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‘Bridal Outfits from the Heart of Filmland’: Clothes Rationing, Wartime Film Production and Gainsborough Pictures’ Studio Hire Service

Richard Farmer

Abstract: This article explores the Studio Hire Service, a wardrobe ‘pooling’ scheme set up by Gainsborough Pictures at the Shepherd’s Bush film studio following the introduction of clothes rationing in 1941. The Service enabled producers to hire rather than purchase items of clothing for use in their films, saving them money, reducing the number of new outfits required for each production and allowing clothing coupons, which film-makers were expected to use sparingly, to be spent on only the most important or unusual costumes. Vital to the production sector in wartime Britain, the Studio Hire Service also played a notable role outside the film industry, not least in that it loaned outfits – including those worn by major female stars in films such as *Love Story* (1944) and *Waterloo Road* (1945) – to women for them to use as wedding dresses. In the last years of the war and the early years of the peace, hundreds (and possibly thousands) of British brides got married wearing a film-studio dress. The contribution that costume made to contemporary enjoyment of many of Gainsborough’s most famous films has been noted by scholars; this article shows that some of these same costumes also had a significant role to play in the real-world experiences of many ordinary Britons, offering access to a glamorous bridal outfit in a period of widespread sartorial scarcity and providing a noteworthy example of the way in which the bond between the picturegoer and the cinema extends beyond the auditorium.

Keywords: Gainsborough Pictures; wedding; dress; costume; wardrobe; wartime; clothes rationing; coupons

The massive popularity of Gainsborough Pictures’s 1940s melodramas can be explained in part by the visions of excess and escape they afforded Britons enduring wartime and post-war hardships and shortages. Food, exotic locales, sex – all were relished with varying degrees of

lip-smacking abandon by a vibrant cast of caddish lords, jealous suitors, brutish husbands, and highway robbers, and all could be similarly enjoyed, vicariously although not necessarily less intensely, by British picturegoers. This was perhaps especially true of the costumes seen in the films. Clothes rationing schemes meant that many a Briton's wardrobe came to look increasingly threadbare as the war progressed, while the introduction of austerity regulations and Utility designs further reduced the scope for clothing to function as an avenue of self-expression. Consequently, the historical finery seen in *The Man in Grey* (1943) and *The Wicked Lady* (1945) or the gypsy-inspired styles of *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944) and *Caravan* (1946) were important both for the visual pleasure and the sense of psychological release they gave cinemagoers, specifically the female audience with which they have so often been associated (Harper 2002: 167).

The fashions seen in a contemporaneously set melodrama such as *Love Story* (1944) were just as attractive to wartime audiences, as one young female respondent to J. P. Mayer's sociological survey of British cinemagoers made clear: 'I can honestly admit that no dresses have ever attracted me as much as those worn in *Love Story* by Margaret Lockwood. They were very simple but were of the type that most young women could wear and afford' (Mayer 1948: 81). These fashions were particularly desirable because they existed – potentially, at least – in the same world as the viewer, even if their appeal often lay in the contrast they offered to the more limited and quotidian range of clothes then available to British consumers. In what has been dubbed a period of sartorial 'famine', American columnist Hedda Hoppa noted that any film producer able to satisfy the hunger of British women 'starved for glamorous gowns' would 'find his reward in his receipts' (Calder 1969: 378; Hoppa 1946). This was certainly the case for Gainsborough, and one wartime visitor to the Shepherd's Bush studio where many of the company's films were made noted that in the wardrobe department she saw 'the most beautiful dresses, all refreshingly non-utility, among

them countless evening gowns of satin, velvet and crepe, heavily embroidered with jewels, sequins or gold'. Just to see these garments up close was enough, she said, to send 'all the ladies into raptures' (Lambert 1944: 2).¹ If, as Sue Harper has observed, the popularity of the costumes in Gainsborough's historical films 'was predicated in wartime on what was unavailable and forbidden', then the same could also be said of many of the contemporary fashions seen in the company's other productions (Harper 1994: 132).

In this article, though, I will explore the circumstances in which some Gainsborough costumes were in fact made available to picturegoers, circumstances in which they were permitted – encouraged, even – to take temporary possession of clothes that had actually appeared on screen. I am talking here of a scheme operated by Gainsborough that allowed British women to hire dresses from the company for use on their wedding day – a scheme that transported Gainsborough costumes from the realms of cinematic fantasy into a place of tangible, material reality. While the clothes created by Gainsborough's costume designers were copied or approximated by many a female cinemagoer (within the limitations imposed by wartime conditions), the hire scheme meant that women could enjoy, and wear, some of the actual costumes worn by Phyllis Calvert or Margaret Lockwood – including at least one of the dresses from *Love Story* that had excited such admiration.² Replicas of some dresses were also available for hire. The dresses originally appeared in various films made in a range of styles, not just melodramas, although most were set in or near the present day: such dresses were more closely aligned with wartime fashions, while historical costumes were not always practicable as wedding dresses and would be far harder to replace or repair should they get damaged.³ Consequently, the wedding dress that proved so distasteful to Lockwood's Barbara in *The Wicked Lady* – 'Wear that? I wouldn't be buried in it!' – is unlikely to have been made available to the public.

