



COURT DRESSMAKING
IN MAYFAIR
FROM THE
1890s TO THE 1920s

AMY DE LA HAYE



I'd like to think that I was almost born on the steps of a Court dressmaker. Hardy Amies³

London's court dressmakers formed the precursor to – and overlapped with – the city's couture industry as it emerged in the early 1920s. It was in Mayfair, an exclusive residential and luxury trades area, where the two industries became concentrated and converged. Dressmakers and court dressmakers both made fashionable dress. The distinguishing characteristic of a court dressmaker, as the name suggests, was the additional provision of ceremonial dress. In Britain, elite social life revolved around the royal court (see Murphy, pp.247–57), and occasions such as the presentation of debutantes to the monarch, royal weddings and coronations generated numerous orders for etiquette-correct dress, accessories and robes.

Court dressmakers can be divided into three core categories: those established from the outset as court dressmakers (the majority); firms that evolved from menswear tailors; and those operating within department stores. In this chapter, a series of case studies is situated within an analysis of the broader industry, drawing on evidence newly gleaned from London's street directories. Emphasis is placed upon court dressmakers whose lives intersected with the fashion personnel and houses featured in subsequent chapters. In an era when Paris was considered the international fashion capital above all others, London's exclusive dressmakers and court dressmakers placed great premium upon Parisian designs. While many of London's couturiers who came after them initially set up using the title 'court dressmaker', it was to be the individual fashion identities they carved out, independent of Paris, that would set them apart.

Looking back to the year 1924, when he was appointed head of *Vogue's* London office, Harry W. Yoxall wrote in 1966 that, 'there was no couture in London, except for our branches of Worth and Paquin. Lucille [*sic*] and Reville, our only "native claimants to the title" had both retired.'² In fact they both were still operating, but note the premise that Lucile and Reville (discussed below) were proto-London couturiers.

THE BUSINESS OF DRESSMAKING & COURT DRESSMAKING IN THE METROPOLIS

By the late 1880s, London spanned 122 square miles: it had doubled in size over 50 years and was home to a population of some 4,358,000 people.³ The demand for clothing was huge. London's geographic and social spaces were commonly divided into the East End, the West End and the City, the latter being the financial and commercial centre. The East End housed thousands of small, labour-intensive clothing production units creating both cheap and luxury garments, and was home to scores of out- and home-workers. Skilled immigrants, many of whom had fled religious and political persecution, had expanded and enriched the workforce, particularly the Jewish community in the East End of London, and many Europeans worked as tailors on Savile Row. Fashion and textiles wholesale and warehousing businesses were primarily located in the City.

Twenty years earlier, in 1863, *Punch* had published a satirical illustration by John Leech titled 'The Haunted Lady or "the Ghost" in the Looking Glass'. As a client tries on her new, silk-flower-decorated, crinoline gown, the proprietor remarks that – whatever the sacrifice – completion on time had been assured. Looking into the mirror, the client sees not her fashionable self reflected, but the deathly appearance of the exhausted dressmaker who had honoured the deadline.⁴ Such injustices were also highlighted by contemporary social investigators Henry Mayhew, in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), Charles Booth, in *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1897), and in 1906 by *The 'Daily News' Sweated Industries' Exhibition*. They later formed the subject of historical studies, such as Christina Walkley's *The Ghost in the Looking Glass: The Victorian Seamstress* (1981) and *The Sweated Trades: Outwork in Nineteenth-Century Britain* by Duncan Bythell (1987). Less effectively documented are the experiences of permanent employees, engaged within exclusive West End court and dressmaking firms.

2. (previous) Frederick Bowditch, tailored jacket and skirt, wool tweed with leather trim, London, c.1908. Worn with a matching flat cap, for golf, by Miss Heather Furbank. V&A: T.20-D-1960.

3. (opposite) Alice Keppel and her daughter Violet Trevelyan, c.1912.

For most young women (dressmaking was female-dominated), the entry-point into the industry was to serve a three-year apprenticeship, which provided recognized qualifications and transferable skills. Familial support was essential, however, as no or only minimal wages were provided – thus preventing swathes of ambitious and talented women from poorer families developing a career with prospects. Sometimes this employment policy was strategic: Madame Clapham (1856-1952), a court dressmaker based in Hull (Yorkshire), is known to have implemented it precisely to ensure she attracted employees from 'good' families.⁸ By the early twentieth century, trade schools and technical colleges, such as the Barrett Street Trade School (est.1915), situated just north of Mayfair, also provided training opportunities for employment in West End dressmaking firms, but, like apprentices, students were self-supporting.

The trades sections of London's street directories (published annually by Kelly's and the Post Office, these list names and addresses gathered the previous year) record numerous court dress and dressmaking firms located in the West End – in and around Bryanston, Manchester and Portman Squares; Wigmore, Great Portland and Brook Streets – and in Kensington. They show that the most exclusive firms were predominantly Mayfair-based. The directories also reveal that the majority of these firms were headed by women, many of whom are listed as 'Mrs' or 'Madame'. Seemingly ambitious, creative and capable, these businesswomen suggest alternative narratives to the widely accepted depictions of Edwardian gentilewomen as socially and professionally constrained, routinely giving up paid employment upon marriage.

America did not have court dressmakers, but narratives from that continent's fashion industry, and the struggle facing its practitioners, highlight the considerable achievements of many London court dressmakers, such as Madame Handley-Seymour (1873-1948), who remained in business in Mayfair for three decades. A rigorous study of dressmakers and milliners working in Boston (Massachusetts) between 1860 and 1890, by Wendy Gamber, revealed that most had:

labored [sic] long at their callings, slowly climbing the occupational ladder from apprentice to proprietor. To be sure, few achieved more than modest success; the typical dress-or-bonnet[-]making establishment was a marginal, short-lived concern. Nevertheless, entrepreneurship had a special significance for those women who dared to enter the commercial arena.⁹

She states that the majority were in their thirties or forties, some 10 years older than the women they employed, and that most were unmarried. (This contrasts with those in London, who chose to style themselves as married.) One in three businesses failed after two years: the fact that two-thirds survived is a tribute to these tenacious, multi-talented women.⁷

From the street directories we can ascertain that the number of court dressmakers based in Mayfair grew significantly during the late nineteenth century; it stayed relatively stable during the First World War, and increased again after the war (from 42 firms in 1887 to around 90 between 1897 and 1918, rising to 101 in 1924). During the 1890s – as the indigenous industry was becoming established – leading Parisian *haute couture* houses also started to open London branches, in the same Mayfair streets and squares; clients could place orders from select, small collections (see Warwick, pp.197-9).

