A Female Skilled Trade: Dressmaking in Colchester 1860-1914

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Abstract

This dissertation uncovers the thriving Victorian trade of dressmaking which has been neglected by historians. Using evidence from census records, trade directories, magazines and newspapers, this study concentrates on the town of Colchester, a town with a thriving middle-class population, to discover how important this trade was to both the women who ran it and those who were its customers. The period 1860-1914 was a time of technological innovations in garment manufacture together with the growing popularity of shops selling directly to women. This study examines the effects of these changes on dressmakers.

It considers two possible reasons for the absence of the trade from the historiography of women’s work: the rhetoric of domesticity (sewing seen as female and therefore domestic) and the theory of separate spheres (the belief that middle-class women were kept out of the marketplace). The trade is examined in detail as a specifically female economy, run by women for women, in a period when occupations for single women were expanding. The training and apprenticeship schemes for dressmakers reflect the skills needed to succeed. The study also examines the importance of fashion to Victorian and Edwardian women and how crucial the dressmaker’s business was in ensuring that clothes were available for all occasions when there were no shops selling clothes for women. Fashion was a purely female economy and its place in the patriarchal culture was not clear. On the one hand men left it in women’s hands but many worried about the lack of male control in this area and felt free to criticise its perceived ‘frivolity’.
The study considers technological innovations and the impact of the expansion of drapers’ shops on the dressmakers’ trade. The evidence in Colchester seems to suggest that some dressmakers saw these trends as opportunities rather than threats, opening their own women’s outfitters shops demonstrating their business acumen and ability to adapt to changing environments.
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I confirm that this dissertation is entirely my own, unaided work and that I have not submitted it, or any part of it, for a degree at The Open University or at any other university or institution. Parts of this dissertation are built on work I submitted for assessment as part of A825.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Jenny Zmroczek for her invaluable help in supervising this dissertation
Chapter One: Introduction

The ready-made clothing industry in Colchester, Essex, at the end of the nineteenth century was one of the largest in the country and employed much of the female workforce of the town and the surrounding villages. It can be seen from advertisements for their businesses in local newspapers, however, that these clothing firms only made clothes for men and boys. Studies of this industry by local historians do not examine the producers of clothes for women – dressmakers.\(^1\) Dressmakers supplied middle- and upper-class women with their clothes as there was nowhere to buy new ready-to-wear garments in this period. Colchester had grown to be quite prosperous in the nineteenth century with a growing middle class and a fast railway service to London, and it is clear from trade directories that dressmakers represented a sizeable proportion of commercial businesses by the 1870s. This dissertation aims to examine the role of dressmakers, how they ran their businesses and how successful they were. Pam Inder and Wendy Gamber have both studied the business of dressmaking in Leicester and Boston, USA, respectively and both state that there is more research to be done since, despite its success and proliferation in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, it has been largely ignored in the historiography of skilled trades and women’s work.\(^2\) The study aims, by examining evidence from Colchester and nearby towns, to discover how this industry was run, who participated in it and how successful it was. It also aims to consider the social conditions and beliefs under which this industry operated, and to ask whether these have contributed to its omission from the historiography.


The study will be situated within the wider discussion of the place of middle-class women in the cultural and economic systems of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In order to understand the constraints under which women lived, sociological theories of patriarchy and class have been applied together with historical theories such as ‘separate spheres’. The latter is of particular interest as the success of dressmakers in a business context appears to question the view that middle-class women were systematically excluded from the marketplace in this period. Pam Inder and Wendy Gamber are two historians who have made extensive studies of dressmakers, Inder in Britain and Gamber in the United States. Their studies are helpful to compare their findings with the evidence of the lives and businesses of Colchester dressmakers.

Primary source material for this study has been difficult to find due to the nature of these businesses: small scale and run by women who, as part of a society that saw businesswomen as a problematic category, were perhaps not keen to appear too business-like and did not have the advantages and networks of businessmen. The main sources are trade directories which record dressmakers in their lists of commercial businesses and census records which can be cross-referenced with the directories to discover the dressmakers’ backgrounds. The Essex Record Office has two dressmaker’s apprentice contracts and two sets of dressmakers’ record books which have been used to build a picture of the skills required to become a dressmaker, the type of work they were asked to do and the prices they charged. Local newspapers, aimed at a middle-class readership, have been used to examine attitudes to clothes for women, advertisements by dressmakers and drapers and articles pertaining to bankruptcies, working

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conditions and anxieties about fashion choices. Contemporary fashion magazines which were read by Colchester women, give evidence of attitudes towards dressmakers and fashion, dressmakers’ suppliers, and details of the complicated nature of the clothes that the readers were encouraged to wear.

Chapter Two will examine the theory of separate spheres, put forward by historians such as Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff, in the light of the dressmaker’s businesses.\(^{5}\) The theory, proposing that middle-class women of the Victorian age were gradually excluded from the public sphere of business into the private sphere of the home, has been challenged by historians such as Vickery whose research into the work of women well before the Victorian Age seems to suggest that this had been the case for centuries. Despite this they had found ways of working within the sphere of public life as charity workers and campaigners.\(^{6}\) Zakreski also challenges it by showing how middle-class working women redefined the separate spheres idea by running businesses in areas which were classed as domestic, like needlework, and therefore were not seen as a threat to the patriarchy.\(^{7}\) In the light of these ideas, the chapter will consider the evidence of dressmakers’ businesses in Colchester and surrounding areas: how independent were they, how successful and how respectable.

Chapter Three will examine in detail the unique nature of this trade as a ‘female economy’, run by women for women.\(^{8}\) Dressmakers were part of the fashion industry which was in the control of women as it was deemed by men to be related to needlecraft and therefore ‘domestic’. Nevertheless there were debates in which men became involved and these

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\(^{5}\) Davidoff and Hall.


\(^{8}\) An idea put forward by Gamber
debates reflected the patriarchal views regarding women’s ‘frivolous’ and sometimes unhealthy fashion choices. It will examine the very influential women’s fashion magazines, some aimed at the upper classes and some at the middle classes. Breward’s work on the signifiers of fashion and class will be explored in the context of Colchester women using fashion columns in the local press and articles and letters in fashion magazines.9

Chapter Four will discuss what Pam Inder has described as the ‘watershed of the 1870s’ after which the dressmaking industry experienced significant changes due to new technology and the rise of consumerism. It will examine local evidence of this in terms of the availability of sewing machines and paper patterns, who bought them, and whether the encouragement to women to make clothes at home affected the dressmakers’ businesses. This chapter will also consider the growth of drapers’ shops in Colchester: how they advertised to women shoppers and whether they succeeded in their desire to incorporate dressmaking into their businesses and create what Wendy Gamber referred to in the United States as a masculinisation of the dressmaking trade.10

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10 Gamber, p. 231.
Chapter Two: The Business of Dressmaking

Introduction

There are several reasons why the dressmaking trade in this period may have been under-researched by historians. In nineteenth-century England, paid employment was seen to detract from women’s standing in middle-class society and work deemed suitable to meet standards of feminine behaviour, that could be pursued without endangering their virtue, or corrupting their manners, was not plentiful. Small business presented an alternative pathway to independence and survival. However, such enterprises are often hidden from view not only by their nature (often small and carried on from the home) but also by the too eager acceptance by historians of the Victorian rhetoric of domesticity. Sarah Parker describes dressmakers as ‘these largely overlooked middle-class businesswomen’.¹ ‘Separate spheres’, the term used by some historians to refer to the ideal of the public versus private realms of Victorian men and women, has been used as a model to illustrate the capitalist power of men.² However, recently, some have accused this model of being metaphorically ‘sloppy’, referring interchangeably ‘to an ideology imposed on women, a culture created by women, a set of boundaries expected to be observed by women’.³ This chapter will explore these ideas and use primary source material to examine the ways in which dressmakers ran their businesses, how widespread they were and how they survived in a patriarchal system.