Gainsborough Pictures has generated a substantial academic literature, and the clothes that appeared in the company's films (especially its historical and costume melodramas) have been extensively analysed (see, for example, Seaton and Martin (1982a and 1982b); Aspinnall and Murphy (1983); Harper (1994: esp. 119-35); Cook (1996: esp. 80-115); Cook (1997); Harper (2002); Turner (2009)). The dress-hire scheme has, however, received no scholarly attention. In order to contextualise my exploration of these 'bridal outfits ... right from the heart of filmland', I will first discuss the clothes pooling scheme from which it emerged (Film Wardrobes Ltd, 1949). The Studio Hire Service, operated by Gainsborough at the Shepherd's Bush studio in west London but including costumes used at Islington studio a few miles to the east, was introduced in an attempt to maintain aesthetically interesting costume design in a period of general sartorial scarcity. However, the rationale behind, and the need for, the Studio Hire Service also very effectively demonstrate that British film-makers were subject to the same types of shortage then affecting British consumers, even as producers sought to facilitate cinemagoers' escape from 'the drabness of the ... world of clothes coupons and austerity' (Ostrer 1945).

The Studio Hire Service

On 1 June 1941, Britons learned that clothes rationing was to come into effect by means of 'a very surprise announcement over the radio' and stories in their Sunday newspapers (Mass-Observation 1941: 7). The clothes rationing scheme was devised and administered by the Board of Trade (BoT) and was intended to regulate consumption and free up labour in the clothing industry by providing every Briton with an annual allocation of clothing coupons (a.k.a. 'points'). When buying new clothes, consumers had to pay out both money and some of these coupons, with different items of clothing having different points values. Second-hand

clothes were not included in the scheme. Adults were initially provided with 66 clothing points per year to use as they saw fit – a total that permitted the purchase of approximately half of the average adult's pre-war outlay on clothing. This number fluctuated as the war ground on, reaching a nadir of 36 points per annum pro rata for the eight months from September 1945, with reductions to personal allocations and increases in the types of clothes covered by the scheme both negatively affecting public attitudes. It was possible to apply for supplemental coupons in specific circumstances and certain groups of workers, including some film studio employees, were given additional points (Calder 1969: 239-40; 377). The value of coupons was such that a black market flourished pretty much from the introduction of rationing until the BoT gradually decontrolled clothes in the twelve months to May 1949 (Roodhouse 2013: 23-4; 47-8).

To the general public, the arrival of clothes rationing was unexpected, but not necessarily unwelcome: a Mass-Observation survey conducted on 2 June 1941 found that 70 per cent of those consulted approved of the new measures as constituting a necessary aspect of the war economy (Mass-Observation 1941: 8). The film industry was similarly shocked but noticeably less sanguine, especially when, as *Kinematograph Weekly* reported on 5 June 1941, the BoT declared that there would be 'no privilege or exemption for stage or screen [meaning] that actors and actresses must use their own coupons for clothes worn professionally. This means only two changes of frock or suit per annum'. Michael Balcon of Ealing Studios, whose *Big Blockade* (1942) was delayed by costume problems when the rationing scheme was implemented, claimed that the BoT was 'making it impossible to produce properly' (Mannock 1941). It was feared that historical films would be particularly badly affected as actors would not be able to supply their own clothes.⁴ Rationing would also affect the wardrobe department as it tried to clothe actors appearing in films set in the present day. Clive Brook took this in his stride, and was quoted by the same issue of *Kinematograph*

Weekly as saying that stars might look ‘a little less smart, but they will be faithfully portraying the wartime Englishman’. Indeed, communicating how fashion would be forced to adapt to wartime realities, and the contribution that such changes might make to the war effort, was a not insignificant aspect of the ideological role played by realist dramas such as *The Gentle Sex* (1943), *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *Two Thousand Women* (1944), the last two of these produced by Gainsborough (Turner 2009). It was not only by offering visual pleasure that cinematic costumes could perform an important wartime function.

In July 1941, the BoT announced changes that would allow film-makers to apply for clothing coupons; as many as 3,000 for an ‘average’ picture by 1946, but more than 10,000 in unusual cases (Mannock 1946: 29). Requests for coupons to purchase costumes or fabric were to be submitted by film-makers to the British Film Producers’ Association at least 21 days before the coupons were required. It was taken as read that film-makers would avoid all ‘unnecessary extravagance’, and that applications for extraneous or gratuitously elaborate costumes would be rejected (Carter 1941: 280). Any unused coupons were returned to the Board of Trade.⁵ This concession obviated the worst of the film industry’s immediate problems, but was not sufficiently generous to allow British costume designers to work entirely unaffected by wartime restrictions; extreme economy in the use of fabric was still required. At Shepherd’s Bush, costume designer Elizabeth Haffenden had to cut her cloth according to the material that she was able to access, as she noted in January 1943: ‘I need not say anything about coupons! We all know how few of these there are’ (Ostrer and Black 1943). Haffenden had to make do with just 15 yards of fabric when producing the ‘pleats and flounces’ of the Victorian-era dresses seen in *Fanny by Gaslight* (1944). Pre-war, such dresses might have been made using three times as much material, so Haffenden supplemented her designs with overdresses and draperies created using unrationed fabrics (Whitley 1943b).⁶ Haffenden also breathed a sigh of relief that the wartime films she

designed for were all black-and-white productions: in a period of ‘restricted’ colour, when a full range of fabrics was not available, she could rely on texture and pattern to create aesthetic diversity: ‘I am able to give one star three dresses in the same colour, though made from different materials’ (Ostrer and Black 1943). Technicolor productions had a voracious appetite for clothing coupons: outfits designed for monochrome photography didn’t always translate well into colour, thereby requiring wardrobe departments to spend more points on new costumes (Mannock 1946: 29). When Haffenden did finally work on a Technicolor production, 1947’s *Jassy*, it affected her ‘design range, necessitating the learning of a different colour “language”’ (Harper 2002: 186).