The proportion of Mayfair-based court dressmakers, compared to court dressmakers operating throughout the rest of London, was relatively stable in the period leading up to the First World War, hovering around 30%, but this overall market share had increased to 43% by 1916. As social life was much curbed, and court events suspended, for the duration of the war and into the early 1920s, these firms must have offered highly desirable fashion apparel to wealthy consumers whose lifestyles and budgets were not significantly impacted. The percentage of court dressmakers among dressmakers throughout London increased from 14.2% in 1887 to 32.3% in 1924. In Mayfair, however, the rate of growth was almost three times this, increasing from 57.5% to nearly 158% over the same period.



4. "Town Life" in Bond Street. After the black & white drawing by Edward King, c.1904.

Mayfair's dressmaking that was not linked to the court experienced a more tumultuous history. In 1887, there were 73 dressmakers in Mayfair; in 1902, there were 67, after which the number dropped dramatically – to 25 in 1907, falling further, to 16, by 1912. By 1916 (perhaps surprisingly, in the midst of the war) the quantity had risen to 51; it increased further, to 64, in 1924.⁶ The trade in luxury fashion and ceremonial dress had become a major industry in Mayfair.

So, by 1924, the city's court dressmaking industry was at its peak, with 101 court dressmakers based in Mayfair and 224 conducting business throughout the rest of the capital. It was at this point that London's couturiers emerged, first establishing their businesses as court dressmakers. However, from the 1930s they mostly eschewed the term – which sounded old-fashioned and implied a lack of fashion creativity – while continuing to design court dress.

HOW MAYFAIR BECAME FASHIONABLE

Mayfair is a name to evoke visions of exclusiveness, of luxury, of formal pleasures, of elaborate entertainment, of diamonds and ermine and hot-house flowers, of red carpets and white satin and white shoulders, of beauty and elegance and distinction. It is a vision of the past ... the recent past but remote from present day. Barbara Worsley-Gough, 1952⁹

Mayfair is situated within the City of Westminster in London (distinct from the financial district known simply as 'the City'). It spans some 285 acres and has two royal parks at its periphery. It is bounded by four of London's most famous and fashionable streets: Oxford Street (to the north), Regent Street (east) Piccadilly (south) and Park Lane (west). Originally, the site was used for agriculture, dairy farming and market gardening, and the name Mayfair was derived from the annual spring fair, which commenced on the first day of May. By the late eighteenth century, wealthy landowners – the Grosvenors (the Dukes of Westminster), the Berkeleys, Burlingtons, Curzons and Albemarle – had built mansions in streets and squares bearing their own names. Not long after, purveyors of luxury goods became established in the area to serve its wealthy residents.

Bond Street, in the centre of Mayfair, was to become one of London's foremost fashion streets. It is divided between Old Bond Street (built 1686) at the south end, and New Bond Street (built 1690). By the 1850s, most private residences and hotels on this street had been replaced by specialist retailers and, by the 1890s, many of these were dressmakers and court dressmakers. Mount Street, Dover Street, New Burlington Street and Hanover Square became similarly populated. The larger dressmaking firms and department stores were established in Mayfair's major thoroughfares – in Oxford Street and in Regent Street, which was designed by John Nash in 1813 and named after his patron the Prince Regent, later King George IV (r.1820-30).

Mrs Charlotte Mortimer started her career as a house mannequin at Reville & Rossiter (est.1906, 15 Hanover Square) and went on to become a director at Worth (London) (see de la Haye, pp.111-13). She believed that high fashion was far more visible in the 1900s than in the 1950s and attributed this to women shopping on foot in these elegant districts:

Going to the dressmaker was looked upon as a social activity, as much a part of the fashionable pattern as the At Home or the dinner party. By five o'clock Hanover Square and the streets all round were filled with waiting carriages and there were usually little groups of spectators waiting to see the notables.¹⁰

It should be noted, however, that while women's increasing visibility and participation in city life during this period was considered emancipatory, it also provoked unease in some quarters.¹¹

16 GROSVENOR STREET: A CASE STUDY

The following biography of one building provides a vignette of elite Mayfair social life and its attendant industries, noting its shifting function from private residence to couture house. It also charts the changing trends in interior design, later evidenced in the décor of London's couture houses.

The elegant Georgian buildings in Grosvenor Street, designed by the architect Thomas Ripley (1683–1758), were erected between 1720 and 1725. F.W. Shepard's *Survey of London* (1980) reveals that, initially, residents comprised the nobility, army officers, ambassadors and senior churchmen. By 1820 the rent had become prohibitively high, however, and the building at no.16 remained empty for four years.

In 1824, the lease was granted to Thomas and George Seddon, fashionable cabinet-makers and upholsterers, on the condition that it was used as a showroom, not as a manufactory or shop. The *Survey* quotes a 1938 history of the house, stating that:

*In Grosvenor Street, [...] a small brass plate 'on the inside door was the only outward and visible sign of the considerable inward activities that took place there. Only top hats were allowed in the front, caps and aprons finding entrance at the back. If an unsuspecting vanman pulled up at the front door the whole street shuddered.'*¹²

In the late 1950s, London's couturiers would also be obliged to keep their front doors closed, to render discreet their commercial function.¹³ Between 1824 and 1828, the Seddon brothers rented the upper part of the building to the newly founded Oriental Club, for which a new staircase and separate entrance were installed. In 1860, the building was leased to Collard and Collard, piano-makers, who engaged the influential designer and design theorist Owen Jones (1809–74) to add colour to the Adam ceiling and interior (Robert Adam, 1728–92). They also adapted a room to host afternoon concerts (pl.5).

By 1909, however, 16 Grosvenor Street had resumed its residential status, when Lieutenant-Colonel George Keppel bought the lease. His wife, The Hon. Mrs Alice Keppel (1868–1947, pl.3) was a society beauty who, from 1898, was the mistress of the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII (r.1901–10). Her husband – like others before him – was compelled by etiquette to turn a blind eye to a very public affair. Alice ordered clothes from Worth in Paris and, in Mayfair, patronized Kate Reily (est.1880) and Lucile (est.1893 as a dressmaker and 1895 as a court dressmaker), whose premises were close by. Mrs Mortimer, mannequin and later fashion director (at Worth), remembered people gathering outside Lucile's premises, hoping to catch a glimpse of Keppel and other famous clients.

Alice Keppel engaged the architect F.W. Foster to undertake interior remodelling, including the building of a branching staircase and new

chimneypieces. She retained the original eighteenth-century interior and gave prominence to two huge porcelain pagodas, which were a gift from the King, who died before seeing the house. Alice plunged into mourning and set off for China. She did not move into no.16 until 1912, when she tinted her white hair blue and – phoenix-like – resumed her elaborate social life.