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The growth of demand for women’s clothes

The ways in which clothes were produced and sold went through great changes between 1800 and 1900. The production of textiles saw huge technical developments in methods of spinning and weaving, prosperity grew and with it the demand for fashionable goods. Greater mobility and communication enabled people to see what was happening in other parts of the country and even in other countries. Shopping patterns changed and the concept of fashion and being fashionable was becoming more widespread due to the greater accessibility of fashion magazines and the growing number of women with the means to dress fashionably.4 Whereas before only the rich could afford to be fashionable, by the 1870s it was becoming more attainable to a larger social circle as materials became more affordable. Factories were set up to mass-produce men’s clothes but women’s clothes were too complex for the factory machines and their production was left in the hands of dressmakers. Even with the introduction of sewing machines in the middle of the century, dresses had to be fitted and finished by hand. Despite the obvious skills involved in dressmaking, it is hard to find dressmakers amongst histories of other skilled trades. As Inder states:

Making an elaborate dress that fits and flatters the wearer, working from an illustration and adapting it according to the instruction of the customer (paper patterns as we know them did not become generally available until the 1870s), requires manual dexterity, taste and understanding of materials on a par with those of a potter, silversmith, woodworker or glass-blower.5

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Skills of the dressmaker

After 1850 dressmakers saw many changes of fashion and would have had to learn to use a sewing machine. Their ability to adapt and customise patterns and understand the properties of different fabrics and to have a good grasp of finances made the successful dressmakers highly sought-after. As Pinchbeck stated in her study of women’s work: ‘Of the skilled trades left almost entirely in the hands of women, the chief were the clothing trades in which thousands of women were engaged as milliners, mantua makers, staymakers, embroiderers and seamstresses.’ She went on to say that milliners and dressmakers ranked first in importance as businesswomen. By the 1860s, dressmaking, millinery and teaching were by far the main occupational groupings listed for middle-class women. Right up to the beginning of the twentieth century it was rare for shops to sell ready-to-wear clothes for women. All dresses were either bought second-hand, or, in the case of the upper and middle classes, made by dressmakers, servants, or by the women themselves at home. As Davidoff and Hall point out: ‘Millinery and dressmaking, catering to an all-female clientele, were the main exceptions to male dominance in the higher reaches of retailing’. Nevertheless throughout the century society regarded men as skilled workers and women as unskilled workers. This view has pervaded many histories of the period. Charles More, for example, in *Skill and the Working Classes*, states that he has not considered women in his study because ‘it is not possible to fit women’s work into the general hypothesis of skill and its acquisition.’ He believed they were excluded from apprenticeships, but this ignores women who became skilled weavers, dressmakers and milliners. This view was supported by the widely held belief that the man should be the ‘breadwinner’, in the sense that he should earn

enough money to maintain his family without his wife having to work. This belief emerged from a combination of the patriarchal view of a woman’s place being in the home, and male trades unions’ attempts to prevent employers undercutting male wages by using women as cheap labour. Dressmakers are mentioned in studies which are specifically about women’s work such as those by Ivy Pinchbeck, Elizabeth Roberts and Pamela Sharpe but not in any great detail. Pinchbeck relies quite heavily on reports by the Children’s Employment Commission which described the overcrowded workrooms, insanitary conditions and long working hours among dressmaking establishments predominantly in London and other large cities. Wendy Gamber has made a very comprehensive study of dressmakers in late nineteenth-century Boston, Massachusetts, where many of the same conditions applied as in England and she states that, on the contrary,

Dressmakers and milliners were artisans in all the traditional meanings of the word – training as apprentices, working for increasingly respectable pay thereafter, saving to set up shops of their own – except that they were women, and so were the patrons of their businesses.

The skills of a professional dressmaker depended on a long apprenticeship and years of experience in making clothes. A dressmaker who was apprenticed at fourteen and continued working into her sixties, would, in the course of her working life have had to learn at least four different ways of cutting and assembling garments due to the changes of fashion and would also have had to learn how to work with a sewing machine. Even after paper patterns became generally available her clients would have expected her to be able to adapt and

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12 Pinchbeck, p. 311.
13 Gamber, The Female Economy, p.5.
customise them. She would also have been expected to find out what colours and trimmings were in vogue by reading magazines and visiting suppliers.\textsuperscript{14} In the \textit{Ladies’ Treasury}, a popular magazine in the 1870s and 1880s, a writer extols the virtues of good cutting to make even cheap materials look stylish:

\begin{quote}
Dressmakers should be “artists”, have an eye to form and figure, to complexion and manner, of their customers; and now so much work is done by the sewing machine, ample time would be available for such artistic education.
\end{quote}

She also berates bad dressmakers for trying to copy Paris fashions but ‘blindly caricature’ them.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Problems for businesswomen in a patriarchal society}

According to Davidoff and Hall there was a distinct fear among some commentators in the nineteenth century about women working. In the authors’ view these fears about working-class women not accepting the ‘paternalistic discipline of domestic service’ in reality reflected ‘a deep seated uneasiness about the middle class itself.’\textsuperscript{16} The idea of ‘separate spheres’ put forward by Davidoff and Hall and other historians suggests that women were marginalised from the new capitalism of the nineteenth century but later studies, notably by Vickery, suggest that, in the long view of history, very little changed in the area of women’s working lives or attitudes to working women. She states that the separate spheres argument is not upheld by real circumstances, and the evidence of the lives of dressmakers and of their

\textsuperscript{14} Inder, \textit{Busks}, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ladies’ Treasury}, 1 August 1871, p.25.
\textsuperscript{16} Davidoff and Hall, “The Hidden Investment”, p.243.
businesses seem to bear this out.\textsuperscript{17} In Vickery’s view, where historians research the activities of particular individuals or groups, one sees that despite the contemporary theories about women’s place that supposedly restricted them, ‘Victorian women emerge as no less spirited, capable, and, most importantly, diverse a crew as in any other century’.\textsuperscript{18} Patricia Zakreski’s study of work for middle-class women in the second half of the nineteenth century, reveals the ways in which their work challenged and redefined the separate spheres ideology. She shows how, by redefining needlework as a creative endeavour, contemporary commentators removed from it any association with the market, trade and financial concerns.\textsuperscript{19} In this way dressmakers sought to reconcile the pressures of the public realm with the demands of the domestic sphere. Male commentators were also able to reconcile the work of middle-class women with their notions of domesticity by persuading themselves and others that the work they were doing was not outside the domestic sphere. Sir William MacEwan, for example, when addressing nurses in 1891, reminded them that a woman was uniquely suited to being a nurse because the job allowed her to ‘retain her womanly characteristics’. \textsuperscript{20} As Gordon and Nair put it:

Just as women could use current ideologies to justify
being ‘self-supporting’, so too could men come to terms
with a new role for women if that was forged within existing
ideological parameters.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{How dressmakers ran their businesses}

\textsuperscript{18} Vickery, p.390.
\textsuperscript{19} Patricia Zakreski, \textit{Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman} (London: Ashgate, 2006).
\textsuperscript{21} Gordon & Nair, p.184.
Many dressmakers in small provincial towns appeared to work alone, with colleagues or with family members which seems to be the case in Colchester and nearby towns according to local trade directories and census records. The majority of dressmakers with their own businesses in Colchester were single women, either unmarried or widowed.22 A dressmaking partnership listed in *Kelly’s Directory* for 1902, Moth and Adams, was clearly a very successful business.23 In the local paper in November 1899 a list of donations made to a fund for wives and families of soldiers away at war, included one by the Misses Moth and Adams for 20 shillings, one of the most generous.24 The 1871 census recorded Kate Moth living with an aunt in Brixton who had an ‘interest of money’ and in 1881 she was in Colchester at the age of 36 with her own business and two assistants. By 1891 she had moved to a more salubrious address where she lived and ran her business with four other dressmakers and an apprentice. Marie Adams can be found in the 1871 census living with a wealthy family in Richmond Hill, London, where she was described as a visitor dressmaker. Many families would employ a dressmaker to come and stay with them for a period of time to refresh their wardrobes, make clothes for special events and make clothes for their children and servants, for example.25 By 1880, at the age of 42 she had come to Colchester and joined up with Kate Moth. In the census of 1901 they were both recorded as heads of the same household with an employee dressmaker and Marie’s niece, Harriet Adams, an assistant dressmaker, at the same address that they were trading from in 1891. All of Kate’s previous partners and employees have moved on.26 It is not recorded how Kate and Marie got together but by 1880 they were advertising in the local paper:

22 *Kelly’s Directory of Essex, 1870-2010; Post Office Directory of Essex 1871, 1874, 1878,1884,1902.*
23 *Kelly’s Directory for Essex, 1902.*
24 *Essex Standard, 18 Nov 1899,* p.4.
26 England and Wales Censuses
All their assistants over the years came from different parts of the country as did Misses Moth and Adams themselves. Colchester, as a growing town, no doubt seemed a good place to start a business or find work as a dressmaker.