Despite the ingenuity and creativity of costume designers such as Haffenden, it was obvious that additional strategies for eking out clothing allowances were necessary. To this end, the Studio Hire Service (sometimes also referred to as the Wardrobe Hire Service or the Gainsborough Hire Service) was established at Shepherd’s Bush in the summer of 1941 with the blessing of the BoT. The brainchild of Maurice Ostrer, the Service functioned as a centralised clothing ‘pool’ that producers working in different studios could access when they needed costumes for their own films.⁷ As well as reducing the need for labour and the consumption of fabric, hiring clothes – crucially – did not require the outlay of clothing coupons, meaning that points could be focused on those places where they would be most noticeable (e.g. on stars) or most needed (e.g. spectacular, specialist or unusual costumes that might not be available from the pool already). The Service would provide another source of apparel for film-makers, working alongside, but not replacing theatrical costumiers such as Berman’s, whose stock, consisting of 80,000 items, was simply too important to ignore (Berman 1946). The first item hired out by the scheme was a pair of men’s pyjamas, sent to an unknown producer in return for a payment of 2s 6d, but charges were often much higher: a white crepe evening dress with crepe bolero was hired for a period of two months for a cost

of approximately £40 (Studio Hire Service 1946c; Whitley 1943a). Even so, the Service represented a significant saving: hiring clothes was cheaper than purchasing them outright, especially as scarcity drove up demand and increased prices – that white crepe dress had originally cost £89 (Whitley 1943a).

The Studio Hire Service was managed by Ernest Beha, wardrobe master at Gainsborough, and towards the end of 1941 produced its first catalogue containing photographs and details of hireable clothes to which producers working at other studios could refer when seeking to dress their actors.⁸ By late 1942, the catalogue included the particulars of more than 7,000 different items, including ‘hundreds of dresses, articles of lingerie, shoes, fancy costumes and accessories’ (Flanagan 1942b). The Service was also a boon to producers working at Shepherd’s Bush. When in 1943 it proved difficult to get sufficient coupons to provide Evelyn Dell with a pair of thigh-high leather boots for her role in *Time Flies* (1944), the catalogue was consulted and a suitable pair, initially worn by Cicely Courtneidge in *Me and Marlborough* (1935), was located (Whitley 1943a). Haffenden herself stated that having access to the costumes offered by the Service ‘helps my department very much’ (Ostrer and Black 1943). When a Gainsborough production wrapped, any new clothes used in it were added to the catalogue. For fear that cinemagoers would notice if the same outfits reappeared time after time on different actors in different films, limits were set on how often certain items could be used. One gold-trimmed velvet cloak, for example, was deemed ‘so vivid’ that its use was ‘limited to one hire per half year’ (Whitley 1943a). Other dresses were ‘camouflaged’ so as to make them unrecognisable from one appearance to the next (Editor 1943).

There were, of course, some drawbacks. There were concerns that artistes would object to wearing clothes that might have been designed for another actor or that changes in fashion would all-too-quickly render some of the more modish styles out-of-date (Beha

1946). The exigencies of film production in wartime put paid to such concerns. Some items of clothing were, however, significantly more difficult to acquire than others – even for film stars. Actresses expressed ‘great objection’ to wearing their own stockings during filming because of the difficulty of replacing them should they get damaged on set.⁹ With women’s hosiery in generally short supply, filmmakers came to fear that ‘the most dramatic love scene would be ruined if the heroine had a ladder in her hose or “utility bags” appeared around her ankles’ (Stapleton 1945).

More important, though, was ensuring that clothes fitted the actors who wore them. Costumes hired through the Service were not bespoke garments tailored to the needs of each individual user, but were, rather, based on the measurements of the person for whom they had originally been made; indeed, before the introduction of clothes rationing, stars had often been allowed to keep or purchase the clothes they wore on screen. Alterations were therefore needed, and the Service’s staff became so proficient at making them that, as *Kinematograph Weekly* reported on 26 November 1942, ‘an artiste from another studio can now ... be fitted and have an alteration done in time for the set the next day’. Alterations were carried out in such a way that each garment could revert to its original state after being returned to Shepherd’s Bush.

The Studio Hire Service was a successful innovation, and much utilised by various companies working in the British production sector. A particular advantage was the cinematic provenance of most of the garments, which had been designed or purchased by film industry personnel with an eye to how well they would photograph under the bright lights of the studio. As such, they differed from the clothes offered by theatrical costumiers, many of which were designed for the stage rather than the screen (Beha 1946). Even if we treat with slight scepticism the claim in a January 1946 advertisement that ‘some article or other from Gainsborough Pictures [had] appeared in nearly every British feature film since 1942’ – a few

months later a slightly more modest appraisal noted that ‘more than 100 productions have been assisted’ – it is evident that the Service functioned as a prodigious source of clothing (Wardrobe Hire Service 1946; Studio Hire Service 1946a). It even received a mention in the credits of *A Night of Magic* (1944), a second feature set in contemporary Britain and ancient Egypt for which the Service dispatched costumes both ‘period and modern’ to producers working at the Nettlefold Studio. By the end of December 1945, it was declared that ‘83,107 coupons had been saved’, a total sufficient to ‘provide new wardrobe for more than 20 normal productions’ or ‘clothe a division of troops with demob suits’ (Wardrobe Hire Service 1945; Kine Correspondent 1945). The following July the coupon-value of the clothes hired out was said to have increased to 92,106, and to more than 100,000 by February 1947 (Studio Hire Service 1946c; Studio Hire Service 1947). **[Fig 1. Near here]**

