Discussion of women’s fashion in Britain during the First World War has been surprisingly generalised and lacking in detailed primary research. Typically characterised by a number of ‘truisms’; it has been summed up thus: that uniforms were worn most of the time; that fashion was temporarily suspended; and that practical clothing predominated. Such a view has been reinforced by social historians who have interpreted the wearing of munitions clothes and uniforms by women as a further, though perhaps minor, indicator of women’s progressive liberation. In such analyses, fashion comprised part of the backdrop, whilst significant change was measured in terms of employment, wage levels, or political rights. Proposing an analysis which is less about measurement and more about individual experience, Susan Kingsley Kent calls for studies which reveal how war ‘transformed the lives of men and women, their relationships with one another, and the cultural understandings of gender and sexuality that informed their consciousness and sense of identity’. In attempting to explore such issues, this essay proposes that fashion functioned as the key representational site where women from the skilled working class and lower middle class in Britain began to make visible their changing consciousnesses and identities. In this respect, fashion provided a language which potentially empowered women and transgressed patriarchal codes.

Popular representations of the fashionably dressed female body between 1914 and 1918 were highly contradictory, and, as this essay will show, these were sharply delineated in Home Chat, one of a number of
new women’s magazine titles launched in Britain at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In existence from 1895 until 1956, *Home Chat* was a widely available weekly journal for the home which, at a price of one penny in 1914, was cheap enough to be bought and read by the better-off working class and the lower middle class. Aiming to provide women with practical advice about all aspects of their daily lives, from the traditional concerns of fashion and beauty, marriage and children, to the more contentious issue of women’s aspirations beyond the home, it exposed tensions around class and gender which were particularly evident during wartime.

Magazines such as *Home Chat* provided a crucial space during wartime in which representations of women were redefined, and fashion played a large part in this. By organising leisure within an increasingly industrialised and capitalist economy, women’s magazines such *Home Chat* provided a journalistic formula which structured time away from work and regulated female consumption. However, it is apparent from first-hand examination of *Home Chat* just before and during the First World War, that it refused a single editorial voice, comprising instead ‘a fractured rather than rigidly coherent form’. The identification and representations of gender and class identities were not seamless in this magazine, and it is clear from close scrutiny that tensions emerged in *Home Chat* between the depiction of women’s changing roles – in effect, their lived experiences – and idealised, essentially patriarchal, definitions of femininity which posed particular problems for the editors. These were manifested in a number of ways: in the factual reporting of what women were doing; in the fictional stories dealing with different aspects of women’s lives; and importantly for the arguments in this essay, in the visual representations of femininity in fashionable clothes, photography and illustration. In the magazine’s characteristic format, what it meant to be a woman was endlessly reiterated, but also subtly undermined. As this essay shows, the First World War disrupted conventional gender roles as never before, and in a magazine such as *Home Chat* the ideal of the gendered self as a fixed entity was increasingly questioned, and, in this sense, wartime issues of *Home Chat* could be simultaneously regulatory and liberatory.

Fashion, in terms both of making, buying and wearing clothes, and the representation of popular styles in women’s magazines, mapped out the social and cultural boundaries of the female body in the public and the private spheres during a period of great social upheaval. At work and at home, the female body remained an aesthetic object, to be defined, refined and re-articulated, but, between 1914 and 1918, a sense of urgency underpinned the social and cultural definitions of the aestheti-
fashion and dress in *Home Chat* were sharply polarised. Women were required to be feminine, but also serious and independent; they were to be ‘womanly’, but also to pull their weight in the war effort. Contradictory demands were made of women, and their bodies became a site where battle ensued. Uniforms and casual clothes were worn not merely for their practicality, but also for their fashionability – as symbols of new types of feminine identity. There was a chic stylishness about the unstructured, slightly unruly wartime looks which were also emblematic of modernity. An engagement in fashion and a knowledge of its complex language was a sign of women’s entry into all areas of social and cultural life in the early years of the twentieth century, and it was also a symbol of women’s relationship with modernity. Embodied in the image of the ‘New Woman’ wearing a masculinised cropped jacket, straw boater and shortened skirt, young working women from both the better-off working class and lower middle class had already challenged the notion that women were defined solely in relation to home and family just prior to the First World War.

