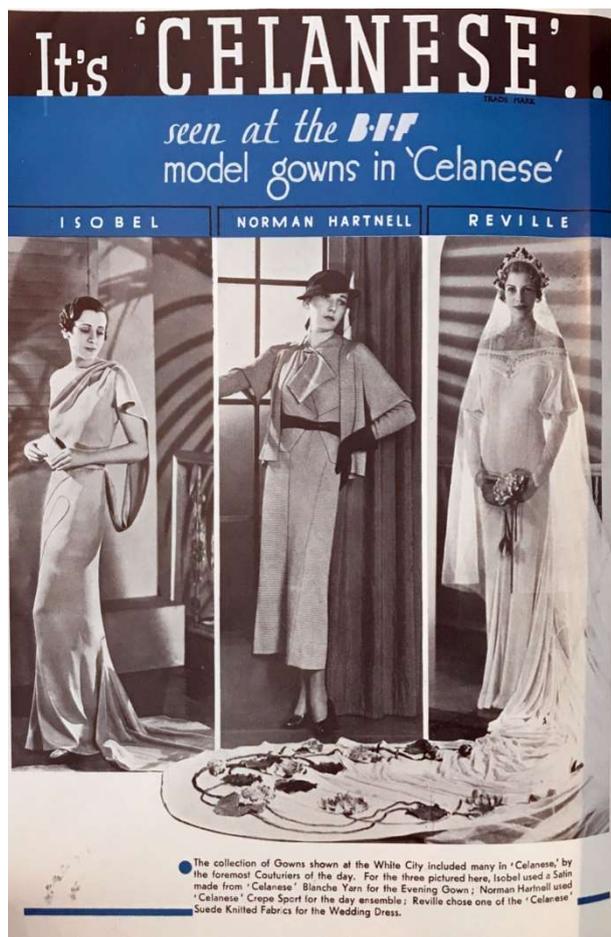


Figure 37 Celanese advert showing garments made by British designers, 1934. *The Drapers' Organiser*, March 1934 © British Library.

A Very British Pairing: The Modern and the Traditional in trade and consumer advertising

Reviewing rayon advertising across the interwar period, it is apparent that manufacturers and advertising agencies were learning as they went along, and overall, there was an increased sophistication in techniques and style across both the trade and consumer press. As the years passed, advertisers seemed to take more heed of the poster designer Paul Colin's idea that the best advertising "must be readable at 100km an hour", and intricate drawings and acres of text were replaced with a pared-back, modern style.⁷² Adverts needed to be attention grabbing and memorable, and rayon companies and their advertising agencies (if they had one) were increasing their skills at doing just this. These newer, modern adverts usually date from the mid-1920s onwards, and they were

⁷² Paul Colin, quoted in Michael Robinson & Rosaline Ormiston, *Art Deco: The Golden Age of Graphic Art & Illustration*, (London: Flame Tree, 2008), p. 155.

undoubtedly influenced by European modern art. The 1925 *L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels* in Paris had encouraged a simplicity and exoticism in design across all mediums, including advertising. Many businesses were convinced that this new-fangled style of art was “un-British” and would not be suitable for their own advertising.⁷³ Yet by the mid-1920s the London Underground, under the auspices of Frank Pick, was experimenting with new graphic forms in its advertising posters. Regional rail companies followed suit, and the art historian Anthony Blunt noted that these posters “familiarized a very wide public with the conventions of modern art”, as they were visible by the huge numbers of people using public transport.⁷⁴ This public art was a form of non-threatening modernism: the styles used may have been distinctly modern, but the images they portrayed were of a “cozy, insular England.”⁷⁵ Michael T. Saler argues that of the many modernisms that exist, British modernism has largely been sidelined as it did not have the visual ‘punch’ or “stylistic breakthroughs” which defined European modernism. Instead, he says, English modernists looked to combine traditional and even “Medieval” values with the new aesthetic styles.⁷⁶ These values included community, spiritualism, craftsmanship and commerce all of which helped the English (or British) form a domestic identity. The public encountered this “medieval modernist” art on the Underground and railways, and they warmed to the “domesticated” modern graphic design. These aesthetics would rapidly move beyond the realm of transport, and soon many businesses, including rayon producers, were using this peculiarly British form of modernism in their own adverts.⁷⁷

Today we refer to the modernism of the interwar years as “art deco”, the name deriving from the 1925 Paris exhibition of *arts decoratifs*. This artistic phenomenon cannot be defined by one particular style, but a central tenet was that design aesthetics and mass consumerism could, and should, be

⁷³ Steven Heller and Louise Fili, *EuroDeco*, p. 426.

⁷⁴ Anthony Blunt, quoted in Michael T. Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar Britain: Medieval Modernism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.15.

⁷⁵ James Trilling, “Review”, *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 9 No.1, Winter 2003, pp. 158-159 (p. 159).

⁷⁶ Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar Britain*, pp. 7-10.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

united. The fashion and textile industries were particularly well suited to art deco design: the movement had partly been born from the fashion plates of illustrators like Erté and Georges LePape, who had been employed by couturier designers and high-end fashion magazines since before the First World War. The simplified human forms against modern backdrops created by these illustrators showed an idealised form of femininity and glamour which depicted fashion and glamour in an entirely new way. In these modern renderings of textiles and clothing, it was not the actual fabric or clothing which counted, it was the *Idea* of the garment, and the impact it would have on the wearer. Art deco also had an additional resonance for rayon manufacturers: not only was rayon primarily an aesthetically based product, it also had to be produced in large volumes, so it epitomised mass production and consumption. Combining art (in the form of fashion) and mass production, rayon manufacturers were ideally situated to embrace art deco themes and motifs in their advertisements. British manufacturers (or their advertising agencies) worked to create adverts which would not alienate readers by being *too* avantgarde or European, but rather which would stress the quality and fashionability of their products by using choice motifs, fonts and layouts appropriated from the art deco movement, whilst maintaining notions of Britishness and tradition.

As we have already seen, fashion illustration formed a key part of rayon advertisements. Many rayon fibres and the resulting fabrics were, as discussed, only differentiated by pseudo-differences, so the manufacturers relied on their name being associated with the most fashionable styles and forms of rayon. As T.R. Nevett had argued, “consumer goods manufacturers were coming to realise that the product they were selling was more than the sum of the ingredients plus performance”, and creating an aura around goods was ever more imperative.⁷⁸ Taking a broad view of rayon adverts in the 1920s and 1930s it is clear that the style of advertising was drawn from high fashion drawings and illustrators, but the time it took for these high-end designs to trickle down and appear in rayon advertisements is

⁷⁸ Nevett, *Advertising in Britain*, p. 152.

notable in its lengthiness. In the early 1920s high-end fashion magazines in France, Britain and the United States were using artists such as Helen Dryden, Robert Bonfils and Eduardo Benito, all of whom were creating simpler and more abstract depictions of fashion. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, rayon manufacturers were taking inspiration from these high-end magazines of the early 1920s for their own advertisements. Some of the adverts from this period draw so closely from an earlier piece of work that the boundary between homage and plagiarism is indistinct. A Ferguson's advert from the British Textiles Exhibition 1933 appears to draw extremely heavily from an illustration of actress and dancer Paulette Duval in the French society magazine *Gazette du Bon Ton* (see Plate XI). The illustration of Duval dates from 1920, but the similarities in the subject and style are clear. The dancer was an oft illustrated figure in art deco as she (they were almost always female) offered a sense of movement and grace, which could be depicted with simple lines, as seen in sculptures of dancers by Otto Poertzal and Demetre Chiparus. The Ferguson advert develops the single dancer of Duval into a pair of dancers; repeated, indistinguishable figures are another common feature in art deco, again as shown in Chiparus' sculpture. The fabrics which the dancers wear in the Ferguson advert appear superimposed, giving the illustration the appearance of being layered or collaged. This technique had been developed by Paul Iribe when he created multi-layered stencil images for the *couturier* Paul Poiret in 1909. A later version of this style is seen in a 1924 illustration by Andre-Eduoard Marty and clear similarities to the Ferguson's advert can be seen: the print of the dress is on an exaggerated scale to draw the viewer's attention to it. The reader of a Ferguson's advert would likely not have been aware of the exact source of these high art and high fashion inspirations, but art deco themes had seeped into the British consciousness over the decade and made the Ferguson's advert look modern yet approachable.

Other fashion illustrations in rayon adverts did not only use the same artistic style as their inspiration, but also used fashionable art deco settings and themes. A 1933 Marshall Fabrics advert again uses repeated, featureless female figures, and oversized fabric stencilled onto the illustration. However, in

this advert, it is not the garment or fabric which is creating appeal, but rather it is the nautical theme which had become incredibly chic. Chanel's seaside boutiques, Breton tops and fisherman's jumpers had helped inspire the illustration of nautical settings in high-end fashion magazines, and it was repeated again and again through the interwar period across every strata of advertising and publication (see Plate XII). Without the need for sails and rigging, modern boats had a streamlined look which lent themselves to art deco; the breeze aboard a ship could give a sense of movement to illustrations; and of course, the idea of boating as a leisure activity or travel on a liner lent an air of glamour. Settings where activities such as sailing, dancing or socialising were undertaken which were common themes in interwar advertising formed a "heraldry" which the public understood as relating to the modern and fashionable, and which could induce envy and desirability.⁷⁹ Variations on these heraldries appear repeatedly in rayon advertising. They all work to create aspirations for the reader, and make them seem achievable, simply through the purchase of rayon clothing.

It was not only fashion illustrations that rayon manufacturers borrowed from art deco; font and type played a leading role in creating modern-looking advertisements. Sans serif fonts were incredibly popular in this period, as lettering moved away from the curlicued, italic fonts favoured by the Victorians and Edwardians. Appearing on new cinema buildings, across the underground and in almost every form of advertising these modern fonts were bold, geometric and often had strong decorative features. It was exemplified by **BROADWAY**, **BIFUR** and GILL SANS which were created in the late 1920s by leading designers, and which were then reinterpreted by numerous other font artists. In March 1934, an article in *Advertisers' Weekly* suggested that the average reader may not have understood the intricacies of typography, but they expected to be "flattered rather than insulted" by the fonts chosen by the advertiser, the inference being that manufacturers using older fonts would be scorned by the public for being archaic and obsolete.⁸⁰ Technological advances in both creating type and printing allowed a huge proliferation in the number of fonts available, and the rayon

⁷⁹ Wilkinson, "The New Heraldry", p. 25.

⁸⁰ "The British Public is *Type Conscious*", *AW*, March 1934, p. 98.

industry made full use of them across their adverts (see Plate XIII). However, businesses lacked consistency in their use of new fonts: when JWT took on Courtaulds' advertising in the early 1930s, their guard books show that they used no less than twenty-six different fonts for the word "Courtaulds" on adverts between 1933 and 1935. These include varieties of standard serif type; a range of modern art deco style fonts; and curlicued script. Although some of these fonts were used for the duration of a campaign, some were only used once or twice, before being abandoned for an alternative lettering.⁸¹ The Ferguson's advertising folder shows a similarly scattergun approach throughout the later 1920s and early 1930s, as do British Celanese adverts in the trade and consumer press.⁸² This approach shows just how little knowledge there was around brand creation and maintenance in the interwar period. The overall impression is that any attempt by rayon manufacturers at brand creation through a logo or font was clearly secondary to concerns about presenting a modern face to the reading public.

Illustrations remained a key part of rayon advertisements where the look of the fabric or garment was paramount, however, changes in advertising trends saw some manufacturers experimenting with the use of text itself as illustration. *Commercial Art* dubbed this new form of artwork "New Typography": the requirement for a "restful page" was done away with, and "every plane...and direction of line" could be utilised to create a "visually attractive and varie[d] design".⁸³ There are not many examples of rayon companies using New Typography alone, but where it is used the bold artistic use of text ensured the adverts stood out. A 1933 advert for British Celanese does not make use of any pictures, it relies entirely on graphic type which almost shouts to the reader (see Figure 38). Similarly, in 1935, the CPA created an advert where images of the fabric and garments were reduced to a mere side-line in the advert. The text is a question – "I like the pattern – but will it wear" – presented on curved

⁸¹ Courtaulds Guard Books, 1935 and 1933-60, History of Advertising Trust, Suffolk, JWT/GD/21 and JWT/GD/341.

⁸² Ferguson Brothers; Textile Manufacturers and Printers of Holme Head, Carlisle; Cumbria Archives, Carlisle, DB110/224; and British Celanese adverts in the trade and consumer press across the period.

⁸³ Jan Tschischold, "New Life in Print", *Commercial Art*, July 1930, pp. 2-10.

parallel lines which formed into the required question mark . In both of these adverts there are strong similarities to adverts such as “Le Tour du Mont Blanc” (1927) by Roger Broders and “Shop between 10 and 4” (1931) by Edward McKnight Kauffer, where striking typography is used to draw the viewer in (see Plate XIV). By taking inspiration from other advertisements and following recent trends, rayon manufacturers were experimenting with art and design in an effort to differentiate themselves and maintain what we would now term “brand consciousness” amongst consumers. However, with no feedback or market research the success of these adverts could not be measured, and advertisers continued in an endless race to keep up with the new, sightless as to whether their adverts were well-received or effective.

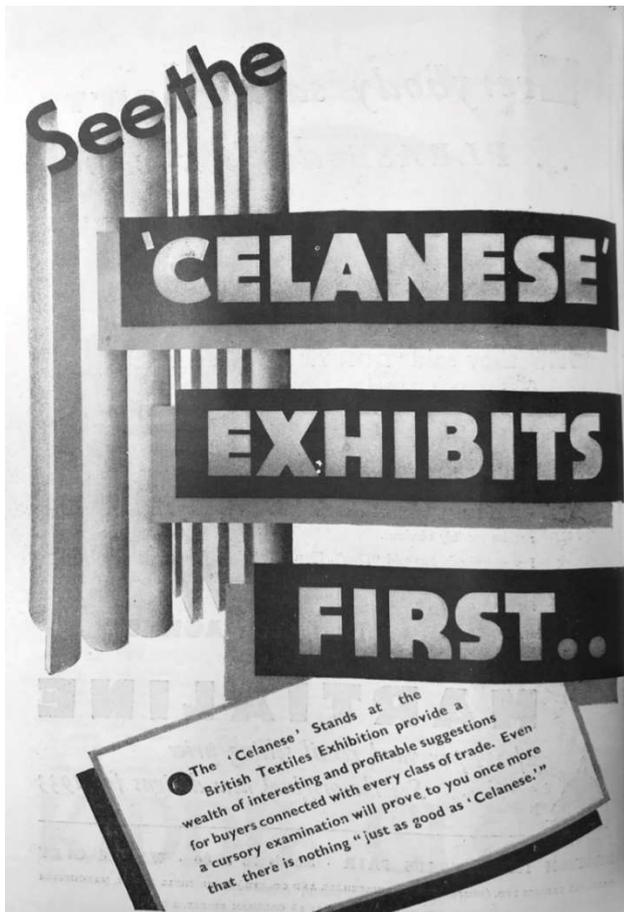


Figure 38 British Celanese Advert which uses bold text rather than images of their products to draw the readers' attention, 1933. *The Drapers' Record*, February 1933 © British Library.

Yet for all the modern tendencies which rayon adverts in this period showed, there were very few adverts which adhered wholly to a modern, art deco aesthetic. Two notable examples from *The Drapers' Organiser* stand out from other adverts in the journal because of their commitment to this style. The first is an extremely distinctive advert by Raffael Besso & Co from July 1927 where a simplified, female nude is depicted holding stylised rolls of fabric (see Figure 39). The background is entirely black, with the text and illustration in white, and there is no shading or detailing. This dark background reverses traditional illustration of black on white, creating a very dark page, which arrests the reader and ensures it stands out in the journal. The second advert is by Simpson & Godlee Ltd and dates from early 1929. It draws directly from cubist influences: abstract, geometric shapes make up the backdrop and a featureless female figure gazes off into the distance; the font used is also art deco in style (see Figure 39). Printed in colour, still a rarity at this date, like the Raffael Besso advertisement, it used striking tonal differences to grab the readers' attention. It is telling that this style of overtly art deco advert was never widely used in the trade or consumer press: it would appear that advertisers were too worried about the reaction to such avantgarde ideas, and adverts were tempered, using a wide variety of methods, to suit a public that was seen as preferring more traditional versions of commercial art.



Figure 39 Two examples of rayon advertisements which made full use of the art deco aesthetic. (L) Simpson and Godlee Ltd, *The Drapers' Organiser*, January 1929 © British Library; (R) Raffael Besso & Co, *The Drapers' Organiser*, July 1927 © British Library.

It does seem surprising that the manufacturers of an entirely new material would turn to tradition to help sell products, but some producers did have a long history in textile manufacture. As described in Chapter 1, Courtaulds Ltd had built its business selling silk in the previous century; other companies with a long past included Ferguson Bros Ltd established in 1824; Horrockses, Crewdson & Co Ltd established in 1791; and some members of the CPA also dated their formation to a similar period. These firms could all use their long-standing business success to attempt to demonstrate that they produced quality products. Some adverts simply used the text to vaunt their credentials: Horrockses boasted that the “quality and *reputation* of [our] productions needs no enlargement” [my italics] and Courtaulds said they were a “firm known and respected throughout the country for over a century”.⁸⁴ Advertisers also employed images to emphasise their longevity: in 1929 the BDA issued an advert

⁸⁴ “Horrockses”, Horrockses, Crewdson & Son Ltd advert, *DO*, July 1927, p. 8, and “Tell Your Staff”, Courtaulds advert, *DO*, May 1931, p. 3.

where a stylised eighteenth century costume is viewed through a billow of rayon fabric emanating from an extremely modern, low-backed dress. The illustration of the latest dress fashion ensures that it appeals to modern women, but the historical costume not offers the tradition which the British public were apparently so keen on, but also suggests that the BDA's fabrics are created with over a century's worth of skill and knowledge. The BDA advert indicates that no matter what the fashion, their materials have a timeless femininity (see Figure 40).



Figure 40 Bradford Dyers Association advert, 1929. *The Drapers' Organiser*, December 1929 © British Library.

Keen to emphasise their long history, from the early 1930s, Courtaulds referenced their past and depth of knowledge in almost every advert they produced by using a “house mark”.⁸⁵ Designed to show that products were genuine and that their goods were made to the “highest possible technical perfection”, the house mark appeared in advertising and on goods, and drew from traditional

⁸⁵ The house mark was trademarked on 12 February 1930; the first use I have seen dates from January 1930 in *The Drapers' Organiser*.

heraldry.⁸⁶ A faux-heraldic shield design which used centuries-old symbols imbued with meaning created an elevated sense of history and integrity (see Figure 41). The images of the elephant, tower and sword on the shield all have traditional heraldic connotations of strength and reliability, which Courtaulds stressed were qualities of their products. The three swords of Essex referenced their historic manufacturing sites and it reinforced the idea of British production.⁸⁷ The fleur-de-lys was lifted directly from the Courtauld family crest, and referenced the French origins of the skilled Huguenot weavers who had established the company over a century earlier. Though drawing from traditional themes, the house mark had simple lines and is more geometric in design than traditional heraldry. By using this historically based image in their adverts, along with modern illustrations, type and layout, Courtaulds adverts embody the idea of “medieval modernism” and show the efforts of advertisers to appeal to a diverse public.⁸⁸



Figure 41 An example of Courtaulds' house mark, this version is white on black, but it also appeared in black on white. *Silk & Rayon*, February 1936 © British Library.

⁸⁶ “The Name Courtaulds”, Courtaulds Guard Book 1933-60, History of Advertising Trust, JWT/GD/341.

⁸⁷ Courtaulds' rayon factory was in fact in Coventry, although some rayon weaving did take place in Essex.

⁸⁸ Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar Britain*, p. 8.

Evaluation

Although this chapter has concentrated on particularly salient and often modern rayon advertising, perhaps in summing up it would be valuable to see an example where there is a more indiscriminate approach to publicity, and which demonstrates the tensions between modernity and tradition. In June 1932, an advert for Tricoline fabric was printed in *Modern Woman* (see Figure 42). This advert has many of the characteristics of a pre-war advert: copious amounts of serif text and multiple messages are conveyed in a relatively small space which makes for an uncomfortably crowded appearance. But there are nods to the modern in the use of some of the art deco font at the top, and the woman is a “Puppet Lady”. Yet the glamour which is so often seen on Puppet Ladies is tempered by the suggestion that this woman is a wife and mother, and that she makes her own clothes.⁸⁹ Finally, Tricoline is still described as “The equal to Silk”, when other manufacturers were now advertising rayon not as an alternative to silk, but as a fabric worthy in its own right. However, when considered in more detail, this advert targets its audience perfectly: many women did sew their own clothes in order to make their housekeeping money go further; it was more likely that women would be playing with their children than attending swanky soirees; and many did want a fabric that would “wear & wear”.



Figure 42 Tricoline Advert, 1932. *Modern Woman*, June 1932 © British Library.

⁸⁹ By this period, ready-made garments held their own glamour, and sewing one's own clothes was not aspirational. This will be examined further in Chapter 10.

It is the sheer variety and experimentation in rayon adverts which shows the difficulties manufacturers faced when trying to create successful advertising. Not only was their little in the way of continuity in what they produced, but the psychology of advertising was not understood, and the effect of adverts on sales was not investigated. On top of this, advertisers were trying to establish how and where advertising would fit into a business (and indeed economy) based on mass production and mass consumption. The advertising placed by rayon businesses in the trade and consumer press illustrate the best guesses of what the manufacturer believed would stimulate the retail buyer and final consumer to make purchases. The intersection of art, fashion and commerce in adverts helps illuminate how rayon businesses perceived themselves and their products at a time when non-essential clothing was becoming an achievable aspiration for many for the first time.