The complicated nature of the dressmakers’ craft can be gauged from the sheer amount of different materials and accessories they had to contend with. This can be seen from the account book of Hannah Hicks which span the years 1860-65. 27 She lived and worked in Braintree, a market town serving a rural community, thirteen miles from Colchester. It gives a fascinating insight into the complexity of the dressmaker’s work and the charges she made to her customers. The meticulously kept account book, listing the price for her labour as well as the prices for all the material and haberdashery she had to supply, reveals both the skills involved and the business acumen of a good dressmaker. In 1860 she was 43 years old, single, and living with her unmarried sister, Sarah, also a dressmaker, together with a male lodger and a servant in a respectable part of town. In the 1860s it was unlikely she had access to a sewing machine and it was not until the 1880s that machines were able to do much more than sew in straight lines and could not do any of the intricate work needed for women’s outfits at this time. One of Hannah’s customers was a Mrs Hobbs, a well-to-do farmer’s wife with six children, two housemaids and a cook. In the mid-Victorian period one estimate

27 ERO, D/F 95/2/1 Miss Hannah Hicks dressmaker’s business 1860-65, 1875, 1877-98, Braintree.
suggest that the minimum amount a working-class family needed for their clothes was £6 a year.\textsuperscript{28} Presumably that would include clothes for men and boys, few of which were made by a dressmaker. Mrs Panton in her book aimed at a more prosperous middle class, suggested a women should spend no more than £50 a year.\textsuperscript{29} This puts Mrs Hobbs, as a farmer’s wife in the Essex countryside, somewhere in between, spending around £7 a year on herself and her children. In the 1860s middle-class women were still wearing crinolines and Hannah noted in her account book that she had charged Mrs Hobbs 4 shillings for a ‘steel petticoat’. During the year Hannah made the following garments for Mrs Hobbs and her children: ten dresses, two children’s dresses, four petticoats, three coats, one maid’s dress and a steel petticoat. It is interesting to compare Hannah’s account book with another in the record office. The account book of Mrs Jane Bailey is for the year 1901. The prices the women charged are comparable despite the forty-year gap because, as the historian Pam Inder states, prices had changed very little in a hundred years.\textsuperscript{30} The main difference between the two dressmakers is that Mrs Bailey was married to a wheelwright and lived in a small village about fourteen miles from Braintree. She was shown in the 1901 census as having no employment but her eldest daughter Ellen aged 27 was shown as a dressmaker. She had no wealthy clients and catered to her local community. Interestingly the records show an invoice for ten shillings from a London Dressmakers’ Supply Store, referring to her as ‘Madam’, which means, despite being in a fairly isolated village, Mrs Bailey was able to deal with London suppliers. Her account book is a lot less detailed than Hannah’s. She charges a certain price for making a dress and doesn’t list all the materials and accessories involved. This may be because her clients were working-class people and wore much plainer clothes.\textsuperscript{31} It is interesting to compare the types of clothes that the two women were asked to make and the amount they charged:

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{28} Flanders, The Victorian House, p.258.\textsuperscript{29} Mrs Panton, From Kitchen to Garret, Hints for Young Householders (London: Ward & Downey, 1888), p.264.\textsuperscript{30}Inder, Busks, p.126.\textsuperscript{31} ERO, D/DU 246/9, Dressmaker’s Account Book 1893-1919.}
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<th>Mrs Bailey Jan – Dec 1901</th>
<th>Amount charged £ s d</th>
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</tr>
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*Figure 2 Table showing two dressmakers working in the town and the country. (Source: see fn. 27 and 31).*

It would appear that Hannah Hicks was only required to make smart garments (she also made three coats in this period), presumably plainer garments such as nightdresses and underwear were made at home by the servant or by the customer herself. She only recorded this one customer in 1860 and that may be because she paid infrequently, and Hannah needed to keep a tally of what she owed. In July she owed £5 – 9s – 11d which was quite a substantial amount. This contrasted to Mrs Bailey’s customers who paid per garment. It is interesting to see how many alterations Hannah did, and the fashion magazines all advocated altering
dresses to accommodate changes in fashion because the materials used, especially for middle-class dresses, were expensive and of lasting quality. Most middle-class women expected to wear a dress for up to ten years and replaced their best only every three to four years. There appear to be fewer alterations in the account book of Mrs Bailey but she charges in many instances for unspecified ‘one day’s work’ which may well have involved repairs and alterations. As the wife of a wheelwright, Mrs Bailey was helping to support her family, her earnings would not have been enough to live on. Hannah Hicks, on the other hand, was earning a living. Her account books list five clients and their families, and she and her sister must have worked very hard to produce clothes in the timescales involved. They had to acquire materials and haberdashery from suppliers, as did Mrs Bailey. In the 1881 census, at the age of 64, Hannah is described as a boarding-house keeper with one lodger and a servant, so she had made a good living and was able to retire in some comfort.

A minority of dressmakers in Colchester were married and worked in conjunction with their husbands. In one apprenticeship agreement, dated 1865, to be found in Essex Record office, for example, Elizabeth Sallows was apprenticed to Richard Ellison of Head Street, Colchester, described as ‘dressmaker and milliner’. In fact it can be seen from the 1861 census that Richard Ellison was an upholsterer and it was his wife who is described as a dressmaker with ‘6 hands’. At the time, it was not possible for a married woman to enter into a contractual agreement. It seems that Richard Ellison’s wife had to use him to contract her apprentices even though she is listed in Kelly’s 1870 Directory as having her own dressmaking business. Head Street was one of the main shopping streets of Colchester at this

32 Flanders, The Victorian House, p.261.
33 D/DU 774/5, ERO, 8 June 1865, Apprentice Indenture, Eliz Sarah Swallows.
34 England and Wales Census 1861.
time, and the fact she was employing six hands suggests that her business was thriving. Interestingly, her ‘hands’ do not live in, unlike those of Moth and Adams. From the middle of the century it became more common for drapers and dressmakers to marry and form partnerships. In the 1851 census John Gilmor, aged 36, who later became a renowned portrait photographer in Colchester, is described as a ‘linen draper’. His wife Maria is described as a ‘milliner’. In 1855 she died and the following year Gilmor married Maria’s widowed sister. In the 1861 census she is described as a ‘milliner’ and there are two young women living in their premises in Head Street, one described a ‘milliner’s assistant’ and one as a ‘milliner’s apprentice’. Gilmor is described as a ‘draper/milliner’. In the trade directories from 1855-1898, he is ‘milliner, haberdasher, photographer, artist and picture dealer’. Considering how successful he was as a photographer it is probably safe to conclude that it was his wife who ran the drapery and dressmaking business although she is not listed in the trade directories as a businesswoman in her own right. The fact that women dressed in their finest for their portraits suggests a symbiotic relationship between the skills of John and his wife. Many of his portraits were for cartes-de-visite which became immensely popular in the 1860s among the middle classes to show their status. They were replaced by cabinet cards which were larger and lasted well into the twentieth century.

Figure 3 One of Gilmor’s cartes-de-visite dated 1864

35 England and Wales Census 1851.
36 https://www.photohistory-sussex.co.uk/CDVGilmorColchester.htm.
The under recording of dressmakers in the census records

Census records tended to underestimate married women’s work as can be seen in the Colchester records where they are listed as having dressmaking businesses in the trade directories but often listed in the census as having no occupation. In the Essex Standard in 1870 there is a substantial advertisement bringing readers’ notice to a ‘Dress and Mantle Establishment’ in the High Street run by a ‘Mrs Brook’ who thanks her customers for their custom over the last 12 years and hopes for their continued support.\(^{37}\) In the 1871 census, however, she was listed as having no profession (her husband was a builder). This would appear to be an error, deliberate or not, on the enumerator’s part, perhaps because she had three children under ten at the time. The 1861 census had her down as dressmaker with one living-in apprentice aged 15, the 1881 as dressmaker employing nine females with an assistant and an apprentice living in, and the 1891 census, at the age of 64, as ‘Ladies’ Costumier’ with two assistant dressmakers living in.\(^{38}\) Clearly she ran a very successful business for at least thirty years. The fact that her husband was a builder ‘employing men’, and they had a live-in domestic servant and a nurse when the children were small, implies that she was a middle-class woman who chose to run a business.

In Kelly’s Directory of Essex for 1870, where it is noted that because of the expanded barracks ‘many houses, inns and stores have sprung up’, there are thirty-one dressmakers listed having their own businesses, all females. Their numbers rose as the population grew, by 1910 forty-five were listed.\(^{39}\) Of the thirty-one dressmakers listed in 1871, 42 per cent were married. Of the single ones, three worked with their sisters and one with a female partner. In 1881 only 27 per cent were married, and by 1911 only 17 per cent, possibly due to

\(^{38}\) Census returns 1861-91.
\(^{39}\) Kelly’s Directory of Essex, 1870 and 1910.
a rise in opportunities for single women to make a living at the trade and to the large number of single middle-class women in this period. One example is Rosa Nicholls who is recorded in the 1871 census as a widow with a five-year-old son. She is in a business closely allied with dressmaking, a ‘Fancy Draper’, who would have supplied materials and trimmings to women who would go on to employ a dressmaker. She lived and worked in a smart part of Colchester. She was in the same position in 1901 where she has one assistant and is described as a ‘stay-maker’ which was a highly skilled craft. Her business lasted for at least thirty years which shows her skill as a businesswoman. Her father had been a bonnet and millinery warehouseman in Colchester High Street and her mother was a straw bonnet maker and milliner, so one can surmise that she had gained a great deal of knowledge as well as good connections and help from her family which stood her in good stead after becoming a widow at such a young age. Of the thirty-one dressmakers listed in Kelly’s Directory of 1870, fourteen were still in business in 1882 and four by 1902.