The outbreak of war on 4 August 1914 drew into sharp relief those anxieties about feminine identities and women’s roles which had already surfaced prior to 1914. The campaign for the right to vote was one part of a larger process of social, political and economic change which affected women from the mid nineteenth century. Work outside the home and growing participation in trade-union activity were elements in this process, as were smaller families, the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, the gaining of rights of custody over children in 1873, and the extension of all levels of education to women from the 1870s. War, however, was initially a male experience. It offered men an escape from the routines of social, economic and sexual responsibilities; it released them from the private sphere of home – the feminine world – and propelled them into ‘the domain of the masculine, the army or navy, to the world of discipline, obedience, action’. The spaces of war were clearly articulated as masculine, whereas women’s spaces, particularly those of middle-class women, were predominantly represented as domestic. Very soon, however, war threatened ‘the collapse of those established, traditional distinctions between an “economic” world of business and a private world of sentiment’ particularly for older, better-off women whose lives had not been subject to the same degree of change as that experienced by younger women from the skilled working class and lower middle class. For this latter group of women, such distinctions had already been partially eroded and they were no longer sharply delineated except perhaps in the patriarchal imagination. Perhaps key to this was work as 55 per cent of single women had paid employment outside the home by 1910.
When war was declared, the predominantly lower-class reader of Home Chat was addressed in language which was both patriarchal and class-specific, to

keep a stiff upper lip and smiling front when things are going badly, to have a comforting word for the sad when we ourselves are almost in despair, to share our little with those who have less – these are gallant deeds which we can perform every day if we will.¹³

Women’s duty, graphically depicted in Home Chat, was to support men in an unobtrusive fashion, and their ‘gallant deeds’ were to be found in the routines of everyday life rather than at the front. In this, it reinforced the upper-middle-class ideal of the ‘Angel at Home’. However, the lives of many working-class and lower-middle-class women (Home Chat’s readership) had already undergone fairly significant change, and such depictions were at odds with their everyday experiences. Features in Home Chat dealing with war crèches, feeding routines for new babies, and the duties of older children reflected this. However, the erosion of boundaries between public and private, men and women, and working class and upper class which the war accelerated began to be commented on in Home Chat. An article in March 1916, ‘How the Girl of the Period Faces War’, revealed the class aspirations and orientation of Home Chat. Noting that under normal circumstances the 18-year-old girl would soon ‘be coming out’,¹⁴ after a year of war, it was reported that instead, ‘women are stepping into positions they had to fight hard for previous to July 1914’.¹⁵ Surprise at women’s resourcefulness characterised the reporting. One young woman, who gave up perfume, gloves, and sweets for the war effort before learning to drive the post van, was particularly admired as she refused payment which she claimed belonged rightfully to the man whose job she had taken. The language of duty, of self-denial, and class deference was still detectable, and occasionally the magazine’s writers would remind the female readership that the war’s end would return everything to ‘normal’. There was a sense of foreboding that things had changed irrevocably, ‘and no one can possibly foresee how it will affect HOME LIFE as well as the business of the nation’.¹⁶ But there was an absolute certainty that ‘women will not seek to do men out of their old jobs’.¹⁷

For those still based at home or in domestic service, it was war work which was to transform their lives, as George Wade, a writer for Home Chat, put it, ‘She has gone into workshops, factory, office, bank and school, to keep the regular daily round going on as smoothly as possible; she has taken on jobs which women never did before to-day.’¹⁸ Wartime offered young women greater opportunities as they took over white-collar jobs vacated by men and, as Pugh has argued, ‘Their families
increasingly accepted the desirability, or even necessity, of their finding some means of supporting themselves after the war ... [For women] a wider and more independent personal life often appeared to be the chief gain of the war year. Registration for war work had been a haphazard affair, only gaining a sense of purpose after 1915 when state intervention initiated the reorganisation of industry and negotiations with employers and trade unions allowed the employment and training of women workers particularly in the engineering and chemical trades. From 1916, working-class and middle-class women worked in many aspects of industry, in commerce, banking and finance, in the civil service, in agriculture as part of the Land Army, and as bus conductors, ticket collectors and eventually bus drivers. They also volunteered for various auxiliary organisations such as the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VADs) and the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACs). A direct result of these new types of work was that large numbers of young, single working-class women abandoned domestic service and sweated trades such as dress-making for factory work. Although domestic service was the largest employer of women at the time, the number going into service had been falling by the end of the nineteenth century, paradoxically, as demand grew from the burgeoning middle class. Regarded by their families as respectable work, domestic service was deeply unpopular with young working-class girls. Unhappy at the lack of freedom in service, many young women welcomed the opportunity to work in the new munitions factories where wages too could be significantly different. For married women from the working class with a home and children to manage, factory work offered better opportunities to supplement the family income than had existed prewar when the possibility of combining work outside the home with caring for the family was very limited. As Maud Pember Reeves stated, in 1913 roughly 50 per cent of adult working men in Britain earned 25 shillings or less each week. To compensate for this, working-class married women had to be highly resourceful, managing woefully small amounts of money for rent, food, and clothing. Often attempting to find paid work, they then faced extra costs for childcare thus rendering the work uneconomical. At least wages for munitions work were capable of supporting some childcare even if it was heavily dependent on the goodwill of neighbours and relatives. Prior to the war, middle-class married women had generally not worked outside the home. Their role was to manage the household, direct the servants, oversee the upbringing of the children, and to maintain the home as a civilised retreat for the husband. However, as the war progressed, older married middle-class women often volunteered for various public services or the Land Army, or in some cases they were prepared to work in munitions as supervisors or organisers.
Writing in *Women and Work* in 1945, Gertrude Williams reflected upon women’s experience of work during the First World War, arguing that women,