Plate VII



★

*Unfailing
Satisfaction*

The evenness, strength and truth to denier of Courtaulds Rayon Yarns is a source of unfailing satisfaction to leading textile manufacturers in all parts of the world.

Courtaulds Rayon is entirely British, of course. It is available in forms suitable for every section and class of the textile trade.

COURTAULDS LIMITED

FOLESHILL ROAD, COVENTRY & 16 ST. MARTIN'S-LE-GRAND LONDON, E.C.1

Distributors Overseas: — LUSTRE FIBRES LIMITED, 16 ST. MARTIN'S-LE-GRAND LONDON, E.C.1

4384—R Courtaulds F.B.I. Register March 1934 71 x 5



1 RAW MATERIALS, of the finest quality the world produces, are assembled at Courtaulds factories where they are examined and graded before being used to make Courtaulds Rayon.

2 WORKMANSHIP is proudly maintained at the highest possible level of efficiency by Courtaulds skilled staff, working in ideal conditions under constant, expert supervision.

3 EQUIPMENT is continually being improved and modernised by Courtaulds who have the most up-to-date plant in existence for the manufacture of Rayon Yarns.

4 COURTAULDS RAYON ensures economical trouble-free production. Courtaulds Housemark on your goods is guarantee of quality, recognised by trade and public alike. Courtaulds, Ltd., C.P. Dept., Polehill Road, Coventry. Distributors Overseas: Lustre Fibres Ltd., 16 St. Martin's-le-Grand, London, E.C.1

G7 468-3736—R. Courtaulds Silk Journal Feb. 1935 10 x 71

Courtaulds' adverts from the JWT Guardbook 1934, showing employees at work. History of Advertising Trust, JWT/GD/341.

Plate VIII

These adverts from Courtaulds and British Celanese illustrate emancipated women who no longer rely on the social standing of their male husbands or partners: women are placed in the spotlight.

Top Left: *Modern Woman*, August 1932, p. 1; Top Right: *Woman's Fair*, May 1937, p. 49.; Bottom Left: *Modern Woman*, February 1932, p. 1.; Bottom Right: *Good Housekeeping*, November 1935, p. 117. All © British Library.

MODERN WOMAN

AUGUST



COURTAULDS FABRICS

NOW is summer at its hey-day. Jolly evenings and week-ends and eventful holidays make heavy demands on your wardrobe. Demands for which you can provide—through COURTAULDS DRESS and LINGERIE FABRICS. Every sort of loveliness in textiles is there. Shades to thrill, designs and weaves akin to every hour of the day. For the latest in fashion, the utmost in quality, ask at your usual Drapers or Stores for

COURTAULDS

DRESS & LINGERIE FABRICS

LADIES SHOULD LOOK FOR THE COURTAULDS HOUSE MARK WHEN BUYING DRESS AND LINGERIE FABRICS. IT IS A GUARANTEE OF QUALITY AND SATISFACTORY SERVICE.

If you are in difficulty in obtaining Courtaulds' Dress and Lingerie Fabrics, please write for name of nearest retailer and descriptive literature to: COURTAULDS LTD. Dept. F.4, 15, St. Martin's-le-Grand, LONDON, E.C.1.

'Celanese'

FABRICS BY-THE-YARD

● You can settle down now, plan your whole wardrobe in 'Celanese' and you'll be wearing the very latest and the very loveliest of fabrics. *Everything*... Day and Evening Frocks; Sportswear; Undies; the Children's things. Beautiful "weaves", lovely colours. And the most practical of materials... for 'Celanese' washes AND dry-cleans to perfection.

	PER YARD
'CELANESE' WASHING SATIN	1/11
'CELANESE' LODESTAR CREPE	1/11
'CELANESE' NINON	1/11
'CELANESE' CREPE-DE-CHINE	2/11
'CELANESE' CREPE SATIN	2/11
'CELANESE' TAFETA	2/11
'CELANESE' SUPER SURAS	2/11
'CELANESE' DRESS CREPE	2/11
'CELANESE' SATIN MAROCAIN	3/11
'CELANESE' SPORTS CREPE	3/11
'CELANESE' COURT SATIN	4/11

Also ask to see what is new in 'Celanese' Novelty Fabrics.

POST FOR PATTERNS
To British Celanese Ltd., Celanese House, Dept. M9, Hanover Square, London, W.1.

NAME: _____
ADDRESS: _____

IT'S 'Celanese' THAT'S THE BEAUTY OF IT

Sub-Manufacturers of 'Celanese' Yarn & Fabric & Proprietors of the Trade Mark 'Celanese'. BRITISH CELANESE LIMITED, CELANESE HOUSE, W.1.

elegance

Fabrics in which every inch is hardy, hold how that shade suits her, how that lovely swirl accords with her figure. Supreme elegance rewards a choice from among Courtaulds' Fabrics.

Your important gowns, your simplest frocks, your most slender intimate attire, each gains special grace when a Courtauld fabric plays the leading role. New colourings and charmingly different weaves prove completely satisfactory. You see more novelties, obtain better values, attain the peak of elegance, when you ask directly for Courtaulds' Dress and Lingerie Fabrics.

BRITISH MANUFACTURE
SOLD BY LEADING DRAPERS AND STORES.

If any difficulty in obtaining Courtaulds' Dress and Lingerie Fabrics, please write for name of nearest retailer and descriptive literature to: COURTAULDS, LTD. (Dept. F.4), 15, St. Martin's-le-Grand, LONDON, E.C.1.

LADIES SHOULD LOOK FOR THE COURTAULDS HOUSE MARK WHEN BUYING DRESS AND LINGERIE FABRICS. IT IS A GUARANTEE OF QUALITY AND SATISFACTORY SERVICE.

COURTAULDS

DRESS & LINGERIE FABRICS

Courtesa sees a show in style...



THAT MORNING...

"Hello," says Courtesa. "Why, yes, I'd love to see Rosanna this evening. I'll be there" - Courtesa is always in demand. You see, she dresses with such distinction. When frocks and undies are made of Courtauld Rayon, its easy to combine expensive tastes with moderate means.

THAT EVENING...

No wonder people turn to look at Courtesa as she goes into the theatre. She's wearing one of Courtauld's lovely fabrics that make-up so beautifully yet cost so little. Be sure to look for Courtauld's name on the sash - it's your guarantee of goodness.

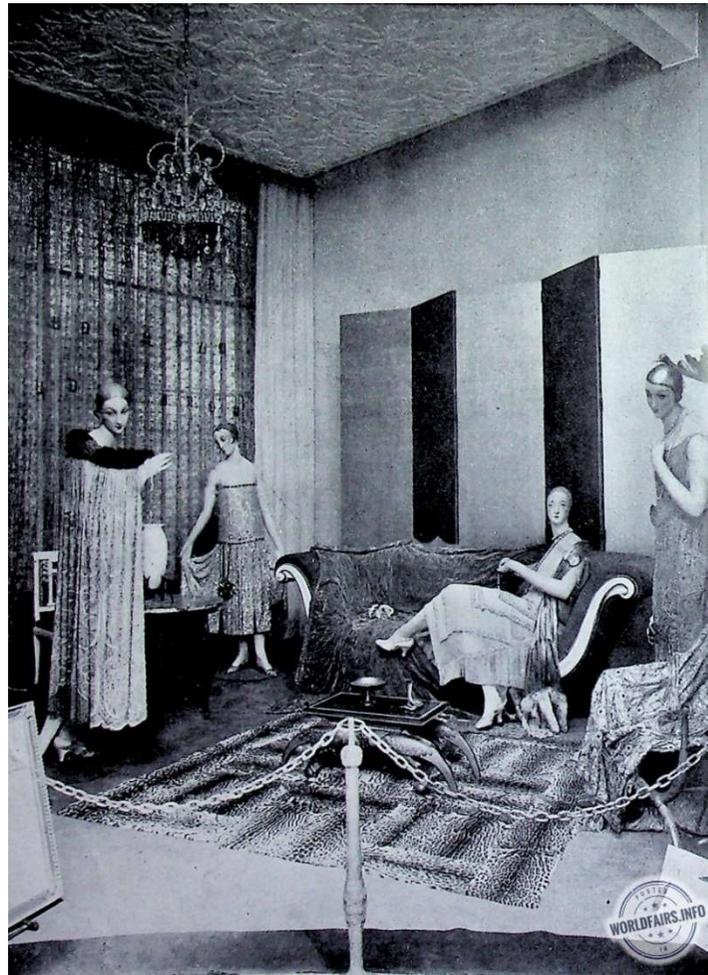
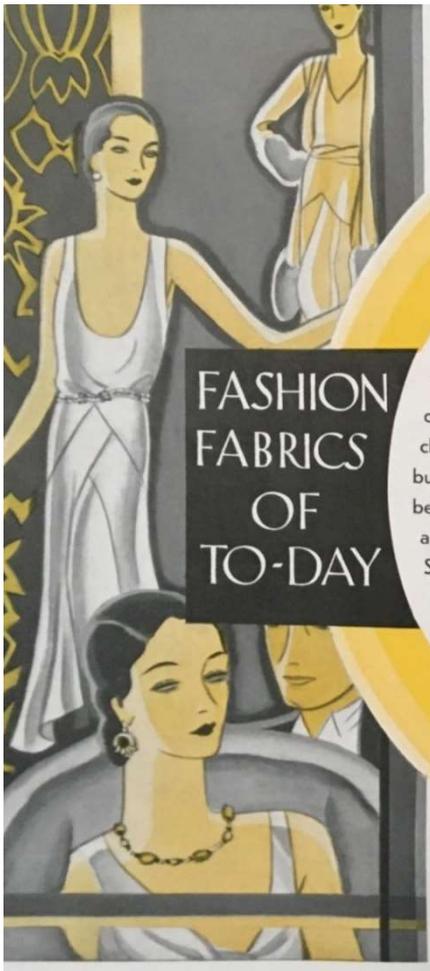
AND SO TO BED...

"This nightie is really most becoming," thinks Courtesa. "It must have been washed over and over again and it still looks as good as new." ... That's the best of buying undies that carry the Courtauld's Housemark.

LOOK FOR THE COURTAULDS HOUSE MARK

Courtaulds

Plate IX



Left: British Celanese advert dating from 1930 showing the typical “Puppet Lady”. *The Draper’s Organiser*, February 1930, p. 122.

Right: The mannequins used by couturiers at the *Exposition des Arts décoratifs et industriels* 1925, “Jenny” stand at the 1925 Paris Expo, from <https://www.worldfairs.info/forum/download/file.php?id=12166&sid=855ef85d0381a54ef11e4db1fe4cef38&mode=view>

Plate X

British Celanese adverts making use of improved techniques in photography and printing, taken from *The Drapers' Record* in 1932. (L) *The Draper's Record*, 13 February 1932, Supplement II; (R) *The Draper's Record*, 23 January 1932, p. 28 © British Library.

Note how the background of the adverts echoes film sets of the day: the example shown below is a still taken from *The Wonder of Women* (1929) directed by Cedric Gibbons, copyright unknown.

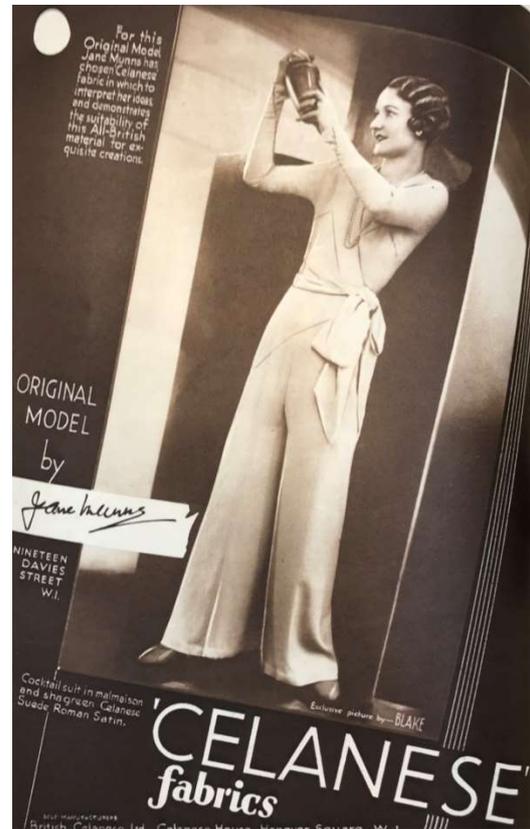
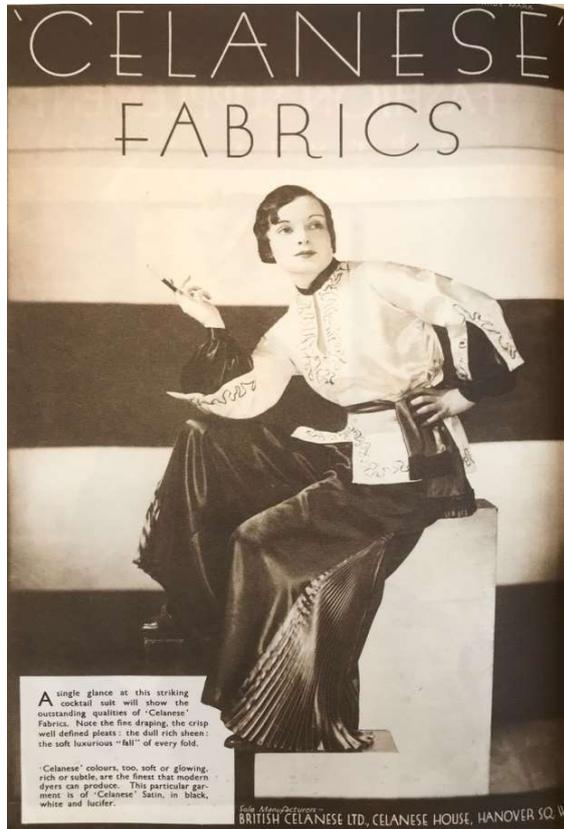


Plate XI

Top left: Fergusons Fashion Fabrics advert from the 1933 British Textiles Exhibition brochure © British Library. The illustration draws from earlier fashion plates and art deco portrayals of dancers.

Top Right: Paulette Duval wearing an outfit by Doeuillet illustrated by Barjansky, *Gazette du Bon Ton* (February 1920) © Gazette du Bon Ton/The Samuel Courtauld Trust

Bottom Left: 'Le Pouf' illustration by Andre-Eduard Marty. © National Gallery of Australia.

Bottom Right: Demetre Chiparus' *Les Girls* (1930), © Sothebys

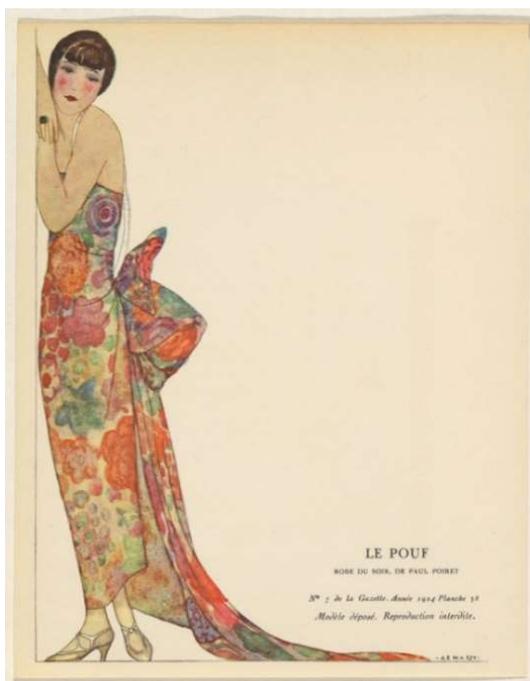
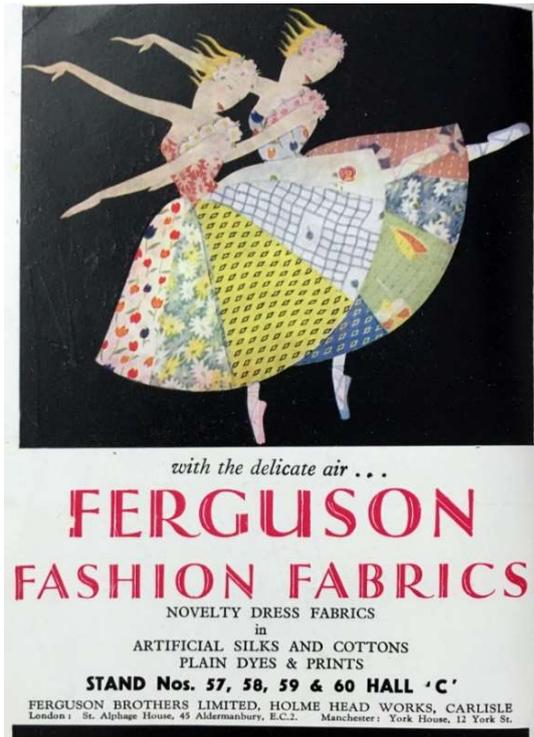


Plate XII



FOR CRUISING

MARSHALL FABRICS

Here they are . . .
"MARTIALINE" and "MARTIALESE"
 . . . all ready for a record cruise. Trust them to be first on board with the snappiest nautical effects and the jolliest colourings . . . something fresh and captivating for every day of the voyage. At the moment you see them in two of the latest designs . . . an inspired version of the Kodak stripe and the 'breathlessly new' 'Shepherd's Plaid.' Ahoy there! You must meet the Captain's twin favourites. Let our representative introduce you.

RETAIL SELLING PRICE 2/11½ YARD

MARSHALL FABRICS LTD, PROPRIETORS—D. MARSHALL & CO., LTD., 17, MINSHULL ST., MANCHESTER
 LONDON OFFICE AND SHOWROOMS: 28, GRESHAM STREET, E.C.2



Above left: This Marshall Fabrics advert (1933) makes use of repeated figures, and a nautical setting, both popular in art deco design. Earlier adverts from high-end French fashion magazines show how Marshall Fabrics used previous themes in their own advert. The Drapers' Record, 6 May 1933, p. x © British Library.

Above: Fashion illustration by J.C. Haramboure in *Femina* (April 1930)

Left: Fashion illustration by unknown artist in *Vogue* (January 1926)

Plate XIII

Examples of art deco fonts used by rayon manufacturers in the interwar years.

SPERO

ADVANCED

CEPEA
creates
fabric fashions

Rayonain[®]

MARTIALINE

FERGUSON

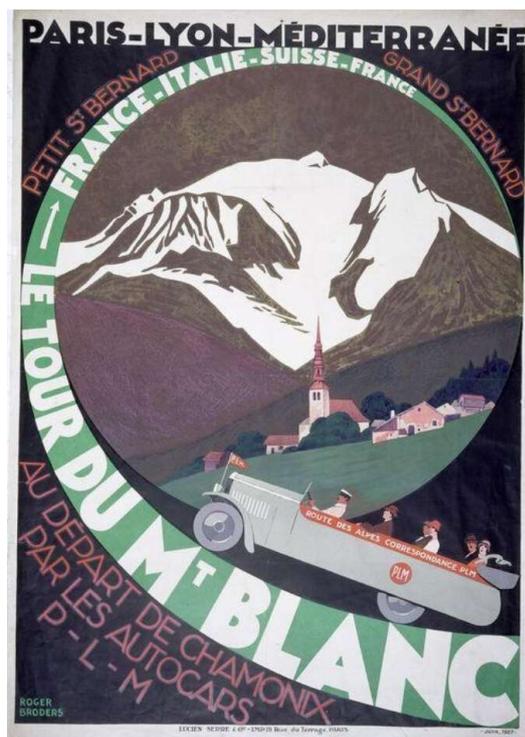
TRICOLINE REGD.
All over the world TRICOLINE is the secret of the most beautiful fabrics.

FLEUR-DE-CHINE REGD.


FASHION

DURO 
fabrics
d.2.

Plate XIV



Above left: This Calico Printers Association advert (1935) draws from the “New Typography” which did away with conventional left to right text. Earlier adverts using this technique are shown for comparison.

Above Left: Calico Printers Association advertisement, *Woman and Home*, June 1935, p. 7. © British Library.

Above: ‘Shop between 10 and 4’ (1931), Edward McKnight Kauffer, © The London Transport Museum.

Left: ‘Le Tour du Mont Blanc’ (1927), Roger Broders, © Victoria and Albert Museum.

Gleaming Palaces of Fashion and Fabric

Harry Trethowan, *Selling Through the Window*, 1935

7. Retailing Rayon

The interwar years were a period of change in the retail sector: just as department stores had disrupted the existing pattern of shopping for the upper and middle classes in the late Victorian period, so the introduction of multiple chain stores and fixed price shops in the early twentieth century began to revolutionise the shopping habits of the wider population. In addition, for a certain members of society more disposable income and time meant that consumption was no longer simply about the essentials: shopping often became an activity undertaken in leisure time, and for pleasure. The changing landscape of shops has already been well-examined by historians such as Jefferys, Lancaster, Winship and Nava, and it is not ground that needs to be re-covered here.² The aim of this chapter is to show how rayon, as a mass-produced consumer good, integrated into this evolving state; and indeed, how it helped shape some retailing practices. These were years in which the presence of the manufacturer in the drapery and garment retail space became more evident: shoppers were presented with increased branding and in-store advertising, and producers began offering guarantees on the serviceability of their fabrics in the final years of the 1930s. Large retailers followed the lead of department stores and realised that clever manipulation of their physical space and better merchandising could improve their efficiency and increase the number of sales they made. All of these changes were critical for rayon producers who were making vast volumes of goods which needed to be sold. Before beginning these examinations, a brief introduction into the changing distribution patterns in the period is needed to set the scene.

² See Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History*, (London: Leicester University Press, 1995); J.B. Jefferys *Retail Trading In Britain, 1850-1950*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), Mica Nava "Modernity Tamed? Women shoppers and the rationalisation of consumption in interwar Britain" and Janice Winship "New Disciplines for Women and the Rise of the Chain Store in the 1930s", both in *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture*, ed. Andrews, Maggie and Mary Talbot, (London: Cassell, 2000), pp. 46-64 and pp. 23-45, amongst many. See Bibliography for further examples.

