

**A Horrockses Fashion Dress in Worthing Museum:  
The changing status of ready-to-wear in post-war Britain**

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Figure 1 Front View. Horrockses Fashions dress  
c.1957-9. Worthing Museum. Accession number  
1990/744. Photograph taken by Karen Scanlon.

A late 1950s Horrockses Fashion ready-to-wear evening dress belonging to Worthing Museum and Art Gallery [Fig. 1] offers a case study for examining the production and consumption of women's ready-to-wear fashion.

John Horrocks founded the brand Horrockses in 1791. Initially producing cotton yarn and cloth, it soon became the largest manufactory in Preston, Lancashire and throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Preston historian, Margaret Burscough, believes Horrocks was 'in the right place at the right time' to harness the economic and social impact of the mechanization of textile manufacture that had begun in the early eighteenth century. His insistence that all cloth produced from his mills was to be of an exceptionally high standard resulted in the name 'Horrockses' becoming synonymous with quality, and it remained so for the next two centuries.<sup>2</sup>

In 1938 the brand created Horrockses Fashions as a response to the rise in the wholesale trade of ready-to-wear women's fashion, and as a way to secure ongoing demand for its cotton cloth. The industry of ready-to-wear was classified into three distinct qualities of production; model, medium quality and cheap. Horrockses Fashions fell within the first two of these. Christine Boydell suggests, 'with the ending of cloth allocation in 1946, the Utility Scheme lost much of its popularity with manufacturers.' The fact that Horrockses Fashions had a ready supply from the parent company meant it was in a very good position in relation to the competitors.<sup>3</sup>

Factors that encouraged the growth of women's ready-to-wear fashions were the changing social structures following the First World War, meaning wealthier women had less time for multiple fittings usually required of bespoke fashions, as well as the import duties on cloth and garments in 1931.<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Wilson notes, 'by the 1920s

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions: Off the Peg Style in the '40s and '50s* (London: V&A Publishing, 2010) 19.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Burscough, *The Horrockses: Cotton Kings of Preston* (Lancaster: Carnegie Publishing, 2004) 17. Susan North, "From Neoclassicism to the Industrial Revolution: 1790-1860," *The Fashion Reader*, ed. Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions*, 23-29.

<sup>4</sup> Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions*, 23-25.

and 1930s, “wholesale couture” or “middle-class fashions” had developed and the first time proper sizing of mass-produced clothes was introduced into Britain from America.’<sup>5</sup>

As technical advancements improved the production of women’s ready-to-wear clothing after the Second World War, Worthing dressmakers saw more and more people changing to buy ready-to-wear. Also, Worthing at this time had a considerable number of shops specializing in clothing as well as private dressmakers catering for the wealthy clientele of West and North Worthing, and the affluent areas nearby.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as the availability of ready-to wear products met with increased income throughout the different classes, it encouraged consumption. However, producing fashionable ready-to-wear clothes was a complex process and it was important to know what would sell especially when deciding on volume, as any kind of misjudgment would result in excess stock. Therefore, Boydell points out, ‘an effective production plan was key to Horrockses’ success.’<sup>7</sup>

Accompanying information found on file at Worthing Museum and Art Gallery about this particular Horrockses Fashions dress only indicates that the garment is from the 1950s. However, after careful observation into the general condition and construction of the dress and with thorough research into the date of the garment using available periodicals, I was able to conclude that the dress can be dated 1957-1959. The information also indicates that the original owner had purchased her Horrockses’ dress from the retailers, C&A, a Dutch fashion retail chain with an emphasis on low prices and therefore usually regarded as down-market [Fig. 2].

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014) 79.

<sup>6</sup> Ann Wise, “Dressmakers in Worthing, 1920-1950,” *The Journal of the Costume Society* 32 (1998): 82.

<sup>7</sup> Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions*, 35.

EVENING NEWS, MONDAY, JULY 13, 1953.—5

**HOLIDAY WEEK**  
**C&A**  
 MODES LIMITED

Daisy-print cotton.  
 Boned strapless  
 bodice, bolero. Grey,  
 peacock, mushroom  
 pink. 34" to 40" hips.

**55/-**

**C&A's**  
**All-occasion**  
**Dresses**  
*... yours to look*  
*lovely in...*

**TAILORED**, embroidered  
 dress for town... romantic daisy-  
 printed dress for sun! They're two  
 of the loveliest you've seen this  
 summer! They're two from C&A's  
 wonderful selection—of the best  
 summer dresses in town! See them  
 in C&A's better-dress department.