> had tasted the sweets of independence; they had widened their mental and social horizons … and they were determined not to give up lightly the control over their own lives that they gained by spending the money they earned for themselves.\(^{29}\)

Defining and understanding women posed a new challenge for social commentators and for men alike. Pat Barker drew on this in 1991 in the first part of her fictional First World War trilogy, *Regeneration*, when she discussed Second-Lieutenant Billy Prior and Sarah, his working-class munitions-worker girlfriend,

> He didn’t know what to make of her, but then he was out of touch with women. They seemed to have changed so much during the war, to have expanded in all kinds of ways, whereas men over the same period had shrunk into a smaller and smaller space.\(^{30}\)

In discussing modernity and its implications for gender identities, Rosi Braidotti suggested that it represented ‘the crisis of masculine identity in a historical period when the gender system is being challenged and restructured’.\(^{31}\) One could argue that the First World War was a defining moment of modernity and in this respect it was without equal as a moment of restructuring. War loosened patriarchal control, and domestic responsibilities were necessarily redefined in ways which ruptured gender identities. Women’s wartime roles differed due to obvious factors such as class, age, and marital status, but also due to the nature of the war, which saw a stark separation between the home and war fronts. Although uniformed service-men were a familiar sight on city streets and troops were highly mobile, most women did not directly confront the danger of war between 1914 and 1918.\(^{32}\) They did, however, deal with the consequences of war; with the loss of their husbands, brothers, sons, friends and lovers as well as with the physical damage and psychological scarring experienced by the survivors. Most families experienced loss and anxiety, and for those women who served at the front, the experience was beyond comprehension. From this they acquired ‘secret knowledge ... that transformed the consciousness, the senses, the very soul of the initiate, who was thereby ushered into a wholly different existence’.\(^{33}\) As Vera Brittain put it, ‘the war ... is too gigantic for the mind to grasp’\(^{34}\)

Wartime experiences also jolted women’s personal lives. Spending time with other women, they discussed more openly their marriages, their sexual feelings and attitudes. Married women’s relationships with their husbands were sometimes questioned as they recognised men’s complacency and their own lack of fulfilment. Sexuality was a
particularly highly charged issue, and Susan Kingsley Kent has argued that, partly in response to war, there was a new awareness of women’s sexual needs: ‘The new accent on motherhood was accompanied by a growing emphasis on the importance of sexual activity, sexual pleasure, sexual compatibility between husband and wife.’ Significantly, the anxieties underpinning these discourses of female sexuality frequently centred on the masculinisation of women’s dress and the blurring of gender identities which came from women wearing uniforms and factory clothes. This was particularly acute during the First World War as such images clearly jarred against the dominant images of femininity which were evident before the war. Such images also recalled to popular memory the prewar struggle for women’s suffrage and anti-suffrage feelings. Writing in 1931 Caroline Playne remembered her perceptions of munitions workers:

A short local train came in, drew up and disgorged, on the instant, a couple of hundred de-humanised females, Amazonian beings bereft of reason or feeling, judging by the set of their faces, bereft of all charm of appearance, clothed anyhow, skin stained a yellow-brown even to the roots of their dishevelled hair ... Were these really women?

Home Chat provided a distinctive formula for being a woman which was well established and familiar. For one penny, an array of advice and information was available, mainly concentrating on the traditional concerns of the home and the family, but with some references to jobs and careers. Love and marriage figured prominently in both fiction and features, and significantly women were given some practical advice in dealing with men. In June 1914 a feature asking ‘Is Any Man Easy to Live With? A Question that Every Woman Sometimes Asks of Herself’ elicited a surprisingly modern reply:

In a condition of society where one half [of] the world is economically dependent upon the other half, the dependent half takes orders with small protest. It has to. [However] in the last twenty years women have become human beings. They have begun to reflect on their position. The fearful daughters of a past generation are today going their own way to work and to play.