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Training and working conditions

Due to its links with domesticity, dressmaking was seen as a genteel profession for young girls. Parents were willing to pay substantial amounts for their daughter’s apprenticeship. This also suggests that marriage for their daughters was not a guaranteed outcome, and a career might become essential to them as it did to Rosa. In the apprenticeship agreement of Elizabeth Sallows, mentioned on page 4, it is documented that her father paid £30 for a two-year apprenticeship, she in return would receive ‘meat, drink and lodging’. Her father was a reasonably well-to-do farmer with 100 acres and must have felt that dressmaking was a respectable profession for his daughter. Future censuses show that indeed,

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40 Kellys Directories of Essex 1870-1911
41 D/DU 774/S, ERO, 8 June 1865, Apprentice Indenture, Eliz Sarah Swallows.
Elizabeth never married but that in 1881 she was a lodging-house keeper in a respectable part of town and in 1891 was ‘living on her own means’. Whether she continued as a dressmaker is not certain but her address in Queen Street, a central shopping area of Colchester, suggests she may well have done. Another apprenticeship agreement concerning Florence Eliza Ison, dated 1889, is between her father, a railway worker, and Edmund Piper, a draper of Great Dunmow, a market town about 25 miles from Colchester. She is to be ‘taught the business of a dressmaker’. She is to board with her father and in the third year of apprenticeship she will receive 1s 6d weekly as payment. Edmund Piper, a single man, had a draper’s shop in Great Dunmow High Street. In the 1891 census he has living at his property, Margaret Barnard, 21, a milliner’s assistant, Lilian Knight, 18, a dressmaker’s assistant, and Olive Smith, 15, a draper’s apprentice. It is not clear whether he also used more experienced dressmakers who lived elsewhere but it does seem as if he was not only supplying material to his customers but offering a dressmaking or possibly alteration service as well. This was a growing trend among drapers as will be examined in chapter four. Both Elizabeth and Florence were fourteen at the beginning of their apprenticeships. Unlike Elizabeth, Florence married eight years later but records showing her subsequent working life have not been found. Possibly her parents, by paying for her long apprenticeship, were ensuring that their daughter would be able to carry on with her profession and contribute to her family’s budget should her husband not be in a position to support his family.

The choice of dressmaking as a career for girls reflected the importance of needlework, seen as an essential skill for well-brought-up girls. Nevertheless the trade was not regulated and many young dressmakers suffered from low pay and bad conditions. As with the other most common employer of middle-class women, education, dressmaking provided occupation at

42 D/DU 338/1, ERO, 8 October 1889, Apprenticeship Indenture, Florence Ison to Edmund Piper.
several levels. By 1891 it made up by far the largest group of working single women. Levels of employment went from successful businesswoman to sweated worker. It is difficult to tell how far this was the case in Colchester though a letter written to the Essex Standard in July 1892 shows how hard life was for some (see Figure 3 below). And a reply shows how little sympathy there was for the poor dressmaker. (see Figure 4 below).

*IMAGE REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

*Figure 4 Letter from The Essex Standard, 21 June 1892.*

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The letter in reply suggests that the dressmaker has the Factory Act on her side. The Workshop Regulation Act of 1867, to which he or she is probably referring, was designed to limit the working hours of people employed in small workshops, specifically women and children, and to bring them in line with the provisions of the Factory Acts of the 1850s. It limited the working hours of women in workshops to twelve a day, banned Sunday working and working after 2pm on Saturdays, as well as offering additional protection to working children.44 In the Essex Standard of 5 February 1869, it was reported that the Town Council discussed the Act. They noted that, in London, milliners were frequently brought before magistrates and fined for breaking the law regarding working hours.45 The same paper reported in November of that year that a meeting had taken place in which the Inspector of factories explained the provision of the act to employers. It was chaired by the owner of a local ironworks company.46 It was further reported in December that it was felt to be too expensive to hire someone specifically to inspect local workshops and the job would be given to an existing employee.47 Implementing the act in full would have had serious implications for small businesses and many of the town councillors were businessmen. In the Report of the

44 Workshop Regulations Act 1867 https://parlipapers-proquest-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/parlipapers/result/pdview?accountid=14697&groupid=95579&pgId=9383a95f-7ec5-488d-9962-c03ae93ecd7c&rsId=181819B782F

45 Essex Standard, 5 Feb 1869, p.2.
46 Essex Standard, 26 Nov 1869, p.2.
47 Essex Standard, 3 Dec 1869, p.2.
Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops of 1894 it was noted that there were certain overtime exceptions applied to dressmaking businesses because of the seasonal nature of the trade:

It is probable that the abolition of overtime in dressmaking workshops would only lead to an extension of the not uncommon practice of taking work home to do after hours.48

The report also noted that many local authorities were not enforcing the Act and were neglecting the poor conditions such as bad ventilation and overcrowding.49 There were ambivalent views about dressmakers. In The Lady it was stated that a good dressmaker might earn £120 a year, but there was the tricky question of class: ‘the main difficulty in the way of well-bred girls choosing dressmaking as a profession […] is the question of caste’. No matter how much she earned, the article said, she remained a tradeswoman, unlike a governess who might earn less but remained ‘a gentlewoman in reduced circumstances’.50 Others were less exacting. The Queen, which was widely circulated emphasised the necessity of training, skill and business acumen for those aspiring to become dressmakers.51 This demonstrated that they were indeed skilled artisans and calls into question those, like in this Punch cartoon, who saw them as exploitative and grasping.

48 Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops, 1894, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, p.23
50 The Lady, 16 December 1886, p.476.
51 The Queen, 11 June 1887, p.710.
Conclusion

In conclusion it appears that the ‘separate spheres’ ideology has contributed to the omission of dressmakers from the history books. They are seen as an anomaly in a commercial world dominated by men but research into the lives and businesses of dressmakers in and around Colchester recording the sheer numbers of dressmaking businesses, their success, their skill and their training structures, challenges this view. For those with reasonable stamina and ability, dressmaking offered women the possibility of a good wage, or of running a business of their own. By the 1870s it also offered the opportunity for young women from modest backgrounds to travel to different parts of the country to work as can be seen from the censuses which show dressmakers coming to Colchester from all over England, a much more adventurous proposition at the end of the last century than it now seems. Dressmaking not only offered unmarried women a means of support but it can also be seen from Colchester records that it provided women who married with a respectable and flexible means of augmenting their husbands' income and of supporting themselves if they were widowed; and
middle-class families whose daughters needed to work saw dressmaking as one of the more attractive options. As Ellen Jordan argues, these middle-class women were active agents in claiming a place in the labour market and this did not run counter to middle-class values at the time. Notions of independence and self-reliance led women into philanthropy and, where necessary, into employment and business.\textsuperscript{52} She sees women working both within the ideology of separate spheres and within radical religious and liberal political ideas of liberty, independence and free will. These women were not merely transferring household skills to the marketplace, as the separate spheres argument assumes; they learned their work in the workshop, not the home.\textsuperscript{53} The next chapter will explore how dressmakers and their clients navigated the world of fashion, and how the dictates of that world both restricted and liberated them.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{52} Ellen Jordan, \textit{The Women’s Movement and Women’s Employment in Nineteenth-Century Britain} (London: Routledge, 1999)
\textsuperscript{53} Gamber, p.5.
\end{flushleft}
Chapter Three: The Place of Fashion in the Lives of Middle-class Women with reference to Colchester 1860-1914

Introduction

This chapter will look at the growth of the middle classes in Colchester, the fashion milieu within which the dressmakers and their customers were trading and how information about fashion trends reached them. It will also examine the unique nature of this trade as a ‘female economy’, a phrase used by the historian Wendy Gamber to describe a business run by

women for women, and how this trade both challenged and supported the patriarchal hegemony. It will look at the part magazines played in shaping taste and style, signifying meaning and reflecting society, and the crucial part played by dressmakers in facilitating this complicated terrain. Primary sources such as local newspapers, magazines and photographs will be used to illustrate preoccupations with fashion choices and strictures, and historical debates about the meanings behind them.

Colchester’s middle classes

By the middle of the nineteenth century Colchester was dominated by a large but diverse middle class. This included farmers, shopkeepers, professional men and master artisans and their wives and families. Many were small employers (Colchester was yet to develop large-scale production) and they gave employment to the great majority of workers. The persistence of small businesses and family-owned businesses in the British economy has been well established. By the middle of the century there were 600 commercial and professional firms, 73 farms and 350 artisan workshops listed in Colchester. There was a significant rise in the numbers of non-industrial middle-class occupations for women, especially in women’s clothing. The census of 1911 records 231 teachers, 212 nurses, 429 in other professions, 314 in clerical work and ‘574 women making hats, stays and dresses in places of work other than factories and large workshops’. Whereas in the middle of the century there was much apprehension about women in the urban commercial marketplace and their choices of occupation were limited, by the beginning of the twentieth century things were beginning to

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5 Brown, p.13.
6 Brown, p.35.
change, occupations for single women had expanded and they were negotiating their own space as shoppers, charity workers and political agitators. Throughout the period Colchester was a congenial place to live for the middle classes who could afford a secluded residence with a spacious garden and many such properties were built in the latter part of the century, mainly in the Lexden area of the town which was near the centre but far enough away to be wooded and pretty. In 1864 the local paper remarked that ‘houses on the Lexden Road are in great demand’ and land around Maldon Road was put on sale with the recommendation that houses there would enjoy the double advantage of rural seclusion and proximity to the smarter Crouch Street shops. By 1902 Kelly’s Directory was describing ‘elegant modern houses in Lexden Road, the principal promenade’. The growth of smaller houses around Maldon Road that can be seen in Figure 3 were less grand than those nearer to Lexden village but they housed

*IMAGE REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

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8 Jess Jephcott, Colchester, the Postcard Collection (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2014), p.64.
9 Essex Standard, 10 Feb 1864, p.1.
10 Kelly’s Directory, 1902.
middle-class people such as Ernest Barritt and his family. He owned a pharmacy in the High Street and became mayor in 1904. It can be seen from the trade directories that a significant number of dressmakers had their properties in these smarter areas.

