

RECLAIMING THE RAG TRADE

Former rag-&-bone lady GILL BARRON explores the seamy underside of recycling.

When I was a penniless squatter in Calderdale in the mid-1970s, my guru, rôle-model and employer was Thelma, Queen of the Todmorden Rag-Shop. Large, loud and flamboyant, she sprawled on a makeshift throne atop a vast pyramid of discarded clothing brought in by the local rag-and-bonemen, entrepreneurial hippies, and seedy-looking bailiffs in charge of shutting down the area's weaving sheds, cloth mills and corduroy-trouser factories. The Post-Industrial Age was just beginning. Old textiles were worth money, and Thelma paid cash.

My job was to sort the silks from the sows' ears, the detritus from the quality tat. Wool was *good*: infinitely recyclable, especially hand-knits, but even the roughest would make carpet underlay or felt or "shoddy", a compostable soil-improver. Cottons were ripped into squares and sold as wipers to garages or house-painters. Satin party-frocks, military and dinner-jackets, and so-called 'cocktail wear' were hung on a rail at the back of the shed, for collection by an exotic young man from Camden Town. Dismal afternoons were spent darning holes in hessian potato-sacks for resale to allotmenters (possibly the parents of today's Incredible Edible Todmorden-ites). The occasional joyous flash of scarlet flannel was a relic of generations of mill-worker women, whose red petticoats were believed to be a charm against the rheumatics of that damp climate. Corsets, still commonly worn, would bring a guffaw from Thelma, whose overflowing curves were a living rebuke to any such daftness.

Wading through the chintz curtains, moquette cushions and winceyette nighties, I'd fall into the dark abyss of nylon. None of it was any good for anything. It was flung onto the Crap Heap; later tied into bundles, using bri-nylon bedsheets, and dumped into some quarry, there to moulder for evermore.

Make Do and Mend

The synthetic fabrics posed other problems as well: according to Thelma, wreathed in fag-smoke on her lofty perch above the petroleum-based ex-clothing, there was a danger that static electricity caused by friction among the nylons might set off sparks and burn down the shed. And the noxious vapours given off by mixed, used rags caused strange dizzy spells. But the nastiest aspect of these garments was their creepy pretence to be something else. Acrylic posing as wool, for instance. When in doubt, there was the "teeth test". Are you, dear Reader, perhaps wearing a jumper of dubious provenance? I dare

you to place the cuff between your teeth and pull it sideways. Nails down a blackboard have nothing on this. Whereas you *can* chew on wool, should the fancy take you, without any such shuddery sensations.

"Recycling" was a brand-new word in those days; and a puzzling concept. Things you no longer needed you offered to friends, surely? And only then passed on to the Jumble Sale, whence most of them had originally come. It was a familiar experience to see someone walking down the street in your old jumper. This all stemmed from the fact that there was far less stuff, generally, available. No Primarks, no Peacocks — and Marks&Sparks's knickers famously lasted a decade.

Unlike stockings, with a lifespan of about two minutes. But even these had an after-life, as everything from jelly-bags for jam-making to emergency fan-belts for vehicles. Now that purpose-made solutions to every problem can be purchased off the shelf, we've lost those Eureka! moments when the sudden serendipitous juxtaposition of random objects would provide an inspired solution to almost any problem.

It helps if you don't have too much money. Fast fashion is a by-product of disposable incomes, which many choose to spend, not on books or music or seaside outings, but on cheap n' nasty garments that fall apart in no time. Unpleasant textiles that convert sweat into stink and are scratchy to boot, their tackiness covered up by gratuitous decoration; plastic sequins, machine "embroidery", obnoxious slogans and, absurdly, the manufacturer's logo writ large, do nothing to make people look more attractive.

The greatest irony is that it is now fashionable to look shabby — the so-called "distressed" look that originated with Punks and Crusties has gone mainstream, and jeans now come pre-ripped, exposing large areas of uncomely kneecap to the world. This ostentatious faux-poverty comes at a price — people happily pay extra for clothes that make them look like Worzel

Gummidge. Few can be unaware that these garments are produced under inhuman conditions in the sweatshops of poor countries, by people who would love to afford beautiful clothes for themselves. The most destitute road-mender will take pride in a beautiful sari, worn with grace, however worn-out. Indeed, all those Westerners who lollop round India in trendy rags, thinking to blend in with the locals, cause great offence by this lack of appreciation of their own good fortune.