Changes in women’s social and political position prior to the war clearly framed this assertion of their right ‘to reflect on their position’. Along with subsequent historians, contemporary commentators detected a difference in women’s consciousness during the First World War. Surprise and condescension characterised the views of the magazine’s social commentator, otherwise known as ‘A Man o’ the World’, when he wrote, ‘Women are astounded at their own capacity – their own utility and value in the complex organism of ultra-modern life.’

From September 1914, *Home Chat* had a new role: to map out a place for women within the conflict. The focus was initially on women’s role on the domestic front, and, in an article entitled ‘Householders and the War’, the editors asked, ‘What ought we to do? What can we do to help our country, and to defend from want and distress those for whom we are responsible?’ The covers of the magazine, which were particularly important in visually representing its editorial content, shifted from images of romance and the young and fashionable, to those dealing with war themes as depicted in the first issue of October 1914 which, under the headline ‘Billeted: A Story of War’, depicted a soldier billeted in a private home playing the piano. This particular image of a smart, educated young soldier contributing to a convivial evening at home was obviously designed to reassure those who harboured anxieties about having strangers billeted in their homes. Other articles dealt in a relatively factual way with aspects of wartime. In the early years of the war, magazine covers showed women crocheting, and included articles such as ‘Cook – On the War: On War-time Manners’ and ‘How England “Mothers” Her Army’. At the same time there were already efforts to provide stories dealing with other aspects of life and designed to alleviate the gloom of war, such as the short story introduced with the headline ‘Nothing to do with the War!’, which gave a light-hearted account of ‘Dolly of the Dailies: The Surprising Adventures of a Newspaper Girl’.

Alongside these, *Home Chat* ran features on the practical details of women’s life that such work threw into disarray, including childcare. Dr Truby-King, the magazine’s health specialist advised on ‘feeding by the clock’ for babies, and the advantages of the new crèches were explained next to a photograph of the London Woolwich Arsenal workers’ crèche. Significantly the magazine did not shy away from controversial subjects such as illegitimacy, war babies and unmarried mothers. The magazine’s social observer, ‘A Man o’ the World’, discussed the problems of war babies and illegitimacy in June 1915, pointing out that illegitimacy during wartime was not just an issue for the ‘lower’ classes.

Interest in romantic love and marriage was underpinned by an insistence on the importance of fashion and appearance in the pages of *Home Chat*, and although it is tempting to read this as evidence of the regulatory nature of such magazines, this also drew attention to the high level of concern around representations of the female body during wartime. Wartime sharpened and intensified the experience of modernity, and women’s ‘practical negotiation of ... life and one’s identity within a complex and fast-changing world’ took on new meaning, as did their attempts to make sense of this visually through fashion. *Home Chat* played a crucial part in articulating and delineating – on a
weekly basis – new technologies and a vast array of consumer products for women, as well as pointing to new types of work and leisure, and personal relationships. Ostensibly about reaffirming women’s traditional roles in making clothes and dressing up to meet social expectations, *Home Chat* also functioned to represent women’s changing lifestyles, and although fashions could be both mundane and highly impractical, discussions of women’s dress and appearance were firmly ‘located’ within the context of modernity.

Fashion, as both social and cultural artefact and as representational process, was increasingly discursive during the period of the First World War and it provided a highly charged space in which femininity, modernity and class identity were negotiated. The fashionable female body in particular became an interface where different values and ideologies overlapped and competed, and definitions of the female body were firmly located in the gender uncertainties which accelerated and intensified. Often living away from home, young, single women in particular began to imagine themselves differently. Even married and older women with a little more to spend could experience the pleasures of wearing new clothes. A magazine such as *Home Chat* tried to direct and inform women about fashion, but it sent out mixed messages. It attempted on the one hand to support women as they took on different responsibilities and as their approach to dress and appearance changed. But on the other hand it attempted to steer them towards images and roles which were not too contentious – practical, but at the same time feminine – often leading the magazine’s editors and writers into uncertain territory.

Fashion drew attention to key aspects of women’s identity, particularly sexuality and gender, but also class as it became less easy to read social status from dress. Land Girls, who took over agricultural jobs in men’s absence and were largely drawn from the working class, reputedly wore their breeches off duty, whereas wealthier women apparently made a fashion out of looking shabby, thus undermining the dress codes which had previously delineated social status. Officially fashion was to be put in abeyance for the duration of the war, but it was also recognised that the country’s morale required women to literally ‘keep up appearances’. Their appearance was intrinsic to the war effort, but certain types of feminine images were preferred above others: those based on an upper-middle-class ideal of women as essentially decorative, idle and passive. In discussing *Home Chat* at the end of the nineteenth century, Beetham writes:

*Home Chat* assumed that physical appearance was central to femininity and that in this respect at least women were not born but made and made themselves. Even ‘the plain girl’ could make herself ‘as popular and charming as her Beautiful Sister’.