Textile Distribution

In the early years of the twentieth century, the way in which clothing was produced began to be transformed. As increased spending power and fashion consciousness led to larger volumes of ready-made garments being produced, so the ideas of mass production began to filter into the industry. In 1957, Margaret Wray showed that the move towards the industrial manufacture of clothing had begun in the men's tailoring trade in the late nineteenth century. In menswear the introduction of machinery to complete simple, repetitive tasks was far easier as fashions changed much more slowly, and suits and shirts were produced in standard sizes.³ However, the complexity and frequent, fashion-led changes in womenswear saw the introduction of machinery lagging behind its counterpart.⁴ It was the double impact of the simplification of women's fashions in the 1920s along with better and more flexible machinery that allowed mass production of womenswear begin to fledge. Innovations such as the portable cutting knife allowed the more complex shapes required by women's clothing to be cut; and improved sewing machines meant that not only could button holes and hems be easily sewn, but that ruching, pleating and frilling were now possible.⁵ In the hosiery industry, we have already seen how knitting and sewing machines were being utilised to make underwear in larger volumes. An influx of German and Austrian refugees in the 1930s who had greater technical knowledge and experience of mass production shared their expertise, and larger-scale and more efficient methods of manufacture began to be established.⁶ The increasing significance of ready-made garments can be seen when we look at how the government recorded information about the industry. In 1913, the cost of living index drawn up by the Ministry of Labour calculated clothing outlay based on the cost of having thirteen different garments made up by a dressmaker or tailor. By 1924 wholesale dressmaking had

³ Except in the bespoke tailoring trade.

⁴ Margaret Wray, *The Women's Outerwear Industry*, (London: Duckworth, 1957), p. 15.

⁵ Suzanne Rowland, "'Easy enough for any girl to use': Mechanical cutting machines and female cutters in the ready-made blouse industry", online conference, *ACORSO: The Global Diffusion of Tailored Clothes for Women 1750 – 1930*, September 2022; Wray, *The Women's Outerwear Industry*, p. 24.

⁶ Wray, *The Women's Outerwear Industry*, p. 24.

grown enough for it to be included in the Census of Production of that year (although information received back from businesses was patchy at best). The 1935 Census of Production captured far more detail about the industry, noting that 140,000 people worked across 1500 wholesale dressmaking and tailoring establishments.⁷ At this point, it is important to note that “ready-made” clothing does not necessarily correspond to “mass-produced” clothing. Much of the ready-made outerwear made from woven fabrics in the interwar period was made in small batches, and in small factories or workshops with additional labour being provided by home-workers. There were exceptions to this, and there were notable investments in larger garment factories in the North-East, but mass production as we know it today was rare. Turning to the hosiery trade, the transition from small, home-based workshops to large factories had happened prior to the First World War.⁸ Part of the reason for this was that knitting machines had increased in size and were expensive; they required space and investment which only bigger businesses could provide. Most items produced in the knitwear factories could largely be completed in the same establishment, perhaps with the exception of dyeing which usually took place at the end of production, and most goods left the factory “ready-to-wear”. The volumes produced by these machines were enormous, so it was hosiery, as opposed to the women’s outerwear trade, was really where factory mass production was sited in this period.

As production volumes of garments increased, so mass, or large-scale, retail became increasingly common. The two trades were inextricably linked, and one could not survive without the other: producers needed mass retailers to buy their huge volumes, and the retailers needed this volume of clothing to ensure they could benefit from economies of scale and that they had sufficient stock for all their stores. These mass retailers were instrumental in a critical change in the supply chain which reduced the stages of getting a product from raw material to shop. The traditional supply chain

⁷ See Census of Production 1935, Volume I General Report, Clothing Trades, p. 402. This number is for the retail rather than bespoke trade, and it excludes the vast army of sweated outworkers who worked at home making ready-made clothing.

⁸ A. Wells, *The British Hosiery and Knitwear Industry: Its History and Organisation*, ([S.I.] : David & Charles, 1972), p. 169.

included the role of a wholesaler who bought from the factories and then sold on a variety of items from different manufacturers to retailers. However, large department stores had sold such volumes of goods that in the late nineteenth century that they began to approach manufacturers directly, omitting the wholesaler.⁹ This not only ensured volume discounts, but also removed the additional margins and transport costs incurred by using a middleman. The resulting lower costs allowed retailers to offer lower prices in order to entice consumers into their establishments. When chain stores emerged, they too began to approach manufacturers directly. The nascent rayon industry, with their reliance on high volumes of sales, and often without long-embedded methods of doing business, were well placed to become involved in this alternative supply chain structure. Both fabrics and garments were eventually distributed in this way, with estimates suggesting that by the late 1930s 60% of womenswear was bought directly from the factory by the retailer.¹⁰

In 1925 British Celanese Ltd announced that their Celanese branded underwear would be sold direct to retailers in order to protect their trademark, and this was implemented in spring 1926.¹¹ British Celanese had always been keen on vertical integration, having factories which could produce filaments, yarns and knitted and woven fabrics at Spondon. Given this, it is not surprising that they also wanted to keep control of their products towards to end of the supply chain. The success of their strategy was such that by 1928, they were selling a whole variety of outerwear direct to retailers. They offered a “delivery by return [post]” once the order had been placed, and promised that their strong advertising campaign would “prepare the ground for brisk...business” for retailers.¹² This revolutionary way of shortening and accelerating the supply chain was quickly adopted by others.

⁹ Gamages bought direct from the manufacturer in the late nineteenth century, and Selfridges Ltd also began to do this prior to the First World War. Tessa Boase, *London's Lost Department Stores*, (London: Safe Haven 2022), p. 80 and Lindy Woodhead, *Shopping, Seduction and Mr Selfridge*, (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2008), p. 126.

¹⁰ Wray, *The Women's Outerwear Industry*, p. 34.

¹¹ “Commentary”, *The Silk Journal*, August 1925, p. 1 and “Celanese new direct to retail” advert, *DO*, February 1926, p. 24.

¹² British Celanese advert, in the Fashion Supplement of *DO*, September 1928, p. cvii.

Marks and Spencer Ltd are well-known for working with Corah and Sons Ltd to produce hosiery and knitwear for them: this was such an effective model that Corah stopped using wholesalers entirely just a decade later.¹³ Just months later, Salts Ltd and Tootal Broadhurst Lee Ltd followed the footsteps of these garment manufacturers, offering their woven fabrics direct to retailers in 1926 and 1927 respectively; and by the 1930s Ferguson Brothers Ltd, Marshall Fabrics Ltd and Duro Fabrics Ltd were all selling direct to retailers and using the trade press to advertise this way of trading.¹⁴ This shorter supply chain was obviously problematic for the wholesalers and also for the more traditional members of the trade – they claimed that the wholesaler was necessary to save the retailer time and energy by providing a pre-selected range of goods, and that their system of placing orders well in advance ensured the manufacturer would be able to manage their workload, machinery and cashflow effectively.¹⁵ Further criticism was based on the idea that removing the wholesaler encouraged a “chaotic trading system” where price cutting became the norm in order to meet the retailers’ requirements.¹⁶ Despite these grumbles, and an attempt by some wholesalers to modernise to meet the demands of retailers, the model of distribution was already on its way to changing permanently.¹⁷

Branding: Identity, Quality and Price

A combination of advice from trade journals and closer relationships with retailers revealed to textile manufacturers that in terms of promoting their goods in shops, retail space was “a great machine of unapprehended [sic] power.”¹⁸ Unlike packaged goods, fabrics were not sold in boxes or bags which could be emblazoned with brands, so from the mid-1920s manufacturers were offering “showcards”

¹³ Wells, *The British Hosiery and Knitwear Industry*, p. 193.

¹⁴ Salts Ltd, Minutes of Meeting of Directors, 17 February 1926, West Yorkshire Archives, Bradford, Yorkshire, WYAS 9094/1/3/2-3; “Around the Trade”, *DO*, July 1927, p. 81; advert for Ferguson Brothers Ltd, *DO*, September 1932, p. 20; advert for Marshall Fabrics, in *ibid.*, p. 14; advert for Duro Fabrics, *Women’s Wear News*, July 1936, p. 10.

¹⁵ “The Cost of Wholesale Distribution”, *SJRW*, 20 October 1937, p. 14.

¹⁶ “Rayon Fabric Distribution”, *SJRW*, 20 July 1937, p. 26.

¹⁷ The *Drapers’ Organiser* ran a series of articles in late 1928 showing how wholesalers were introducing modern design and displays; using cars to keep in contact with customers; and receiving large amounts of fashion news more quickly from the continent.

¹⁸ “Retail Sales and Showmanship”, *DO*, May 1928, p. 1.

to retailers which detailed the fabrics offered by a particular brand. Tricoline boasted that their “tasteful and attractive” cards were designed by “well known artists – in collaboration with Fashion Experts”.¹⁹ Courtaulds, British Celanese and many knitting and weaving firms all offered various showcards which were free of charge, and often colour printed: these could be used “alone as counter cards, or for building up a window display”.²⁰ In their search to gain more window and counter space in shops, marketing ploys by manufacturers became ever more sophisticated. By the 1930s, British Celanese offered “Backgrounds, Centre-Pieces and Drape Stands” which linked directly to their national advertising campaigns. All of these were supplied free, and would have allowed retailers to create an entire display based on Celanese products (see Figure 45). In 1936, Horrockses, Crewdson & Co Ltd had a projected £2,000 spend on providing retailers with window display items and showcards. Alongside these items, they also offered newspaper blocks so retailers could design their own adverts for the local press, and, notably, cinema slides.²¹ The inclusion of cinema slides shows just how important films and their stars had become in influencing clothing choices: using Horrockses slides would have allowed smaller retailers the opportunity to advertise themselves to local fashion-conscious cinema-goers just before a film started. Other marketing gimmicks used by rayon manufacturers included the installation of trade exhibition stands (see Chapter 6) and helping to create shows or events for department stores.²² British Celanese employed a permanent team of “Celanese Girls” to travel round various retailers modelling and selling Celanese garments (see Figure 43).²³ The same “celebrated” team were also used to demonstrate how various machinery was used to make up clothing in their factories. One local journalist was clearly taken by their visit to Hull,

¹⁹ Tricoline advert, *DO*, March 1928, p. 41.

²⁰ Courtaulds advert, *S&R*, March 1937, p. 219; Celanese advert, *DO*, December 1929, p. 48; Ferguson Bros advert, *DR*, 25 March 1933, p. iv.

²¹ Celanese advert, *DR*, 18 March 1933, p. xiii and *Horrockses Advertising Services to Retailers*, undated, but likely mid-1930s, Horrockses & Crewdson Ltd Archive, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford, Yorkshire, DDVC acc 7340.

²² Department stores had developed a tradition of creating spectacles to entice customers into their stores. Examples of this range from bands playing in store; to Amy Johnson’s plane on display and tennis lessons by Suzanna Lenglen in Selfridges Ltd; and real life elephants advertising a “Jumbo” sale at Kennards in Croydon.

²³ “Trade News”, *DO*, July 1928, p. 58.

exhorting readers that they “should not fail to pay [the store] a visit”.²⁴ In offering their assistance to retailers, rayon manufacturers were not only taking an active role in shaping the advertising and marketing of retailers, but also encouraging them to become more efficient by “shift[ing] goods off shelves” to speed up and increase the production-distribution cycle.²⁵



Figure 43 The “Celanese Girls”, 1928. *The Drapers’ Organiser*, July 1928. © British Library

In the late nineteenth century, grocery manufacturers had led the way in developing branded goods which had certain values and qualities attached to them, and which differentiated them from the competition.²⁶ By the early twentieth century, many other companies had followed this example and fabric manufacturers were no exception. As rayon production boomed, there was an astronomical growth in the number of fabric trade names. In 1919, *The Drapers’ Organiser* published their first directory of trademarks and names of textiles: it ran to just 14 pages. By 1928 there were 114 pages,

²⁴ “An Enterprising Hull Store”, *Hull Daily Mail*, 8 March 1927, p. 11.

²⁵ Janice Winship, “A Culture of Restraint: the Chain Store in the 1930s” in Jackson, P. M. Lowe, D. Miller and F. Mort (eds) *Commercial Cultures: Economies, Practices, Spaces*, (Oxford: Berg 2000), pp. 15-34 (p. 16).

²⁶ Grocery companies such as Cadbury’s, Fry’s and Lipton’s were among the first to label their goods in the late nineteenth century.

and over 12,000 brand names listed.²⁷ In part, this was because of the proliferation in the types and styles of rayon fabrics which were produced as technology advanced, but it was also due to the realisation by textile manufacturers that their goods needed to be easily identifiable. The branding of textiles at this time was almost always undertaken by the manufacturer, as retailers very rarely commissioned the manufacture of goods or branded those goods they sold.²⁸ The use of brand names brought the consumer into the orbit of the manufacturer by actively using words which had been created by the business. A consumer now “only had to say the [brand name] to get what she want[ed]”, with the request for a branded item in a shop often precluding any alternative.²⁹ The choice of name could also prove an asset to a business, with the realisation that

the psychological effect of a happily chosen name has spelt success for many an article which enjoyed no other advantage, in the beginning, over competing lines.³⁰

The trade press suggested choosing a brand name which was easily pronounceable so the customer would not have to “risk a *faux pas*” by saying the name wrong, and in order that it could be easily recollected.³¹ Producers could use brand names to signify certain qualities and properties of their goods and rayon manufacturers appear to have realised the value of this: an examination of rayon trade names shows that sounds and semantics which cultivated images of quality and luxury were frequently used. In addition, some manufacturers used trade names which were easily identifiable as belonging to their company, for example by always using the same letters at the beginning of the word. Table VI presents a small selection of branded rayon goods from 1931 which show how manufacturers used their brand names to create desire and familiarity.

²⁷ “Shoppers Favour Branded Goods”, *DO*, August 1929, p. 16. Not all of these brands were for goods made of rayon; other textiles are included in this number.

²⁸ One notable exception to this is the Marks and Spencer Ltd brand *St Michael*, which was introduced in 1928, but not used on clothing until the early 1930s.

²⁹ “Shoppers Favour Branded Goods”, *DO*, August 1929, p. 16.

³⁰ “Branded Goods Biggest and Easiest Sellers”, *DO*, August 1927, p. 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Table VI³²

British Celanese Ltd	CELACHENE	The name "Celanese" was purportedly derived from a combination of the word "cellulose" and "ease" [of wearing]. ³³ Many of the Celanese brand names begin with "Cel", and they include either the manufacturing method e.g. "-weave" and "-spun", or a description of its properties e.g. "-sheen", "-chene"; there are also references to Far Eastern silks e.g. "-shung".
	CELANESE	
	CELASHEEN	
	CELASPUN	
	CELASYL	
	CELAWEAWE	
	CELAWOVE	
	CELESTACHINE	
	CELFECT	
CELSHUNG		
Courtaulds Ltd	COURDULLA	Courtaulds also used the beginning of their name for many of their trademarks. They also integrated descriptive words e.g. "Dul", "Opa". Feminine sounding words were also favoured e.g. "Courgette" and "Courtine". "Luvisca" appears to be a combination of the words "luxury" and "viscose", creating a sense of a high-end product.
	COURGETTE	
	COURTAS	
	COURTINE	
	DULESCO	
	LUVISCA	
	OPACETA	
	RAY-DU-LENZA	
Wilson's Fabrics Ltd	BONCHERIE	In 1931, all of the Wilson's Fabrics' tradenames began with "Bon-". Derived from the French "good", this not only suggested the goods were of a high quality, but
	BONCHIC	
	BONIQUE	

³² These names are taken from the *Silk and Rayon Directory and Buyer's Guide 1931* (Manchester: John Heywood, 1931).

³³ This was referenced in Andrea Robertson's PhD thesis "From Economy to Exclusivity: a History of the Devore Textile 1880-1940", (Brunel University, 2005) and was taken from the Celanese AG website in 2002; the link provided is no longer active.

	BONISYL	also designated that the goods were made by Wilson's.
	BONQUISITE	The ending of the names suggest an elegant look:
	BONSHEEN	"-quisite"; texture "-sheen"; or being inspired by Parisian fashions "-chic" and "-ique".
Evans & Weale Ltd	JAPPELLA	Evans and Weale do not appear to have used any part
	LOUICHENE	of their brand name to distinguish the product was
	MIRAMAR	theirs, but they do use words which suggest exoticism
	RADIAN	e.g. "Jap" and "Miramar" as most real silk was
	RAYDECHENE	imported from the Far East; "Radian" suggests a link to
	SPUNSHAN	the radium which at this time was popular beauty aid
	SYLKEVOILE	and cure-all; "-chene" and "Sylke" suggest a gleaming fabric. ³⁴

It is also worth noting how some producers used their tradenames: "Are you selling to Miss Celanese?" asked an advert in *The Drapers' Organiser* aimed at retailers. Not only were British Celanese Ltd effectively classifying the target customer "who has money to spend" for the retailer, Miss Celanese is also a readily identifiable, illustrated character, which would have helped consolidate the brand in the mind of the retailer (see Figure 44).³⁵ British Bemberg Ltd and the CPA also made attempts to turn their brand into a generic term for fashion fabrics, using the tag lines "Fashion has a word for it...Wilemba" and "Fashion has a name for it...it's Cepea" respectively.³⁶ Although many brands were recognisable by shoppers it was only Celanese which appears to have passed into common usage as a noun by both retailers and consumers. This may have been because they had offered such a wide range of branded goods (underwear, outerwear, and fabrics etc) from an early date, meaning more

³⁴ See Lucy Jane Santos, *Half Lives: The Unlikely History of Radium*, (London: Icon Books, 2020).

³⁵ British Celanese advert, *DO*, June 1929, p. 22.

³⁶ Wilemba advert, *WGT*, April 1936, p. 14 and CPA advert, *WGT*, April 1936, p. 20.

people were able to identify it, and also because of their insistence that “Celanese is Celanese” rather than rayon.³⁷

... Are you selling to Miss 'Celanese'?

She deserves your special attention. There are so many of her. She crowds the pavements of London's busiest shopping centres. She is represented in her thousands in every Provincial city and in every County town. She has money to spend. She is spending it freely in the Shops that specialise in 'Celanese.' Now is the time to attract her custom with a display of 'Celanese' Products. It is a sound business maxim to cultivate the 'Celanese' girl. Make 'Celanese' a feature.

TRADE MARK

'CELANESE'
**Fabrics, Lingerie, Gowns,
 Hosiery and Waterproofs.**

Sole Manufacturers:
 BRITISH CELANESE LIMITED, CELANESE HOUSE, HANOVER SQUARE, LONDON, W.1

1398

Figure 44 British Celanese Ltd advert, 1929. *The Draper's Organiser*, June 1929 © British Library.

Providing the retailer could source the appropriate branded goods for their customer base it might be argued that their role as a trader became easier as the brand itself along with advertising from the manufacturer effectively made sale for them. By simplifying the decision making process involved in buying a garment or fabric by using a known brand, a busy retailer could serve a higher number of customers in a given time frame. This was not only beneficial for the retailer, but also the manufacturer who was making large volumes of goods. There was concern that a retailer merely handing over an “advertised, packaged article” meant they had become the manufacturer’s selling

³⁷ Mass Observation Archive, Brighton, Sussex, Topic Collection 18_1_C: Mrs Banks refers to owning “two Celanese dresses”, and retailer’s adverts refer frequently to “Celanese dresses”, whereas I have noticed that other brands are mentioned far less frequently, particularly in the 1920s.

agent rather than the consumer's purchasing agent, and consequently the consumer would suffer from high prices and low quality.³⁸ However, this method of retailing was increasingly popular as it echoed the mass-manufacture model, where low margins on high sales had become more common as a business model. Producers and the trade press reassured the retailer and consumer that "the brand [was] the buyer's best insurance" and that "it pa[id] to buy branded goods".³⁹ Conversely, a brand was susceptible to damage if it was associated with inferior goods, or one which did not meet the expected standards. Maintaining a positive brand identity had to be consistently strived for by all manufacturers. In order to bolster the idea that a "branded good was a better good", many textile manufacturers began to guarantee their products in the 1930s in order to encourage sales.⁴⁰ In 1937, the need for a guarantee was so important that Courtaulds launched a Quality Control Plan [QCP] with huge fanfare across the trade and consumer press. The aim of the QCP was to

raise quality Levels [sic]...to identify quality tested merchandise [and] to strengthen customer confidence⁴¹

What made the QCP so notable was that any article made by another manufacturer using Courtaulds' rayon yarn or fabric could be covered under the guarantee. The articles in question had to be submitted for testing at the newly established Retail Trading Standards Association, and providing they met certain standards set by both the Association and by Courtaulds, they could bear a Courtaulds' House Mark label, which was the brand guarantee.⁴² By 1939, despite around 38% of the goods submitted not being of the required standard, three hundred manufacturers had been given the right to use the House Mark on their goods.⁴³ By the late 1930s, retail buyers from stores were also becoming "more selective" about the "unseen" traits of rayon, such as proofing, shrinkage and

³⁸ F.W. Taylor, *The Economics of Advertising*, (London: George Allen and Unwin), 1934, p. 162.

³⁹ Headers taken from the Branded Goods Section Special in *DO*, August 1932, p. 67.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Courtaulds Quality Control Plan Advert, *S&R*, May 1937, pp. 404-5.

⁴² The Retail Trading Standards Association was established in 1935 as a group of retailers who worked together to ensure that certain standards in retailing, so-called "straight-forward shop keeping" would be adhered to; "Courtaulds Quality Control Plan", *S&R*, April 1937, p. 284.