‘Bridal outfits from the heart of filmland’

So helpful was the Studio Hire Service to British film-makers that a decision was made to open it up to other parts of the wartime show business. This included other sectors of the film industry: costumes could be hired by cinema managers for use in promotional stunts, such as when twelve dresses used in *The Wicked Lady* were sent to Glasgow, where they were displayed in the foyer of the Picture House (Studio Hire Service 1945; Showman 1946: 45). Theatrical productions (both professional and amateur), cabaret artistes and acts performing in charity concerts were also encouraged to contact Ernest Beha, who ensured that his name came to be very closely associated with the Service – much more so than the ‘large staff of alteration experts and clerks’ referred to by *Kinematograph Weekly* (9 March 1944), many of them women, who presumably did most of the handling, despatching and logging of the costumes.¹⁰ Assiduously cataloguing individual items of clothing allowed orders to be placed by telephone and processed extremely efficiently; the Service boasted, for example, of its

response to a 'wardrobe SOS' where a theatrical producer in the Midlands urgently requested three dresses and the required costumes were on stage within 24 hours (Studio Hire Service 1946b).

Costumes were also supplied to ENSA (the Entertainments National Service Association) to supplement its own wardrobe stores, and to the armed forces, where dresses including Margaret Lockwood's satin evening dress from *Alibi* (1942) and Bebe Daniels's ice-blue silk outfit from *Hi Gang!* (1941) were worn in revues and camp shows around the country (Gordon 1944). As the *Kensington News and West London Times* of 10 September 1948 reported, it was as a consequence of the Studio Hire Service's involvement with female service personnel that dresses also first started to be hired out to brides. When a corporal in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) visited Shepherd's Bush, she saw the wedding dress worn by Joy Shelton's Tillie Colter in *Waterloo Road* (1945), **[fig. 2 near here]** itself recently returned from an amateur theatrical engagement:

Oh, if only Private Smith could borrow that dress. Her troubles would be over. All last night she was crying in the barracks because she could not fulfil her life-long wish – to be married in white. She could not raise the coupons and in any case time was too short now for her to get a white dress.

Beha was said to be so moved by these words that he invited Private Smith to come down to Shepherd's Bush from her camp in Yorkshire to try on Shelton's dress. After some minor alterations were made to improve the fit, the bride-to-be was sent away to get married in white, 'nearly ... crazy with happiness'.¹¹ Hiring the dress meant that she did not need to hand over any clothing coupons, and did not have to get married, as did an increasing number

of servicewomen, in what one observer called an ‘ugly, ill-fitting khaki uniform’ (Kay and Storey 2018: 94; Summers 2016: 144-5). As news of Private Smith’s wedding spread, scores of women from the ATS, Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and Women’s Royal Naval Service (WRNS) contacted the Studio Hire Service. Members of the Women’s Land Army were also able to get married in Gainsborough dresses: an article in the *Alderley, Wilmslow and Knutsford Advertiser* of 26 April 1946 showed that one such gown was used as an unofficial recruiting tool at a fete held at Stockport.

In many cases, women visited the Shepherd’s Bush studio to get fitted for their hired dresses, but as this was not always possible others ordered them by telephone or post; one visitor found Beha and his team working their way through ‘a foot high pile’ of wedding dress-related correspondence.¹² In one instance mentioned in the *Daily Mirror* (18 October 1945), a WAAF sent an RAF chaplain to choose a gown on her behalf. Although most women contacted Beha – described as a ‘genial 18 st. 5lbs ... fairy godfather’¹³ – about hiring a Gainsborough dress, some wrote directly to individual stars to ask them for help. Jean Kent, for example, responded to a letter from a Lt Brown by informing her that she needed her own dresses for personal appearances (‘I only have the same coupon allowance as everybody else’) and advising Brown to contact Beha, making sure to give him ‘full details of measurements, &c.’ (Lumley 1993: 162). The Mantilla-style veil worn by Kent when she got married entered the scheme and was used by 20-year-old June Blake on her wedding day (Wace 1947).

The demand for borrowed wedding dresses was particularly high because clothes rationing made it much harder for women to put together a traditional trousseau – the BoT refused to supply additional coupons for the purchase of wedding wear and there were often not enough points to go round. In *Millions Like Us*, for example, Celia (Patricia Roc) is shown deliberating over whether to put what remained of her points allocation towards some

walking shoes, a night dress or a spare set of underwear. Similarly, one real-life bride noted that:

I just couldn't even have thought of a white wedding if it hadn't been for Gainsborough ... I've got 32 coupons to last me from now [May] until November. I've spent eighteen on a going-away suit, seven on a pair of walking shoes and seven on one cotton dress for my honeymoon' (Ibid.).

Although 'the fashion was still for a white wedding with long dress, veil and all the trimmings', many women decided to get married in clothes could be worn on other occasions – a photograph of Celia's wedding in *Millions Like Us* suggests that she got married in a matching dress and jacket (Summers 2016: 143). Other brides acquired items of clothing second-hand, wore their mother's or grandmother's dresses – a long-standing tradition that became more common during the war – or, 'if the brides were all of a similar size', formed their own pool and used the same dress for a number of different weddings (Kay and Storey 2018: 91-2).