Figure 9 Street maps of Colchester. The first from 1880 showing Crouch Street on the Lexden side of Colchester surrounded by farmland and market gardens, the second from 1910 showing the amount of growth the town had made towards Lexden. (Ordnance Survey Collections).

**Women’s fashion as a female economy**

In the view of the cultural historian, Christopher Breward, fashion has a role in ‘defining contemporary sensibilities, is a marker of identity, a mainstay of popular culture and a driver of economies, in its material and virtual forms’. In her study of Victorian dressmakers Pam Inder states that ‘Dressing correctly was the passport to respectable society and failure to do so was social suicide.’ In her opinion the social mobility and the rapid rise of the middle

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classes, meant that more and more women wanted to be seen as ladies.\textsuperscript{12} Many magazines were produced to advise these women what to wear and it was often up to the dressmakers to translate their demands into realities. Colchester, like many other provincial towns in England, benefitted from the coming of the railways and good postal services which facilitated the proliferation of periodicals for women and information about clothing and fashion. Amanda Vickery’s contention that women were no more restricted in Victorian times than they had been in the past, and that there were many ways in which they were able to enter into the public realm despite living in a society which barred them from many institutions and professions, is well illustrated by a study of their clothing.\textsuperscript{13} Fashion and women’s clothes was one area where middle-class women were in control in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Until department stores became widespread in the twentieth century, women’s fashion was seen by men as a trade not worth their while to get involved in and women were specifically charged with the task of regulating fashion and textiles.\textsuperscript{14} Magazines, novels, essays, sermons, and conduct books had all come to assume that dress culture was ‘women’s work’. As historian Christina Walkley points out, sewing was the most consistently taught subject for young girls and often a woman’s only marketable skill.\textsuperscript{15}

The fashion trades radiated both downwards to those who worked for dressmakers and milliners and outwards to incorporate the consumers who patronised their shops.\textsuperscript{16} Women who worked in the trade or who purchased items from dressmakers still had disadvantages

\textsuperscript{14} C.B. Kortsch, Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction: Literacy, Textiles and Activism (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016, p.38.
\textsuperscript{16} Gamber, p.3.
regarding financial independence, however. Married women needed their husband’s permission to borrow money or enter into financial contracts. Women were regarded as poor credit risks because of their legal restrictions, dependence on male intervention and good will and the short-term nature of their business ventures and it was more common for a woman to inherit or raise a lump sum rather than establish reliable credit.\textsuperscript{17} Despite this, Wendy Gamber refers to this trade as a ‘female economy’ which gave women autonomy precisely because of the sexual division of labour, ‘the principal actors – proprietors, workers and consumers – were all women’.\textsuperscript{18} Although her research was based in Boston, Massachusetts, there were many parallels with the situation in England.

\textit{Debates and anxieties around fashion}

The historian Kortsch suggests that the position of ‘the sanctioned knowledge of all things pertaining to sewing and clothing’ gave women a certain kind of authority in a patriarchal society. The problem with this authority in her view is that it rested on class distinctions (it was not the same for working-class women), and it simultaneously threatened and supported patriarchal society. For these reasons, how women dressed and how and where they sewed, remained issues of heated debate for decades.\textsuperscript{19} There was a tendency for women’s manuals and doctors to criticise women’s unhealthy lifestyles, for instance, and to often lay the blame with fashion.\textsuperscript{20} It was thought that consumption was caused by low-cut dresses and thin shoes, and the evils of tight lacing were often brought up. In an article in the \textit{Essex Standard} in 1870, for example, the writer quotes from an article in \textit{Cassell’s Family Magazine}:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{18} Gamber, p.2.
\textsuperscript{19} Kortsch, p.51.
\end{flushright}
If the fair reader of these pages for the household complains of a sense of heat and pain after meals … if she suffers from occasional palpitations and difficulty of breathing …. If a little walking makes her limbs ache … if fits of melancholy are frequent and unaccountable and she bursts into tears without knowing why…. Let her remember that such symptoms are commonly traceable to the prevalent system of tight-lacing.\(^{21}\)

There were many ambivalent attitudes towards tight lacing which had been fashionable for centuries and become extreme by the middle of the nineteenth century due to the invention of metal eyelets, which allowed the material to be pulled tightly without tearing.\(^{22}\) It is a commonly held view that the fashion of tight lacing in the Victorian age was limiting female independence.\(^{23}\) For instance, Helène Roberts wrote:

> The clothing of the Victorian woman clearly perfected the message of a willingness to conform to the submissive masochistic pattern, but dress also helped mould female behaviour to the role of the ‘exquisite slave’\(^{24}\).

But other commentators have questioned this view and argued that, on the contrary, it was the reactionary, anti-feminist moralists of the period that inveighed against the ‘unnatural’ practice, and that it could actually be thought to express a covert form of rebellion.\(^{25}\) The *Essex Standard* describing a debate in the Physiological Department of the British Association in which two physiologists condemned tight lacing, reported that:

> The wearing of stays and of fairly tight lacing found an advocate in

\(^{21}\) *Essex Standard*, 8 April 1870, p.4.


Miss Lydia Becker, who held that a woman, to be comfortably
dressed, must have on well fitting stays well laced.26

Some feminists defended the corset, Emmeline Pankhurst for instance said it created a
respectable figure, others, such as the Rational Dress Society, lampooned it as fetter for body
and mind.27

Another aspect of women’s clothing which courted controversy was the tournure, a padded
undergarment which added fullness, and supported the drapery at the back of the dress. A
Colchester paper’s fashion column of October 1882, referring to the tournure as ‘a subject of
great dispute’, contained an extract from an elite fashion magazine called The Season. In the
magazine writer’s view, it is only to be criticised if it is badly made and, if well-made can
make ‘a pretty dress more elegant and distingué’:

Most dressmakers of good standing and taste place tournures for
elegant out-door as also evening toilettes [outfits] in petticoats or in skirts
or dresses.

The newspaper’s review of The Season extolled its virtues as being one of the best magazines
of its kind with many illustrations and patterns. The fact they chose to highlight the article
about tournures ‘which may be of interest to gentlemen as well as ladies’, perhaps illustrates
the relish that such debates provoked.28 There was a very complex ideology surrounding
women’s clothes in late Victorian society. Because of the autonomy that women had in this
area, fashion was often dismissed as a frivolous enterprise.29 The same newspaper had a
column entitled ‘Our Social Intercourse’ in which the writer berated young women for

27 Kortsch, p.64.
28 Essex Standard, 10 October 1882, p.2.
29 Christopher Breward, ‘Cultures, Identities, Histories: Fashioning a Cultural Approach to Dress’, Fashion
choosing husbands they don’t love, ‘they have no notion of obeying anyone but their milliner who dictates what the colour of their new bonnet must be’.30

The effect of fashion magazines

It is not helpful to study fashion plates within contemporary magazines read by Colchester’s middle classes and assume that women in an Essex market town were dressed in this way. Most fashion sources related to high fashion and this did not typify the middle-class lifestyle.31 The lives of average middle-class women who set up as dressmakers, or who bought clothes for themselves and their children, are not recorded but a few surviving dressmakers’ account books, records of magazines that were for sale, photographs and descriptions in the press are all useful sources. It is certain that women’s magazines such as Myra’s Journal of Dress and Fashion were widely read and letters from women in Colchester within the magazines are an indication that it was read locally. There was a new connectedness between middle-class women due to magazines, ease of communication through railways, and the postal system, which lead, according to Kortsch, to ‘women’s communities expanding into a national “feminine” identity’.32 Women’s magazines had a profound impact on the creation of an imagined community. They were full of advice and debates on fashion and etiquette and readers were encouraged to write in with problems or tips, and to sell or barter items. For instance, a Miss Taylor of Colchester wanted ‘to exchange songs’.33 Myra’s Journal of Dress and Fashion and other similar magazines were full of information and rules on how to dress in the latest fashions, how to alter clothes to bring them up-to-date and how to make clothes. They often included paper patterns but they

30 Essex Standard, 27 December 1872.
31 Branca, p.10.
32 Kortsch, p.41.
33 Myra’s Journal of Dress and Fashion, 1 May 1875, p.87.
were so complex that it seems likely, considering the number of dressmakers’ businesses there were in a town like Colchester at the time, that most women were not making them themselves. There are many advertisements in these magazines, a great number aimed at dressmakers and not at women at home. In an article in 1885, *Myra’s Journal* remarked that the Dressmakers’ Supply Store in Aldersgate stocked ‘every species of goods required in their business’ and that ‘every dressmaker naturally wishes to prove that she is not behind her contemporaries in these minor, but, at the same time, important details of her art’. The main message of the journal, and others like it, was that all women should conform to the dictates of fashion. As Judith Flanders points out, ‘personal taste was not an issue’, and wearing something just because you fancied it was seen as distinctly peculiar. The fact that the wide distribution of cheap magazines and the proliferation of paper patterns and sewing machines was making fashion easier to come by for more women, appeared to make those who wrote about fashion more determined that these women should get it right. An article headed