Typical 1970s Rag & Bone boys delivering their finds to a shed very like Thelma's.



The reverse of this postcard reads:
"Combining a social occasion, local fundraiser, and affordable shopping with a chance to satisfy the hunting instinct, the jumble sale helps to sustain a traditional way of life amongst rural communities"

filling empty shop windows: rent and rates free, usually. Now they are big business, just like Top Shop; when you donate your cast-offs, a slice of the proceeds goes to pay overheads, not the charity itself. But in this Age of Waste, anything that enables and encourages the re-use of clothes, and household textiles too, all so energy-hungry in their manufacture, has to be a good thing. And the 230,000 volunteers who staff these shops get a bit more fun out of life.

Sartorial Signalling

Can it be that the espousal of gratuitous scruffiness by the Affluent Society is a warped expression of guilt; offsetting by some twist of logic our awareness of over-consumption? Clothes are very much a tribal badge in a faceless society: identifying as an 'outcast', a refusenik of some description by means of one's appearance is an ever-growing trend. Think, for instance, of all those youths from relatively safe, comfortable backgrounds who shamble around with their trousers at half-mast. This is a fashion copied from U.S. prison inmates, apparently. Bad boys! It turns out, however, that the designer-label underpants thus revealed are part of the trousers. Sewn in. They're manufactured to look like that. Rejecting society by buying in to some of its dafter products is only one symptom of the prevailing confusion.

Faith, Hope and Charity Shops

It's a cause for celebration that, in so many towns, charity shops now outnumber fashion-clothing chain-stores, re-selling those garments that were of sufficient quality to survive their first owner. Not all new clothes are rubbish, just most of them. The better ones deserve a second chance. One could argue that there are now so many second-hand clothes in circulation that there's no need to make any more; how about wearing this lot out first? (Yes, one *could* make an exception for underwear, and for men's clothes, which are scarce because often sold on to pricier vintage shops). And it's easy to separate the natural from the nasty materials: just shut your eyes and run your hand along the rail — a variation on Thelma's "teeth test".

Towns such as Weston-super-Mare owe a big chunk of their local economy to being Meccas for charity-shop shoppers. In the first quarter of 2019 their sales increased nationally by 6.2 percent.¹ This is why jumble sales are almost extinct: national and regional charities, everything from hospices and air ambulances to feral cats' homes, now have the dedicated infrastructure and trained managers needed to run such shops and extract the maximum profits from donated goods. Once they were just local councils' way of

Robin Osterley, CEO of the Charity Retail Association, says that charity shops are "bucking the high street trend that has seen well-known commercial chains struggle." But this success has a downside — they are having to deal with the rubbish as well as the saleable stuff. Tremendous disputes have broken out between charity-shop operators and waste management companies, the latter refusing to accept the insane quantities of low-grade fabrics being dumped on them. However the volume of textile waste sold on to recycling merchants is down 7.6 percent since last year.² This might mean that either fewer clothes are being discarded, or fewer bought in the first place.

Some well-meant solutions have turned out to be disastrous: for instance, another odd-job I had, working for a firm which sent second-hand lorry spare parts to Africa, was packing the containers with rags to stop the carburettors or whatever rattling around. Then we heard that these crappy old clothes were being sold in Nigerian markets to the dire detriment of the local weavers and tailors, and the uglification of the population. Apparently 61 percent of discarded clothes are exported, and in some African countries 80 percent of the people dress in second-hand gear.³

Reclaiming the Rag Trade

The current price of mixed "rag" is 42 pence a kilo, which is good for the charities selling on their rubbish, but a bit high for re-use options. Shredded, pulped and compacted ("flocked") textiles are already used for insulating buildings and cars, creating noise-barriers and loudspeaker cones, furniture and mattress padding and suchlike, and scraps create "eclectic garments marketed as a type of style known as Bohemian". These scraps are what's cut off when patterns for garments are cut out from the broadcloth. Traditionally they would have been turned into smaller garments to cover and keep larger ones clean: for aprons and pinafores, typically, as in the picture opposite.

