

A social history of second hand clothing

Ian Woods of Bag2School takes us on a quick gallop through the history of old clothes, from relative scarcity to profusion.

History has an amazing ability to take us by the arm and tantalizingly lead us on journeys that open up a vista of times gone by even as we walk in our modern era.

Visitors to London who arrive at Liverpool Street Station may wish, if they have the time, to turn down Bishopsgate and then left towards Houndsditch. This marks the route of an old ditch which ran outside part of the London Wall, renowned in the 13th century as a place to dispose of rubbish and in particular dead dogs – hence the name. The

granted a charter to the Jews to operate stores selling strazzaria, which literally means rags but, by extension, included secondhand clothing, which were sought by a large part of the population especially foreign diplomats and visitors to the city and even the government itself for state occasions, as prior to the Industrial Revolution the production of clothes took a great amount of human and material resources.

Because even the simplest garments were relatively scarce and their production was costly, time consuming and labour intensive, an item of clothing became extremely transferable – a coat might be cut down into a vest or a dress into a scarf. A dress might be handed from mother to daughter and a master might give his worn-out shirt to his servant. In the Renaissance period it was common for servants to sell



Houndsditch Rag Fair

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City Authorities found it a continual problem to clean and scour the ditch and in 1503 it was paved over and became the haunt of brokers and sellers of old clothing. The playwright Ben Jonson refers to it in *Every Man in His Humour*, first performed in 1598:

Wellbred: *Where got's thou this coat?*

Brainworm: *Of a Houndsditch man, Sir, one of the devil's near kinsman, a broker.*

However the social history of second hand clothing goes back way before the 16th century. An association of 'Rag Collectors' is reputed to have been formed in 50 AD by Christian slaves captured by the Romans, and the 150th anniversary of this association is fully recorded in the archives of the Roman Empire in Milan. There was also a substantial Jewish colony in Rome and from the descriptions of contemporary writers they had the same characteristics as the Jewish colonies in European cities throughout the Middle Ages. They were forbidden to own land and were excluded from practicing most crafts – their primary sources of living were peddling and trading. In 1513 the Venetian government

their masters' old clothing to peasants in neighbouring villages. Itinerant rag and old clothes dealing grew into a calling – a profession of portability. By the middle of the 19th century, Petticoat Lane in London (not far from Houndsditch) held Sunday markets attended by between 12,000 and 15,000 persons, famous for its market of secondhand clothes from those of the richest in the land to the tattered garments of poverty.

The advent of mass reproduction heralded an era of increasing clothing production in Europe and North America. The more clothes there were, the more they changed hands. Cotton gins, mechanical looms and sewing machines made clothing easier to produce and more affordable. With more clothes for the taking, the middle class purchased more of them, therefore wearing each garment for less and less time.

Fashions changed faster – clothing became common instead of rare and worn clothes were discarded or exchanged at an even quicker pace. A range of disposal routes developed for the second (and third and fourth) lives of secondhand clothing and by the early 20th century secondhand

clothing was resold in shops and through itinerant merchants.

The advent of the charity shop is a relatively modern phenomenon – the first Oxfam shop opened in London in 1948 but it was only in the 1990s that the sector began to take off; there are now 9000 charity shops in the UK.

The demand for secondhand clothes has now moved to Eastern Europe, Africa, South America and the Asian sub-continent, and the UK now exports over 650,000 tonnes to these markets. Secondhand clothes now increasingly journey overseas en route to new encounters with new wearers.

Let's close this article by going back in time again, to the 3rd of July 1858. An article in *The Builder* magazine summarized Petticoat Lane market as follows – "Garments which in the eyes of most persons, would seem to be quite useless, are eagerly purchased by other artists, who, with marvelous powers and knowledge, turn, patch and cleanse these cast-off habiliments, and put upon them a gloss which gives them a charm in the eyes of a future purchaser. Oh, strange and composite world!"

Enviro facts

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An initiative by a market in Mexico City – Mercado de Trueque – that allows residents to exchange plastic bottles for vegetables has been so successful it is struggling to cope with demand.



The Metropolitan Police Service working across 31 London boroughs and employing 55,000 people at 900 buildings now achieves a waste recycling rate of 77% (this includes vehicles, uniforms and manure).



According to research from Zero Waste Scotland, over half the country's population is guilty of dropping litter. The research found that the amount of litter dropped costs £53 million to clear up



Waste and Recycling facilities across Lincolnshire are now able to generate their own electricity after the completion of a £300,000 solar energy installation.