*IMAGE REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

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*Figure 10 Advertisement for Dressmakers supplier in Myra’s Journal of Dress and Fashion, 1 Jan 1885, p.5.*

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34 *Myra’s Journal*, 1 Nov 1885, p.529.
35 Flanders, p.256.
‘Fashion for Autumn’ in the *Essex Standard* in 1882, quoting from *Mrs Leach’s Practical Family Dressmaker*, goes into great detail about exactly how the latest coats and dresses should look:

- Some simple little dresses for young ladies’ dances are composed of Spanish lace flounces over a coloured skirt; black over red or gold, crème or ficelle over pale blue or pink, the latter a shrimp or coral shade. The bodices are made high to the throat, the sleeves transparent and elbow length.
- For less dressy costumes nun’s veiling in all the new shades may be used, plentifully trimmed with lace of the same shade.\(^3^6\)

In the view of Breward, these fashion and dressmaking journals were promoting the values of homemaking and instructing on the ‘modification of unfashionable necklines’ while at the same time encouraging escape through Parisian fashion plates and lyrical portrayals of society events, thus having a role in the debate around separate spheres. The authorial voice of the magazines, which connects women solely to the domestic sphere, must, in his view, be judged against the intentions of the readers.\(^3^7\) Magazines like *Myra’s Journal* were not aimed at the rich although the fashion plates in both these magazines and the Haute Couture magazines were the same. It is only through the text that the reader can ascertain the target audience. Magazines for the rich do not include articles on home dressmaking, budgeting and critical discussions of material excess. The readers of magazines aimed at a middle-class readership who cannot afford Paris fashions are shown how to emulate them more cheaply. Fashion reflected class and elite magazines did not encourage women to make their own

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\(^{3^6}\) *Essex Standard*, 4 November 1882, p.2.

clothes or alter existing ones. In *The Season*, an elite magazine recommended by the *Essex Standard*, its readers were told:

The leading toilettes [dresses] may be divided into two distinct classes. One style which is greatly patronised by the aristocracy, fits closely to the figure at the front and sides, and is only supported by a small tournure.

The writer goes on to say that the other style which is not so well-fitting will suit a more mature and less slim woman.³⁸ The hidden message seems to be that the second style is easier to make and therefore more suitable for the less well off.

**Fashion and class**

The fact that the journals aimed at the middle classes contained the same Haute Couture illustrations and instructions on how to emulate them led, according to Breward, to a blurring of the distinctions between classes and therefore a sense of insecurity regarding appropriate dress.³⁹ At the other end of the scale, working-class women were often criticised for their fashion choices. For instance, Sonya Rose quotes from a newspaper which stated that if women were allowed to earn too much money they would only spend it on ‘fal-de-rols’.⁴⁰ Many middle-class debaters believed that a love of finery in working women was the first step to prostitution, and although Mrs Pankhurst considered a corset to be a sign of respectability, a working-class girl who was seen to be tightly-laced was in danger of being accused of having loose morals.⁴¹ In 1870, the *Essex Standard* reported that a dressmaker in Colchester was assaulted by ‘a showily-dressed girl’, implying that her lack of tasteful

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³⁸ *The Season*, October 1887, p.1.
⁴¹ Wilson, p.156.
clothing was a sign of criminality. She was fined 2s 6d plus expenses.  

The sense of insecurity is illustrated by reports of middle-class women who felt that their servants were too well-dressed. In the middle-class Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine, a letter from a woman whose ‘income is small’ but who had two servants to keep up a ‘good appearance’, described her shock in finding that her cook ‘has been getting gayer and gayer in her dress’. She said the cook had a silk dress very like her own and a hat which she thought she saw in a shop window for 25s. She went on to say, ‘she looked as if she had stepped out of a fashion plate’.  

Journals such as Myra’s had to tread a fine line between making their readers feel that they could aspire to Paris fashions and making it affordable for them without making them feel inferior in any way. The two photos below, taken in Colchester in 1907 and 1905 respectively, show the difference in wealth portrayed in dress. Jane Crick was a labourer’s wife and her dress is plain but stylish. Many working-class women would hire a dress for a studio portrait. This one has old-fashioned leg of mutton sleeves but a well-fitting bodice. She has a piece of lace around her neck but very little else in the way of decoration compared to that of Drusilla Bunting, who, as the wife of a successful Colchester businessman (Arthur Bunting owned a market garden), could afford to dress well. The amount of work that the dressmaker has put into her dress is a sign of Mrs Bunting’s standing in the community. Her dress is a good deal more fashionable than Jane’s.

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42 Essex Standard, 1 July 1870.
43 The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine, February 1876, p.133.
Conclusion

In conclusion it seems that the middle-class women of Colchester were part of a new national community of women who were using new forms of communication, especially fashion magazines, to embrace an industry that, for a brief few decades, was entirely their own. There were debates around the fashions of the day in which men could get involved when discussing the place of women in society, but basically it was an area in which women had control. As in all other aspects of Victorian and Edwardian society, class played an important part, and fashion was a contested area and created many insecurities among the middle classes. The next chapter will show how the industry began to be absorbed into the male domain of drapers’ shops and department stores, how women became the targets of

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advertising and how the sewing machine and paper patterns were introduced into nearly
every home while fashions became simpler and easier to mass-produce. It will ask how these
developments affected dressmakers’ livelihoods.
Chapter 4: The Effects of New Technology and the Rise of Commercialism on the Dressmaking Trade in Colchester

Introduction

It is claimed by Inder that the 1870s were a watershed in the making and supply of women’s clothes mainly because many important innovations occurred at this time. Firstly, the arrival of the sewing machine which speeded production helping to produce ever more elaborate garments and, along with the paper pattern, which simplified cutting out material and fitting, encouraged women to make their own clothes at home. Secondly, the beginnings of a realisation by suppliers and shopkeepers that there was money to be made in women’s clothing by supplying to the rising numbers of middle-class female shoppers. Nevertheless, dressmakers and milliners remained very important to middle and upper-class women, since, until the second decade of the twentieth century, it was unusual to find a shop selling ready-made clothes for women, especially in the provinces. This chapter will examine the use of advertising in local papers and fashion magazines to persuade women to buy sewing machines and paper patterns, and to try to gauge the effect of this on women’s use of dressmakers. It will also examine the way shopkeepers, especially drapers, saw the opportunities in women’s clothing: how they changed from merely selling materials and haberdashery to employing dressmakers within their own establishments and using advertising to persuade consumers to buy their products. The historian Wendy Gamber, whose study is based in the United States, sees this move by drapers to take over the

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dressmaking business as eroding women’s influence in this area.\textsuperscript{46} This chapter will attempt to discover whether there is evidence of this erosion in Colchester.

**The Home Dressmaker: sewing machines and paper patterns**

The demand for sewing machines increased rapidly during the second half of the nineteenth century and became an essential item in middle-class homes. Branca’s list of expenditure for a middle-class household in the 1870s, shows what a major purchase these machines were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stove</td>
<td>£3.10 - £7.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing machine</td>
<td>£2 - £3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewing Machine</td>
<td>£6 - £15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath</td>
<td>£3 - £4\textsuperscript{47}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1870 a Colchester firm, Buckinghams, was advertising ‘sewing machines supplied on easy terms’, and offered free instructions on their use.\textsuperscript{48} The many advertisements in newspapers and magazines, and letters from women to journals asking for information about them shows their growing importance. In the view of historian Alison Adburgham, this is not surprising:

> Up till the 1850s, every seam of every mantle, jacket and dress, every stitch of all those innumerable petticoats and voluminous undergarments, whether made at home or by a dressmaker, or whether bought in a shop, had been stitched by hand.\textsuperscript{49}

To begin with there were so many different makes, that dressmakers and home sewers were overwhelmed with choice. Figure 1 shows five different manufacturers, ‘and other hand machines’, and options for extras such as tables and covers.


\textsuperscript{48} *Essex Standard*, 28 October 1870, p.1.