Central to that making was ‘fashion’ which was explicitly linked to the ideal of the Lady. The ideal of being a ‘lady’ was crucial in defining femininity in *Home Chat*, and during wartime, as class distinctions as well as gender relations were disrupted, such an ideal was especially important. Many working-class women worked in close proximity to women from the middle and upper classes; however, there were key differences in approach to dress and fashion as well as to ladylike behaviour. Whereas upper-middle- and upper-class women could enjoy the privilege of dressing up to their ‘normal’ social position and dressing down to demonstrate their patriotism and commitment to the war effort (by wearing uniform or shabby work clothes on the streets), for the first time, the better-off working-class and the lower-middle-class readership of *Home Chat* had access to fashionable clothes by dint of their jobs and better wages.

The contradictory nature of class and gender identities was increasingly evident in the pages of *Home Chat* as the editors and features writers avidly promoted new fashions, and fashionable looks, and offered an infinite number of fashion tips. The frivolous and the highly practical coexisted, as in September 1914, when the *Home Chat* fashion editors, Camilla and the aristocratically styled Lady Betty, advised on ‘Easy to Make Fashions’. With little sense of contradiction, they wrote an article entitled ‘Dress – Not Fashion’ (10 October 1914), in which they argued, ‘Nobody is thinking about fashion just now, but most of us will soon be thinking about a pretty blouse ... a woman’s duty is to try to make herself as nice as she can.’ At the same time, although the magazine’s letters pages were filled with complaints from women about long hours, about standing all day, and difficult journeys to work, concerns about fashion were still clearly evident as it was recognised that ‘munitions work was undeniably fashionable’. This extended to the wearing of khaki and uniforms on the street as these became statements of both fashion and patriotism. Significantly this new-found fashionableness was accessible to women from the lower classes as well as those from higher up the social scale, as munitions clothes, uniforms and khaki were widely available irrespective of class.

In the early twentieth century, high fashion was generally diffused in only one direction: downwards from the upper classes to the lower classes; however, the working class had become major consumers of the new mass media and capitalised leisure activities – publishing, the cinema, the recording industry, radio, dancing, fashion. Fashionable styles changed relatively quickly in the context of developing capitalism, and Paris led the way for fashionable women’s clothes. However, women’s access to fashion information widened within the context of
modernity. Department stores, mail order, advertising, paper patterns and women’s magazines were available to more women across the country. New styles from the fashion centres were widely diffused, and it was possible to see in magazines such as Home Chat the increasingly simplified rectilinear outlines of Paris couturier Paul Poiret’s designs, for example. Although the dominant fashionable ‘looks’ were still largely predicated on luxury and leisure, during the First World War other fashionable ‘looks’ emerged from the very different context of work; from munitions and uniforms, thus demonstrating the ways in which women’s fashion could be influenced by mass as opposed to high culture. Importantly, fashion allowed women to signal their new-found identities visually – even if it was only for the duration of the war – by wearing uniforms or garments designed for work, in the street for pleasure. There was a great deal of concern at the time that war was making women more ‘masculine’ as they took on modes of behaviour more typical of men by becoming independent and self-reliant, working outside the home, and managing their own finances. Their clothes were practical responses to this, and although such changes were often read at the time as ‘masculine’, they were still highly feminised, as women’s magazines show. Pretty fabrics, delicate bows and ribbons, glamorous make-up, and brightly coloured scarves were combined to ‘feminise’ some of the more austere wartime looks (Figure 1). As a report in the national newspaper the Daily Mail put it:

Eating out is clearly interpreted as a sign of female independence here, yet some women had eaten out alone or with other women from the mid to late nineteenth century. It became a necessity for some women when they were geographically isolated from their families working as munitions workers and poorly served by cooking facilities in their temporary accommodation. With little time to spare between shifts, eating out and wearing their munitions clothes on the street was inevitable.

