

The Industry

Davies & Field were one of the largest dress manufacturing companies in the UK and date back to 1946. It was part of a large national industry where all aspects of the garment and fashion industry were catered for. Davies & Field were a vital part of the production and supply infrastructure which reached across Britain and the world.

The textile and fabric industry in Britain dates back to Roman times when wool, linen and leather clothed the European population, and silk, imported along the Silk Road from China, was a luxury. Flax fibre was used in the manufacturing of cloth in Northern Europe and this dates back to Neolithic times. The key British industry at the beginning of the 18th century was the production of textiles made with wool. This came from the large sheep farming areas in the Midlands and across the country. Certain British cities were known and famous for specific things, the Northern towns of Bradford, Halifax and Huddersfield for example were known for wool tweeds and velvets.

Due to pioneering advances in production techniques these areas kick started the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century and were to be the main driving force and wealth creation of Britain as an Empire. This industrialism also brought problems such as child labour and sweat-shop type working conditions. As production started to move abroad from the late 20th century these working practices as well as the innovations were exported, India and China now sees the same kind of working conditions as England did in the 19th to mid 20th century. Ethical manufacturing is now high priority for consumers and garment manufacturers are responding to this and providing better working conditions.

“...one of the things that has been left out in history is our contribution in England with the fashion because a lot of the first immigrants, they used to work in the sweat shops.”

Charles Phillips, Urban Photographer, Collector

The conditions in the UK even up to the late 20th century still left a lot to be desired. Davies & Field were on the whole good employers, however across all industries attitudes to do with gender and pay were very different to now.

200 years after the boom of the Industrial Revolution certain areas in the North of England are starting to see a renaissance in textile production with advanced engineering and “on-demand” manufacturing. Fabrics such as specialised laminates & woven mats made from polyester or glass fibre, which are used to reinforce structures in construction and engineering, are now manufactured in the North, through to Peter Reed, a 150 year old company in Nelson, which makes high quality sheets and pillow cases.

Made In England By Sweated

THE Brick Lane and Whitechapel Road area is the centre of a trade employing thousands of immigrant workers. Conditions in the often unregistered workshops are appalling, rates of pay are very low and hours long. But operating through middlemen, the big high street shops have kept the price of their merchandise down to the level of 1978.

A spokesman of the Garment Workers' Union said: "The more prestigious the name, the worse the exploitation. Most of these workers get no benefits of any kind. The retailers have it all their own way — they keep prices down with a dual threat of unemployment and cheap foreign competition."

Most of the big stores refused to supply information about the source of their goods. Labels give no information on the origin of a garment. C&A admitted that some ladies clothing was produced in the East End, but said it was 'not company policy to divulge information to the Press.' Caroline Lewis at Chelsea Girl said: 'It's our business where we get our products from.' But a buyer at Woolworth's was more forthcoming:

"We use these places for fill-in type buys. Most of our clothes are ordered nine months in advance, but of course we often find nearer the time that we are short of a particular line. This year, for example, it's knickerbockers. We might well order 10,000 from these small manufacturers."

She admitted: 'It's very hard to control. They farm out the work to each other. But I don't think the rates of pay are that low. It's a very necessary evil, something we have to do to keep the merchandise up to date in the shops. Some of the factories in the East End do leave a lot to be desired.'

Most of Woolworth's fill-in buying is done through a middleman, Brand X in Great Portland Street. The manager there says: 'Frankly, we don't care if the stuff is made in the toilet as long as it's up to scratch.'

The mark-up made by the retailers varies between 100 and 200 per cent. The middleman makes a lot less — about 30 per cent. This means that a dress selling for £15 in a high street store provides only £4 for the manufacturer, while the cloth may come to only £2.

Baji Bassi, who runs a business in Whitechapel Road, says: 'The big stores always find an excuse to cancel their order if a line's not selling well. Usually it's quality; sometimes they say the clothes don't fit, even if they do. They couldn't care less about anybody.'

Machinists at Dalbir Kudaham in Brick Lane work a 48-hour week for £35. The workshop is noisy, hot and crowded. The manager says: 'How can I pay more? It's a family business. I can get £3.70 for a dress — the price hasn't gone up for three years. The wholesalers get no more than

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Many high street chain stores are filling their fashion racks with huge amounts of clothes made by unprotected sweated labour in London's East End. David Rose reports. T-O 13-11 NOV. '81



East End factory where women work for £35 a week.