**59/11**

Embroidered spun. Navy/grey,  
 turquoise, green, mauve,  
 blue or grey/red. 38" to 40"  
 hips 59/11. 42" to 44" hips  
 63/-.

*Personal Shoppers Only*

*- it costs less at C&A*

**COMMERCIAL ROAD · PORTSMOUTH**

Figure 2. C&A advertisement "It costs less at C&A." Portsmouth Evening News, July 13 1953. 5. Britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

This is interesting considering a typical Horrockses Fashions customer was reasonably well-off and middle-class. It is also known that the distribution of Horrockses ready-to-wear fashions was a very calculated procedure, with the brand only supplying to high-end retailers throughout Britain. Since the company took great care when considering what styles it sold to each location, this helped Horrockses Fashions to remain exclusive, and in turn, women were less likely to appear at an event in the same town wearing the same dress. However, Boydell found that many women remarked on the difficulty of getting hold of a Horrockses dress even though they could be purchased in most major cities in Britain.<sup>8</sup>

Although Boydell believes the Horrockses dress in Worthing Museum may be from the 1960s (when she notes that a pink version of the dress was worn in Italy for a beauty pageant), I would argue that the donor's own memory of when this dress was originally purchased and worn should not be discounted, especially considering the excellent condition of the dress, as this might be an indication that the dress was worn for a special, and therefore memorable, occasion. The curious addition of a pink rose, which appears to have been hand sewn to the back clasp, might also indicate this [Fig. 3]. It may have been a way for the wearer to personalize her Horrockses Fashions dress, and thus make it more special, unique and memorable.

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<sup>8</sup> Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions*, 150 & 173.



Figure 3 Back View. Horrockses evening dress. c.1957-1959. Accession number 1990/744. Decorative rose hand stitched to the back of the dress. Worthing Museum and Art Gallery. December 2016.

Interestingly, a photograph in Boydell's book, *Horrockses Fashions: Off the Peg Style in the '40s and '50s*, illustrates a group of women all wearing Horrockses dresses with a caption that reads 'according to Juliet hers was a "would-be" Horrockses, which was cheaper and purchased from C&A in Leeds.'<sup>9</sup> During my research I also came across mentions of 'C&A knock-offs' made by older visitors to the Fashion and Textile Museum's Horrockses exhibition of 2010.<sup>10</sup> This provoked further enquiry into the authenticity of the WMA dress.

I contacted C&A directly who were unable to confirm a line of Horrockses dresses ever being sold. I then visited the C&A archive at London College of Fashion. Although I did not find any more examples of Horrockses dresses, their collection of photographs taken during the 1950s-1960s in the factories is extensive. In one photograph an artist is seen sketching a new dress from what looks like a magazine and in another, yards of fabric with a floral pattern typical of Horrockses dresses can

<sup>9</sup> Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions*, 173.

<sup>10</sup> [vintagefashionguild.org](http://vintagefashionguild.org). December 9, 2010.

be seen. When I brought this to Boydell's attention, she had no record of Horrockses selling through C&A and also thought of them as a down-market retailer. Given the date of the dress Boydell also believed it to be after the brand's heyday and suggests they decided to spread the retail net a little wider. She also suggested the dress might not be knock-off as the label looks genuine [Fig. 4].<sup>11</sup>



Figure 4. Horrockses Fashions' dress label. c.1957-9.  
Worthing Museum. Accession number 1990/744.  
Photograph taken by Karen Scanlon. December 2016.

I found it interesting that this dress was produced at the end of the brand's heyday. As Boydell notes, 'by the late 1950s British cotton firms faced increasing competition from the Far East and from the man-made fibres industry. This resulted in the parent company – Horrockses Fabrics - introducing cost-cutting strategies, including the reduction in the quality of the cotton cloth made available to Horrockses Fashions. This and other compromises led to some of the company's key players' resignations.'<sup>12</sup>

Close object analysis of the dress revealed that the fabric felt stiff and hard, unlike how Horrockses dresses are usually described. A particular memory of many women who wore Horrockses dresses is of the quality of the cotton which was thought to be so different from all the other cotton dresses which were considered not as nice to wear as they were so stiff.<sup>13</sup> Whether any images of the Horrockses dress worn in a

<sup>11</sup> Christine Boydell, "C&A Horrockses Dress," email, 15 December 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions*, 176.