The contradictions of identity inherent in women’s fashion during wartime are summed up visually in the poster designed by Septimus Scott entitled ‘These Women Are Doing Their Bit: Learn to Make Munitions’, which was produced to encourage women to take up munitions work (Figure 2). In this, a young woman with her hair drawn back in a safety cap, pulls on her overall at the start of her shift. With a plain, shortened calf-length skirt and blouse, this evocative wartime
Figure 1: ‘All Easy to Make’, Home Chat, 5 September 1914. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.
Figure 2: ‘These Women Are Doing Their Bit. Learn to Make Munitions’, poster designed by Septimus Scott. Reproduced by permission of the Imperial War Museum, London.
image highlights the sense of purpose experienced by the independent young munitions worker temporarily loose of familial ties. Such images suggest an entirely different world to the highly regulated life typical of domestic service which was endured by large numbers of working-class girls. Similarly, contemporary photographs of munitions workers, as well as those of VADS and WAACs, although less glamorous, show a casual female body. Calf-length loose dresses and uniforms, belted at the waist, brought an informality to women’s dress that was unheard of a few years earlier. Clothes such as these reveal women as subjects rather than objects; engaged in active lives outside the home and unconstrained by many of the social mores governing appropriate female behaviour. Such informality, increasingly integral to women’s fashions both during and after the war, undercut the elaborate dress rituals which epitomised upper-middle-class femininity in the Edwardian era. Recruitment posters and photographs of this type sent powerful messages to young women that they could be independent and they could contribute to the war effort in a more dynamic way than knitting for the troops.

It is something of a paradox that as women’s lives underwent momentous change, their personal appearance should attract such attention from the editors of Home Chat. Wartime practicalities were evident throughout the pages of Home Chat, although the editors found the lure of fashion for its own sake hard to resist. Whereas one issue might suggest, ‘The reign of fashion is over for many and many a long day … The aim of fashion writers and designers to-day is to show how plainly other people are dressing, not how elaborately’, another issue dictated ‘the narrow skirt is a thing of the past, and the new one measures sometimes as much as six yards around the hem!’ These apparent contradictions led to the emergence of a number of representations of appropriate fashionable looks for women, as those clad in breeches and short skirts appeared in the same issues as women wearing clothes in the latest Paris styles. These were rather elongated and simplified at the outset of war, but by 1916 a clearly defined waistline was discernible. According to Camilla and Lady Betty writing in 1916, ‘women are to present a more fluffy, feminine appearance than has been the case for some long while. The trend in favour of a less masculine style in dress is unmistakable.’ Accompanying this ‘fluffy femininity’ was, however, a marked casualness which differentiated women’s fashions from ten years earlier, and which suggests a response to the more recent experiences of wearing clothes for wartime work. The highly corseted outline of the Edwardian era was replaced by a looser, less structured look which nonetheless required the aid of corsets. Softly gathered blouses were tucked into narrow skirts which draped and ruched at the waist rather than being panelled and gored. Feminised ties were often worn around
the neck, and décolletage was open and informal. The ‘easy to make’ patterns included in *Home Chat* allowed women a good deal of flexibility to mix items of fashion as they desired, and recommended fabrics often included those like cotton that were hard-wearing and practical. Although the patterns were quite complex and could be difficult to follow, many women had some dress-making skills, acquired as young girls and improved upon as the demands of family life arose. It is perhaps ironic that the visualisation of this new female identity depended on the continuation of such a traditional female task. For those with few such skills, less time but more money, a visit to the home of a local dress-maker and the purchase of materials from the nearby draper would be sufficient to acquire a moderately priced new outfit. Drapers’ shops dominated small towns and cities throughout Britain, and although they tended not to lead the way in stylistic innovation, such knowledge could be gained from the magazines and from department stores. Through such mechanisms, the look of high fashion reached a wider audience.

The fashion advice in *Home Chat* was supported by the inclusion of very practical information about all aspects of women’s beauty and grooming. In an article entitled ‘What Should a Typist Wear?’, those confused about office dress codes were advised to wear ‘a plainly-made serge costume. Nothing about it to date. Just plain with a stock collar and tie … And if a girl must have some sort of colour about her outdoor attire she could easily introduce it in wings on her hat.’ The unmistakable uniform of the ‘New Woman’ was described as the obvious solution to the problems facing working women. It was practical and smart, but importantly it also functioned as a symbol of emancipation and modernity. In a manner which typifies the magazine’s approach of aiming to balance the traditional and the modern, the fashion editors directed women to the latest styles:

Everyone is mad about the tango, and dresses are made specially for it. The short, slit, draped Liberty or velvet skirt, with a full tunic dropping lower behind than in front, is the most graceful thing so far, otherwise the effect of the body in movement is decidedly ungraceful. Very light and brilliant colours can be worn at a tango tea in Paris, and there is a certain tomato red which is specially named ‘tango’ that one sees a great deal.