Hiring a wedding dress did not require any outlay of points, meaning both that a more traditional-style gown could be worn, and that coupons could be used to buy other items. Brides were also able to hire veils, shoes, stockings, gloves, headdresses 'and even bust improvers', as well as posies of artificial flowers and wedding cake ornaments. Women in the Services who were 'really up against it for honeymoon clothes' could apply to hire 'an evening or afternoon frock, too', and bridesmaids dresses were also available.¹⁴ Coupons aside, there were also significant financial savings to be made. The *Dundee Evening Telegraph* of 31 August 1945 reported that the average cost of hiring a dress from

Gainsborough was two guineas. Although prices increased after the war – by mid-1947 most dresses could be hired for between £2 10s and £4 – they still represented a significant saving on the cost of buying a dress outright, and might also have brought the products of more exclusive dressmakers within the budgets of women of limited means (Wace 1947). As clothes rationing came to an end, Beha's advertising became more focussed on the financial advantages of hiring a dress.

By the time that Beha met Private Smith, other schemes that allowed women in the Services to borrow wedding dresses were already operational, and these might have informed his decision to start his own. For example, the *Daily Telegraph* reported on 11 August 1943 that a consignment of wedding dresses had arrived from America for use by women enlisted in the WRNS. These were sent by the British War Relief Society and could be hired for 10s, the cost of cleaning them. Canadian women donated dresses for use by WAAF brides. From 1944, numerous women in the ATS were married in dresses obtained through the War Office, many of which had been donated personally by, or through the charitable efforts of, novelist Barbara Cartland. Estimates as to the number of dresses sourced by Cartland range from 120 to more than 1,000 (Cloud 1979: 116-7; Lumley 1993: 162).

It was in this way that Beha and his colleagues at the Studio Hire Service 'began to dress ordinary Jills and Janes for the most important performance of their lives'. By August 1946 the dress-hire scheme had been expanded to serve all women, and started to operate on more overtly commercial lines, advertising in both local and national newspapers even as it continued to be promoted as an efficient solution to the specific problem of clothing scarcity. The need to preserve the dresses was of paramount importance – the same shortages that led women to hire them also made them difficult to replace. Lipstick was Beha's greatest bugbear, and 'the tell-tale smears of Cupid's Blood or Danger Red' were said to be 'more annoying [to him] than they could be to a jealous woman finding them on her husband's

collar'. Women wearing lipstick were asked to keep a handkerchief in their mouth when putting on a dress.¹⁵

In 1947, Beha started his own wedding-hire business, setting up shop on Goldhawk Road, close to the Shepherd's Bush studios, with a second premises in Leicester, and continued to stress that he, the service he offered and the products he provided had their origins in the film industry. This business, Film Wardrobes Ltd, survived the closure of the Shepherd's Bush studio in 1949 and was still advertising in April 1952. The timing of Beha's decision to go independent was likely not coincidental. Rates of marriage rose in Britain after 1945 and Beha fancied himself as the Lord of the Aisles, arranging for wedding cars and invitation cards and publishing a pamphlet entitled 'What every bride should know' (Calder 1969: 312). In late 1947, Harry Day, a tailor in Trowbridge, Wiltshire, advertised in several papers in the west of England that he had come to an 'arrangement with Shepherd's Bush film studios' that allowed him to offer 'the whole of the studio wardrobe for your wedding' (Day 1947). The exact nature of Day's arrangement is unknown, but it does open up the possibility that he was operating under licence from the studio, or possibly even from Beha.

Without internal company documentation we are reliant on published sources for details about the number and popularity of dresses that Gainsborough hired out. Although useful, such information is usually limited and boosterish in nature; further research might unearth more detailed accounts. Nevertheless, data found in trade publications, periodicals and newspapers suggests a thriving operation. When arriving at Shepherd's Bush, the *Warwick Daily News* (9 February 1948) found 'an excited and happy crowd of young women patiently waiting their turn in a queue stretching from the studio's wardrobe department nearly to the street'; this queue was said to be visible 'just about any day of the week'. By June 1945, reports claimed that some 620 Service brides had got married in Gainsborough dresses, a number which had risen to more than 1,700 by July the following year (Wardrobe

Hire Service 1945; Studio Hire Service 1946c). Separate articles from August 1945 and April 1947 report that approximately 30 brides hired Gainsborough wedding outfits each week.¹⁶ Numbers increased during particularly busy periods, and some 300 women were said to have got married in Gainsborough dresses over Easter weekend 1947 alone (Wace 1947). Beha claimed in September 1948 that in the preceding two years he had assisted 4,500 women – ‘all radiant as film stars in their film star dresses’. If true, this would mean that approximately one bride out of every 200 who got married in Britain in 1947 and 1948 did so in a Gainsborough dress.¹⁷ The truth is probably less startling: Beha noted in the *Kensington News and West London Times* of 5 September 1947 that the 40 outfit hires per week needed to reach this huge total included those for bridesmaids and pages. Even so, it is evident that film studio apparel was a not uncommon feature of British wedding ceremonies in the post-war period.