That spring, the Keppels' elder daughter Violet (1894–1972) was presented as a debutante: 300 guests were invited to her coming-out ball at the house. The older women gathered resplendent in grand gowns and fine jewels, while Violet entertained her friends in rooms decorated in the informal, oriental-fantasy style popularized by the Ballets Russes. Violet was a reluctant debutante: she was already devoted to the writer The Hon. Victoria Mary (Vita) Sackville-West (1892–1962). She came to regard the formalities of life at 16 Grosvenor Street as utterly stifling; Sackville-West fictionalized the lifestyle in her comedy of manners *The Edwardians* (1930).

When Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith (1852–1928) resigned in 1916, it was to the Keppels' house that he and his wife Margot (1864–1945) decamped. (Margot provoked 'The Gowning Street Scandal' when she invited the *haute couturier* Paul Poiret [1879–1944] – a Parisian – to show his collection at Downing Street in 1909. Her action was considered intensely unpatriotic.) The Keppels remained in residence until 1924.

The next and final private residential leaseholder was a Captain Gerard Leigh who, during the mid-to-late 1920s, let the building to the egregious Mrs James Corrigan and her husband, from Cleveland (Ohio). Loeila Ponsonby (1902–93), the future Duchess of Westminster, attended several parties there and described Mrs Corrigan as an eccentric, well-liked character, recalling her signature tombola event, which had prizes from Cartier that were always 'won' by the highest-ranking guests.¹⁴

In 1935–6, the architects Wimperis, Simpson and Guthrie were brought in to convert the building for the purposes of a fashion textiles firm and couture house, requiring a design studio, workrooms and a showroom (pl.6). The exterior portico and continuous balcony with iron railings were replaced with pilasters that framed the entrance, and first-floor window guards. The eighteenth-century interior was, again, preserved and it was this style that came to characterize London's couture houses. The 1937 street directory lists the four new occupants as, 'J.H Lyons and Co Ltd. (silk mercers), Jacqmar (fabrics), Albert & Johnson (court dressmaker) and Ina Claire (lingerie designer)'. Jacqmar became a successful couture house, with a series of designers at the helm, including Victor Stiebel and Bianca Mosca (see de la Haye, pp.85–97; 151–3). Set in Mayfair's heartland, 16 Grosvenor Street was in a prime location for the home market and also enjoyed significant business from overseas personnel stationed at nearby embassies.



5. Engraving of the concert room at 16 Grosvenor Street, *The Illustrated London News*, 2 August 1862.



6. Exterior of Jacqmar, 16 Grosvenor Street, mid-to-late 1930s.

COURT DRESSMAKERS IN MAYFAIR

By the early twentieth century the fashion media had expanded to include a range of income levels and tastes. More than ever before, women were informed of the latest Paris trends, the most fashionable *haute couturiers* and the lifestyles led by their glamorous, international clientele. Monthly journals such as *The Lady's Realm* (est.1896) and weekly papers such as *The Queen* (est.1861) also reported on British high-society news, including descriptions of garments and sometimes noting the court dressmaker, who in the majority of cases was London-based. Among the most prestigious Mayfair court dressmakers were Russell & Allen (17-20 Old Bond Street), Kate Reily (10, 11 and 12 Dover Street), Madame Hayward (67-8 New Bond Street), Madame Handley-Seymour (est.c.1910, 17-18 New Bond Street) and Sarah Fullerton Monteith Young (31 Mount Street and 65 South Audley Street).

A number of garments and accessories bearing their labels are housed in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. These provide fascinating material evidence of styling, cut, fabrics and workmanship during this period, as well as revealing which models were ordered and worn by clients, for whom they were made to fit perfectly. The paper archives provide depictions of sample designs in watercolour, some with fabric and trimming swatches attached and written annotations. There also exist photographs of mannequins modelling sample garments; together with images of interiors of dressmaking premises and fashion parades.

Business documents such as sales ledgers, staffing details, and records of materials costs and capital investment do not appear to survive. Prices paid by clients for garments were recorded on receipts, but few of these are extant. One receipt from Russell & Allen dated November 1899 (pl.7) records that a pale-green satin, silk-lined, ballgown trimmed with chiffon and lace cost £15 4s 6d (about £1,680 at today's prices) – the 5% discount was standard for prompt payment. Numerous firms failed to survive due to outstanding client bills, however.

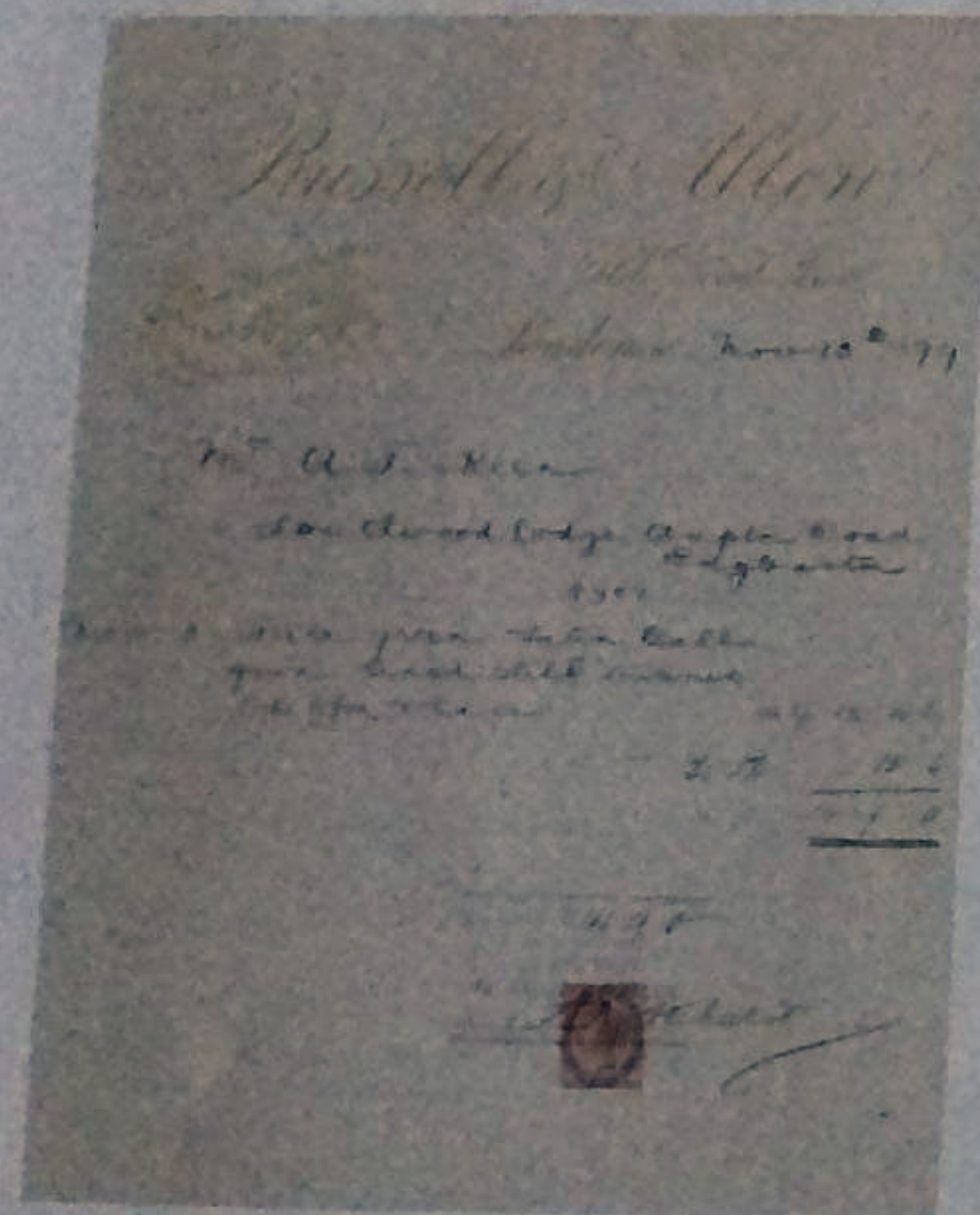
Evidence can also be gleaned from press reports, tourist guides to London, testimonies, memoirs, autobiographies and biographies. The anonymously published *Modern London* (1889) documents the city's multifarious industries, including some compact case-studies of select Mayfair court dressmakers and ancillary trades. Madame Tofield, 'Court Milliner and Dressmaker' (est.c.1865, 179 New Bond Street), occupied the upper three floors of a roomy building with a picture gallery at street level. Having established herself as a milliner, Tofield successfully grew her business, offering costumes and mantles, court robes, ballgowns, dinner- and tea-gowns, walking costumes and bridal gowns. By 1889 she held a royal warrant as court milliner to the Queen. The writer noted:

*The firm have won eminent renown for their skill and taste in the illustration of the modiste's art, and their confections are always conspicuous for elegance and perfection of style. They are invariably adapted to the personal appearance of the wearer, and are every one of them studies in harmony of colour and clever combinations of materials in artistic forms and designs.*¹⁵

When London's dressmakers and court dressmakers were noted for their design distinction (rather than fostering an association with Paris) the adjectives 'artistic', 'original' and 'individual' were commonly applied (see Faiers, pp.287-301).

Dressmakers also offered a guarantee of 'correct' dress, saving their clients sartorial embarrassment. An annual guide to London's elite social life and shopping, written by Charles Eyre Pascoe from 1885, called *London To-Day: An Illustrated Handbook for the Season*, was aimed at Americans and other visitors. In the 1890 edition, Pascoe noted the presence of several 'high-born' dressmakers who each:

*have the advantage of knowing that she not only possesses the taste of a highly-cultivated lady, but from her social rank must be cognizant of what is worn by those, who, if they do not make the fashions, decide in their own persons what is 'good form.'*¹⁶



8. Madame Handley-Seymour, design for an evening dress, pencil, pen and ink, and watercolour, Spring/Summer 1911. V&A: E.202-1958. Given by Mrs Joyce Whitehouse.

9. Madame Handley-Seymour, design (attr. Chanel) for a day dress with royal blue embroidery and matching wide-brimmed hat, pencil, pen and ink, and watercolour, Spring/Summer 1920. Sketch by Gwendoline Jenner. V&A: E.1677-1958. Given by Mrs Joyce Whitehouse.

Among his examples was Mrs Cyril Drummond, owner of Mascotte (est.1905 at 89 Park Street; 29 Kensington Church Street, Kensington in 1909). The dressmaker Lucile, who was to become Lady Duff Gordon (1863-1935), was another.

MANNEQUINS

Lucile injected an unabashed glamour and sophistication into London's court dressmaking industry, partly through her mannequin presentations. Her salons at 17 and, later, 23, Hanover Square (pl.10) were decorated and furnished to resemble luxurious private residences; the practice of inviting clients to view seasonal collections was one promoted by Worth in the 1860s and subsequently adopted by most Parisian *haute couturiers* and London couturiers. Lucile's autobiography *Discretions and Indiscretions* (1932), forms a fascinating, amusing and somewhat grandiose read. Having observed various firms showing their models to clients on house mannequins with anonymous demeanours, wearing full-length, black satin undergarments, Lucile wrote:

*Slowly the idea of a mannequin parade, which would be as entertaining to watch as a play, took shape in my mind. I would have glorious, goddess-like girls who would walk to and fro dressed in my models, displaying them to the best advantage to an admiring audience of women.*¹⁷

She engaged six young women who she then groomed, coaching them in how to walk and express the character of what she called her 'gowns of emotion'¹⁸ by best exploiting their distinctive styles and personalities. Lucile's first fashion parade was staged in 1904. Printed leaflets, designed to emulate theatre programmes, recorded the running order of the parade and each ensemble was given a name, some romantic and some 'bold'. Her guests included Margot Asquith (Lady Oxford, wife of the Liberal Prime Minister), the great Shakespearian actress Ellen Terry (1847-1928) and stage actress Lillie Langtry (1853-1929). According to Lucile, the orders flowed in and her mannequins became famous overnight.

In 1907, when Mrs Charlotte Mortimer was a young married woman with two children, she went to Reville & Rossiter at 15 Hanover Square to seek employment as a house mannequin. Exclusive firms usually required a premium (payment) upon appointment. Unable to provide this, she offered to work free of charge for a period of time instead. Her working hours were 9am to 7pm Monday to Friday, and 9am until 2pm on Saturdays. Her salary, once payments began, started at 10 shillings a week, soon rising to 23 shillings (20 shillings in a pound; she was making £1 3s), which, she recalled, was considered an enormous sum for a young woman to earn.¹⁹ A full court dress from Reville cost £70 (over a year's earnings for a mannequin) and the firm received orders for about 50 of these each year.²⁰

THE INFLUENCE OF PARIS, & PROMOTION

Madame Handley-Seymour (née Elizabeth Fielding) was a married woman in her early twenties when she launched her eponymous business (c.1910). She remained at its head for 30 continuous years at the same address, 47 New Bond Street. In 1958, her daughter, Mrs Joyce Whitehouse, generously donated to the V&A 48 large volumes of watercolour designs depicting the court dressmaker's seasonal collections (missing only the years 1930-5, pls 8,9).²¹ Three further albums in the V&A archive marked 'Theatrical dress' record costumes (in the style of contemporary fashion) designed by Madame Handley-Seymour for actresses to wear on stage, as well as luxurious fancy dress, both of which enterprises provided an important income stream and generated valuable publicity for many of London's court dressmakers and couturiers. These records of one court dressmaker's design work are unrivalled.