The dipped hemline of the dance dress and the smart practicality of the serge costume and blouse (see Figure 1) epitomised different, but related facets of modernity. Both were glamorous and chic, but a sense of movement, spectacle and performance influenced the diaphanous bodices, panniered skirts and slit or uneven hemlines of the dance dress. Dancing the tango required a type of physical flamboyance and a lack of restraint.
which was at odds with the prewar generation. Equally at odds, but for different reasons, was the remarkably minimal ‘tailor-made’ suit which epitomised the young, working woman in a man’s world, albeit a ‘feminised’ and glamorised one. This latter image evoked most forcefully the inroads that women were making into the world of work, a process exacerbated by wartime needs. A number of ‘femininities’ coexisted then within women’s wardrobe, and with the aid of Home Chat paper patterns, women could move relatively easily from one identity to the other in the peculiar circumstances that existed during wartime. The ultra ‘femininity’ evoked by these wide, flowing dance skirts was seemingly at odds with women’s increasing confidence outside the home, yet they were part of a wardrobe which might also include a uniform, munitions wear and/or other work clothes.

As the war continued, Home Chat included articles that outlined suitable clothes for munitions and other types of war work. In ‘Dress for War Workers’ photographs showed young women workers wearing bloomers and shirts that were just below the knee, alongside an article which declared:

> It looks as if war-time work would bring about something of a revolution in women’s workaday attire … There is no doubt about it that you are HANDICAPPED if you go haymaking or harvesting or gardening or feeding the pigs in an ordinary skirt.67

The photographs accompanying this piece showed women wearing skirts which were just below the knee for gardening, and gaiters, a long linen coat and Panama hat for haymaking. Another article in the same month discussed the dress of the ‘Lady Postmen’, who looked ‘very neat and business-like … in their plain skirts and blouses, with their bags slung over their shoulder’.68 In both articles, the discussion of suitable dress for war work was couched in the language of fashion rather than just ‘dress’ in order to emphasise women’s duty to remain at all times within the bounds of what was considered ‘feminine’. The photographs of the women gardening and haymaking were accompanied with credits which declared ‘Fashions for Gardening’ and ‘Fashions for Haymaking’, whereas the garments were clearly intended as practical work clothes. This particular article examined the background to reformed dress prior to the war, and it reminded its readers of the ‘hideous and ridiculous’ bloomers which were now, in the special conditions of wartime, described as practical and appropriate items of dress.69 A few years earlier, bloomers had been tolerated for sport, but as the writer in Home Chat made clear, in the public mind they were associated with the suffrage movement.

For the first time, representations of fashion in Home Chat drew on a range of different visual codes from those used in regular fashion features. Reformed styles of work dress were unusually modelled by
women doing particular jobs: the parcels lady wore a shortened skirt and three-quarter coat on her bicycle; the agricultural worker wore trousers, a shirt and straw hat as she dug in a field; and the Southampton tramway conductors wore ‘short sensible skirts’ just below the knee so as to run up and down the high steps of the tram. The static, languidly posed images normally adopted to represent latest fashions were eschewed for photographs of women in the process of working, thus emphasising the practicality of their clothes. Two things are significant here: firstly, the juxtaposition of manual labour and fashion clearly detached fashion from its association with leisure as well as undermining any pretensions to ‘ladylike’ behaviour; and secondly the visual style and representational codes of the magazine diversified in response to the fragmentation of women’s identities. As if in recognition of this very process, permeating the writings on fashion and dress in *Home Chat* was an attempt to provide some sort of rationale for these highly contradictory messages and images which directly addressed the reader’s expectations and prejudices. An article from 1916 entitled ‘How the Girl of the Period Faces War’, liberally illustrated with images of women wearing breeches and uniforms, revealed the difficulties which this posed (Figure 3). Regretting ‘such an old head on young shoulders’, the writer admitted

**Figure 3:** Women farm workers wearing breeches, *Home Chat*, 18 March 1916. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.

that the modern girl is ‘self-willed and full of assurance … and absolutely
determined to get her own way’. At the same time, acknowledging
the country’s dependence on ‘these fearless young women’, now an
important resource, the writer adds ruefully, ‘well we made her ourselves.
When she was in the nursery we were greatly allured by the dogma of
feminine emancipation, and preached the rights of individualism for
every creature.’71 The reality for a large number of the magazine’s readers
was that war produced unconventional lives, and fashion was just one of
a number of things that had to adapt. Women had already changed and
representations of the fashionable female body in Home Chat
undoubtedly contributed to this ongoing process.