The exact number of dresses made available for hire is not known, although the total likely ran to hundreds. Beha complained that ‘We just haven’t enough in stock’ and noted that suitable outfits that ‘were unlikely to be used for film purposes again’ were ‘altered by expert dressmakers and turned into sparkling wedding dresses, some of them breathtaking in their loveliness’.¹⁸ **[Fig 3 near here]** Alterations became more difficult to effect as fabrics and decorations became harder to source (Gordon 1944). The extent of these alterations, and how closely the finished garments resembled their on-screen appearance is unclear. Moreover, Beha noted, ‘often we piece together several [dresses] when they begin to get worn out’; on one occasion, a dress that was ‘too far gone to wear again’ was converted into a christening gown for a child born to a mother who had got married in a Gainsborough outfit (Wace 1947). Because we lack an inventory, we do not know what proportion of these dresses had been worn by stars as opposed to bit part players or extras. Beha later advertised that brides would be able to ‘dress like a film star’ for their wedding, wearing either ‘the

original gown or an exact replica' – both would make the bride 'the envy of all' (Film Wardrobes Ltd 1949). It seems probable that there were multiple versions of popular gowns; it is also possible that as the service expanded, some dresses were hired out for weddings without having first appeared on the screen.

Contemporary reports stress that women could hire specific gowns worn by particular actresses in named films, indicating both that such dresses were recognisable from their on-screen appearances and that the prospect of getting married while wearing one was attractive. Beha reported that women were not always able to get the dress they had seen in the cinema and set their sights on: some servicewomen – 'romantic at heart but stocky in figure after good army feeding' – had a body shape 'just slightly different' to the star on which their favoured gown had first appeared (Wace 1947). On 31 August 1945, a report in the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* noted that a dress of 'white cobweb lace and white sequins', worn by Margaret Lockwood in *Love Story*, was 'very popular'. Also said to be 'greatly in demand' were three dresses seen in *They Were Sisters* (1945): a period-style cream satin wedding dress worn by Dulcie Gray, and two bridesmaid's gowns – one blue, the other pink – worn by Phyllis Calvert and Anne Crawford, respectively. [Fig 4 near here] June Randall, working as a continuity girl at Gainsborough at the time of her wedding in 1948, got married in a dress worn by Jane Hylton in *Here Come the Huggetts* (1948).¹⁹

According to *Picture Post* of 5 April 1947, it cost £5 to hire Joy Shelton's wedding dress from *Waterloo Road*. Also available via the scheme was a dress worn by Dulcie Gray in the propaganda short *Victory Wedding* (1944); in that film, the dress can only be purchased because the bride's parents donated some of their own clothing coupons, thereby referencing the kind of problem that the dress hire service was established to overcome. There is also a report of a bride wearing a dress worn by Margaret Lockwood in *Bedelia* (1946), a drama featuring a good deal of 'exciting and often exotic fashion wear.'²⁰ Although the film's

dresses were designed by Elizabeth Haffenden, who was still based at Shepherd's Bush at this time, and although Lockwood and co-star Anne Crawford were under contract at Gainsborough, *Bedelia* was made at Ealing by John Corfield Productions – so the dress might not have been the property of Beha's wardrobe department. It is evident, however, that other production companies were willing to help British women get married: Two Cities donated Rosamund John's bridal gown from *The Way to the Stars* (1945) to the WAAF while a gown worn by Vivien Leigh in London Films's *Anna Karenina* (1948) became Eileen Dickerson's wedding dress.²¹ The positive publicity generated by such generosity was no doubt welcome, but Gainsborough appears to have been the only company that instituted a regular hiring service.

Dresses were sent all over Britain, but some travelled much further, being used in weddings in Germany and Libya.²² These weddings gained the attention of national newspapers, as did the April 1947 marriage of Pearl Ackerman and Harry Schneider at the Alie Street synagogue in London, a photograph of which, showing Ackerman in Lockwood's *Love Story* dress, appeared in the *Daily Mirror* on 21 April 1947. Marriage announcements in local newspapers are, though, a richer source of information, providing the names of some of the women who wore Gainsborough dresses on their wedding day. I have to date located some 30 such announcements, but there is still much to learn about these women, especially in terms of their feelings about the dresses they hired.²³ We can say with some confidence, though, that many brides were very excited about gaining access to a film studio wardrobe, mentioning the source of their wedding dress in marriage announcements that sometimes also featured a photograph of them wearing it.

Indeed, it is possible that the glamour of a studio-sourced gown, with its attendant film star associations, might have offset some of the less positive connotations of having to hire a wedding dress. Shortly before the war, *Picture Post* had noted that, for wealthy women

at least, it was a ‘tradition that a bride must start her new life with everything new.’²⁴ By 1947, however, a woman asked about wearing a hired gown gave a phlegmatic reply: ‘It’s surprising how easy it is to pocket your pride after seven years of scrimping and saving on clothes.’ It also proved surprisingly easy to integrate such wartime innovations into established tradition: ‘Most of those lucky enough to get one of those lovely [hired] gowns looked upon it as the “something borrowed” of the old superstition’ (Hodges 1947: 22).

For women who considered themselves film fans we might speculate as to whether awareness of the dress-hire scheme affected the way in which they consumed Gainsborough’s output. A 1943 survey found that more than a third of British women went to the pictures at least once a week, with younger and less affluent Britons, who might tentatively be assumed to be more likely to use the Gainsborough dress-hire scheme, the most enthusiastic cinemagoers (Glancy 2011: 456). The costumes seen in the company’s productions were a major point of their appeal and stressed in many publicity campaigns, but knowing that certain dresses could, in particular circumstances, be made tangible might have altered the viewer’s interest in and perception of them (Harper 1994: 131-2). Stella Bruzzi (1997) has differentiated between cinematic costumes that are designed to be looked at (i.e., enjoyed as spectacles in their own right) and those that are designed to be looked through (i.e., not presented to the viewer as an overt site of visual pleasure). Approaching a Gainsborough film knowing that some of the clothes it showcased might be hired could have encouraged women to see and evaluate elements of the film differently, persuading them (in Bruzzi’s terms) to look at clothes that had initially been intended to be looked through. Here, the cinemagoer’s imaginative relationship with a costume would not simply emerge from the immaterial and the fantastical; rather, it would be informed by the possibility of a haptic, real-world encounter with the thread, fabric and buttons of a garment that they might actually wear.²⁵