By far the most lucrative end-use is in papermaking: the best quality artists' papers are still hand-made from rag, not wood-pulp. Describing America in 1749, Jack Frazier writes:

In a very real sense, paper-making in New England was made possible by ... the availability of discarded underwear, dresses, britches, shirts, rope and sailcloth. This brought down the price of the pulp for paper-making. It was common in those days for mill-owners to run ads such as the following: "The printer hereof, having a paper-mill, now at work near this city, desires all persons to save their old linen rags, for making paper. All sorts are useful, from the coarsest Crocus to the finest Holland or Cambrick; and he will give a price in proportion to the fine-ness, from a half-penny to three-halfpence, per pound."⁴

In 2008 the University of Copenhagen worked out that every kilo of textiles re-used saves 3.6 kg of CO₂ emissions and 6,000 litres of water. Given that the fashion industry is 'worth' \$1 trillion a year, and British consumers, according to WRAP, are throwing out almost a million tonnes of clothes, bedding and curtains a year, a good deal of this waste could probably be diverted into making quality paper, for producing books that are meant to last, thus saving a lot of trees and thereby yet another wodge of carbon.

Schwopping Shops

Some of the larger chain-stores have become quite aware of how much of the stuff they sell adds to the eventual rubbish mountain. There is as yet no sign of Primark, the worst of the cheapy-cheap retailers, developing a conscience, but over ten years ago Marks&Spencer's inaugurated a buy-back scheme for their famously durable clothing, called SchwopShop, in partnership with Oxfam, which has prevented an estimated 7.7 million items of clothing going to landfill. The idea continues to flourish. John Lewis's, a department store and online retailer owned by its workers has recently announced another such scheme, whereby unwanted clothing in any condition will be collected from its owner's home for redistribution or re-processing.⁵ Another estimate puts the value of clothes in the average British individual's wardrobe at £4,000; many of these garments are never worn, not least because the owner has got fatter and they no longer fit. In November 2017 the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (which studies potentials for a circular economy) and the Circular

Fibres Initiative produced a must-read 150-page report⁶ on the cost to the environment and economy of all these excess garments. Startling facts emerge, such as

Every second, the equivalent of one garbage truck of textiles is landfilled or burned. An estimated USD 500 billion value is lost every year due to clothing that's barely worn and rarely recycled. If nothing changes, by 2050 the fashion industry will use up a quarter of the world's carbon budget. As well as being wasteful, the industry is polluting: clothes release half a million tonnes of microfibres into the ocean every year, equivalent to more than 50 billion plastic bottles.

But, can you believe, it gets worse:

Total greenhouse gas emissions from textiles production, at 1.2 billion tonnes annually, are more than those of all international flights and maritime shipping combined.

So there is a great deal that can, and must be done to rescue the rag trade from the world's dustbins. It is of course a bit of a judgement call whether clothes are genuinely worn out: most people no longer work hard enough to destroy their outer coverings; instead they just wash their clothes to death. Artificial fibres just can't take the strain.

As Oscar Wilde put it, "Fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months." So why not ignore fashion altogether? With the growing awareness of the need for sustainable everything, comfort and warmth are making a come-back, along with knitting and darning as cool hobbies. It seems that fewer people are now buying ephemeral, disposable, trashy clothing and more are discovering an individual and creative approach to what they wear. Shabby chic is all the rage. People look better in their old clothes anyway — the face is so much more interesting than the frock.

1. fundraising.co.uk

2. Bureau of International Recycling: blr.org/textiles

3. W. Mallett, Whitney Inside the Massive Rag Yards. *New Republic* 18.8.2015

4. Frazier, Jack: *The Great American Hemp Industry*. Solar Age Press, West Virginia 1991

5. Smithers, Rebecca, "Money for Old Socks". *The Guardian* 20.6.2018

6. *A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future*, Ellen MacArthur Foundation, November 2017

Gill Barron

Based on a faded photograph of Lancashire silk-mill workers in 1939, this painting shows how ubiquitous and idiosyncratic the brightly-printed cotton pinafore, usually home-made from offcuts, was.