This advertisement also shows that these machines were sold initially by companies which dealt in ironmongery and farming machinery rather than in shops specialising in materials. This perhaps shows a perceived relationship between men and machines and explains the criticism by some commentators who saw the machine as destroying the craft of needlework and adversely affecting women’s internal organs.\textsuperscript{50} The historian Tim Putnam sees the sewing machine as very significant in the transition of machines from their initial male context to being regendered because of the cultural connection between women and sewing, and that this regendering led to the commercialisation of ‘consumer durables’ for the domestic market.\textsuperscript{51} Women were very quick to welcome the new technology and by 1870 sewing machines were in use in most dressmaking workshops.\textsuperscript{52} The manufacturers were keen to tap into the home market, knowing that home dressmaking was a popular, and often

\textsuperscript{52} Pam Inder, \textit{Busks}, p.140.
necessary occupation for women. The American machine made by Singer had begun to dominate the British market and 10,000 were sold in 1870. By 1900 they had three-quarters of the market share. The following table shows the rapid rise in Singer sewing machine sales:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Machines sold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>62,252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>150,008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>164,980</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 13 Sales of Singer sewing machines in the UK 1880-1900 from the Singer Sewing Machine Company Archives in Madison Wisconsin, cited in Godley, p.58.*

*Kelly’s Directory* for 1882 lists a Singer Sewing Machine Manufacturing Company in Colchester and Singer had advertisements in *Myra’s Journal of Dress and Fashion* which, as noted in the last chapter, was widely read in Colchester. As Branca points out, the sewing machine became a piece of technology that was completely within women’s control and was to their benefit. However, until the 1880s, their usefulness was limited since the early lockstitch machines could only sew straight lines, so they were only used in factories making men’s low-grade trousers or by women and dressmakers to sew skirt seams. According to Godley, it is the inability of this machinery to handle fabrics as sensitively as the human hand which meant that the female clothing industry maintained its character of a very high labour content and saved dressmakers from being replaced by factory production for such a long time.

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55 Branca, p.150.
56 Godley, p.57.
Although paper patterns had been around in some form since the beginning of the nineteenth century, they were very complicated with many different patterns on top of one another on the same sheet of paper. They were only decipherable by trained dressmakers. It was the American firm Butterick’s which first introduced simple patterns into Britain in the 1870s and they were a huge success as they were promoted as being for home dressmakers as well as for the dressmaking trade. Many experienced dressmakers, however, still preferred to make their own.  

Patterns were offered in fashion magazines and many drapers’ shops became agents. In an 1882 trade directory, Ager’s in Colchester High Street are listed as agents for Buttericks paper patterns. One series of magazines which promoted patterns for home dressmaking was ‘Mrs Leach’s’:

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58 Adburgham, p.118.
Although most women had been taught to sew, many found that they didn’t have the skill to cut out and fit clothes correctly, which led to them hanging badly.\textsuperscript{59} There was great skill involved in cutting out as economically as possible so as not to waste material. Many women’s clothes at this time, especially those for special occasions, were too complicated to make at home other than by a very skilled needlewoman and dressmakers were still very much in demand. The reason they were so complex was that the patterns overlay each other on the same sheet of paper, and it was not until the 1890s that these overlaid patterns went out of use.\textsuperscript{60} (See Fig.5)

An exhaustive study of the clothes of one middle-class family in York Castle Museum in Edwardian times shows that the clothes of the female members of the family and their children were a mixture of home-made, dressmaker-made and commercially made. The researcher concludes that some women who could afford dressmakers nevertheless chose to make clothes for themselves and their children for pleasure in the process.61 This view is supported by correspondence in magazines such as *Myra’s Journal*, discussed in the previous chapter, which shows a huge interest in making clothes using sewing machines and patterns. Women who were not so well off often made skirts and less complicated garments at home and bought bodices which were becoming more easily available from drapers’ shops, or they used dressmakers for special occasions such as weddings, balls and mourning. Kate Moth and

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Annie Adams who were mentioned in Chapter 1 as running a very successful dressmaking business, particularly promoted this aspect of their business as can be seen from Figure 6. Although they are listed as dressmakers in the 1882 trade directory, they are in a busy shopping street and their business seems more like a shop, a precursor to what was soon to be listed as a ‘ladies’ outfitter’.

*IMAGE REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

Figure 17. Advertisement in Essex Standard, 10 January 1880.

**Drapers and the expansion of their businesses in Colchester**

In the words of historian Krista Lysack, by the 1860s shopping in Britain had become ‘a fully articulated form of middle-class women’s leisure’. She claims that during the Victorian age ‘the consumer experience was fundamentally altered in scale and scope through the coming of the mass market and related developments such as the institutionalisation of the department store and the wealth generated by imperial expansion’.\(^{62}\) Shopkeeping became a substantial middle-class sector in the second half of the nineteenth century as High Street shops grew to support rapidly growing towns such as Colchester. Their custom came mainly from the local middle class ranging from local gentry coming into town for business and services, to the best paid of the skilled artisans.\(^{63}\) Primarily their customers were merchants, manufacturers, professionals and farmers. The historian Molly Proctor found that most


drapers’ shops in provincial towns catered for one class of customer but in those that sold a wide range of materials to suit all, social etiquette saw to it that the classes did not have to mix. The gentry preferred shopping in the late morning or early afternoon, middle classes at other times during the day and the poorest came in the evening, especially Friday or Saturday after they had received their wages. Contemporaries who commented on improvements in the organisation of shopping tended to refer to the drapery business since it was the first type of shop to exhibit the characteristics of modern retailing. It had the advantage of being free from production and therefore drapers were able to concentrate their capital on shop improvements such as plate glass windows, gas lighting, price ticketing and cash trading. Even by 1879, one successful Colchester draper was being praised in the local paper:

*IMAGE REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

Figure 18. The Essex Standard reports on George Ager’s expansion, 8 November 1879.

Ager appears to be trying to emulate London shops by making shopping into a pleasurable experience for his customers with heating and lighting. According to the census, he employed a ‘milliner’ at this time with five assistants who did not live on the premises. Ager advertises

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65 Hall, p.116.
his business as including ‘dressmaking’. It is possible that the milliner was also a dressmaker, as the terms were often interchangeable in the nineteenth century. There are no records remaining of his business, but Pam Inder describes similar drapery businesses in nearby Stowmarket and Ipswich which kept detailed records. One of these businesses sold ready-made dresses by 1873 and the workroom specialised in customising them. They carried a stock of black dresses and trimming them with black crepe for mourning was quite a profitable side-line. They did a huge number of alterations. It is likely that Ager’s team did similar work as he advertised ‘mourning orders executed with promptitude’. As travel to London was becoming more usual and speedier due to the railway, it was important for Colchester shops to increase their allure. The department store of the twentieth century grew out of these draper’s shops whose customers were predominantly female. They traditionally sold material for making clothes, haberdashery and all kinds of household linen from bedding to table napkins. It can be seen from the trade directories that there were many drapers’ shops in Colchester doing a thriving trade. E.P.Baker, for example, had a shop in Head Street, as can be seen from this early twentieth century postcard:

Figure 19. E.P.Baker’s drapery shop (Colchester and Ipswich Museum, Colchester Collection, COLEM 78A.)

66 Inder, Busks, p.161.
67 Essex Standard, 18 August 1871.
Census records show that Baker was born in Sudbury where he trained in his father’s linen drapery shop after studying at the Albert Middle Class College in Framlingham. By 1901, at the age of 35, he had the shop in Head Street but lived in fashionable Lexden Road with his wife and children. Living over the shop were two young dressmakers, a milliner, three drapers assistants (one male, two female) and a domestic servant. Another very successful Colchester draper, George Ager from Stowmarket, Suffolk, who is mentioned above, started trading in the 1860s in the High Street. The 1861 census showed him, aged 32, living above the shop with six live-in drapers’ assistants (two female). By 1871 he and his family had also moved to a smart area of town. This reflects the gradual separation of work and home, which historians have commented on, where the domestic ideal was a place away from the marketplace.  

In 1875 he was advertising in the *Essex Standard* ‘latest London Styles in Millinery, Bonnets, Hats’, and ‘New Spring Hosiery’, so already branching out from the traditional drapery products of fabrics, household linen and haberdashery. Another High Street draper, John Salmon, who advertised in this same edition as ‘the oldest established draper in Colchester’ boasted of ‘millinery and dressmaking – increased facilities’. Salmon had inherited his shop from his father who had moved to Colchester in the 1830s from Cambridge. In 1851 his father employed three men, two women and a boy, but by 1871, John was employing four assistants, two apprentices and three servants, all living in. There are no dressmakers listed among his staff and it could be that he was a more traditional linen draper but felt the necessity to branch into dressmaking and millinery to keep his customers from using more recently established drapers’ shops. By 1882 George Ager & Sons was described in *Kelly’s Directory* as ‘linen drapers, silk mercers and hosiers, millinery, mantle dressmaking and general mourning establishment, ladies outfitters and furriers; agents for

68 Hall, p.110.
69 *Essex Standard*, 16 April 1875, p.6.
“Buttericks” paper patterns’. By 1881 he had living in the shop a male draper’s assistant, aged 20, described as ‘assistant head’, thirteen drapers’ assistants of which ten were female, servant, cook and housekeeper; clearly a substantial establishment. Pam Inder describes a draper in Stowmarket, Suffolk, who opened a dressmaking department in the 1880s and whose appointment books survive. He employed three dressmakers in succession. None lasted long in his employment and he made plain in his descriptions of them that he did not get on with them. All three came from other parts of the country and were paid £20 per year each.70 This seems to have been the going rate as C.B. Hawkins, in his Social History of Norwich, written in 1910, stated that The Report on Clothing Trades had suggested that the average wage earned by dressmakers working for shops in the eastern counties was 10s. 9d. a week, but in his opinion it ‘may not unreasonably be placed at 9s., less than a woman can earn in unskilled factory work.’ In his view, however, ‘Socially they belong to a very superior class, and the conditions of work are rather better than in an ordinary factory. These advantages are no doubt a set-off against the low wages.’