⁴³ "Company Meetings Courtaulds Ltd", *The Times*, 16 March 1939, p. 24.

fast colour, suggesting that the consumer was also demanding these properties.⁴⁴ As many of these “unseen” factors could only be verified in a laboratory it was evermore imperative that goods were tested and labelled as “guaranteed”. In offering a guarantee on their wares alongside a brand name, manufacturers were doubly bound to maintain their reputation for quality, in order to maintain the goodwill of both the retailer and the consumer.

Creating a brand and advertising it was all very well, but the product itself also needed to be identifiable. The labelling of goods became an important way of identifying a particular brand of textile or garment in the interwar period. Fabrics were increasingly being produced with the brand on the selvedge: the CPA had three selvedge printing machines in use as early as 1922, and the Research Committee wanted to establish which one was best, presumably so extra machines could be purchased and put into use.⁴⁵ Advertisements by many rayon fabric manufacturers, including Courtaulds, the Bradford Dyers’ Association, Worrall Ltd, and Horrockses, Crewdson & Co, told buyers to look for the name on selvedge in order to identify their goods. In terms of garments, one of the best ways to label goods was with a woven tab. One of the main label manufacturers was J. & J. Cash Ltd and they frequently advertised their products and services across a variety of textile trade journals. They boasted that “A Cash label had a ‘cash’ value” as purchasers could easily identify a product. Woven in colour and with the brand design copied “accurately”, Cash also ensured their labels would wash well so that consumers could read the label when they needed to make a repeat purchase.⁴⁶ British Celanese had made use of woven tabs since at least 1925 in order to stop competitors offering inferior goods under the name of Celanese, and Courtaulds were using them for some ready-made blouses from 1923.⁴⁷ With the introduction of their House Mark, Courtaulds’ adverts told customers

⁴⁴ “Retailers Becoming Quality Conscious”, *SJRW*, September 1937, p. 12.

⁴⁵ The selvedge is the edge of the fabric which is woven differently to prevent fraying; CPA Research Committee minutes, 29th May 1922, Calico Printers Association Ltd GB127.M75, Manchester Archives, Manchester, M75/7/1/1 [Green 1382]

⁴⁶ J. & J. Cash advert, *DO*, November 1928, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Celanese advert, *DO*, October 1925, p. 17; “Luvisca” advert, *Daily Mirror*, 31 July 1923, p. 10 – these blouses are a rare diversion by Courtaulds from their primary focus on producing filaments in the 1920s.

that genuine articles had tabs in them, and they even informed the consumers where they would find the label. How far women bought and trusted these branded goods is difficult to establish, but the continued use and investment in branding suggests that purchasers were susceptible to choosing one item over the other simply based on the supposed reputation of the manufacturer and their goods.

Rayon manufacturers had been conscious of the price of their goods since they were first retailed: keeping prices low was central to their mass-volume model. Bill Lancaster notes that by 1930 many brands had introduced “Fixed Retail Prices” [FRP], and rayon manufacturers were no exception.⁴⁸ An FRP meant that prices were standardised for branded goods across all retailers, and those retailers who would not comply would not be supplied with goods, although this rarely seemed to happen in the fashion trades.⁴⁹ For retailers, this offered more stability in the marketplace, and obviated the risks of being undercut by competitors; conversely though, it also meant that those smaller retailers who needed to charge higher prices to cover their costs were not able to do so. For consumers however the benefits were clear, as reported by a 1931 government committee:

consumers are very ready to buy price-maintained goods... they appreciate the knowledge that they can buy similar goods at the same price wherever they happen to be.⁵⁰

The prices of rayon piece goods were frequently part of the advertisements placed by manufacturers in the press, so women knew in advance the price they would have to pay for a length of fabric (see Plate XII and XIII). Fixed prices offered convenience at a time when many middle class women were seeking to ease their domestic burden, largely owing to a decline in domestic service. There was a preponderance of “convenience products” such as tinned food and electrical appliances, and arguably one of the results of these convenience products was that they created a consumer who also wanted an undemanding purchasing experience.⁵¹ Fabric manufacturers were quick to realise that they could make shopping even more leisurely by allowing consumers to pre-select their fabric and calculate the

⁴⁸ Lancaster, *The Department Store*, p. 94.

⁴⁹ “Retail Trade Control”, *The Times*, London, 14 August 1931, p.7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Winship, “A Culture of Restraint”, pp. 28-9.

price without having to step out of their front door. In 1928 British Celanese Ltd was offering free shade cards posted out to customers: this even included swatches of fabric so a potential purchaser could gauge the feel and handle of a cloth. They claimed that with this pre-planning “shopping time will become mere minutes in any good store.”⁵² By 1938, Duro Fabrics, Tricoline and the CPA offered style books to consumers so they could plan their wardrobes in the comfort of their own home, allowing women to “take a load off their mind”.⁵³ This pre-planning and convenience may have offered benefits to consumers, but for stores working hard to encourage women to browse and make unplanned purchases it was less helpful, and it also ran contrary to the notion of shopping as a leisure activity which they were keen to promote.

The Art of Display

Department stores had begun creating pleasant and all-encompassing shopping experiences in the nineteenth-century, and their success saw multiple stores trying to emulate this formula. Whilst their size meant they could not have tea rooms or hairdressing salons, they were able to create environments where shopping was a leisure activity, and where browsing was encouraged. In 1925 Holbrook Jackson noted that

shopping [for fabric and clothes] has become a social function [and] shopping excursions have become a definite part of a woman’s life.⁵⁴

As the face of the store at street level, shop windows were “the voice that arrests the crowd” but it was in the interwar period that window dressing began to turn into an “art”.⁵⁵ Very early on, *The Drapers’ Organiser* recognised that “no other fabric lends itself to display treatment [as rayon does].”⁵⁶ It offered a gleam and drape that only silk could rival, and a later on, the sheer variety of fabrics made

⁵² Celanese advert, *MW*, April 1928, p. 77.

⁵³ Duro advert, *WF*, April 1938, p. 61; Tricoline advert, *MW*, June 1938, p. 81 and CPA advert, *WF*, May 1938, p. 88.

⁵⁴ “The Future of Retailing”, *DO*, October 1925, p. 1.

⁵⁵ George Parnell & Co advert, *DO*, January 1929, p. 108.

⁵⁶ “Display Men Like It”, *DO*, March 1925, p. 38. For more on window dressing see Susan Lomax “The View from the Shop” in *Cultures of Selling: Perspectives on Consumption and Society since 1700*, ed. Benson, J. and Laura Ugolini, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) pp. 265-292.

from the fibre allowed endless design options. Manufacturers had learnt from the “dignified simplicity” of department store windows and the Continental “craze” for window dressing how rayon could best be displayed, and their exhibits at the BASE and BIF provided retailers with inspiration for their own windows, and the “exhibition style” of display could be seen in windows of many stores.⁵⁷ The “close packing of merchandise” which had created a busy window display was becoming passé, and suggested an old-fashioned retailer. The ‘new rules’ of window dressing decreed the necessity of artfulness and space to make merchandise “look attractive and sell readily.”⁵⁸ The below examples show how different modern displays were from previous years – they are designed to be viewed “at a glance” in the few moments when passers-by swept past on the pavement (see Figure 45). *Advertiser’s Weekly* noted that window displays were “little short of living poster advertisements” and they had to show off the “fashion appeal [and] wearability” of goods.⁵⁹ The power of a window display compared to a poster was clear to those that advocated for better window displays: what they showed was “reliable [and] believable”, plus if a consumer liked what they saw they could immediately “step in and buy any article that is displayed.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ “Aim to Sell from your Window”, *Women’s Wear News*, 4 July 1935, p. 17.

⁵⁸ Hilda Gibson, *The Art of Draping*, (London: Blandford Press, 1936), p. 3.

⁵⁹ “Manufacturers’ Displays are Welcomed by Dealers”, *AW*, January 1925; Gibson, *The Art of Draping*, p. 5.

⁶⁰ Herbert N. Casson, *Windows Display above All*, (London: The Efficiency Magazine, c. 1936), pp. 40-1.



Figure 45 (Clockwise from top left): a typical "stocky" window dating from 1924, H.E. Morgan and E.H. Butcher, eds., *The Retailers' Compendium* vol. 2 (London: The Waverly Book Co., 1924); British Celanese Ltd advert showing how a window can be dressed, 1932, *The Drapers' Organiser*, November 1932 © British Library; Marks & Spencer Ltd window display in Blackpool, 1938, image reproduced with kind permission of the M&S Company Archive.

The growing importance of window display was such that, as we saw earlier, rayon manufacturers began to provide all retailers with window display items, and drapery trade journals frequently ran articles on how to “make good windows” using photographs of displays they deemed successful.⁶² The archive of Marks and Spencer Ltd also gives an insight into how important their window displays were to the company’s success. The Head Office issued a complete set of instructions for store management on how to dress windows, where they were told to “plan” their displays based on the time of year and best sellers.⁶³ In 1929, Head Office noted that a line of “Art Silk Drapery” was a particularly fast seller, and if it was put in a window the public would be “drawn into the Store”.⁶⁴ Frequently changing window displays encouraged women to see window shopping as a regular event, which helped embed the idea that consumption could be a leisurely activity.⁶⁵ A Mass Observation survey in 1939 showed that women were window shopping for both pleasure and to get ideas about what they may purchase next: one respondent noted that she got “nearly all her ideas [about what to purchase] from windows” and another said “[windows] are so beautifully done nowadays you can get an exact idea of the outfit you have planned, before even stepping foot in a shop”.⁶⁶ Just as women’s weekly magazines provided a “hallucinatory” effect, where women could imagine a different life, so too did these modern windows.⁶⁷ A 1928 newspaper article commented that window shopping usually involved “an afternoon stroll round the shops spending fabulous and fortunately *make-believe* sums” [my italics].⁶⁸ The hallucinatory effect could be further enhanced with the use of wax mannequins to show “the woman you might be”.⁶⁹ These life-like figures had been introduced in the

⁶² The *DO* ran a series on this throughout the 1930s and had a whole section dedicated to retail architecture and shopfitting.

⁶³ Weekly Bulletin, Marks and Spencer, 9 July 1927, M&S Company Archive, Leeds, Yorkshire, HO/3/2/2/1/1.

⁶⁴ Weekly Bulletin, Marks and Spencer, 18 February 1928, M&S Company Archive, HO/3/2/2/1/2.

⁶⁵ Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman*, p. 221; “Materialistic Values: Their Causes and Consequences”, Tim Kasser, Richard M. Ryan, Charles E. Couchman, and Kennon M. Sheldon, in *Psychology and the Consumer: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World* ed. Kasser and Kanner, (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2004), p. 11

⁶⁶ Mass Observation Archive, Brighton, Sussex, Topic Collection-18_1_C and MOA May 1939 Directive, Respondent 1077.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, (London: Virago, 1985), p. 157.

⁶⁸ “On Window-Shopping and Window Shoppers”, *The Scotsman*, 31st August 1928, p. 5.

⁶⁹ “The Woman you are and the Woman you might Be”, *WF*, January 1938, p. 11.

1920s and by the 1930s they had become so engrained in retail practices that the Co-operative Wholesale Society produced a promotional musical-comedy film in 1937 in which mannequins came to life after hours.⁷⁰ Just as photography allowed a greater sense of realism on the printed page, so garments on mannequins presented a more real-life perspective than simply being presented folded on a counter. The fabric pattern, the cut and the drape of a garment were all easily visible and digestible on a mannequin, and Siegel and Stockman advertised that their life-like figures were “Best Sellers’ because they will sell your garments even better.”⁷¹ If the advertising of rayon in magazines by manufacturers created printed visuals which women aspired to, then window displays were the palpable embodiment of them.

It was not only the exterior of shops which began to look different. Interiors of department stores and multiples changed, with a focus on efficiency for both the retailer and the consumer: the aim was to look “tidy and clean” for the “discriminating buyer”.⁷² Some innovative establishments began to display garments on self-service hanging rails and counters so that customers could view items at their own pace, and without the pressure of a salesperson. Retailers also began to embrace shop fittings which could be moved around, rather than the traditional fixed cabinets and counters of earlier years.⁷³ This flexible approach to fittings allowed retailers to change the look of the store at will, and choose the rails and counters which best suited a product. As with regularly changing window displays, a variation in display could encourage browsing on each visit. Marks and Spencer Ltd relied on a fast turnover of goods and their forward-thinking merchandising techniques encouraged managers to change displays to encourage sales. In 1927 a Store Supervisor recorded

it was evident that Ladies' Dresses etc., were rather cramped on the side counter [so we gave the] full Island Counter to Print Dresses 2/11d, Dresses 3/11d, Tricoline Jumpers 3/11d, Art Silk Dresses 2/11d, and Cardigans 1/11d. Each end of the counter was devoted to Frocks 3/11d

⁷⁰ “Let’s Ask the Ladies”, Co-operative Wholesale Society promotional film, dir. Ralph Smart, 1937, accessed at the BFI online, <<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-lets-ask-the-ladies-1937-online>>, May 2022.

⁷¹ Siegel and Stockman advert, *DO*, September 1928, p. 92.

⁷² Kwikserve advert, *DO*, January 1929, p. 143.

⁷³ “Quicker Service in the Fashion Showroom”, *DO*, July 1934, p. 100.

and 2/11d which, in the first place, acted as a means of attracting the crowds of women to the counter, and in the second place the extended display enabled us to cope with the crowd.⁷⁴

Here, the display was both selling the product, and allowing staff to serve customers efficiently, something expedient in a low margin, high turnover model. Other methods of encouraging purchasing were also being investigated by some shopfitters, such as the psychology of colour and design, and their effects on consumers. It was suggested that fashion and drapery retailers update their shop scheme “from time to time” using the newly available “plastic paint” because the nature of their product was also changeable.⁷⁵ With more space and bigger budgets, multiples and larger stores were able to create fluid environments for shoppers, in terms of both their visual merchandising and their stock, so there was always something new with which to tempt the customer. Retailers were turning their environments into part of the shopping ritual as they played on the desire of consumers to keep up with the new and modern. Departments stores had long offered a glamorous shopping experience, but now chain stores were becoming, in their own way, every bit as much as a “dream palace” as a cinema.⁷⁶ They offered women a physical and sensory escape from their close-packed city terrace or isolating suburban semi. Garments or fabrics purchased on shopping expeditions could carry a little bit of the dream back home.

Evaluation

The changing retail environment offered a perfect space for rayon to be introduced. The retailing of garments increasingly relied on the trope of modernity to aid sales: new forms of window display and shop fittings allowed rayon to be presented to the public in novel ways and these methods very often suited the mass-retailing required for the quantities of rayon being produced. The manufacturers’ enhanced branding and brand awareness meant that their logos, slogans and motifs could be seen in shops across the country, from the largest to the smallest. In educating the public about their brand

⁷⁴ Weekly Bulletin, M&S Company Archive, 16 July 1927, M&S Company Archive, HO/3/2/2/1/1.

⁷⁵ “There is sales value in the colour of the shop”, *AW*, 4 May 1933, p. 132.

⁷⁶ Jeffery Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

and product, some manufacturers such as Celanese, Courtaulds and the CPA, and the names of their merchandise, began to seep into public consciousness and become household names. The effort the manufacturers put into keeping retailers happy was also an important part of their work in getting products to the final customer: the provision of free advertising showcards, along with various other accoutrements, forged a closer relationship with shop owners and managers. In addition, Fixed Retail Pricing and guarantees often offered stability to both retailers and consumers: when they bought a particular brand either for their shop or for personal use, the price and quality were to be relied on. With such large manufacturing companies behind it, rayon was able to establish itself in the retail environment swiftly, and remain there, becoming an ever-larger presence in shops and in the minds of consumers.

The surest way to a woman's purse is through her sense of style

British Celanese Ltd advert, December 1930

8. Choosing and Purchasing Rayon

The purchase of clothing is an extremely personal act: as with any purchase, it is largely delimited by practical needs and financial decisions, but commensurate with this is desire, irrational pleasure, and the reimagining of oneself. In the interwar period, women were encountering new forms of advertising and retailing which shaped their aspirations, habits and self perception, whether they were aware of it or not. Navigating this new environment, whilst observing social norms, making personal and emotional choices, all whilst balancing a budget meant that every woman's experience of purchasing was completely unique. I will try to establish what the nation's women spent on rayon clothing as a whole, and then make a closer examination of individuals and how they budgeted for their garments. Using data gathered from a range of sources I will look at whether we can establish "average" prices for rayon garments, and whether this is a useful tool for understanding why rayon was so popular. Although evaluating the shopping habits of the women of a nation is impossible, I hope to give a broad overview which illustrates why rayon became so popular from both a financial and more personal perspective. However, before we can move on to this, a brief but important digression will be made to examine the naming and locution of this new textile.

"What's in a Name?": Artificial Silk vs Rayon

In August 1936, *Silk and Rayon* ran an article titled "What's In a Name?", which once again repeated its long-standing view that the fibre should be properly called rayon rather than artificial or art silk, and summarising the position of those in the industry who were still, even a decade after the textile had become popular, refusing to use the term "rayon".¹ The confusing use of three different terms (four, if the term "silk" which was often used erroneously is included) was not merely confined to the

¹ "What's In a Name?", *S&R*, June 1936, p. 417.

manufacturing trades, it extended into the retail environment, with consumers faced with a barrage of terms and brand names. The background to all this confusion and discussion lay in the initial development of the product itself. The various inventors of the different forms of rayon had all sought to create a material that imitated real silk, and so naming the resultant products “artificial silk” seemed like a natural choice. The first mass manufacturers followed this lead, partly for lack of a better name, and indeed because the idea of a “silk” was more appealing to investors and consumers than a reconstituted cellulosic fibre. In the United States, the word rayon was used fairly widely in place of “artificial silk” as early as 1925, but Britain lagged years behind in its adoption of the term.² *The Drapers’ Organiser* and *The Silk Journal* had championed the dropping of the name artificial silk since 1923 and 1925 respectively. Their concern was that not only did the term suggest that the fibre was an inferior emulation of silk, but that inevitably the “artificial” would become “art”, without the necessary full stop to show an abbreviation, leaving the public confused as to what the product actually was.³ Other commentators noted that the use of “artificial” left the public wondering if they were getting good value for money from the product they were being offered: how could something claim to be good value if it was not genuine? The Silk Association of Great Britain also voiced its concern: “artificial silk” suggested that it was a cheaper imitation of their exclusive product, and in order to distance themselves from the new fibre they adopted the term “rayon” in 1925. At this point, no British manufacturer had accepted the term rayon for their product, although a writer in the *Manchester Guardian* suggested this was a grave oversight as “the dealer and the public prefer to know exactly what they are dealing with”.⁴ Alongside “artificial silk” the term “synthetic silk” was occasionally employed by some in the industry, but this was short-lived as the Board of Trade quickly decreed this was a false trade description, and it was banned in 1927. This ruling left “artificial silk” as a legitimate term, indeed the Board of Trade instructed that any products or invoices containing the words “synthetic silk” should be changed to “artificial silk”, strengthening the argument for its

² “Artificial Silk renamed Rayon”, *DO*, January 1925, p. 34.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ “The New Fabric”, *Manchester Guardian*, 10 March 1925, p. 6.

continued use.⁵ Many, however, still disagreed about this nomenclature, not least those writing for trade journals as we saw above, and it was in these pages that the war on the term “artificial silk” was played out. In 1928, *The Silk Journal* editorial noted that the use of “viscose silk...acetate silk [and Bemberg] silk” was a “reprehensible practice [as] none of these are silk.”⁶ A year later, the same journal changed its name to become *The Silk and Rayon Journal*, having covered rayon, or as they still termed it prior to 1928, artificial silk, extensively since the journal’s inception in 1924. The change to using both “rayon” in the title, and the championing of this name in the industry’s main journal began to signal that “artificial silk” was no longer a term that could usefully be used. In the same year, Courtaulds Ltd formally adopted the term, saying that “‘artificial’ implied a stigma”: this move “profoundly influenced” the textile trade, and the word began its slow filtration down to the retail environment.⁷

Despite the largest producer in Britain utilising the term “rayon”, the move to this word was still problematic for some. British Celanese had never accepted that their product was rayon, as they believed that term was merely for the viscose and cuprammonium forms. As a cellulosic fibre created through the application of acetate, they saw their fibre as something which was completely different chemically to rayon. Their chairman, Henry Dreyfus, was extremely vocal on this point, and his view extended into their public insistence that “Celanese is Celanese” in many of the company’s adverts throughout the 1930s. This action certainly encouraged the use of their brand name, but it also complicated matters for the consumer, who was not likely to be well-versed in the technicalities of the various varieties of rayon which were manufactured. The only other British acetate rayon on the market was produced by Courtaulds, and they had consistently called it a rayon, further adding to the confusion. British Bemberg meanwhile, who produced cuprammonium rayon, continued to refer to

⁵ “Alternative Terms for Artificial Silk”, *DO*, July 1927, p. 24, and “Commentary”, *The Silk Journal*, June 1927, p. 25.

⁶ “Commentary”, *The Silk Journal*, 20 June 1928, p. 1.