Other women appear to have been broadly uninterested in the cinematic origins of their gown; almost 50 years after her wedding, Winifred Jones could recall the exact price she paid to hire her dress but admitted that she ‘never did find out who wore it’ (Abberley 1995: 29). Some brides might have been indifferent to the pictures in general, accessing the scheme not for the cinematic glamour it might bestow on them, but instead as a means by which they could access a beautiful dress without having to use up precious clothing coupons. Given the unflattering portrayals of marriage in films such as *They Were Sisters*, which details the horrors of an abusive relationship, or *Bedelia*, in which Margaret Lockwood disposes of a series of husbands in order to claim their life insurance, it does not seem unreasonable to assume (or even hope) that knowledge of the film in which a dress appeared was less important than its accessibility via the changing rooms at Shepherd’s Bush.

More comprehensive data would also allow for a more precise triangulation of the position of the scheme in the constantly changing landscape of late-wartime and post-war Britain. As the economic and cultural position of the country shifted, so too did the appeal of hiring a film studio dress. The end of clothes rationing in 1949, however, meant that the deciding factor in whether to hire a dress became more overtly financial, driven primarily by economic rationales and no longer explicable through reference to the logics of wartime sartorial regulation. Even before this, however, both Harry Day and Ernest Beha had in their advertising stressed in the ‘strictly confidential’ nature of their services, with Day also noting that ‘care [was] taken that the Dress is not hired again in the same area’, anticipating the embarrassment that might result from two women in the same town walking down aisle in the same gown (Day 1947). Such pronouncements indicate that some women did not want it to be known that they had not bought their wedding dress, reflecting a post-war situation in which the purchase of new clothes was more likely to be stymied by a shortage of money or stock than a shortage of coupons (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2000: 93-4). The ‘Make Do and

Mend' ethos of wartime, with which the various wedding dress-hire schemes were closely aligned, and which meant that for several years after 1943 'it was considered very bad form to wear a new wedding dress,' was no longer regarded as a patriotic duty in the post-war age of austerity (Waller 2005: 228).

Of course, it seems likely that for many women the appeal of a Gainsborough dress lay precisely in its recognisability, in the idea that somebody famous had already worn it. This was particularly true given the important contribution that clothes have so often made to conceptions of stardom, even in wartime: not all clothes are created equal, and to wear *a* dress was not quite the same thing as to wear *the* Joy Shelton dress, for example. For women 'whose wedding dress might otherwise be their work-a-day utility suit', the prospect of dressing as a film star on their wedding day, and being treated like a film star when they visited the studio for their fitting, added to the excitement they felt: 'The inch tape that has encircled Margaret Lockwood and other famous stars, now measures less famous beauties, whose Cinderella sojourn in white satin and lace is destined to have a more tangible happy ending than any romantic screen story.'²⁶ A bride's use of a Gainsborough gown had the potential to both underline the importance of, and contribute to, the wedding as an occasion. Dresses were not hired for just any day, but rather for a day in which clothing functioned to focus attention on particular individuals, signifying their special status. The bride's role at her nuptials is analogous to that of a star in a film, making it entirely appropriate for her to wear a dress previously worn by a well-known actress and thereby introducing additional glamour into proceedings. In the years of peak cinemagoing in Britain, we should perhaps not be surprised that so many women chose to make the cinema, and their relationship with it, a privileged guest at their wedding.

Conclusion

The pleasures afforded by both Gainsborough's films and its dress-hire scheme were firmly anchored in the here and now by the kinds of shortages and difficulties from which many 1940s picturegoers used the cinema to escape. If the company's films offered temporary respite from these burdens, this was equally true of its dress-hire activities, which also constituted a rare example of cinematic fashion becoming available, even if only for short periods, to ordinary cinemagoers.²⁷ Ideas of fantasy and reality, beauty and duty, excess and restraint all ran as threads through the costumes Gainsborough put on the screen and hired out to British women, weaving a complex fabric of meaning that was made all the more significant by the circumstances of its production.

That the hire of bridal outfits grew out of a film industry scheme designed to mitigate the worst impacts of clothes rationing on the British production sector should also serve as a reminder that wartime film-makers existed in the same world as their audience. Film studios are voracious consumers of a wide range of materials: electricity, wood, film stock, plaster, time, labour, fabric – all get fed into the studio in the hope that they might combine alchemically into a successful and profitable picture. While efficiency and economy are often watchwords as producers seek to keep budgets in check, it sometimes takes the application of external forces, such as the demands of the British war economy, to bring about radical changes to established working practices. The restrictions imposed by clothes rationing did not last forever, but they did have a significant impact on production, altering the ways in which costumes were designed for and used within specific films.

Moreover, the development of the Studio Hire Service spoke to questions of rationalisation and planning then current in debates concerning the future of British film production. Helmut Junge, for example, mooted the idea of centralised props and furniture

stores when advocating for his plan for a modern, 'ideal' British production colony, although his 'Utopian' vision was not able to survive the return to sectional infighting and competition that accompanied the withdrawal of wartime regulations (1945: 48-9; 1946). Nevertheless, the Studio Hire Service shows that such pools were capable of functioning efficiently and demonstrates the benefits that they might have bestowed upon a production sector coming to terms with a return to peacetime operations.