10. Mannequin parade at Lucile, 23 Hanover Square, London, 1913. V&A: AAD/2008/6/28.

Early in her career Madame Handley-Seymour rarely signed her designs. However, she did acknowledge designs she copied or adapted from Parisian *haute couturiers*. For her Autumn/Winter 1911 collection she credits Doucet, Poiret, Chéruit, Beer, Premet, Doeuillet and Bernard. For Spring/Summer 1920, she made her first copy of a Chanel dress (pl.9) and clearly also admired Edward Molyneux (see Taylor, pp.99–109), crediting 11 of his designs that season. Madame Handley-Seymour also showed Paris models alongside her own collections.

An advertisement placed in *Vogue's* late February 1918 issue reads, 'Paris Models. Madame Hayward begs to announce that she has just returned from Paris with an exquisite collection of the Latest Models comprising tailor-made costumes, day, restaurant and evening gowns, cloaks, blouses, millinery and corsets.'²² Among the *haute couturiers* whose models she imported were Chéruit and Callot Soeurs.²³ In 1969, Mrs Gilbert Russell (1891–1981), donated to the V&A a group of garments she had ordered from Madame Hayward over a period of 27 years. These include an afternoon ensemble of black silk taffeta with a *chiné* floral design from 1917;²⁴ day dresses, afternoon dresses and a slip dating from c.1925.

Others, particularly those from the previous generation, such as Kate Reily (1846–1908), eschewed advertising and were altogether discreet about copying Parisian designs. This court dressmaker (est.1880, pl.12) sent her buyer/s to Paris, accompanied by a fashion artist, to attend trade shows staged by the *haute couture* houses and make minimal (probably obligatory) purchases of around one dress per season. (The acclaimed Parisian *couturière* Madeleine Vionnet, 1876–1975, learned her craft as an apprentice at Kate Reily.) Nonetheless, Reily's collections were highly recommended by Charles Eyre Pascoe in *London of To-Day* (1890) for demonstrating a 'more pronounced "personality" in their selection' than those of other court dressmakers. Pascoe noted she could lead as well as following fashion 'if she wanted'.²⁵ At this time, however, it was not considered commercially advantageous for a British dressmaker or court dressmaker to promote her own fashion creativity.

The V&A's fashion collection houses only a few items by Kate Reily, including a princess-line evening dress in cream silk and chiffon, with embroidered tulle and a black silk-velvet waist sash, dating from c.1907.²⁶ However, a Pierotti wax doll (c.1903, pl.11) from the toy collection, wearing a white lace and silk afternoon dress with a straw hat, is labelled 'Kate Reily Ltd., Dover Street, London'.²⁷ Fashion dolls such as this have served as appealing, easily portable and financially economical ambassadors of dressmakers' and *haute couturiers'* creative output since the eighteenth century. The Kate Reily doll was probably made as an eye-catching form of display. She wears a pretty afternoon ensemble, which is all the more fascinating as it is very rare for museum collections to house head-to-toe ensembles from this early period.

LADIES' TAILORS TO COURT DRESSMAKERS

Working alongside the dressmakers and court dressmakers were specialist tailors who, since the eighteenth century, had made sporting dress and tailored costumes, both of which became fashion mainstays from the 1890s. It is in this area that Britain's fashion and textiles industries have long enjoyed international patronage and acclaim. Tailoring firms were usually headed by men and catered primarily to male clients, who sometimes brought their wives and daughters to be fitted. Some of these tailors expanded their businesses to include fashionable and court dress. John Redfern (1820–95) is perhaps the best known of these.

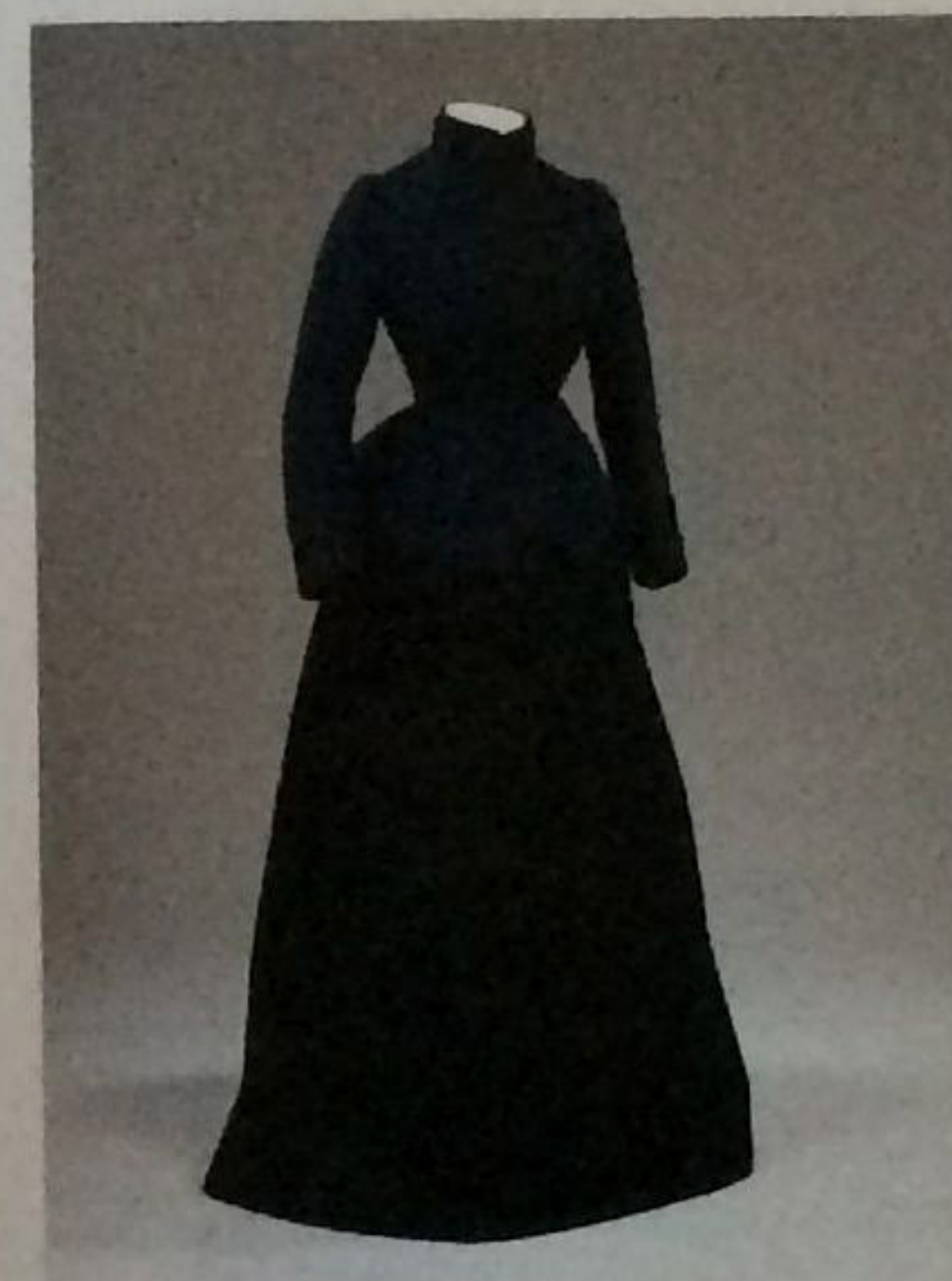
John Redfern & Sons ('Redfern') opened in the late 1840s as a draper based in Cowes (Isle of Wight), a fashionable seaside resort where Queen Victoria (r.1837–1901) was often resident. By the 1870s they were making clothing and the firm dressed her daughters, granddaughters and her daughter-in-law Princess Alexandra (1844–1925). Redfern was to become an international operation, with branches in London (1876), Paris (1881) and New York (1884). Regional outlets were opened in Manchester and Edinburgh (1888).