⁷ “Commentary”, *SJRW*, 20 March 1929, p. 1; “Rayon”, *The Observer*, 13 January 1929, p. 15.

their product as artificial silk, and the term was widely used in their extensive 1933 advertising campaign which ran across various trade journals. The aim of establishing a common name must have seemed almost futile, when, in spite of collective efforts across the trade, the 1935 Census of Production still collected and recorded information about the “Silk and Artificial Silk trade”.⁸

At the retail end of the distribution chain, the use of various terms was also muddled: it appears that many of the large department stores were some of the earliest adopters of the term rayon, but even in 1936 buyers for various London stores noted that the change to rayon remained very much in retailers’ minds. The rayon buyer for Marshall and Snelgrove Ltd noted that the store had moved over to the term rayon “a couple of years ago”, as artificial silk “suggests ‘the cheapest of the cheap’”; while the buyer for John Barker and Co Ltd said that “people don’t like artificial anything.”⁹ Yet other wholesalers and retailers were still using the term artificial silk. The trade catalogues for Wilkinson & Riddell Ltd used the term right up until 1939, and Marks & Spencer Ltd were still using it on their stock cards in the same year.¹⁰ Advertisements show a whole range of usages too: one retailer in Aberdeen advertised “Real Celanese Silk and Courtaulds Rayon [underclothing]” in 1936.¹¹ A woman buying pre-cut fabric from *Modern Woman* in 1932 would have been equally as confused: she could chose from either “silky rayon crepe” or “rayon silk marocain”.¹² The complete interchangeability of the names for rayon can be appreciated when we consider that the Retail Standards Association [RTSA] was content for “art. silk”, “artificial silk” and “rayon” to remain in use when it wrote its Code of Standards in 1935. It also seemed that they RTSA was happy with the description of goods as “Celanese silk” and “Bemberg silk”, without “artificial” being included, as the use of the company name implied that the product was not actual silk. Furthermore, the RTSA did not oblige retailers to identify the constituent

⁸ “Current Notes”, *S&R*, May 1935, p. 234, and Census of Production 1935, p. 100.

⁹ “London’s ‘Week’ Effort”, *SJRW*, 20 May 1936, pp. xxxvi-ii.

¹⁰ Wilkinson and Riddell catalogue, May 1939, Hodson Shop Collection, Black Country History (formerly Walsall Museum), West Midlands, uncatalogued; and Marks and Spencer Checking Lists, 1939, M&S Company Archive, Leeds, Yorkshire, E13/1/6.

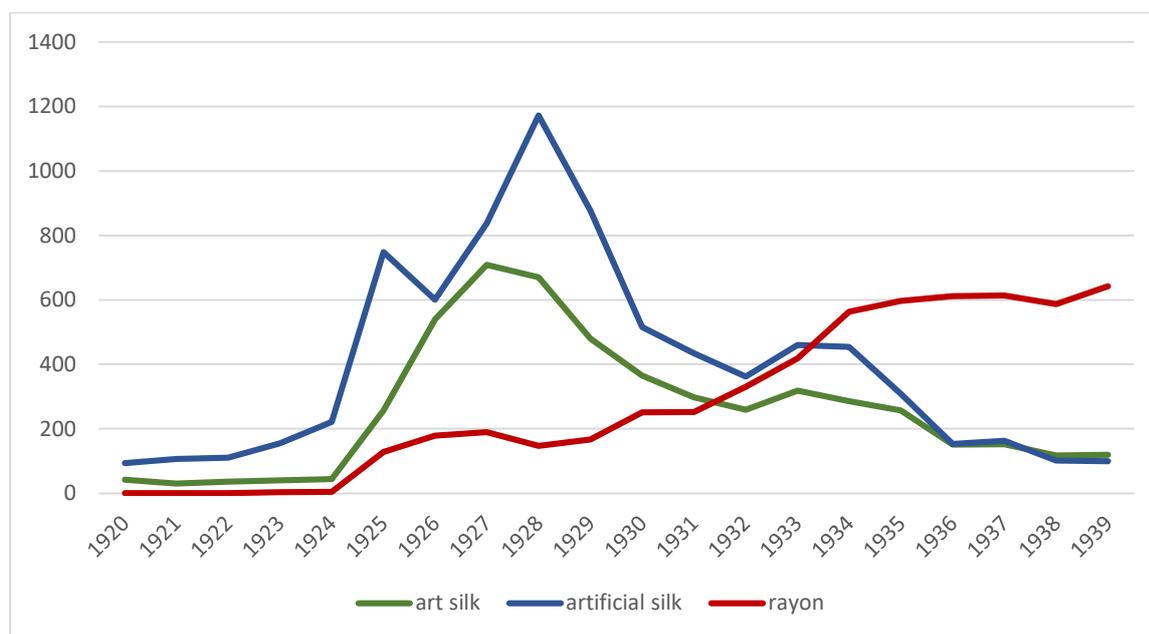
¹¹ “Morrison’s Economic Stores Ltd”, *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 3 December 1936, p. 2.

¹² “Cut Out in Fabric”, *MW*, June 1932, p. 33.

textile fibre when the fabric could be made of either rayon or silk, such as taffeta, crepe-de-chine or satin. The singular lack of consensus in naming the product left the retailer open to making “ludicrous examples of misdescription”, whether intentionally or not, and would have likely made the choosing of rayon (or silk) goods something of a minefield for the consumer.¹³

Chart V – Use of the terms "Artificial Silk", "Art Silk" and "Rayon" in *The Manchester Guardian*

1920-39



It was only in the 1930s that the public would have started to see and hear “rayon” used on a regular basis. The chart above shows how the use of “art silk”, “artificial silk” and “rayon” in the *Manchester Guardian* in both articles and advertisements altered between 1920 and 1939.¹⁴ This demonstrates that the trade was making use of the term “rayon”, and, in a textile-centric location, journalists had also made the shift to using it. However, whilst it tells us that the public were facing this change in

¹³ “Current Notes”, *S&J*, May 1935, p. 234.

¹⁴ Data taken from search terms on the online archive from January 1920 to September 1939, including both articles and advertising. I chose the *Manchester Guardian* as it tends to focus more closely on the textile industry of the north compared to London published newspapers. NB. The spike of in number of uses of all terms in the mid-1920s reflects the “boom and bust” of the industry as seen in Chapter 1.

name, it cannot tell us how far it was reflected in their own vocabulary. In 1936, a National Rayon Week was organised to make the public “more *rayon* conscious” [my italics] and to “remove, once and for all, the term artificial silk, with its lingering suggestion of inferiority”.¹⁵ However, whilst the trade may have felt that “artificial silk” held negative connotations, this many not necessarily have been the case for consumers. Real silk was a highly desirable and expensive fabric, and as we have seen, women were more than happy to buy an approximation of it when choosing stockings in the 1920s, as it offered them the look of something which was more fashionable and more exclusive. For many, even buying something which was an imitation of this expensive fabrics would have been aspirational and would have brought a sense of achievement and worth (this will be examined in more detail below). The young protagonist in *I Capture the Castle* buys some “*practically silk stockings*” [my italics]: in this case the allure of silk is still strong even when the article is not made wholly from the real thing.¹⁶ The reduction of “artificial” to “art.” also avoided the inference of imitation or inferiority, and indeed it simply implies another *variety* of silk. The introduction of the term rayon also had to contend with the inherent reluctance of people to accept neologisms: more recent studies have shown that around 60% of new terms do not endure.¹⁷ In the case of a product which already had a functional and descriptive name, and which held associations with a luxury good, the introduction of the term “rayon” must have seemed illogical to many consumers. “Rayon” itself was an artificially constructed name which had little substance behind it. It may have contained a hint of the fashionable “radium” in it, or even a ray of sunshine, but it had no more meaning than an earlier suggestion, ‘Glos’, which had to be set aside when it was “killed by ridicule”.¹⁸ Consistent advertising and branding by a large company such as British Celanese could rapidly embed a neologism (such as Celanese) into the everyday lexicon, but rayon did not have this advantage: it was adopted piecemeal, and was largely

¹⁵ “National Rayon Week”, *SJRW*, 20 April 1936, p. 15.

¹⁶ Dodie Smith, *I Capture the Castle*, (Vintage Digital, 2011), p. 220. Written in the mid-1940s.

¹⁷ See David Crystal, “Investigating Nonce-ness: Lexical Innovation and Lexicographic Coverage”, in *Manuscript, Narrative, Lexicon: Essays on Literary and Cultural Transmission in Honor of Whitney F. Bolton*, eds, Robert Boenig and Kathleen Davis, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2000), pp. 218-231.

¹⁸ “Rayon”, *The Observer*, 13 January 1929, p. 15.

promoted in trade literature. Even changing from the term “artificial silk” to “rayon” at national events such as the British Textile Fair and running “Rayon Week” was not sufficient to fully establish the word into the English language. As rayon appeared more and more in shops, it seems to have been accepted and understood as a synonym for artificial silk, but even in the late 1930s Marshall & Snelgrove reported that whilst as a business they had adopted “rayon”, if a customer used the term artificial silk they would never “be discourteous enough to force the word ‘rayon’ upon her.”¹⁹ Whilst it is unlikely that that disordered naming of the product affected sales in any meaningful way, it is also probably fortunate that rayon did not have any other man-made fibres to compete with, as its lack of clear identity may have proved to be problematic. Luckily for manufacturers, consumers were still apparently content to buy textiles and garments made of the rayon, no matter whether they called it art. silk, artificial silk, or rayon.

Spending

Perhaps the most important reason for the change in consumer habits in this period was increased spending power, particularly seen amongst in the middle classes, the workers in modern industries in the south-east, and a small but expanding number of female white collar workers. This economic phenomenon has been widely studied, and the body of work around it provides a firm base from which we can progress to a closer examination of the purchasing of rayon clothing and fabric. The growing prosperity of the above mentioned groups was largely based on a decrease in living costs compared to earned income, with Stevenson and Cook calculating that the cost of living index decreased by as much as a third between the wars.²⁰ In terms of actual income, there was an increase in the number of salaried workers: Marley and Campion estimate that in 1931 there were 2.8 million salaried individuals in Britain, rising to 3.2 million by 1938.²¹ This was not a groundbreaking number in itself,

¹⁹ “London’s ‘Week’ Effort”, *SJRW*, 20 May 1936, pp. xxxvi-ii.

²⁰ John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *The Slump: Britain in the Great Depression*, (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2010), p. 25.

²¹ Joan Marley and H. Campion, “Changes in Salaries in Great Britain, 1924-1939”, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, (103:4) 1940, pp. 524-533 (p. 526).

but it did create nearly half a million individuals (and their dependents) whose income was contractually based, and therefore more secure than a weekly wage. Concurrently, in areas where modern industries were flourishing, the average wage had reached around £4 per week, giving an annual income of around £200 per year: earning this put individuals on an economic par with some lower-paid salaried workers.²² Altogether, the number of individuals earning between £4 and £10 per week made up just over one-fifth of the population, or 2.5 million families, and this group was an important one for rayon retailers to cater to.²³ This was because in terms of clothing, it was estimated that those who earned over £250 per annum would use a larger proportion of their income on dressing themselves, spending twice as much as the working class. Even for those outside of this economically-defined group, if individuals remained in continuous employment throughout the interwar period, their spending power was considerably higher by the end of the 1930s. Greater spending power had a marked impact upon the way in which families budgeted and spent their money, with Benson noting:

[once] basic needs had been met, priorities began to alter. The better off wished to enjoy some of the trappings of their new-found, if often insecure, prosperity. They wanted to eat a more varied diet and wear more fashionable clothes.²⁴

Turning to look at the amount spent on clothing and dress fabrics in these years, using the work of Stone and Rowe shows the growth in retail spending on women's and children's outerwear and hosiery between 1924 and 1938.²⁵ I have adapted their figures by excluding furs, millinery and corsets, on the basis that they are largely free of rayon.²⁶ The figures in Table VII include woven and knitted outerwear and nightwear, underwear, stockings and socks, all of which include items made of rayon. It is also important to note that this data based on women's and children's wear: unfortunately, the amount for children's wear cannot be excluded as no separate information on this has ever been

²² Stevenson and Cook, *The Slump*, p. 23.

²³ Mowatt, *Britain Between the Wars*, p. 490.

²⁴ John Benson, *The Working Class in Britain, 1850-1939*, (London: Longman, 1989), p. 146.

²⁵ R. Stone and D.A. Rowe, *The Movement of Consumers' Expenditure and Behaviour in the United Kingdom 1920-1938. Vol. II of Studies in the National Income and Expenditure of the United Kingdom*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954).

²⁶ There will clearly be some exceptions to this, in terms of linings etc, but on the whole it seems a better approach to exclude these items.

gathered and to split it based on population would be extremely difficult. Stone and Rowe group their data as “Men’s and Boys’ Wear” and “Women’s, Girls’ and Children’s Wear” which implies that children’s wear covers both sexes, but only until a certain age. I would suggest this is probably around twelve years old as at this point children would have moved into smaller sized adult clothing. It is also likely that the spending on children’s wear was proportionally lower per head, as a lot of it would have been handed down through families as it is often outgrown before it wears out. Nevertheless, even including this data there is a clear growth of spending on garments over this fifteen year period. When we also consider that this data has not been indexed to the cost of living or lowered production costs, we can infer that consumers were able to buy more for their money, which is indicated by the increased volumes of goods and lower prices which are shown in Charts VI and VII.

Table VII – Spending on Womenswear in the United Kingdom 1924 to 1938, calculated from Stone and Rowe (1954)

	1924	1930	1935	1938
Outerwear	£m	£m	£m	£m
Bespoke Retail	9.7	9.1	8.2	Split not available
Bespoke Wholesale	4.9	5.2	6.3	
Ready-Made	58.5	62.3	63.8	
Fancy Hosiery (knitted outerwear)	16.3	14.6	13.9	
Total Outerwear	89.4	91.2	92.2	114.9
	£m	£m	£m	£m
Underwear and nightwear	14.5	16.5	15.4	Split not available
Stockings and Socks	18.8	21.1	20.5	
Total Hosiery	33.3	37.6	35.9	43.78
Total Women's Outerwear and Hosiery	122.7	128.8	128.1	158.7

Chart VI – Indexed Quantities of Womenswear Sold in the United Kingdom 1920- 1938 (1929 = 100)²⁷

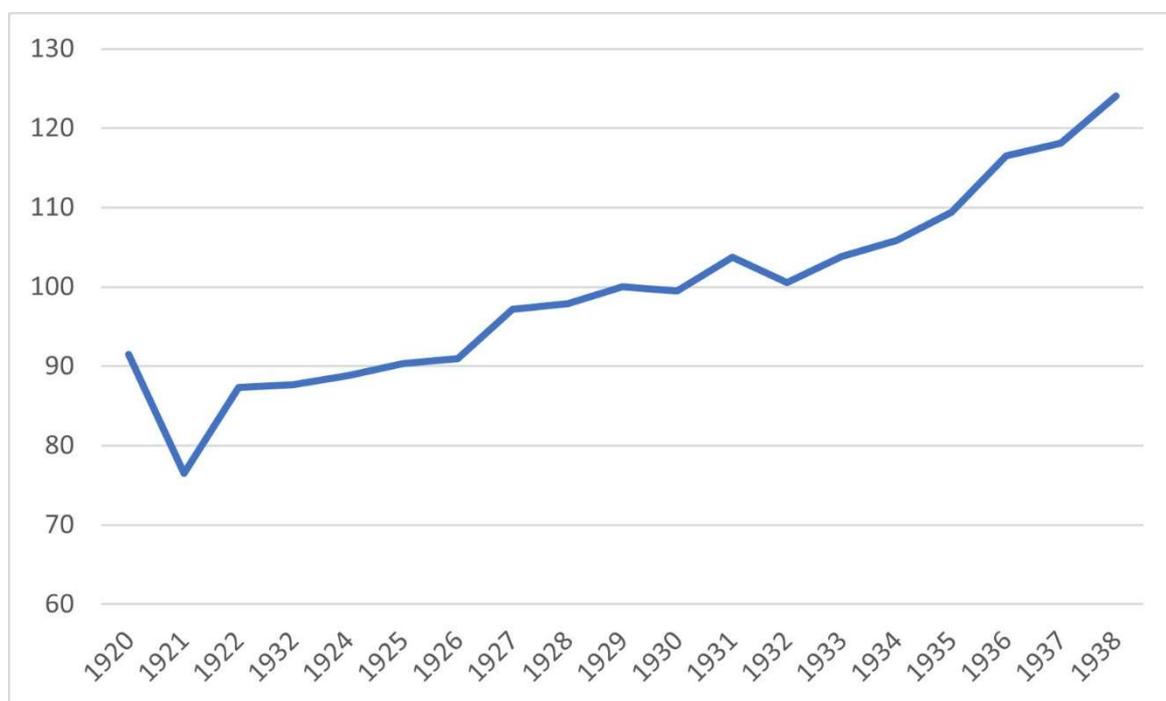
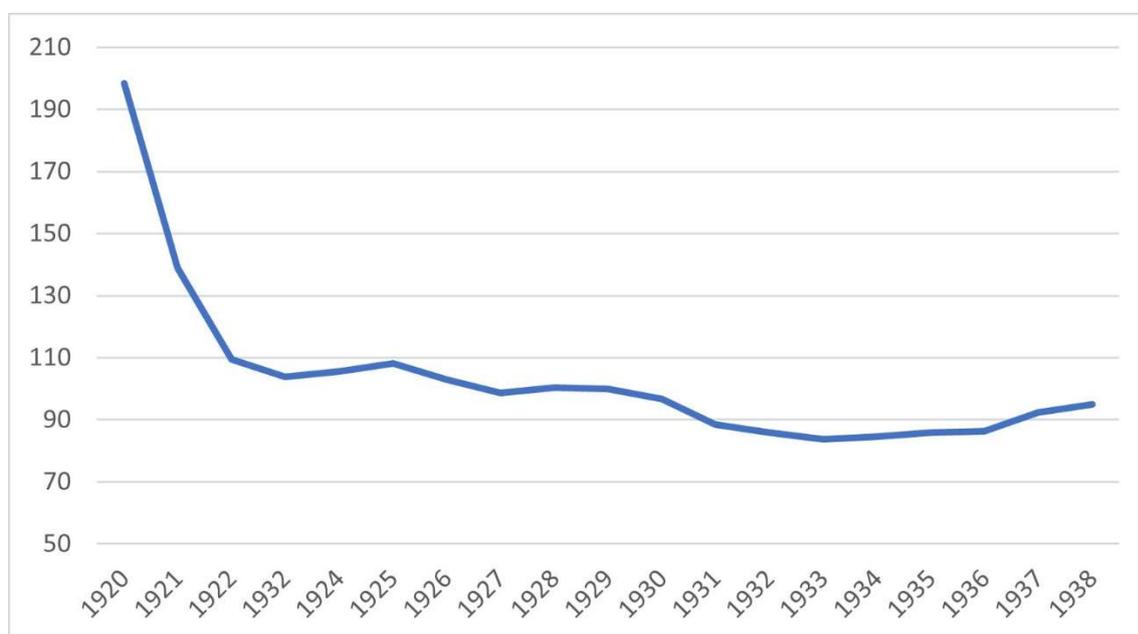


Chart VII – Indexed Prices of Womenswear in the United Kingdom 1920-1938 (1929 = 100)²⁸



²⁷ Data calculated from Stone and Rowe, *The Movement of Consumers' Expenditure and Behaviour in the United Kingdom 1920-1938*, p. 13.

²⁸ Ibid.

Whilst these totals are useful in understanding the national economy, and suggest that the purchase of clothing was becoming more frequent and costing less, they do not give any insight into how individuals were actually spending their income, and even when trying to assess the amount a particular class spent on clothing, the averages that have been proposed vary wildly. Of the 1,360 civil servants earning over £250 surveyed by Massey in 1938, the amount spent on women's clothing was estimated to be £16 10s per year; but a *Good Housekeeping* survey in 1932 suggested that £65 was the average annual spend of its readers, making their audience firmly upper-middle class.²⁹ In contrast, articles published in *Woman's Fair* in 1938 gave examples of how to dress on a budget of £20, £26, £40 and £60 per year, suggesting a huge variation in the incomes of their readers.³⁰ If we use the data calculated from Stone and Rowe in Table VII and the Office of National Statistics total female population figures (including girls) the per capita spend rose from £6 in 1924, to £7 5s in 1938.³¹ Any averages calculated here can be seen as almost meaningless, but taking the overall figures alone, the national increase in spending does suggest that broadly, women were interested and willing to spend on their wardrobes, regardless of the level of their income.

The Censuses of Production and manufacturing records can give some indication of the value of rayon sold in this period, and in what forms, but establishing the purchases of even small numbers of individuals in this period is extremely difficult. There is precious little evidence available, in terms of both records left by retailers and those left by consumers, and neither offer a satisfactory view of purchases. Accounts left by a wealthy Yorkshire woman in the 1920s which have been examined by Katina Bill do not include any reference to rayon.³² The collection of clothing owned by Emily Tinne and now in the care of the National Museums Liverpool can be used to show what wealthy women

²⁹ Massey, "The Expenditure of 1360 British Middle-Class Households in 1938-9", p. 172. Calculated from total spending on clothing, split by the percentage he worked out was spent on women's clothing; "Dress and the Modern Woman", *GH*, March 1930, p. 222.

³⁰ *WF*, March 1938, pp. 40-1, and May 1938, pp. 14-5.

³¹ Based on government population figures and my calculations of clothing expenditure in Table VII.

³² Katina Bill, "Clothing Expenditure by a Woman in the early 1920s", *Costume*, Vol. 27 No. 1, (1993), pp.57-60.

could buy, but Emily Tinne was a compulsive shopper and hoarder of clothing, and much of what she bought was never worn, so again this does not provide a good example of everyday clothing.³³ Mass Observation surveys into clothing were undertaken, but these form only a very small snapshot from late in the period and the majority of the information on shopping and clothing dates from 1939. In terms of retailers, the Hodson Shop Collection from Willenhall is effectively a time capsule, showing how a very small garment retailer in a respectable working class area may have stocked their shop, but it does not show us what was sold and in what quantities.³⁴ Multiple chain stores and department stores have left very few records or catalogues behind: one of the most extensive retail archives, that of Marks and Spencer Ltd, has very little from pre-World War II as its records were pulped as part of the war effort.