He found that private dressmakers were doing well in Norwich, and the women who worked for them earned on average from 14s. to 15s. a week, ‘but their hours are probably long’.71 Despite his belief that dressmakers in shops worked shorter hours, evidence to the Fourth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System 17 August 1889 was that: ‘Dressmakers in shops often stop at 4 on Saturdays and then are put behind counters where they can hide their work under the counter when the inspectors come’.72

Already in 1871 there was a movement to prevent the exploitation of staff working in drapers’ shops as can be seen from this letter in a local Colchester paper:

70 Inder, Busks, p.157.
72 PP. 1889 Fourth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System, 17 August 1889.
It is clear from the census records that many Colchester drapers employed women as assistants, but the records don’t appear to show many live-in dressmakers. Accounts of drapers’ shops around the end of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth mainly show material being sold for making clothes, or, where garments are sold, much alteration is done by female drapers’ assistants in order that they fit their customers properly. Trade directories show that there were many dressmakers in Colchester and despite the expansion of drapers’ shops their numbers did not substantially diminish. In the census of 1881 Sarah Ann Brook, married to a builder, was a dressmaker employing nine females of whom two (a dressmaker’s assistant and a dressmaker’s apprentice) lived in. Her workrooms were just off the High Street and she appears to have had a thriving business. Most drapers at the time dealt in ‘piece goods’ or lengths of fabric which were then sent, with a pattern and
any trimmings, to customers’ private dressmakers. When drapers spoke of ‘dresses’ they usually meant dress material by the yard.

Ladies’ Outfitters and Female Drapers

Whereas in an 1870 Colchester trade directory one of the headings for commercial businesses was ‘Drapers’, by 1882 the same directory listed ‘Drapers and Ladies’ Outfitters’. None of the drapers in the 1870 directory included the description ‘ladies outfitters’ but by 1882, three of the larger stores did. By 1914, all businesses calling themselves purely ‘Ladies’ Outfitters’ were owned by women. This suggests that women being fitted for garments preferred to be served by women, and that women were taking advantage of the new popularity for shopping by opening their own shops. Certainly it can be seen from the censuses that drapers in Colchester employed more female assistants than male. A ‘Ladies’ and children’s Outfitter’ in the smart Crouch Street area of town was in Kelly’s trade directory in 1914 under the name Ellen Polley whereas in fact she had died by 1911. In the 1911 census her widower was calling himself a ‘Fancy Draper and Outfitter’ with five live-in female assistants whereas in the 1891 census, it was Ellen who was ‘Ladies’ Outfitter’ with an assistant and her husband was a ‘Merchant’s Clerk’ employed elsewhere. He had taken over her successful business when she died but kept her name and plenty of female assistants to satisfy his customers. A successful Colchester draper, Richard Parsons, can be found in the census records from the 1870s to 1900. His business, at 34 High Street, grew from having three female assistants living in in 1871 to one female milliner, eight female assistants and two male assistants in 1880, and four male assistants (all his sons) and three female assistants in 1890. In all these

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75 Kelly’s Directory, 1914.
census records, his wife has no recorded occupation. Yet in the local paper in 1878 the following advertisement appears:

*IMAGE REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

Figure 21. *Mrs Parsons’ advertisement in the Essex Standard, 16 November 1878.*

It seems that wives were playing a crucial part in attracting female customers to their husbands’ stores.

Conclusion

Despite the proliferation of sewing machines and paper patterns for home use, the dressmakers of Colchester seem to have thrived. With these new innovations, they were able to run their businesses more efficiently by making clothes more quickly and having to employ fewer staff. Although many sewing machines were used at home, dressmakers were needed for clothes for special occasions and for those women who found dressmaking
beyond their talents even with the use of a machine. There seems to be little evidence in
Colchester that many drapers employed dressmakers but there is evidence of a rise in the
number of female assistants and of drapers’ wives making a much larger contribution to their
businesses than census records show. Many of these women might have been dressmakers,
and it is clear from Mrs Parson’s advertisement (Fig.10) that drapers’ shop customers
required ‘private show-rooms’ in order to be measured for garments or to try them on. There
is also evidence in Colchester of a move towards shops specialising in women’s clothing and
these were predominantly run by women.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine an industry that has been under-researched by historians and, in basing research around the market town of Colchester and the surrounding area, has discovered a thriving and essential trade. Primary source material is scarce but what there is gives interesting clues. Firstly, the apprentice records showed how seriously the training of dressmakers was considered. They were taken on for at least two years training and, in one case, a well-to-do farmer paid £30 to the dressmaker to take his daughter in.\(^1\) Secondly, trade directories showed the significant number of dressmakers that traded in Colchester and how many of them survived for long periods of time. They also showed that many were trading in the more well-to-do areas of the town so clearly their clients were middle and upper class. Census records showed the dressmakers’ backgrounds, many were single women often supported by sisters or nieces, a few were married. Often these census reports showed that their occupations were not recorded despite being listed in the trade directories. This suggests the cultural constraints under which they operated: their skills as dressmakers and businesswomen were not considered important in comparison to the occupations of male heads of households. From the census records this study also found that dressmakers tended to come from lower-middle-class backgrounds, in that their fathers were skilled workers, working independently. The records also showed that dressmakers often changed occupation in their later life, due to health problems common among needlewomen, such as arthritis and eyesight failure, but often had enough resources to own and run boarding houses.

\(^1\) Essex Record Office, Apprentice Indenture for Elizabeth Salows, D/DU 774/5.
Dressmakers were intricately connected to the world of fashion and the study of fashion magazines and newspaper articles gave more evidence of the importance of their businesses and the esteem in which they were held by their clients. These magazines and articles also conveyed the complex nature of fashion, both in the intricate needlework required and also the signifiers of class and social status. These were both complexities that dressmakers had to negotiate. Mrs Parsons of Colchester High Street advertised ‘Latest Paris Novelties’, for example, and the Misses Moth and Adams advertised ‘Ball and Evening Dresses in the Most fashionable Materials and Shades’. Clearly these women were keeping abreast with the latest fashions and their advertisements suggest that they were trusted by their clients to ensure that they wore the right clothes for the season.

The evidence found in secondary sources showed the resourcefulness of these women. It can be seen from Inder’s research that they adopted sewing machines early on even though they could initially only stitch straight lines. Despite sewing machines and paper patterns being advertised to women to enable them to sew their clothes at home, it was not noticeable in the trade directories that this reduced the number of dressmakers plying their trade in Colchester. To judge from photographs of middle-class women in Colchester at the turn of the century, this could well be due to the dictates of fashion whereby their dresses were required to be very ornate. Secondary sources also described the unique nature of the dressmakers’ trade in that it catered exclusively to women and was run exclusively by women. It becomes apparent that this was the main reason for its success but also for its invisibility in studies of

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2 Essex Standard, 16 November 1878; Essex Standard, 10 January 1880.
nineteenth-century skilled trades which tend to concentrate on men on the assumption that women, especially among the middle-classes, were not represented. This study put forward two reasons for this assumption. Firstly, within the patriarchal culture of the time, needlework was seen as a domestic skill and not worthy of men’s consideration, and secondly, the theory of separate spheres held by many historians which describes the Victorian belief that women should be ‘the angel of the house’ and not be involved in the unfeminine world of the marketplace. The fact that these businesswomen were middle class and successful and prolific suggests that women were not afraid of the marketplace and were capable of running businesses and the reason they were successful was precisely because their trade was entirely female.

Finally this study looked at the rise of the department store and consumerism. Drapers’ shops, which traditionally supplied fabrics and haberdashery to dressmakers, and were therefore an essential aspect of their trade, began to expand their range of merchandise in this period specifically to attract the rising number of women shoppers. There were many drapers’ shops in Colchester and records showed that they were expanding rapidly and taking out extravagant advertisements in the local press to attract customers. This included advertising dressmaking on the premises. This study found that although some of these shops had live-in dressmakers, most did not, and were still relying on selling fabrics which were taken to dressmakers to be made up into garments. The trade directories suggested that, instead of being usurped by these stores, dressmakers began to open a new type of shop, the Ladies’ Outfitter. It appears from their advertisements that these female shop owners were taking advantage of the need their customers had for a more discreet female environment in which to be fitted for dresses than they would get in a drapers’ shop.

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Conclusion

This study found a thriving, under-researched, female-run industry which catered to an important requirement of the period, which was the need of middle- and upper-class women to be fashionably dressed at a time when there was no other means of acquiring women’s clothes. These dressmakers ran workshops, apprentice schemes, studied fashion writings, gave advice and were generally indispensable. The culture of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods meant they were not considered as being on an equal footing with male skilled workers and, unfortunately, it appears that this view has also pervaded the historiography.
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