11. Pierotti, wax doll dressed in lace and silk gown, and wearing hat labelled 'Kate Reily Ltd, Dover Street', London, c.1903. V&A: T.23–1943. Given by Mrs D.M. Colpoys and Miss K. Young.



12. The showroom at Kate Reily, 11–12 Dover Street, London, 14 November 1898.



Susan North, Curator of Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Fashion at the V&A, has undertaken extensive research on Redfern, some of which has been published in the journal *Costume*.²⁰ Here, it is important to note that Redfern became famous for designing tailored sportswear for yachting, shooting, riding, golf and walking. The V&A has a stylish black-flannel riding habit, made in 1885 (pl.14). Such designs informed the modern wardrobe mainstay, which Redfern was instrumental in introducing, that comprised tailored jacket, skirt and blouse (as a daytime alternative to the two-piece dress).

Modern London commended Redfern for 'charmingly original and quite unique ideas'²¹ and Pascoe recommended him as the finest tailor for 'dresses for walking purposes'.²² By 1894, Redfern had opened workrooms to make reception and court presentation dresses, ballgowns, wedding dresses and millinery and, from 1899, clients could order undergarments and tea gowns from his specialist lingerie showroom. When the Bond Street premises was refurbished in 1904, a picture window, large enough to display a court dress with the train fully spread, was installed.²³

Redfern's London branches (26–7 Conduit Street and 27 New Bond Street) were managed by the tailor Frederick Mims until 1902, when Mims went on to establish his own business using his Christian names Frederick Bosworth (at 9 New Burlington Street). He was among the London tailors and court dressmakers whom fashion client Miss Heather Firbank (1888–1954) patronized – her substantial wardrobe of over a hundred items was acquired by the V&A in 1960 (pl.13).²⁴ Redfern's business continued to thrive and later merged with Busvine (est.1881, 156 Oxford Street), another prestigious tailoring firm that became a court dressmaker, in 1936. The business operated until 1951.

Working alongside Redfern were scores of London tailoring firms whose names and addresses are listed in a special section on 'Tailoring' in the street directories. Unfortunately, many of their histories have been obscured with the passage of time.

COURT DRESSMAKERS: DEPARTMENT STORES

The street directories identify some department stores operating as court dressmakers. In Mayfair (and its immediate proximity), Marshall & Snelgrove (est.1837, Vere Street), Fenwick Ltd (est.1891, New Bond Street) and Jays (est.1841, Regent Street) are listed as court dressmakers, while other prestigious London department stores, such as Harrods, Selfridges and Liberty of London, are not.

The advent of the department store in the 1830s revolutionized retailing practices, mostly in large towns and cities, by selling multiple – usually high quality – goods and services under one roof. Traditionally, retailers had specialized in one type of merchandise. By the 1870s, many department stores had enjoyed such immense success that their owners were in a position to commission elegant, purpose-built, premises. Marshall & Snelgrove constructed a huge store at 334–48 Oxford Street (on the north side, facing Mayfair) in 1876. Department stores usually had dressmaking departments with workrooms, where garments were made and alterations undertaken.

Retail historian Alison Adburgham has noted that the department stores' clientele comprised mainly visitors from rich manufacturing towns who were not sufficiently acquainted with London to discover dressmakers within their means, or were too self-conscious to subject themselves to the 'dispraising eyes' of the court dressmaker or her *vendeuses*. She adds wryly that, 'a shop with a constant flow of customers to all departments was never quite so alarming as the kind of dressmaking house which the privileged ladies of Society patronized.'²⁵

13. (opposite) Frederick Bosworth, tailored jacket and skirt, wool (faded from its original lilac colour) with silver thread and silk corded decoration, London, c.1908–10, worn by Miss Heather Firbank, V&A, T.265-A–1960. Given by Mrs T.M. Firbank.

14. John Redfern & Sons, riding habit jacket (modelled with replica skirt), flannel trimmed with moiré military-style braiding, lined with satin, made for May Primrose Littledale, London, 1885, V&A, T.430–1990. Given by the Hon. Mrs S.E. Tyser.

15. (overleaf) Atte. Lucile, nightdress, embroidered silk georgette and chiffon, trimmed with lace, London, 1913, V&A, T.1–1973. Given by Mrs Wormald.

LUCILE & REVILLE: PROTO LONDON COUTURIERS?

From 1916 and through the 1920s, both Lucile and Reville's collections were reviewed as the work of creative designers and featured in British *Vogue*. Reinforcing Harry W. Yoxall's view, Barbara Worsley-Gough, author of *Fashions in London* (1952) identified them as firms that, after the First World War, 'competed on equal terms with Paris houses'.³⁴

Lucile was born Lucy Christians Sutherland in 1863; her sister was the romantic novelist Elinor Glyn (1864–1943). She was entirely self-taught as a dressmaker. In 1893, following her petition for divorce from her husband James Wallace, she started to work as a dressmaker, using the trade name Lucile. She had a young daughter and worked from home at 25 Davies Street, Mayfair. Two years later, when her divorce was granted, she opened her own business as a court dressmaker at 24 Old Burlington Street. Her business flourished and in 1898 she moved to a large, prestigious, house at 17 Hanover Square.