Yet by working with all of these sources, and using advertisements, trade journals, trade returns and even snippets from interviews and fiction it is possible to form a very broad overview of how women consumed rayon. The biggest change in the period was the movement away from buying lengths of fabric to make up a garment either at home, or having it made up by a dressmaker, to the buying of so-called “ready-mades”. In 1921, an article in *The Times* suggested that this shift was already taking place:

The number of women who are wearing ready makes is very large nowadays, and includes many who find the “exclusive” tailor ridiculously dear in comparison with the big firm.³⁵

By 1930 a new (but short-lived) trade journal *Garment Manufacturer and Fabric Review* was set up with the aim of “serv[ing] the enormous industry employed in the manufacture of garments”.³⁶ The journal noted that

³³ The Tinne Collection, National Museums Liverpool. This is the largest collection of a single person’s clothing in the UK.

³⁴ The Hodson Shop Collection, Black Country Museums (formerly Walsall Museum).

³⁵ “Dress Problems of a Small Woman”, *The Times*, 28 August 1921, p. 5.

³⁶ “Our Policy”, *Garment Manufacturer and Fabric Review*, June 1930, p. 6.

While we would not go so far as to say that the day for buying dress materials in lengths over the counter is entirely past, there has been a great change in public opinion in favour of the ready-to-wear article.³⁷

Despite this change, sewing remained both a popular hobby and an economic requirement. For many wealthy middle-class women, who had ample time and were socially secure, dressmaking was a leisure activity which gave them an opportunity to be creative and engage with fashion. Lower middle-class women working on much smaller budgets, but striving to keep up appearances, would have found buying all of their items of clothing prohibitively expensive, particularly when society suggested that numerous changes of clothing for different events and occasions was a necessity. The lower cost involved in making garments meant that they could have a wider selection of clothes for the same price as fewer ready-mades.³⁸ Mrs E.H. was a fairly typical middle-class home seamstress: she records that her mother encouraged her to sew “for economic reasons” and because she felt the cost of a shop bought garment would be “easily double” what she would pay for materials.³⁹ For many of the working class their reliance on home sewn garments was out of economic necessity rather than choice: a survey of mill workers in Bolton in 1938 showed that only two out of the eleven girls owned ready-made dresses.⁴⁰ Many working-class women could only afford one new dress a year; this would be their best frock, until it was relegated to second place when a new one was bought the following year.⁴¹ An example of this is Mrs Rogerson of Manchester: her family was made up of herself and her husband, and five children who worked but lived at home - their total family income was £7 per week. Her daughters owned three dresses each: one was “best” and the other two were “washing frocks [in] artificial silk...made by the girls, materials costing 5- and 7/6”.⁴² Another respondent spent 10s on Celanese fabric which her mother made up into two dresses for her.⁴³ It is possible to roughly

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Barbara Burman, “‘What a Deal of Work there is in a Dress!’: Englishness and Home Dressmaking in the Age of the Sewing Machine”, in *The Englishness of English Dress*, Christopher Breward, Becky Conekin and Caroline Cox (eds), (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2002), pp. 79-96 (p. 85).

³⁹ Jennifer Robson, “The Role of Clothing and Fashion in the Household Budget 1919-1947”, Appendix C.

⁴⁰ Mass Observation Archive, Brighton, Sussex, Topic Collection 18_1_C.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mrs Rogerson, MOA, TopicCollection-18_1_C.

⁴³ Miss Edna Lee, MOA, TopicCollection-18_1_C.

calculated how much a rayon dress cost to make by using advertisements where the cost per yard of material is shown, along with information from contemporary sewing patterns. As we have already seen prices of rayon materials dropped markedly across the period: not only do we have evidence of manufacturers lowering their trade prices, but we can also see from price-lists which are part of various advertisements in both trade and consumer magazines (see Plates XII and XIII). The prices of different types of rayon also varied, with acetate remaining more expensive than viscose for much of the period. Using extant sewing patterns for dresses from the 1930s, it is possible to conclude that a fairly typical day dress used four yards of fabric.⁴⁴ If a woman used CPA fabrics in 1930 to sew this 'average' dress, she would have to spend about 15s 8d, or 3s 11d per yard of fabric. In 1937, this would have fallen to around 12 shillings. Celanese fabrics saw a much greater drop in price (despite the fact they remained more expensive than viscose): in 1928 the average advertised price of a yard of Celanese fabric was just over 8s, meaning the 'average' dress would have cost £1 12s to make. By 1937, the average advertised price per yard had dropped to 3s 5d, lowering the cost of the 'average' dress substantially to 13s 8d.⁴⁵ However, it is worth noting that there were cheaper dressmaking fabrics on the market too, for example, Sparva fabrics were priced as low as 1s per yard, which allowed women to sew a dress for much less than these averages, as seen with the Mass Observation respondent above.⁴⁶

For purchasers seeking ease and convenience, ready-made garments were far more enticing. A C&A Modes advert from 1932 encouraged women to choose the option of a ready-made dress, playing on the notions of domestic drudgery and time-saving (see Figure 46):

Don't be a slave to the sewing machine...at C&A prices it's *such* a waste of time to make your dresses at home.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Yards of fabric taken from a selection of sewing patterns for sale at The Vintage Pattern Shop <<https://www.thevintagepatternshop.com/product-category/vintage-sewing-patterns/1930s-sewing-patterns/dresses-all-types/>>

⁴⁵ These figures are based on averages of the fabrics shown on Plate XII and XIII.

⁴⁶ For example, Sparva fabrics were sold at 1s per yard. See advert in *WF*, April 1937, p. 87.

⁴⁷ C&A Modes advert, *The Mercury*, 29 April 1932, p. 5.

C&A certainly did not sell dresses which would have competed in price with the cheapest homemade ones, but with their rayon dresses costing around £1 in the 1930s, they were offering well-priced garments which removed what many women found to be the “difficult process” of sewing one.⁴⁸ The price of ready-made rayon clothing varied drastically: Marks and Spencer Ltd sold some rayon dresses for as little as 2s 11d (although this was particularly cheap), whilst department stores were selling items which could cost several pounds. For example, in June 1936, Marshall & Snelgrove advertised an “inexpensive tea frock, made in figured rayon crepe” for 49s 6s.⁴⁹ For most women in Britain, spending the sums of money that department stores were charging would have been little more than a dream. Working-class women surveyed by Mass Observation said they would spend no more than 12s on a dress, and women of other classes surveyed in London said they put self-imposed limits on what they would spend on a garment, with their average spend being 18s 1d.⁵⁰ The rayon dresses with price tags in the Hodson Shop collection cost an average of 13s, and a selection of rayon dresses taken from the extant Wilkinson and Riddell catalogues show that the average retail price was 18s 1d (happily aligning with the average mean from Mass Observation).⁵¹ Two of the rayon dresses which Mrs Tinne bought (and never wore) have price tags on them for 12s 6d and 20s. Knowing that most budgets did not stretch to expensive clothing, women’s magazines were full of advice on how to look smart on a budget and declared that if one was “clever” when buying low-cost clothes it was possible to “be as well-dressed as a much richer woman”.⁵² Women could find cheaper clothes by shopping in the “Bargain Basements” which high-end stores had introduced; and seasonal sales in larger stores usually included plenty of low-priced rayon lines: for example, Owen Owen Ltd, where Mrs Tinne shopped, ran large, well promoted sales where rayon dresses were advertised as low as 5s 9d.⁵³ Alongside this, there were mail order catalogues such as Littlewoods, local clothing clubs and various

⁴⁸ MOA, May 1939 Directive, Respondent 1574.

⁴⁹ Marshall & Snelgrove advert, *The Times*, 26 June 1936, p. 19.

⁵⁰ MOA, Topic Collection 18_1_C.

⁵¹ This is calculated by using the average wholesale price of rayon dresses from the Wilkinson and Riddell catalogues dated 1931-39 from the Hodson Shop Collection, and adding on the average retail mark up of 35%.

⁵² “Figuring Out the New Fashions”, *WF*, May 1936, p. 41; “Looking Charming”, *MW*, January 1930, p. 30.

⁵³ Owen Owen Ltd advert, *The Liverpool Echo*, 19 April 1933, p. 6.

other payment schemes offered by retailers which allowed women on very small budgets to buy new clothing over a period of time. Littlewoods, for example, offered the 20-week club, where a shilling a week could be deposited in a local club to pay for items in their catalogue. Pope & Chappell were a frequent advertiser in *Woman* in 1938: they offered garments in return for a deposit and a monthly payment (see Figure 47). In the below advert a rayon dress costing 11s 9d can be either bought outright for this price, or is available for a deposit of 1s 9d, and then four monthly instalments of 2s 6d. Schemes such as this allowed women access to new clothing without having to save up for it. Meanwhile, the postal format meant friends and neighbours did not even need to know that the item had been bought on credit or in instalments, in an era when there was still considerable shame attached to borrowing money.

Now that the long days are here—

DON'T BE A SLAVE TO A SEWING MACHINE

—at C & A prices, it's such a waste of time to make your dresses at home. They're never quite as nice as they look in the pattern books, and by the time you've bought the material, the trimmings and buttons, they cost much more than they're worth. Don't be a slave to your sewing machine. Get out in the sunshine and fresh air, and leave your frocks to C & A. You'll look smarter and feel more confident about yourself. Better have a couple of really good dresses than a whole wardrobe full of doubtful ones.

C & A
MODES LIMITED



Practical and smartly cut washing frock in soft silk and cotton, with wide contrast piping, which with the button fastenings, give a desirable braided effect. The skirt is gored. **9/11**

Wonderful value in georgette. Wide revers and collar are a grand, the bodice gives the double-breasted effect. Sleeves have printed pattern. The blouse, gored skirt. **19/11**

Extremely smart frock in printed art. crepe, moulded to fit the figure. Finished at back with bow, handsomely fitted, and new-cut puff at shoulder. All latest, sublime. **34/11**

Stylish art. fashion two-piece. The bodice has a tonic effect given by the contrast piping. The legs are shaped, the skirt is pleated. The case complements charming ensemble. **49/11**

A dainty three-piece of incredible value, in art. mercerized. It has short-sleeved with lace, a good skirt, and a dainty fitting, well shaped top at the waist. **29/11**

NO POST ORDERS OPEN SATURDAYS until 6 p.m.

C & A MODES LTD • CORPORATION ST • BIRMINGHAM
also London (7 branches) Manchester Liverpool Leeds Sheffield Glasgow

Figure 46 A C&A advert from 1932 encourages women to buy ready-made clothes rather than sewing them at home. *The Lichfield Mercury*, 29 April 1932.

Either of these lovely Frocks

ONLY **1/9** DEPOSIT

MODEL No. E 160

Here's something new and specially dainty. Tailored enough to make it just right for sportswear and sufficiently chic to be really attractive, this cool-looking frock is cleanly made in crease-resisting imitation linen. There's a zipp fastener at the neck and the dress has the cleverest pockets, the skirt has a centre pleat and is smartly finished with belt. In lovely clear shades of Blue, Green, Rose, and Natural.

Sizes:
Hips ... 38 | 40 | 42
Length... 46 | 47 | 48

MODEL No. E 154

Embodying all the new fashion points, this frock is gay, young and flattering. Made in Artificial Spun printed with latest floral stripe it is truly lovely. Collar, cuffs and pockets are bound with contrasting shade and the front of the bodice carries the chic edge to edge finish that is so effective. The whole is finished with a contrasting patent leather belt. In Blue, Green, Rose, Brown.

Sizes:
Hips ... 38 | 40 | 42
Length... 46 | 47 | 48

Each Model is Price 11/9 plus 6d. Carr: or 1/9 deposit plus 6d. carr. and 4 monthly payments of 2/6.
Every Garment sold on a Money Back Guarantee. Send for ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE

POPE & CHAPPELL LTD.
52 QUEEN VICTORIA STREET
LONDON, E.C.4

Figure 47 Advert from Pope & Chappell Ltd offering a rayon dress (R) on credit, 1938. *Woman*, 21 May 1938. © British Library.

One method of stimulating extra purchases and encouraging a change in purchasing habits was through the sale of what Ellen Leopold has termed “little ticket items”.⁵⁴ These smaller, cheaper goods often did not require the same consideration as a “big ticket item” such as a dress, coat or suit. Mass Observation recorded the time and effort women put into larger purchases, whilst lower cost items such as stockings were not given as much thought. If an outfit was broken down into smaller constituent parts, such as a skirt, blouse, and jumper or cardigan, it suddenly looked like a more flexible and affordable proposition, even if the total cost may have been higher. The blouse and skirt combination was something “very much in vogue” from the mid-1930s, and continued to be popular right up until the end of the period.⁵⁵ A properly tailored woollen skirt (and possibly jacket to match) may have remained a “big ticket item” but blouses, jumpers and cardigans to go with it could easily fall into the “little ticket” category, encouraging women to buy multiple items. Marks and Spencer

⁵⁴ E. Leopold, “The Manufacture of the Fashion System”, in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, ed. Ash, Juliet and Elizabeth Wilson, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 1010-117 (p. 113).

⁵⁵ “Spring Thoughts in Dressmaking”, *GH*, February 1935, p. 64.

offered “art. Silk blouses” which ranged from between 1s 11d and 4s 11d, and Tricoline jumpers for 3s 11d.⁵⁶ The wholesaler Wilkinson & Riddell supplied a whole variety of rayon blouses which would have retailed at around 3s 9d.⁵⁷ These “little ticket” items allowed women more options in terms of putting together different outfits too, particularly when consumer magazines were increasingly suggesting that women should try to “ensure [they are] never seen in the same thing twice”.⁵⁸ Small items such as scarves and “coatees” could be added or swapped to change the look of an outfit. Marks & Spencer sold rayon scarves for 1s 11d, as did Wilkinson & Riddell which retailed at about 2s 6d, along with small “coatees” (jackets) as low as 6s 6d.⁵⁹ The availability of these low cost rayon items helped contribute to the effect that women had a “seemingly unlimited wardrobe”.⁶⁰ It was noted that women may have been wearing fewer layers of clothing, and with much less fabric in them than pre-war, but, they required “more [garments] in total” and “one only had to look at the number of clothes the average young lady took on her annual seaside holiday [to see this]”.⁶¹ Women in the interwar period were quite literally beginning to buy into the idea that cheap, ready-made clothing was desirable, affordable, and increasingly, disposable.

⁵⁶ “Christmas Shopping Without a Single Tear”, *The Marks & Spencer Magazine* Christmas 1932, p. 17, M&S Company Archive, HO/3/1/4/2/2; Weekly Bulletin, 16 July 1927, M&S Company Archive, HO/3/2/2/1/1.

⁵⁷ Wilkinson & Riddell catalogues, from the Hodson Shop Collection, Black Country Museums, West Midlands. As before, I have taken the wholesale price and added on a 35% markup.

⁵⁸ “Budgetting [sic] for Smartness”, *WF*, April 1938, p. 40.

⁵⁹ “How to get two pounds worth for a pound”, *The Marks and Spencer Magazine*, Summer 1932, pp. 15-6, M&S Company Archive, HO/3/1/4/2/1; Wilkinson & Riddell Catalogues, Hodson Shop Collection.

⁶⁰ “Spring Thoughts in Dressmaking”, *GH*, February 1935, p. 64.

⁶¹ “Civic Week Shopping”, *Manchester Guardian*, 4 October 1926, p. 5; “Modern Needs in Clothing”, *Manchester Guardian*, 12 June 1927, p. 16.



Figure 48 A "little ticket" rayon blouse, 1937. *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 27 November 1937.

The shorter skirts of the interwar years had made stockings a year round necessity for women. The total amount spent on these items was surprisingly large (somewhere around £20m annually) but given their propensity to ladder and rip women had to buy numerous pairs a year, even if they looked after them. Wardle & Davenport, the original makers of rayon stockings, advertised them at 2s 11d or 3s 11d but non-branded pairs could sell for as little as 1s; Marks & Spencer sold rayon stockings for 1s 6d, and fully fashioned stockings made of a mixture of rayon and silk for 2s 11d.⁶² Heavier weight winter stockings made by Celanese were 3s 11d for a plain knit, and 4s 11d for a fancy knit.⁶³ *Woman's Fair* set out a series of clothing budgets in 1938, and they suggested that on a budget of £20 a year women should buy 6 pairs of stockings for a total of 17s 6d; for women on £40 a year the spend was projected as £2 5s, and on £60 a year £2 10s (the latter two budgets did not specify numbers of pairs).⁶⁴

⁶² "Three Knots" advert, in A.L. Wykes, *Artificial Silk*, (Leicester: The Hosiery Trade Journal, 1927), p. 4; Isaac Benzie advert, *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 3 April 1936, p. 3; "How to get Two Pounds worth for a Pound", *The Marks and Spencer Magazine*, Summer 1932, pp. 15-6, M&S Company Archive, HO/3/1/4/2/1.

⁶³ Marshall & Snelgrove advert, *The Graphic*, 8 October 1927, p. 51.

⁶⁴ Budgetting [sic] for Smartness", *WF*, pp. 40-41, and May 1938, p. 14.

Mass Observation queried stocking expenditure in their 1939 May directive which gives an insight into what women actually spent, as opposed to advertised costs and suggested spending. E. Hodson bought around 10 pairs per year, buying them from Woolworths at 1s per pair; and E.M. Mein spent £1 10s a year, but also “relied on presents” for real silk stockings. Respondent 1566 gives a very comprehensive response: she preferred to buy three identical pairs at the same time, so that if one laddered she could easily pair it with another. She also noted

Lately I have been buying Marks & Spencers [sic] 1/11 variety as they are fine...and not streaky and wear well.⁶⁵

Advertisements suggest the actual price of rayon stockings fell only in a very marginal way during the interwar period, but as filaments, yarns and knitting techniques improved, women were getting far better quality products for their money later in the period. As with clothes, women could pay far less for their stockings if they were willing to shop around: the retailing of stockings was very competitive if we judge by the number of “bargains” and “special prices” advertised in newspapers, and this did mean that prices were often cut below the suggested retail price. No matter how much women were spending on these items, what is certain is that the change in purchasing habits was remarkable: at a drapery conference in 1937 it was suggested that “in the old days four pairs [of stockings] lasted a year”, but by the time of the conference delegates estimated that the average “girl” bought between 25 and 35 pairs of stockings per year.⁶⁶

Clothing, Personal Choice and Self Esteem

The purchasing of clothing was not simply a financial calculation and transaction for women, it also involved “active decisions about self-worth and identity.”⁶⁷ In making these decisions, women would have to “imagine [the] possession and use of...goods” and establish not only how they would look, but

⁶⁵ MOA, Part I May 1939 Directive, Respondents 1548, 1566 and 1569.

⁶⁶ “Girls Buy Many Stockings Now”, *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 12 June 1937, p. 8.

⁶⁷ Judy Giles, “Class, Gender and Domestic Consumption 1920-50” in *Gender and Consumption*, eds. Emma Casey and Lydia Martens, (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 15-32 (p. 19).

also how they would feel, and what impression they would make on those around them.⁶⁸ Although advertisers may have liked to believe that if you “captured a woman’s imagination you can sell anything”, this was simply not the case.⁶⁹ Women knew the limits of their spending power and although consumer magazines, the press and films did have a didactic role in telling women what they ‘should’ wear, there were many options available and the final purchase was always a personal choice. This is not to say that this media did not have a role in the decisions women made: many women reported to Mass Observation that they looked at fashion pages, advertisements and newspapers, even if they did not think that the clothing in them was suitable for them. Some women specifically referred to looking at *Harpers* and *Vogue*: one respondent noting that *Vogue* was “an excellent pointer to what is really going to be worn” and by studying it she felt she would avoid “rush[ing] out and buy[ing] the wrong thing”.⁷⁰ Other respondents noted that they would ask friends or family for advice. Another influence on women’s purchasing decisions (whether consciously or not) was “observing other people’s clothes”: there was an increasing visibility of trends on the street, arising from a combination of the sheer volume of new clothes being produced, and their lower prices making them more accessible.⁷¹ Being able to see garments in real life, and on real people, undoubtedly had an effect on what women wanted to purchase and wear. The cumulative result of all these influences meant fashion was increasingly embedded in day-to-day life, and its persistent presence was such that women were aware of what would be available in the shops, and they would often form an idea of what they wanted to buy before they even began looking.

Rayon manufacturers recognised that to cater to these demanding consumers they had to offer a variety of goods. In 1938, a contributor to *Silk & Rayon* wrote that in choosing a fabric or garment

[The purchaser] will consider her age, the build of the figure – whether tall, short etc., and the purpose for which intended.⁷²

⁶⁸ Daniel Miller, *A Theory of Shopping*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), p.141.

⁶⁹ *Advertisers’ Weekly*, October 1931, p. 94.

⁷⁰ MOA, Part I May 1939 Directive, Respondent 1077.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, respondent 1585.

⁷² “Print Designs for Rayon Dress Fabrics XII”, *S&R*, January 1938, p. 26.

This is confirmed by reports sent to Mass Observation with women noting things such as “I choose my clothes to suit my figure and my age” and “I choose clothes which suit me and the kind of life I lead”.⁷³ As well as displaying rational thinking in this regard, women also evaluated and assessed the various options both in and across retail establishments. One respondent to Mass Observation said that to find what she wanted to buy she would first look in shops where she had made previous successful purchases, and that she would try on “quite a large number of garments before finding one that really suits”.⁷⁴ Another scouted round “the best shops to compare prices and styles with the cheaper ones.”⁷⁵ Articles in trade journals show larger retailers were reassessing their attitudes towards customers as they saw these changes taking place: they recognised that they could no longer rely on a woman returning to the same shop for every purchase. The head of Fenwick wrote of his customers:

She lives in a wider and more complex world...She sees more, travels about more, has better papers to read...better films to see. Can we expect her to be anything else than more exacting in the goods we show her?⁷⁶

An example of this “independent” shopper is seen in one of the Mass Observation responses:

If I don't see the right thing I go into the most likely looking shop and get them to show me as wider variety as I can. I always like to feel I have seen everything there is to see and [have] really chosen the best.⁷⁷

Rayon manufacturers drew on this sense of a woman knowing what she wanted in their trade advertisements. Celanese said that the shopper was looking for items which were “‘correct’ in colour...in fabric...in cut...in style” and that “girls of every village...look for and recognise good style in clothes”.⁷⁸ Martialine also ran an advert suggesting that the contemporary shopper was “shrewd” and “critical”, and that retailers could overcome the “foibles” of women simply by stocking their well-designed fabrics.⁷⁹ The Mass Observation respondents did not necessarily perceive themselves to be

⁷³ MOA, Part I May 1939 Directive, Respondents 1544 and 1563.