When the British film industry is discussed in relation to a 'wartime wedding', it is most often in terms of John Shearman's 1946 observation that the union of documentary and commercial film-making after 1939 brought about a realist-influenced narrative cinema suited to articulating, albeit in a frequently restrained manner, the experiences of a country at war (Shearman 1946). Gainsborough's bridal-gown hire service shows that at least one British studio was also closely involved in hundreds of actual wartime and post-war weddings. By placing material elements of the cinematic within the grasp of the ordinary picturegoer, by allowing them temporarily to have and to hold a famous dress, the scheme also functioned as a wedding in a more figurative sense, joining the studio, and the fantasies it conjured, and British women, and their lived realities, in an intimate union that existed beyond the screen.

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Notes

¹ Often associated with the Poole Street studio in Islington, Gainsborough relocated to the Shepherd's Bush studio of its parent company Gaumont-British at the start of the Second World War, and thereafter produced many of its films there. Both studios came under the control of the Rank Organisation in 1941. On Gainsborough's history, see Murphy (1983).

² Numerous picturegoers attested to the influence that cinematic fashions had on British consumers. See Mayer 1948: 42-3; 72; 90; 114; 129.

³ Although its 1940s costume melodramas are now probably the best remembered, at least *as* Gainsborough productions, the company made numerous thrillers, dramas and comedies (Harper 1997).

⁴ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 3 June 1941, 3. See also Flanagan (1942a).

⁵ In August 1946, the British Film Producers' Association reported that in the previous year it had received 75 applications for, and had issued 128,192 additional coupons, of which 9,786 were subsequently returned. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 8 August 1946, p. 16. For a more detailed analysis of clothes rationing's impact on the British production sector, see Farmer (2024).

⁶ Frequently changing regulations brought about 'constant stylistic innovation' and a 'distinctive wartime aesthetic' in British fashion just as it did in studio wardrobes (Biddle-Perry 2017: 3).

⁷ Ostrer also set up a properties pool that, confusingly, also went under the name of Studio Hire Service (a. k. a. Furniture Hire Service). See *Kensington News and West London Times*, 6 October 1944, p. 3.

⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 26 November 1942, 41-2. For a brief introduction to the colourful Beha and his varied career, see Jackson 2011: 48-9.

⁹ The National Archives, BT 64/1378: E. Cornell to R. Lodge, 20 January 1942.

¹⁰ On gendered hierarchies in studio wardrobe departments, see Bell 2021: 72-80.

¹¹ *Kensington News and West London Times* of 10 September 1948, p. 5. *Picture Post* (5 April 1947) erroneously claimed that the wedding hire scheme had started in 1941 after a visiting WAAF was fitted for a gown from *Quiet Wedding* (1941). The *Quiet Wedding* dress was used in a real-world wedding, but only after being gifted to the bride, Edna Preston, by Margaret Lockwood, who had worn it in the film (Mortimer 1940: 7).

¹² *Straits Times* (Singapore), 18 May 1947, 4.

¹³ *Kensington News and West London Times*, 5 September 1947, 5.

¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 30 June 1945, 4; *Straits Times* (Singapore), 18 May 1947, 4. Gainsborough also advertised its evening-gown hire scheme in theatre programmes (Kirkham 1999: 156).

- ¹⁵ *Kensington News and West London Times*: 10 September 1948, 5; 5 September 1947, 5.
- ¹⁶ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 31 August 1945, 5; *Picture Post*, 5 April 1947, 10.
- ¹⁷ *Kensington News and West London Times*, 10 September 1948, 5.
- ¹⁸ *Kensington News and West London Times*, 10 September 1948, 5; *Straits Times* (Singapore), 18 May 1947, 4.
- ¹⁹ BECTU History Project: interview 201: June Randall interviewed by Manny Yospa and Len Harris, 24 May 1991.
- ²⁰ *Old Codgers* 1985: 21; *Kinematograph Weekly*, 20 December 1945, 186.
- ²¹ *Raymond* 1945; *News Chronicle*, 22 March 1948, 3.
- ²² *Daily Mirror*: 18 October 1945, 5; 6 October 1947, 4.
- ²³ I am currently undertaking further research to find out more about these women. Details of their age, background, occupation and where they lived will allow for a more nuanced understanding of who was using the studio dress-hire scheme.
- ²⁴ *Picture Post*, 3 June 1939, 54.
- ²⁵ This idea builds on ideas developed by scholars such as Gaines, who have posited that in many films viewers are invited ‘to imagine [a costume] from the inside out (as worn) as well as from the outside in (as seen)’ (2000: 173).
- ²⁶ *Kensington News and West London Times*, 5 September 1947, 5.
- ²⁷ The nature of the link between film producers and commercial fashion retailers can be difficult to ascertain. Most scholarship relates to the American market: see Herzog and Gaines (1991: 88) on the myth that Joan Crawford’s *Letty Lynton* (1932) dress inspired a copy that sold 500,000 units. The link between the film and fashion industries was both real and potentially lucrative: in the 1930s the Modern Merchandising Bureau put film-inspired clothes into Macy’s while simultaneously offering cheaper versions of the same outfits. Colpaert notes that *Lady in the Dark* (1944) was designed to ‘enrich Paramount on commercial derivatives selling bridal gowns, hosiery and furs’ (2022: 1069).

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