



Fashion on the Ration

Entertainer **Fiona Harrison** talks about Second World War fashion restrictions and their effect on the British public.

It's easy to imagine that the introduction of clothes rationing in 1941 might have persuaded the British public to adopt a less smart appearance for the duration. If anything the reverse was actually true.

Rationing was announced by Oliver Lyttleton the president of the Board of Trade on the radio on 1 June 1941. The previous year when chancellor Sir Kingsley Wood raised income tax to 8s 6d in the pound, he had appealed for personal economies.

"It may be, that in a few months, when people walk along wearing a shabby suit or a shabby hat, the remark will be made, 'he is a patriotic man carrying out the chancellor's idea'".

The editor of *The Tailor and Cutter* hit back. "A shabby suit is not a badge of patriotism. It is a clear indication of the wearer's general slackness, his loss of personal pride and his adoption of the don't care attitude. Surely the last thing to be encouraged in these days."

The majority of the British public agreed and the Board of Trade quickly

realised that a range of utility clothes was essential if it was to succeed in keeping morale high and combat the growing fabric shortages. Military style tailoring became fashionable as shoulders started to widen and British designers came up with a range of clothes which were stylish, hard-wearing and easy to mass produce. These items were branded with the CC41 label which was designed to give consumers confidence and the reassurance they were buying an approved item which was well made and of good quality.

During the 1930s, Jewish tailors and cutters, refugees from Germany and Austria, brought to the UK new and ingenious ways of cutting patterns. This knowledge became essential in creating the ready-to-wear CC41 collections as wartime restrictions continued to bite. Made to measure clothes still remained the privilege of the wealthy, but those less well off could now afford to buy off-the-peg providing they had saved a significant amount of coupons.

A points value system was introduced, designed to make things fairer and

improve availability in the shops. The only snag was the same amount of points was required for a garment regardless of its price or quality, which often led to poorer clothes needing to be replaced more frequently.

To begin with, adults were allocated 66 clothing coupons a year but from 1 September 1945 to 30 April 1946 this fell to 24 which equated to as few as three coupons a month. The coupons didn't go far and consumers were advised to plan their wardrobes carefully and to "Make Do and Mend" before buying new.

Buying a new dress would require 11 coupons, new stockings two, and a man's shirt or a pair of trousers needed eight. Women's shoes required five and for a new pair of men's shoes the bearer would have to surrender seven coupons. Special provision was given to manual workers, civilian uniform wearers, diplomats and theatrical performers.

Children's clothes equated to 42 coupons yearly and these also had to be used in the buying of school uniform. Clothing exchanges were set up by the Women's Voluntary Service which