⁷⁴ Ibid., Respondent 1563.

⁷⁵ Ibid., Respondent 1077.

⁷⁶ “Tomorrow in the Drapery Trade”, *DO*, June 1936, p. 48.

⁷⁷ MOA, Part I May 1939 Directive, Respondent 1010.

⁷⁸ Celanese advert, *GMFR*, December 1930, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Martialine advert, in *ibid.*, p. 1.

shrewd shoppers, and the inference from many is that whilst owning new clothes is pleasurable, the actual process of decision making whilst in a shop could be a stressful one.

One of the reasons that choosing clothing was so fraught for many women was not only that purchases were infrequent, but also because the act of wearing clothes was (and is) so bound up with self-esteem and self-perception. Selina Todd quotes a working-class girl in this period as saying “If I’m dressed and I feel good...I can hold me head up”.⁸⁰ In a society where presentation and clothing was closely linked to respectability and social status, the ability to dress well and be presentable was important: many of the women writing to Mass Observation perceived themselves as smart or well-dressed. Being fashionable was not a concern for many of these women, but being “*suitably* dressed” [my italics] certainly was, as was the approval of other women, be they friends or strangers. The directive responses also suggest that for many women the first time they wore their new clothes was something of an occasion: their descriptions of these moments are overwhelmingly joyful and these feelings are clearly recalled. Aesthetic and sensual responses reported include: “I like the novelty”; “I feel exhilarated”; and “I love wearing new clothes as it’s a pleasure putting on something new & beautiful.” Alongside this, new garments had the ability to raise women’s self-esteem: one respondent wrote “I look better and can demand more...I respect myself more”, while another said “new clothes make me feel more self-confident”.⁸¹ If we return briefly to rayon advertising, many of the adverts which appeared in consumer magazines suggested that their goods would bestow these feelings on the buyer. Courtaulds used Courtesa and other adverts to suggest that “smart women” wore their fabrics and garments; and Sparva said their fabrics offered “the charm of being well-dressed”.⁸² Other companies used the feel of their fabrics to suggest that wearing them would feel luxurious: “delightful [and] dainty”, “[it has] ethereal beauty” and “supersede[ing] silk” were just some of the descriptions

⁸⁰ Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class*, (London: John Murray, 2015), p. 110.

⁸¹ MOA, Part I May 1939 Directive, Respondents 1010, 1014, 1562, 1581, and 1057.

⁸² Sparva advert, *WF*, March 1938, p. 4

of rayon fabrics advertised in the March 1926 issue of *Modern Woman*.⁸³ These notions would have been absorbed sub-consciously by millions of female readers. Whilst there is certainly some form of innate pleasure in the wearing of new clothes, it is also extremely likely that advertising helped exaggerate and enhance this feeling. Reminding women of their reaction every time they saw advertisements in the press and in-store would have provided a strong stimulus for them to make further purchases.

Examining emotions, imagination and perceptions around purchasing can also offer insights into why sewing garments at home began to decline in popularity in these years, and why ready-made garments were bought in increasing volumes.⁸⁴ Although sewing garments at home could be cheaper, it could also lead to expensive or disappointing mistakes, such as making the wrong fabric choice or making sewing errors, which even the most talented of home dressmakers would not have been immune to. Young mill workers in Bolton revealed that they “often” ended up disliking the dresses they had made themselves because “they are not tight enough or there happens something else” [sic].⁸⁵ “Self-worth and identity” were also facets which affected why women chose ready-made garments.⁸⁶ Barbara Burman suggests that women of all classes worried that their clothing was identifiable as homemade.⁸⁷ In contrast ready-made garments conjured an image of affluence and were seen as upmarket, partly because economic necessity had traditionally forced people to adjust cast-off clothes or make their own, and partly because retailers were becoming so adept at displaying and advertising these items: Figure 49 shows how even the cheapest garments could look desirable in a shop window. Finally, there was a good deal of imagination required to envisage what a finished homemade garment

⁸³ Marichene, Courtaulds and Celanese adverts in *MW* March 1926, pp. 4, 11, and back cover.

⁸⁴ In *Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954) J.B. Jefferys noted that in the 1937-38 Cost of Living analysis of working class expenditure the amount spent on fabric had reduced by nearly 70 % since 1904. At the same time the spending on ready-made women's and children's clothing increased by nearly 1000%, p. 332.

⁸⁵ MOA, Topic Collection 18_1_C.

⁸⁶ Judy Giles, “Class, Gender and Domestic Consumption 1920-50”, p. 19.

⁸⁷ Burman, “‘What a Deal of Work there is in a Dress!’: Englishness and Home Dressmaking in the Age of the Sewing Machine”, pp. 85-6.

would look like, as sewing patterns illustrations were highly stylised (see Figure 50). A woman would have had to consider not only how the garment would really look once it was made up, but also how it would look in a fabric of her own choosing. This was not simply a case of imagining the colour and the pattern, but also employing at least a basic knowledge of how different fabrics cut, sewed and draped. A ready-made garment was immediately visible; its cut, drape and size were not open to speculation or errors. Responses to Mass Observation show that women relied on looking at and trying on garments in store to ensure they suited them: the very physicality of ready-made clothing simplified the process of reimagining oneself, something which clothing made at home, or by a dressmaker, simply could not do. Given the complexities of sewing and the desirability of ready-mades, it is not surprising that the growth in the sales of ready-made clothing was remarkable. In 1930 Marks and Spencer Ltd sold one million dresses for less than 5s. Even higher end producers were making enormous numbers of dresses: by 1939, Marley Gowns, who made dresses retailing at around one guinea each, was manufacturing 10,000 dresses per week.⁸⁸ Not all of these were rayon of course, but it was increasingly used in ready-made garments. By the 1930s it was losing its stigma as being “glistening stuff” which “cheap frocks [were] made of”.⁸⁹ Horrockses, Crewdson & Co noted in their 1936 and 1937 AGMs that more and more of their production was being bought by makers-up rather than their traditional drapery customers.⁹⁰ The overall success of rayon in shop-bought garments was such that by 1935 the Census of Production showed that almost one-third of the total rayon fabric manufactured went into ready-made clothing.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Lawrence Neal, *Retailing and the Public*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932), p. 51; Elizabeth Wilson and Lou Taylor, *Through the Looking Glass: A History of Dress from 1860 to the Present Day*, (London: BBC Books, 1989), p. 96.

⁸⁹ Jennifer Robson, “The Role of Clothing and Fashion in the Household Budget 1919-1947”, PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 1998, Appendix C.

⁹⁰ “Horrockses, Crewdson & Co Ltd”, *Manchester Guardian*, 22 December 1936, p. 18; “Horrockses, Crewdson & Company Ltd”, *Manchester Guardian*, 21 December 1937, p. 18.

⁹¹ Final Report on the Census of Production for 1935, Volume 1, General Report on Clothing Trades, (Board of Trade: HMSO, 1938), p. 102 and p. 419 available at <<https://lse-atom.arkivum.net/uklse-dl1eh010030040028>> [accessed March 2024].



Figure 49 Marks & Spencer Ltd window display c. 1937 where cheap goods are arranged attractively. Compare this to the stylised sewing pattern illustration below. Image reproduced with kind permission of the M&S Company Archive.



Figure 50 A Simplicity Sewing Pattern dating c. 1939. Note the stylised drawings of the women. From the author's own collection.

Women were not only making choices about homemade clothing versus ready-mades, they were also making decisions about value and the quality of their potential purchase. One of the questions in the May 1939 Mass Observation directive asked:

Do you prefer, from a limited allowance, to spend a lot on a few things and make them last – or to have frequent change?⁹²

This question itself is indicative of how mass production and cheaper clothing was making “frequent change” possible for far more members of the population. At the turn of the century, this question could only have been asked of the wealthy whereas by the late 1930s it was asked of women of all economic groups. The question was not merely a theoretical one: the respondents were also asked to detail “your [own] practice”.⁹³ Whilst many women did reply that they preferred to buy expensive, durable clothing, there were also a significant number who replied that they preferred “a good many rather cheap clothes”, or that they “tire[d] of clothes such as frocks very quickly”.⁹⁴ One woman said that she “was passionately fond of colour and variety” and even if the fabric was of lower quality and cheaper, she would buy this knowing it would last for a shorter period of time rather than something higher-priced and longer lasting.⁹⁵ Rayon manufacturers had women like this as their target audience: the modern and stylish designs would draw in the purchaser, and low prices meant that women could afford to buy something new when the item was either no longer fashionable, or wore out within a relatively short period of time. To sell higher volumes though, manufacturers also needed to encourage greater numbers of women to shop like this. Newspapers had noted in the late 1920s that shopping practices were changing with quality not being as sought after as it once had been,

Instead of buying real silk dresses for several guineas [a woman] will buy a couple of equally attractive artificial silk dresses for less than the cost of the one.⁹⁶

Even where woman did still prefer to spend money on higher quality goods, Mass Observation shows that changes in shopping habits did occur. A woman with an income of around £300 per year wrote

⁹² MOA, Part I May 1939 Directive.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., Respondents 1563 and 1574.

⁹⁵ Ibid., Respondent 1575.

⁹⁶ “The Modern Girl’s Dress Bill”, *Manchester Guardian*, 23 August 1928, p. 5.

Quality is better than quantity. However I've found that a city makes you so sad when you are lonely that changes in accoutrements help. I now change my scarves, hats and bags a good deal. These articles I can afford to get cheaply.⁹⁷

In this response we see that circumstances (living alone in a city) and emotions (sadness and loneliness) have a direct impact upon the way in which an individual perceives shopping, the act of purchasing, and the wearing of new goods. The "cheapness" of these items allows the subject to keep making purchases to 'replace' items which are not worn out, simply for the pleasure which it affords. The purchasing of new goods can easily become a habit owing to the positive feelings it stimulates. Studies in consumer psychology have shown that "when purchase and consumption are rewarding, people are more likely to repeat them in the future".⁹⁸ This is exacerbated because the pleasure of consumption is not a long lasting experience: as the "exhilaration" of an item wears off, so the consumer is likely to seek the diversion and gratification of making another purchase.⁹⁹ Rayon manufacturers and retailers did not know the detailed psychology behind consumption in the interwar period, but they certainly had some inklings about it: their advertising and in-store merchandising helped encourage these feelings and actions in consumers. As the cost-of-living and cost of rayon continued to decline, it meant that Fashionocracy, with its tenets of frequent and cheap purchases, was becoming a real possibility.

Evaluation

The interwar shopping experience was one which for many women would have been unrecognisable from that pre-war. The growth of multiple stores, the volumes and variety of clothing available, decreasing prices, advancing display techniques and the beginnings of self-service meant that new rituals and habits had been formed and were still taking shape. The idea that one could enter a store and just look was becoming normal, even if many women still felt uncomfortable with the hovering

⁹⁷ MOA, Part I May 1939 Directive, Respondent 1563.

⁹⁸ Wendy Wood and David T. Neal "The Habitual Consumer", *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, (19:4) 2009, pp. 579-592, (p. 386).

⁹⁹ James J. Farrell, "Shopping: The Moral Ecology of Consumption", *American Studies*, (39:3) 1998, pp. 153-173, (p. 172).

sales assistants; and given the wider choice, consumers were becoming more discerning and willing to take their trade elsewhere if a shop did not have what they wanted. Whilst the cost of clothing may have declined in real terms, most purchases still made up a substantial portion of a woman's income or budget. Even those women who reported that they liked "frequent change" in their wardrobe made purchases in a considered way: for the vast majority unplanned and spontaneous purchases were either rare or non-existent. Women may not have professed to being fashionable, but 'keeping up' with the latest trends was certainly seen as part of being well-dressed; most women did some research or 'looking' to see what was the latest thing before they made a purchase. Women also seemed to feel considerable pressure to wear clothing that was suitable and which was presentable, and to conform to social-sartorial rules. A close examination of what women spent on particular items will never be possible, but whilst Marks & Spencer sold one million 5 shilling dresses, even working-class women were often spending at least twice this amount on a dress. For rayon producers, increasing the volumes of product they sold would come through these lower end items, but this did not necessarily mean that they wanted to sell all their goods at rock bottom prices. Rayon needed to be seen to be affordable, but also have a certain prestige so it could be sold at all price levels: it is clear from advertisements that the prices of rayon clothing spanned a vast range, and it was sold in all levels of shops. In the late 1930s, when the Mass Observation responses were collated, women very rarely mentioned rayon when talking about their purchasing choices, but other fibres are rarely mentioned either. Along with the increasing production and sales of rayon, we can take this as a sign that by the late 1930s it was widely accepted as a common dress material: women were neither disregarding it, or especially seeking it out. Given this, it seems only fair to assume that the style *and* value which rayon manufacturers sought to offer was successful in appealing to consumers.

Plate XV

GRAFTON'S CYLVONA	A Rayon and Cotton fabric of excellent quality produced in a specialised range of designs and colourings for use as everyday frocks. Width 36 inches. Retail price per yard,	3/11
GRAFTON'S GRAND PRIX · NINON	A fabric made from hundred-per-cent. Artificial Silk, with a lovely finish and superb draping qualities. Beautiful range of designs for afternoon and evening wear. Width 37/38 inches. Retail price per yard,	3/11
ROSSVALE RAYON VOILE	A hundred-per-cent. Rayon Voile produced in a number of attractive floral designs in light and dark ground colour combinations of surpassing beauty. Width 37 inches. Retail price per yard,	3/11
ROSSVALE RAYON CREPE	A soft lustrous Rayon Crêpe produced in a large and varied range of exclusive designs in exquisite colour combinations. Specially suitable for morning and afternoon gowns. Width 37 inches. Retail price per yard,	3/11
ROSSVALE SATIN CREPE	A strikingly novel production in satin-faced Rayon Crêpe; designs show skilful grouping of colours in floral shapes, giving a kaleidoscopic effect of peculiar charm. Width 36 inches. Retail price per yard,	4/11
CRUM'S LOVELINESS	A dainty All-Artificial-Silk fabric in exquisite flower designs and soft colourings, all guaranteed fast. Lovely for summer and evening frocks. Width 38 inches. Retail price per yard,	3/11
VITASIL	A wonderful value-for-money Cotton and Rayon cloth which has already proved its worth. In a large variety of new designs and colourings. Width 35/36 inches. Retail price per yard,	1/3½
CREPE ERONDEL	A superior Cotton and Artificial Silk cloth in a dainty and attractive Brocade design, in plain shades; a most suitable cloth for modern lingerie fashions. Width 36 inches. Retail price per yard,	2/11
CREPE ROMAINE	A Cotton and Artificial Silk fabric in a full range of plain shades, charming to handle and wear. Suitable for frocks, lingerie and other dress wear. Width 36 inches. Retail price per yard,	2/11
FURNISHING FABRIC	A warp printed Artificial Silk tissue having a wonderful lustre. Design illustrated No. 1349 "New Modern." Many other attractive designs, all suitable for window furnishings. Width 50 inches. Retail price per yard,	7/6

NAMES OF WHOLESALEERS ON APPLICATION
THE C.P.A. LTD. — P.O. BOX 52, MANCHESTER

and here are the other CEPEA starred ranges

RAYONS

GRAFENGA. It was impossible to improve the quality of this popular cloth but the variety of designs and colours is considerably extended Retail price 3/11	NEW GRAFETTE. Entirely new in construction. Note especially the Matt appearance Retail price 2/11
CLAIRDECHENE. An established success—the quality is again improved. The new Matt White printing is a special feature Retail price 3/11	LAVENELLE. A 100% Rayon Marocain. Will be just as popular as ever Retail price 2/11
	INGLORITA. The Cotton and Rayon Crêpe fabric which always commands a very extensive sale. Retail price 1/11½

SPUN FABRICS & FANCY COTTONS

SHANGOO. A new and novel Shantung. Retail price 2/11	VALKO. A 100% Spun Fabric of Special Heavy Weight Retail price 1/11½
DELAGA. A 100% Rayon with a Crease Resisting Finish. Retail price 1/11½	RAYVALE. The 100% Spun Fabric with an unsurpassed range of designs and ever-increasing Popularity Retail price 1/6½
NEW VITASTREL. 100% Spun Fabric—heavy weight and excellent draping qualities Retail price 1/11½	VITADAY. 100% Spun Fabric of outstanding value at the Popular retail price of 1/-
FABRUFF. A novel all cotton "rough" crepey and supple. Retail price 1/11½	

"SIXLINE" ^{FAST COLOUR} GUARANTEE COTTONS

HOYPARELLE. An old favourite with range of designs considerably extended Retail price 1/6½	PATRIOTEX. All Cotton. In an extensive range, pleasant colours. Bearing the Sixline Fast Colour Guarantee Retail price 1/3
POTTER'S W.7. All Cotton bearing the Sixline Fast Colour Guarantee Retail price 1/3	LININGLE. An established Cotton Fabric with a Linen-like appearance bearing the Sixline Fast Colour Guarantee Retail price 1/-
DAYTIME HARMONIES. All Cotton bearing the Sixline Fast Colour Guarantee Retail price 1/-	



How Cepea helps you to sell them

Included in the various advertising and display schemes for 1937 are the Cepea Fashion Bureau, Mannequin Parades, Window and Departmental Display Schemes, Fashion Booklets, Co-operative Advertising, Showcards, Price Cards, etc. and an even more extensive National Advertising Campaign. Particulars of these ambitious plans are detailed in the Brochure "Cepea Selling Plans." Send to-day to the Advertising Department for your copy.

CEPEA FABRICS LIMITED · OXFORD STREET, MANCHESTER

CPA retail prices in *The Drapers' Organiser*, February 1930 (L) and 1937 (R) *The Drapers' Organiser*, March 1937.

Plate XVI

Celanese
Supersedes
Silk



WOVEN FABRICS

CREPE MALIKA
Width 38" 10/9 per yard

CREPE MAROCAIN
Width 40" 10/9 per yard

LINGERIE SATIN
Width 39/40" 6/11 per yard

DRESS SATIN
Width 38" 9/11 per yard

TAFFETA
Width 39/40" 6/11 per yard

FOULARD
Width 36" 5/11 per yard

SURAH
Width 36" 6/11 per yard

LADDERPROOF FABRICS

LOCKNIT
Width 40" 8/11 per yard
Width 54" 10/9 per yard

LOCKNIT
(Light Weight)
Width 40" 5/11 per yard
Width 54" 8/11 per yard

SELF-STRIPE
Width 40" 6/11 per yard
Width 52" 8/11 per yard

MILAKNIT
Width 40" 7/11 per yard
Width 54" 9/11 per yard

WOOL PLATED
Width 54" 9/11 per yard

KNITTED SATIN
Width 54" 6/11 per yard

• *Standard Fabrics*

'CELANESE' WASHING SATIN 1/11
38" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' CREPE 1/11
36" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' NINON 1/11
36" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' CREPE-DE-CHINE 2/11
36" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' CREPE SATIN 2/11
36" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' TAFFETA 2/11
38" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' SUPER SURAH 2/11
40" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' DRESS CREPE 2/11
38" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' SATIN MAROCAIN 3/11
38" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' SPORTS CREPE 3/11
37" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' COURT SATIN 4/11
38" wide. Price to public

• *Novelty Fashion Fabrics*

'CELANESE' SHARKSKIN 4/11
38" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' SATIN POULT 4/11
37" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' SATIN ROMAINE 4/11
37" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' CRUISING CREPE 4/11
37" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' PLAGE CREPE 5/11
37" wide. Price to public

• *Printed Fabrics*

'CELANESE' PRINTED SATIN 2/11
36" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' PRINTED CREPE-DE-CHINE 2/11
36" wide. Price to public

'CELANESE' PRINTED CREPE SATIN 3/11
36" wide. Price to public

*Sole Manufacturers of 'Celanese' Yarn and Fabrics
and Proprietors of the Trade Mark 'Celanese':
BRITISH CELANESE LIMITED, HANOVER SQUARE,
LONDON, W.1.*

Celanese Prices advertised in *Modern Woman*, March 1928 (L) and *The Drapers' Organiser*, March 1937 (R)

“[Rayon] is so admirably suited to the needs of the present day that consumption grows and grows”

Silk & Rayon, March 1936

Conclusion

In 1927, a contributor to *The Silk Journal* wrote,

The rapid progress and development of the artificial silk industry will be cited by future historians as one of the most remarkable industrial achievements during the first half of the twentieth century.¹

This was written when rayon was only just beginning its meteoric rise, and production figures were nowhere near the levels they would eventually reach: had he looked back in 1939 the author would no doubt have been pleased with his prophetic words. However, the rise of rayon was not merely an “industrial achievement”, and as a historian working in the twenty-first century when multidisciplinary approaches have become the norm, I hope this thesis has shown that the production, marketing and consumption of this new textile was a complex and multi-faceted process which was both influenced by the environment it emerged into, and in turn also affected it. The modern, advanced factories in which rayon was created offered new “clean” forms of employment for thousands of industrial workers; and the two main players, Courtaulds Ltd and British Celanese Ltd, grew exponentially and became astoundingly successful. In the traditional mills and finishing plants rayon offered a lifeline to some of the businesses who were struggling due to the stagnating export market; it fuelled advances in industrial chemistry; and acted as a stimulant to woven, knitted and printed design.² Beyond the sphere of manufacturing, rayon was highly visible at the trade fairs which were so popular in this period; the advertising of rayon made use of high-fashion and glamour, and in mixing modernity and tradition, the marketing of this textile echoed the cozy, domesticated version of modern art which the British embraced. In retail, rayon manufacturers proved to be key disrupters to long-established models of distribution and merchandising, as they needed to institute increasingly high turnovers of

¹ “The Decorative Value of Artificial Silk in Textile Fabrics”, *TSJ*, November 1927, p. 45.