<sup>13</sup> Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions*, 168.

beauty pageant in Italy were circulated is not known, as it would be interesting to know if it would have had any influence on the consumer's choice.

Fashion in the late 1950s is marked by key transitional moments such as the untimely death of Christian Dior in 1957, the decline of the debutante society and Parisian couture, and these also coincide with the resignation of some of Horrockses Fashions' most influential members. Thus, things were beginning to change with the arrival of young designers such as Yves Saint Laurent and Mary Quant. Magazine articles and advertisements from 1957 onwards regularly promote fashions for younger women featuring the new modern silhouette [Fig. 5]. During wartime, qualities such as durability, comfort and simplicity had been emphasized. After the war, Horrockses Fashions were able to create quality cotton ready-to-wear dresses into the ideal style. However, by the end of the 1950s, with changing tastes, a growing awareness of new man-made fibres and improvements in ready-to-wear fashion, Horrockses Fashions were starting to become outmoded [Fig. 6].



Figure 5. Vanity Fair. 'For the Younger, Smarter Woman.' May 1957. Worthing Museum and Art Gallery. Photograph taken by Karen Scanlon. December 2016.

BRIGHTEST  
FASHION  
NEWS  
IN YEARS

**COURTELLE**  
THE NEW BRITISH MAN-MADE FIBRE

Coming your way, Courtelle, the first British acrylic ... with assets that make it the ideal fibre for a wide variety of uses in every kind of climate.

Clothes made of Courtelle are *completely* washable. (100% Courtelle drip-dries perfectly. Courtelle blended with other fibres just needs to be touched up with a cool iron when dry.) They're wonderfully warm, soft and light, never shrink, shed creases fast. They're sturdy and both moth and mildew-proof.

What's more, fabrics made of Courtelle have a *natural* handle. They drape softly yet tailor with precision. They're easy to make up—don't fray or slip—and give complete freedom to the designer's art.

Courtelle also has special dyeing properties—takes exquisite colours.

Dorville dress—  
*completely washable*  
in Courtelle  
*double jersey by Jerseycraft*

\* Best Trade Mark for the acrylic fibre made by Courteille Limited. Overseas Distributors: LUTTRE FIBRES LIMITED, P.O. BOX 85, COVENTRY, ENGLAND

Figure 6. British Vogue. December 1959. Courtelle The New British Man-Made Fibre. St. Peter's House Library. December 2016.

The fashions for youth existed alongside the more traditional fashions that met the needs of most women over the age of twenty-five. Elizabeth Ewing suggests, ‘the new fashions for the young had little to do with the Paris Establishment or any establishment. British fashions emerged as distinctly youthful fashions and the rise of the high street boutique challenged patterns of consumption.’<sup>14</sup>

C&A placed emphasis on up-to-date fashions at budget prices, aimed at the woman of modest means who wanted to be in fashion.<sup>15</sup> Their dresses were divided into ‘the better dress department’ and the ‘inexpensive dress department’. It is unknown in which of these the WMA Horrockses dress was sold (although given the earlier testimony regarding Juliet’s dress, I suspect the latter). In the early 1950s, a cotton Horrockses dress cost between £7 and £16. A strapless cotton dress from C&A cost about £2.50. Therefore, this late 1950s Horrockses strapless cotton dress symbolizes a specific slice in time in the brand’s history and identity with the compromise of its cloth quality and distribution of its product.

Perhaps an error in the Horrockses production plan also resulted in the need to sell off excess stock. This could explain why a more down-market retailer such as C&A would have been able to supply Horrockses ready-to-wear fashions in the late 1950s thus enabling more women to participate in the luxury consumption of owning and wearing a Horrockses dress – albeit one of lesser quality. However, as Boydell points out, ‘although ready-to-wear fashions were available at various price points throughout the 1950s, it was the idea of owning a Horrockses that was regarded as acquiring something special.’<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Ewing, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion* (London: Batsford, 2005) 178 and Christopher Beward and Claire Wilcox, eds. *The Ambassador Magazine: Promoting Post-War British Textiles and Fashion* (London: V&A Publishing, 2012) 198.

<sup>15</sup> Ewing, *History of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion*, 174.

<sup>16</sup> Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions*, 172.

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