In 1900 she remarried, becoming Lady Duff Gordon, and thereafter worked by choice. By 1905, the street directory lists her business address at 23 Hanover Square, which, over the course of the next four years, she transformed into a sophisticated fashion house that operated along Parisian lines, with various ateliers, *vendeuses*, mannequins and luxurious salons. Lucile opened her first branch in Paris in 1910, and henceforth described herself as a 'grande couturière'; branches in New York (1911) and Chicago (1915) followed.

Looking back on pre-war couture, Cecil Beaton (1904–80) eulogized, 'Never, surely, has the dressmaker's art soared to such heights as in the dresses of this period designed by that delicate genius Lucille [sic].'³⁵ Lucile's designs were characterized by long, slender lines. Other signatures included the layering of sheer fabrics over a flesh-toned foundation (to suggest bare skin); by 1910 her striking empire-line sheath dresses were distinctive for their asymmetry, and her understated and supremely elegant tailoring often featured multiple rows of self-covered buttons and piped detailing in contrasting colours. She also made extensive use of the colour blue and its tonal variants.

Lucile recoiled from the idea of her romantic gowns being worn over staid undergarments made from 'nun's veiling' (a very fine wool) or Swiss embroidered linen:

So I started making underclothes as delicate as cobwebs and as beautifully tinted as flowers, and half the women in London flocked to see them, though they had not the courage to buy them at first. Those cunning little lace motifs let in just over the heart [pl.15], those saucy velvet bows on the shoulder might surely be the weapon of the woman who was 'not quite nice'.³⁶

The press reviewed Lucile's designs as 'original', 'picturesque' and 'artistic'; she did not align her collections with Paris designs nor did she sell Paris models alongside her own. She harnessed the power of the press, even working within its ranks, writing newsy fashion texts for *The Illustrated London News* and *The Daily Sketch* in the UK, and for American publications including *Weldon's Ladies Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*. This was exceptional among London's court dressmaking industry.

Lucile exploited the nascent talents of two of London's couturiers: Edward Molyneux, whom she employed, and Norman Hartnell (see

Hattrick, pp.45–59), before he opened his own house (and successfully sued her for copying his designs). Though Lucile's career started to decline from the early 1920s, she continued to work until her death in 1935 and arguably holds the mantle as the first London court dressmaker to work as a couturière. More importantly, she was also the first internationally famous female fashion designer. Her family ensured her legacy in perpetuity by preserving her designs and photographs of her fashion houses, which they presented as a gift to the V&A in the 1960s, by which time they had acquired the status of an invaluable fashion-historical archive. Today, Lucile's garments and related print media are held in museum collections in the UK and in the US.

William Wallace Terry (1870–1948) did not leave records for future generations; his various business ventures did not reach the height or scale of Lady Duff Gordon's and his garments are not as well represented within museum collections. Although his career spanned over 40 years in London's elite fashion industry, it has not hitherto been subject to the appreciation or critical scrutiny it warrants. He founded court dressmaker Reville & Rossiter in 1906, at 15 Hanover Square, taking the professional name of Reville and twinning it with the surname of Miss Sarah Rossiter. The duo had met at Jay's department store (est.1841 as Jay's General Mourning Warehouse), where he was the buyer of mantles and she tea gowns. Reville, unusually for a man at this time, became designer and Miss Rossiter undertook the role of business administrator. Reville & Rossiter flourished: in 1908 they acquired 16 Hanover Square and, in 1920, opened additional premises at 297–9 Oxford Street.

Orders for mourning dress formed an important part of the business. Following Queen Victoria's example after the death of Prince Albert in 1861, British society followed strict rituals concerning the public display of grief, of which dress was the most visible indicator. Matte (non-reflective) black fabrics were used to make fashionably styled garments which, after a specified time, could be succeeded by clothes made in a dull mauve colour known as 'heliotrope', shades of grey and white. Mrs Mortimer recalled, 'Not even the Court season with Ascot and the opera and all the rest of it could ever compete with the mourning orders for sheer volume.'³⁷ A principal and a fitter were sent to the home of the deceased and the measurements of the whole family, including the children and domestic staff, were taken. The first order had to be ready for the funeral, which necessitated all staff working until midnight or later.³⁸ The Messel Dress Collection, housed at Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove, includes examples of Reville & Rossiter mourning dress. Following the death of King Edward VII in 1910 all fabrics in the storeroom were dyed black to meet the demand for mourning.

In 1911, Reville & Rossiter was awarded the most prestigious of all commissions – to design Queen Mary's coronation gown, worn at Westminster Abbey beside her husband King George V (r.1910–36). She subsequently placed regular orders. In 1912, Reville bought out Miss Rossiter, but he continued to trade as Reville & Rossiter until 1919. (The business subsequently underwent various permutations but henceforth is referred to as 'Reville'.)

In 1917, British *Vogue* reported that, 'His predilection for the Orient and all its treasures of tissue and gem are well known, and during his many travels to the east he has gathered inspiration and material for some of his happiest models.'³⁹ The V&A houses a gold, brocaded silk Reville evening gown from 1919, with a witty silver and red *trompe l'oeil* design of tassels (regarded as talismanic in Eastern cultures) and also

REVILLE AND ROSSITER, LONDON'S FAMOUS DESIGNERS, SHOW AN ENVIABLE COLLECTION OF THEIR OWN CREATIONS, TOGETHER WITH SOME CHARMING PARIS MODELS