² “The Triumph of Artificial Silk”, *DO*, March 1925, p. 36.

their goods in shops. All stages of rayon manufacture, advertising and retailing were geared towards creating an “insatiable” appetite for goods, which would allow the similarly insatiable factories and capitalist system to thrive.³

From the moment that Courtaulds Ltd and British Celanese Ltd started producing rayon, it was clear that these companies saw the fibre as a good which would be produced and consumed on a grand scale. Their ambitions went far beyond using the yarn for trimmings and adornments, and both companies aspired to making rayon a material which could compete with all natural fibres. It may have started as “artificial silk”, but Courtaulds and British Celanese knew that long term success would come with proving that rayon was eminently adaptable. These two companies were both willing, and had the means, to make large capital investments to create modern chemical plants which could produce this fibre. With these precedents set, other companies were forced to follow the high-volume low-cost model which Courtaulds and British Celanese were pursuing. No other companies would, or indeed could, come near these two behemoths in terms of success or volumes. The establishment of so many new firms in the 1920s demonstrates the belief that so many businessmen and investors had in this new man-made fibre, and the immense possibilities it could offer to those who could manufacture and market it successfully. The initial surge of interest in rayon was based largely on its novelty factor: it represented man’s scientific and technological achievements, and it seemed that it had the potential to surpass any fibre which the natural world could offer. The press and public were also keen to embrace the idea that the growing number of rayon manufacturing businesses in the mid-1920s represented the possibility of a renaissance in the British textile trade. Add these factors to its undeniable aesthetic appeal, and it was no wonder that rayon seemed so enchanting.

³ “Creating demand through novelty in design”; *HT*, October 1931, p. 26.

Whilst consumers may have liked the idea of novelty, rayon could not achieve long-term success on this basis alone. The continued investment in research to create a better product was based not simply on the early flaws in the fibre, but also on the realisation that rayon had to be able to hold its own against traditional fibres, each of which had their own benefits (and disadvantages), and which consumers knew, trusted and valued. Rayon producers had to persuade textile manufacturers in both the knitting and weaving trades to make use of their yarns. British Celanese were able to demonstrate the use of their yarns in a practical way, by producing their own lines of knitted and woven goods. These were heavily advertised in the press in the mid-1920s, creating a widespread awareness of their product. A direct-to-retail sales policy, backed up with strong merchandising support also encouraged retailers to stock their goods. The success of these rayon products is likely to have spurred knitting and weaving businesses into experimenting with the fibre themselves to access a growing segment of the textile market. Concurrently, Courtaulds were avoiding the manufacture of textiles, preferring to sell their yarns to fabric producers. The company's existing scale and presence in the trade probably lent some credibility to their products, and when combined with substantial price drops in the early to mid-1920s, more users emerged. Both British Celanese and Courtaulds offered advice to the trade, whether in the form of booklets, or visits to their plants and laboratories: this cooperation and support would have fostered commercial and technical relationships across businesses, which could have only encouraged sales.

In terms of fabric, knitters were the first branch of the trade to embrace rayon, as consumers did not demand the same durability in stockings as they did in other garments. The fortuitous timing of the fashion for 'natural' or 'skin-coloured' stockings to be worn with new, shorter skirts meant that rayon was ideally placed to be used as a cheaper substitute for silk. In woven fabric, fashion would also prove to be a critical element in the uptake of rayon: shiny 100% rayons were a (slightly more) affordable version of silk fabrics. Owing to the fact that these fabrics were fragile, they were largely used in garments which the relatively wealthy would wear for only a short period of time (rayon was

ideal for fashionable evening clothes); during the early years, these garments managed to garner vital exposure in the press via advertising and editorial features, and also in the retail environment. Expensive 100% rayons certainly did not make up the bulk of the trade in the 1920s, instead, rayon was incorporated into woven cloths made of natural fibres as a decorative feature, where its lack of stability would not prove as problematic. These tentative steps into working with rayon meant that when the price of yarns fell, the trade already possessed some experience of their use, and manufacturers were in a better position to expand their output.

Technological and scientific advances had a major role to play in the establishment of rayon as a viable competitor to natural fibres. As well as increased tensile strength, the growing number of dyes and more successful forms of de-lustring meant that growing numbers of manufacturers were making use of ever larger volumes of rayon. However, it was only in the 1930s that technological and scientific progress would cement rayon's place as a standalone textile fibre. The launch of dull filament yarns and staple fibre would allow rayon to not only imitate silk, but also other fibres such as linen and wool; and alongside this it could be used to create entirely new fabrics which the public had never seen. With faster changes to trends and a greater visibility of high-fashion, manufacturers were able to offer fabrics which were imitations of those either coming from the great fashion houses of France, or those seen on Hollywood stars. Different textures, weaves and knits offered a wide selection in themselves, but when combined with improved dyeing, printing and finishing techniques, the novelties which could be created were almost endless. The many pages illustrating new fabrics which appeared in textile trade journals each month by the mid-1930s is testament to the creative and scientific work which was being undertaken by firms who were eager to attract customers and encourage them to keep buying new fabrics. Although these advances were essential, producers at all levels of the supply chains also had to remain price-conscious in order to turn this into a mass-consumer good. Businesses were constantly seeking to reduce costs and increase efficiencies. As the 1930s progressed, these aims were largely achieved through cost cutting by the filament manufacturers themselves, who made

use of increasingly sophisticated production techniques and reductions in labour costs. Courtaulds was particularly prominent in this respect: their vast operating scale and their belief in rayon as a mass-produced, affordable consumer good meant that price cuts were being made continually, forcing down rayon prices across the British market, and ultimately increasing sales volumes.

Whilst the “remarkable industrial development” of rayon, and growth in production volumes may at first glance appear to be the most noteworthy part of the rise of the fibre in the interwar period, the impact it had upon consumption practices and behaviours is no less astonishing. Whilst other goods had previously sought to make use of the idea of uniformity, mass production and mass consumption (branded and packaged foods are an excellent example of this model), rayon was the first textile which was expressly designed with this purpose. Traditional fibres had grown their market share in a more organic way, and had been largely reliant on fabrics and garments being worn out by the consumer, and then being replaced. Rayon took its place in the market when the visibility of fashion and the speed with which it was disseminated was increasing: producers realised very quickly that rayon could be used to imitate fashionable silk goods without the high price tag: the durability it lacked could be made up for by marketing fabrics as fashionable, with the implication that they would only be worn whilst the trend lasted. Whilst durability and serviceability improved in the 1930s, the idea that rayon should be a fashion fabric was increasingly apparent. A focus on high turnover, frequent change, and low prices, with an emphasis on trends saw manufacturers progressively more focused on fabrics and garments which were not only affordable, but also fashion-led. Producing fabrics like this relied on manufacturers having access to the latest fashion news, and successful firms such as the CPA employed numerous means of keeping up-to-date. However, the information and designs which came from overseas were also adapted so that they appealed to a British mass market audience, and to ensure that production costs could be kept as low as possible. Rayon advertising in consumer magazines indicates the increasing confidence that firms had in their fashion credentials, with a much stronger focus on the fashionability of their goods by the 1930s.

Advertisers, the consumer press and Exhibitions portrayed rayon fabrics and garments as having transformational properties. The idea that women could 'improve' themselves in some way was by no means a new one, and in the interwar period there was an emphasis on encouraging women to become more glamorous, and in the 1930s, more feminine versions of themselves. Early rayons leant themselves to the shiny, straight flapper dresses of the 1920s which epitomised modernity and glamour, and by the 1930s, rayon fabric construction and design had evolved so that it was suitable for the flowing, feminine garments which had replaced the boxy clothing of the previous decade. Rayon itself can almost be seen as embodying the feminine. Its early fashion qualities had not appealed to men; and its lack of durability meant it was not suitable for suiting or shirts which were owned and worn for many years. However, rayon could be made into numerous forms of "feminine" fabrics: satins, velvets, crepes; and its ability to be dyed in all manner of shades and colours was perfect for female consumers. The fibre also proved to be highly adaptable, either in its pure form, or when mixed with other fibres: for example, adding staple fibre to wool created cheaper and more lightweight woollens, which were perfect for mass market skirt and jacket combinations. Combining these practical, manufacturing aspects with glamour, fashion and modernity meant that when rayon was presented to the public the material had a unique character: it was neither as 'dowdy' or traditional as wool and cotton, nor was it as exclusive as silk. Women were persuaded by manufacturers that rayon offered a chance to remake herself as the woman she wanted to be: it was a textile which inspired dreams and aspirations.

When it came to retailing rayon, the developing affiliation between mass production and mass retail would prove to be a symbiotic one, where the manufacture of ever-growing volumes was reliant on the fast turnover of goods in shops. With some of the population having more money to spend, retailers made changes to their established practices by improving displays and shop fittings, in order

to appeal to consumers and “shift goods off shelves”.⁴ Rayon manufacturers were heavily involved in these transformations, and they were some of the many firms who re-shaped the entire relationship which manufacturers (and their branded goods) had with consumers. Branded rayons suggested a level of quality and fashionability which customers could rely on, and Fixed Retail Pricing helped cement the notion of uniformity and suggested that both brand and retailer could be trusted. Female consumers found that shopping for clothing could become a pleasure, and a form of recreation in itself (even if it was only ‘make-believe’ window-shopping): they had more money in their pockets, a greater knowledge of clothing and fashion, and increasingly pleasant and interactive retail environments to explore. A growing range of rayon goods offered women a greater ability to make more personal choices about their clothing, and to ensure they were not seen wearing the same garment as someone else. To a certain extent, rayon helped with the democratisation of fashion: whilst fashion is essentially elitest – clothes made by couturiers, expensive fabrics and intricate forms of manufacture set incontrovertible boundaries – it did allow most women, with the exception of the very poorest, to purchase affordable, feminine and trend-led goods. These items could provide a sense of confidence and higher self-esteem, and helped women escape from some of the class-based sartorial shackles by which they had previously been bound.

The triumvirate of rayon manufacturer, retailer and consumer was made of interdependent and (overall) mutually beneficial relationships. We cannot simply say that there was a ‘pushing’ of rayon onto consumers by manufacturers, nor that the public provided an insistent ‘pull’ for these items. But it is clear that despite limited consumer feedback and research, manufacturers and retailers were managing to create and sell rayon fabrics successfully. There is no doubt that sometimes errors would have been made, and individual lines went unsold, but the acceptance of rayon as a whole suggests that technology, design, advertising, and retailing all aligned and as a result a flourishing mass

⁴ Janice Winship, “A Culture of Restraint: the Chain Store in the 1930s” in Jackson, P. M. Lowe, D. Miller and F. Mort (eds) *Commercial Cultures: Economies, Practices, Spaces*, (Oxford: Berg 2000), pp. 15-34 (p. 16).

consumer good emerged. Yet the success of rayon meant that it would soon lose its place as the sole man-made fibre. At the end of the interwar period, trade journals began to whisper of a new competitor: nylon.⁵ Businesses realised that selling textiles which had been invented in a laboratory to satisfy specific needs could be a highly profitable venture. Acrylic, polyester, spandex (and many others) would follow nylon after the Second World War. The methods in which these textiles were designed, marketed and consumed all had their roots in the wide-ranging developments which the emergence of rayon had set in motion, and these in turn had an impact on the “behaviour and expectations” of consumers in the twentieth century.⁶ Many of the elements I have examined with regard to the rise of rayon as a mass-consumer good have simply been refined over the last century, and they are still used to sell clothing today. However, in the interwar period, all of this still lay in the future. To end, it seems apt to use a line from one of the most quoted commentators of the period: in 1932 J.B. Priestley used Woolworths as a metaphor for the modern, post-war England which he observed around him. Given everything we have learnt in this thesis, it seems that rayon would make an eminently suitable alternative to Woolworths as a metaphor:

[Modern England] is essentially democratic...You need money in this England, but you do not need much money. It is a large-scale, mass-production job, with cut prices. You could almost accept [rayon] as its symbol.⁷

⁵ This had been developed by DuPont in America: the first nylon stockings would be sold in America in late 1939. See Susannah Handley, *Nylon: The Manmade Fashion Revolution*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

⁶ Fiona Hackney, “‘They Opened Up a Whole New World’: Feminine Modernity and the Feminine Imagination in *Woman’s Magazines, 1919-1939*”, PhD Thesis, (University of London, 2010), p. 4.

⁷ J.B. Priestley, *English Journey* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 376. I have substituted the word “Woolworths” for “rayon”.

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Appendix I – Varieties of Rayon

The product which became known as rayon is one of four different scientifically manufactured cellulosic fibres. The majority of manufacturers specialised in just one of the production processes, although Courtaulds who had begun producing viscose rayon also began producing acetate rayon in the mid-1930s. To expand on the information given in my introduction, the four types of rayon and their properties are as follows:

Nitrocellulose Rayon (or Chardonnet silk) – this was first created by Hilaire de Chardonnet in the mid-1870s. Cellulose was treated with nitric acid to dissolve it; it was then extruded and a final wash in an alkaline bath prevented the fibre from being explosive. Despite this final treatment, it was still not a very stable product, and it was eventually replaced by other, better, forms of rayon by the interwar period.

Cuprammonium Rayon – the German company Vereinigte Glanzstoff developed this method Fabriken AG (VGF) in the 1890s. In this process, cellulose was treated with copper oxide and ammonia and extruded into a sulphuric acid bath. In 1908, J.P. Bemberg improved on this process by stretching the filaments as they were extruded, producing a much finer denier which was more suitable for fabric production. “Cupra” or “cupro” as it is often known could be produced at 1 to 2 deniers, making it much finer than other types of rayon. This meant when woven it produced a fabric which was far more akin to silk than any of the other forms, and it draped much better.

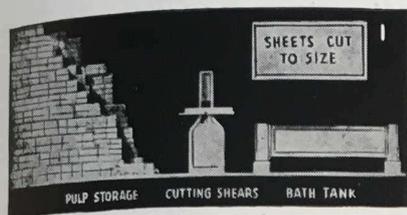
Viscose Rayon – (referred to as viscose throughout this thesis) developed in Britain by Bevan, Cross and Beadle at a laboratory in Kew at the turn of the century. This process treated cellulose with sodium hydroxide, and then carbon disulphide to give a viscous liquid called cellulose xanthate. This was then extruded through spinnerets into a bath of sulphuric acid. Courtaulds bought the rights to this process in 1904, and subsequently took it to market. Wood can be used as the cellulose base for this product, unlike the other forms which require

a cotton base; this was a cheaper raw material. Globally, viscose made up 75% of rayon manufactured.¹

Cellulose Acetate – the Dreyfus brothers first developed this as a method of making film for cameras, but after World War I they realigned their focus onto producing acetate fibre. The process dissolved cellulose in acetic acid and acetic anhydride, once transformed into cellulose acetate it was dissolved in acetone, in order to be forced through spinnerets to produce filaments. It did not need to be spun into a treatment bath unlike other forms, as the acetone dissolved into the air, hardening the filament. It had finer filaments than viscose rayon, making it more pliable and fluid in both its yarn and fabric forms. British Celanese were the largest producer of cellulose acetate in the UK, and marketed their product as *Celanese*. It also made up the majority of the remaining 25% of the rayon market not taken by viscose during this period.

¹ “The Viscose Process”, page vi, Artificial Silk Supplement, *The Times*, March 9th 1926.

How rayon yarn is made



Sheets of pulp (made from wood or cotton) cut to the proper size in yarn mill.



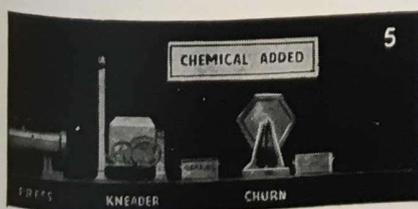
The sheets are mercerised by saturation in a solution of caustic soda.



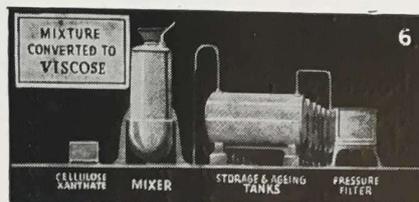
The caustic soda solution is squeezed out.



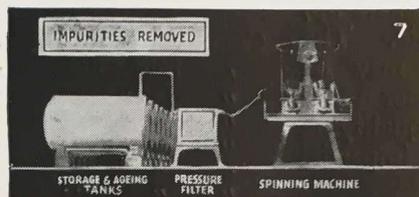
The sheets of pulp are turned into a white fluffy substance called "crumb" in a kneader.



The crumb with a chemical added is churned into Cellulose Xanthate, an orange-coloured substance.



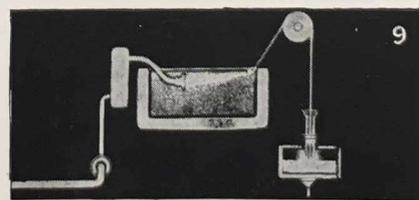
The Cellulose Xanthate is put in a mixer, and converted into the cellulose-spinning solution.



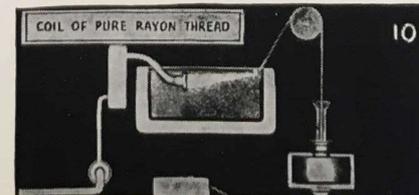
After "ageing", the solution is placed in the pressure filter, where impurities are removed.



The solution is forced through the minute holes of the spinneret cap and presto! the liquid becomes a soft, pliable, strong thread.



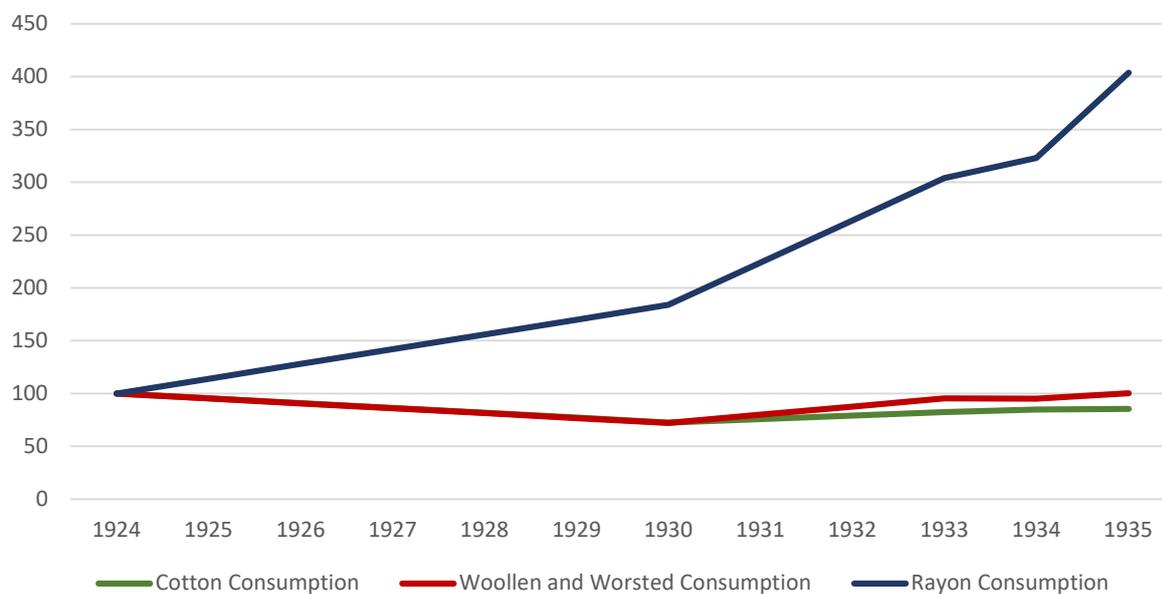
The filaments are twisted together and pulled over pulleys into a box, where they are wound into a cake-shaped form.



We now have a pure coil of unbleached rayon yarn, ready for bleaching, dyeing, etc., before being converted into cloth.

Figure 51 A contemporary image from 'Silk and Rayon' November 1937 showing how viscose rayon is made. *Silk and Rayon*, November 1937 © British Library.

Appendix II – Indexed growth of rayon, cotton and wool consumption 1924-1935



Data taken from the Final Report on the Census of Production for 1924, Clothing Trades; Final Report on the Census of Production for 1930, General Report on Textile; Leather; and Clothing Trades; the Final Report on the Census of Production for 1933, General Report on Textile; Leather; and Clothing Trades; and the Report on the Import Duties Act Inquiry (Board of Trade, HMSO: 1933).

Consumption figures are based on production minus exports.

Appendix III – Imports of Rayon Stockings and Underwear 1924-1935

Year	1924	1930	1933	1934	1935
Rayon Stocking Production	42000000	83364000	106596000	108864000	116100000
Rayon Stocking Imports	11724000	21732000	13200000	14424000	16560000
% imported	27.91	26.07	12.38	13.25	14.26

Year	1924	1930	1933	1934	1935
Rayon Underwear Production	2148000	8976000	19128000	23340000	28116000
Rayon Underwear Imports		2064000	180000	84000	24000
% imported		22.99	0.94	0.36	0.09

Data taken from the Final Report on the Census of Production for 1924, Clothing Trades; Final Report on the Census of Production for 1930, General Report on Textile; Leather; and Clothing Trades; the Final Report on the Census of Production for 1933, General Report on Textile; Leather; and Clothing Trades; and the Report on the Import Duties Act Inquiry (Board of Trade, HMSO: 1933).