From this study, it is clear that representations of women’s fashion in
Home Chat provided an important arena for defining and renegotiating
women’s gender and class identities between 1914 and 1918. As one of a
growing number of relatively new women’s magazines which addressed
the needs of an expanding skilled working-class and lower-middle-class
female readership, Home Chat was uniquely placed to delineate shifting
gender and class relations. These shifts were especially acute during the
First World War as women’s lives became more complex and more
demands were made on them, but it was also the case that women’s lives
had already undergone considerable change due to social, economic and
political factors. Home Chat contributed to these changes by offering a
lively formula of articles which depicted the range of experiences and
ambitions of women. It revealed the complexities and the discontinuities
in women’s lives by examining a number of aspects of their experience,
including home and work, love and sex, fashion and appearance, as well
as their attitudes to war and their roles in it. Arguably, in its pages there
emerged a ‘dissonance’ between women’s ‘lived experiences’ and the
visual representations of femininity in fashion, which could be especially
acute in particular issues of the magazine, but in such representations it
is clear that women’s fashion and appearance constituted a ‘feminised’
space in which gender identities were renegotiated and contested, but
also in some ways reaffirmed. Widespread participation in the workforce,
particularly by younger women from the skilled working class and lower
middle class was the catalyst for this crisis in representation which
significantly focused on fashion and personal appearance. Fashioning the
female body involved women in the process of ‘becoming’ feminine, thus
highlighting the contingent nature of femininity. As this study of fashion
in Home Chat makes clear, dressing to tango, dressing for the munitions
factory and dressing to drive an ambulance in France involved women in
representing themselves as female when the precarious and transitory
nature of gender identities was being acknowledged, albeit reluctantly
at times.
Notes


2. This point is debated by Susan Kingsley Kent in *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Intervar Britain* (Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 3.


4. Other new magazines included *Home Notes* (1894), *My Weekly* (1910) and *Woman's Weekly* (1911).


7. See Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own* for further discussion of these ideas.

8. Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own*, p. 12. Drawing on the ideas of other cultural critics, Beetham discusses the proposition that the fragmentation of women's magazines made them potentially subversive of men's cultural codes in a number of ways.


12. This point is made by Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, p. 2. Pugh cites a particularly buoyant British economy as a key factor.


14. This is the process by which the daughters of the upper echelons of British society would be presented at court and then effectively displayed at dances, parties and the theatre, in order to attract an appropriate suitor. It was an annual ritual for the well-connected and the well-off.


17. ‘Open Doors for Women Workers’, p. 228.


20. This was undertaken by Lloyd George after he gained office in May 1915. A voluntary arrangement known as the Treasury Agreement was negotiated. This enabled unskilled women to take over some skilled men's jobs or aspects of them. By July 1916 the figures for women in the various metal and engineering industries (representing those industries producing munitions and equipment) had risen from 212,000 in July 1914 to 520,000. See Arthur Marwick, *Woman at War 1914–1918* (Fontana, 1977), p. 73, and 'Open Doors for Women Workers', *Home Chat*, LXXI/1051, p. 227.

21. In July 1914 there were 3,276,000 women in industry, by April 1918 there were 4,808,000 – an increase of almost 1½ million. The biggest increase was in the chemical and engineering trades which included munitions. See Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (Pandora, 1987), pp. 38–9.

22. By November 1918 there were 40,000 in these services largely in the VADs and WAACs. See Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, p. 44.

23. At the start of war, the numbers of women in domestic service stood at 1,658,000, but by 1918 the number was 1,258,000. (Pugh, *Women and The Women's Movement*, pp. 19–20.)

25. Whereas a housemaid could earn a paltry 5s a week, a munitions worker could earn £3 a week (possibly £4 with overtime). (Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, p. 58.)

26. Except in a few areas of the Midlands and the north of England (the Potteries and the Lancashire cotton mills were examples), working-class women were expected to stop work after marriage; however, those in desperate circumstances worked at home taking in sewing or washing.


32. In contrast to the Second World War when war was ‘at the doorstep’, and large numbers of women were killed during the blitz. Of 130,000 civilians killed during the blitz, 63,000 were women. (Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain*, p. 264.)


40. See, for example, Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain*; Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace*; and Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*.


44. For example, one described ‘Life in the Army’, and another showed Sir John French, Commander of the British Army, on the cover. (*Home Chat*, LXXXVIII/1021, pp. 41–2; and *Home Chat*, LXXX/1036.)


54. The best discussion of this remains, in my view, Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*.

55. See Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, p. 75.


61. See Barbara Burman, *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Berg, 1999).
62. I am grateful to the editors, Carole Turbin and Barbara Burman, for this point.
66. *Home Chat*, LXXVI/981, p. 44.