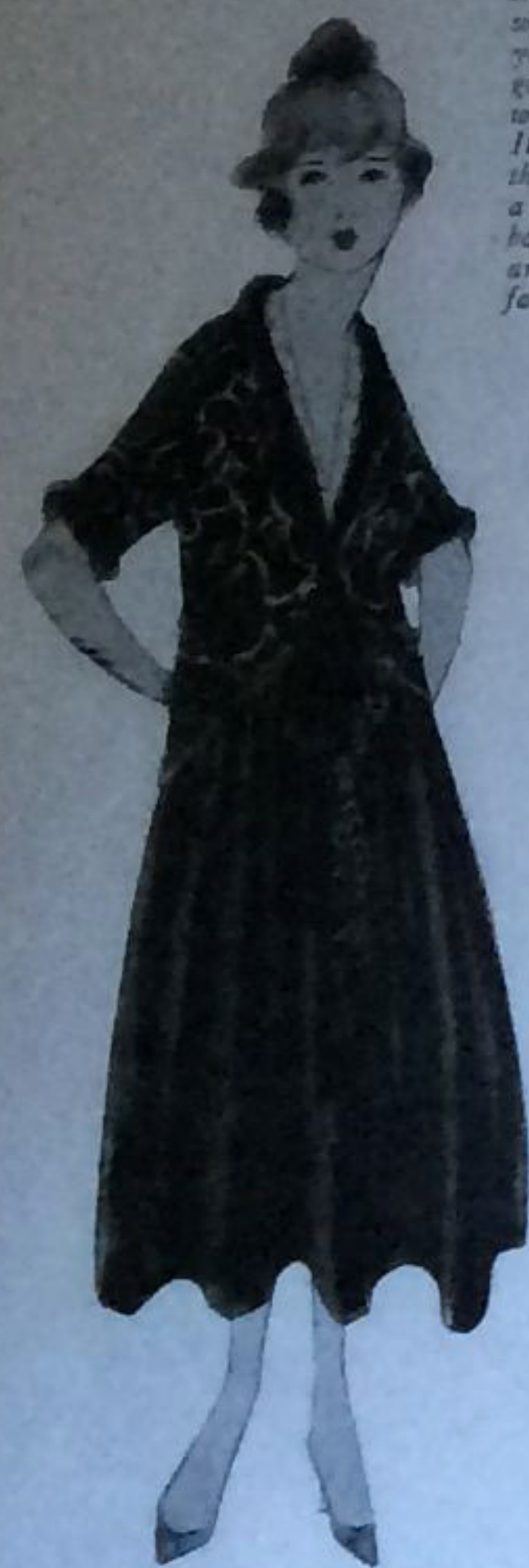
Some tan velours de laine, a wide band of musquash, and you have this softly-falling gown equally suitable for wear within doors or out. It is so cunningly contrived that it looks very simple, but a profound knowledge of the balance and flow of cloth, and many other important facts are hidden in its innocent-looking folds.



No woman who aspires to the enviable state of having suitable clothes for every occasion should allow herself to be without a black velvet fur-trimmed gown in winter-time. Black velvet has almost the unique prerogative of being continually in Fashion's favour, and rightly so, as it is the kindest as well as the smartest of tissues.



Black velvet here leaves nearly all the field to crêpe Grorgette of Joffre blue. This coat-like overdress is very reminiscent of China. The side fastening, the two flat velvet panels on the skirt, and the whole colour-scheme might have stepped from an old Chinese painting. The wide patterned border is of net, embroidered in yellow, blue, red, black, and grey. The only really Western note is the becoming waist swathe with its soft finishing loops.



Rich, luxuriant texture and colour is balanced and emphasized by a fine restraint of line in this lovely Paris gown shown by Reville and Rossiter. Made of the softest Bordeaux-red velvet, the upper part is heavily embroidered with a gold design, the sleeves and neck are bordered with shunk, and there is a little inner vest of deliciously fine lace. The golden chain girdle is an absolutely unique feature.

Folds of cloudy black tulle usually call for admiration on their own merits, but here they serve as an offset to the wonderful starry drapery of jet which, loosely clinging to the corsage, loops into a long bow and terminates in a flat train sparkling with a Chinese coral design. This unusually beautiful and original evening gown was designed and made for no less a person than Miss Teddie Gerrard.



embellished with real beaded tassels.⁴⁰ Reville also patchworked fabrics from the East, including shawls (bought in aid of war charities in 1918) and historical textiles such as Victorian paisley (in 1917) into his collections. In 1919 the magazine described him as 'somebody very clever, with a brilliant imagination and an unerring instinct for fitting adaptability'.⁴¹ By this date, Reville was operating a wholesale firm, advertising availability in London, Paris and New York. The V&A houses a group of fashion drawings from Jay's, undertaken on Reville-headed paper, which suggest that the department store, where he started his career, was one of his wholesale clients. He also advertised the availability of Paris models.

Miss Eveline Gordon was appointed as a junior embroiderer at Reville in 1920, when she was 16 years old. It was her first job after completing a two-year course in embroidery at Borough Polytechnic, to which she had won a scholarship. She recalled that the house employed 80 embroiderers, four designers, tracers and machinists (who used Cornely embroidery machines). Forty women embroidered at frames, working in teams of four, and two teams would work concurrently on a court gown (which took longer, as it had a train). Throughout the summer, staff worked long hours to complete orders for ballgowns, but were put on short time during the winter: they were only paid for work undertaken.⁴² Miss Eveline went on to head Reville's embroidery workshop and subsequently donated her samples to the V&A.

In 1928 the company split again, and Reville – who still described himself as a court dressmaker – opened newly converted premises at 50 Grosvenor Street. It was here that the young Victor Stiebel served his apprenticeship. From 1936 Reville ran and accommodated the London branch of Worth, which henceforth was called Worth (London), and housed Paquin's London business too (see Warwick, pp.197–9). Reville died in 1948 and his company closed the following year. *The Times* obituary was cursory: 'Mr William Wallace Reville-Terry, at one time one of the leading Court-dressmakers in London, died in hospital in London yesterday at the age of 78'.⁴³

To this we could add that for some 30 years, Reville's designs were immensely desirable to a fashionable clientele. As late as October 1935 a *Vogue* writer eulogized, 'I could talk for hours about the lovely clothes I saw at W.W. Reville Terry'.⁴⁴ By offering his designs to the wholesale trade to purchase and copy, Reville aligned his business with Parisian *haute couture* and future London couture practices. However, by purchasing and promoting Paris models he set himself apart from London's couturiers. Throughout his career Reville defined his profession as that of a court dressmaker.

In 1944, Francis Marshall (1901–80), a former staff artist at *Vogue* and esteemed British fashion illustrator, wrote that:

*In the late twenties London could not have been considered seriously as a fashion centre, most smart women either going to Paris for their clothes or buying French models at London Shops. About that time, however, women became conscious of some interesting clothes that did not come from Paris and were somewhat surprised to find they came from London, to be exact, from Bruton Street, where a young man called Norman Hartnell had a salon and actually refused to copy Paris models, preferring to design his own.*⁴⁵

It is from this point that this book continues, telling the story of London Couture.

It gives me pleasure to acknowledge Daniel Milford-Cottam, Cataloguer in the V&A's Word and Image Department, who was very generous with his time and knowledge concerning objects by London court dressmakers and couturiers. I would like to thank London College of Fashion History & Culture MA students Paula Alaszkiwicz, Linda Mora and Helen Spencer for undertaking empirical archival research for this chapter. I appreciate greatly their contributions and professionalism. Alison Kenney at Westminster City Archives kindly drew my attention to *Modern London*. Clive Warwick to the article about Mrs Mortimer. Edwina Ehrman was ever generous sharing her extensive knowledge. Finally, I would like to thank Kevin Reitze for help with statistical analysis.