

**From Saving Lives to Keeping up Appearances:
Possible Uses for a Second World War Parachute Panel**

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Fig. 1. Parachute Panel. Worthing Museum Ref. 1999/103. Photograph by Stephanie Richards.

Reading about the culture of Make Do and Mend in Britain during the Second World War led me to study clothing made from parachute material during this period.¹ Worthing Museum and Art Gallery holds a complete panel from a white war-time parachute (Figure 1) along with other materials and garments relating to parachute fabric clothing production.

Parachutes were an integral part of the war effort, facilitating supply drops and saving the lives of service personnel forced to abandon their aircraft. Different sizes, colours and weights of material were used for different parachute applications. Supply drops utilised black, blue, yellow, green and red parachutes. The white colour of the panel at Worthing

¹ *Make Do And Mend* (London: HMSO, 1943).

suggests that its original intended use was as part of a personnel parachute.² Examination of the item shows it is in an untouched state and remains a whole cut panel from a parachute. It has the printed number 26 at the base. The Standard British Issue parachute was approximately 28 feet (8.5m) in diameter. Panels were 40 inches (102cm) at the base, reducing to just over 5 inches (13cm) at the top. Their maximum length was 158 inches (0.40m).³

The Worthing Museum panel is, notably, made of rayon, not silk. Before the Second World War, the majority of the world's silk had originated in Japan.⁴ The war cut off that supply, so an alternative material was needed in the form of artificial silk, invented in 1846 and first manufactured in 1911 in the United States of America. Renamed rayon from 1924, the semi-synthetic fibre enabled the manufacture of parachutes to continue during the war.⁵

Clothes rationing was introduced in Britain on 1 June 1941 and lasted until 15 May 1949. This initiative, designed to make the dwindling stocks of clothing and cloth accessible to all, was presented to a public accustomed to home dressmaking. Making your own clothes was commonplace and for those who had the resources to employ staff, the services of women who undertook dressmaking and alterations for a living could be utilised. Wartime shortages and restrictions conspired to make the act of making an even greater challenge, whatever one's level of prowess with a needle. Any non-rationed fabric consequently took on a lustre of desirability and became immediately sought after.

² .Jon Baker, Curator, Airbourne Assault, Bldg 213, Duxford Airfield. Email.

³ Jon Baker, Curator, Airbourne Assault, Bldg 213, Duxford Airfield. Email.

⁴ "History of Clothing". *Textile History: History Of Silk* [n.d.].

⁵ Carmen Keist, "Rayon and its impact on the fashion industry at its introduction, 1910- 1924." 2009. "The History Of Silk," The Silk Association Of Great Britain, [n.d.].

Newspapers and magazines gave tips and suggestions on how to remake, remodel and adapt clothing. Historian Geraldine Howell points out in the book *Wartime Fashion*, 'As everyday dressing began to include the products of making–do and recycling an alternative type of fashion arose that would become a significant component of wartime style'.⁶ The attributes of fluidity, softness and lightness that made silk and rayon suitable for parachute use also made them suitable for underwear, blouses and wedding dresses. Parachute fabrics were much in demand for wedding dresses, as white was common and much yardage was desirable.

Where did parachute scraps, panels and other oddments come from? Fashion historian Jayne Shrimpton, in her book *Fashion in the 1940s*, states, 'Parachute silk was not easy to obtain legally or illegally until it was officially made available for sale in 1945'. She observes, 'to acquire it for civilian use was a crime'.⁷ So how common was it to know where to lay your hands on some parachute silk pieces? Was parachute silk really such a commonplace resource, as many remember? Julie Summers, writing in *Fashion on the Ration*, suggests, 'it is hard to believe that so many faulty parachutes were manufactured that there was enough silk material available for so many women to have formed this pervasive memory'.⁸

⁶ Geraldine Howell, *Wartime Fashion: From Haute Couture to Homemade, 1939-1945* (London: Berg, 2012) 185.

⁷ Jayne Shrimpton, *Fashion in the 1940s* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2014) 40.

⁸ Julie Summers, *Fashion on the Ration: Style in the Second World War* (London: IWM & Profile Books, [2015] 2016) 137.

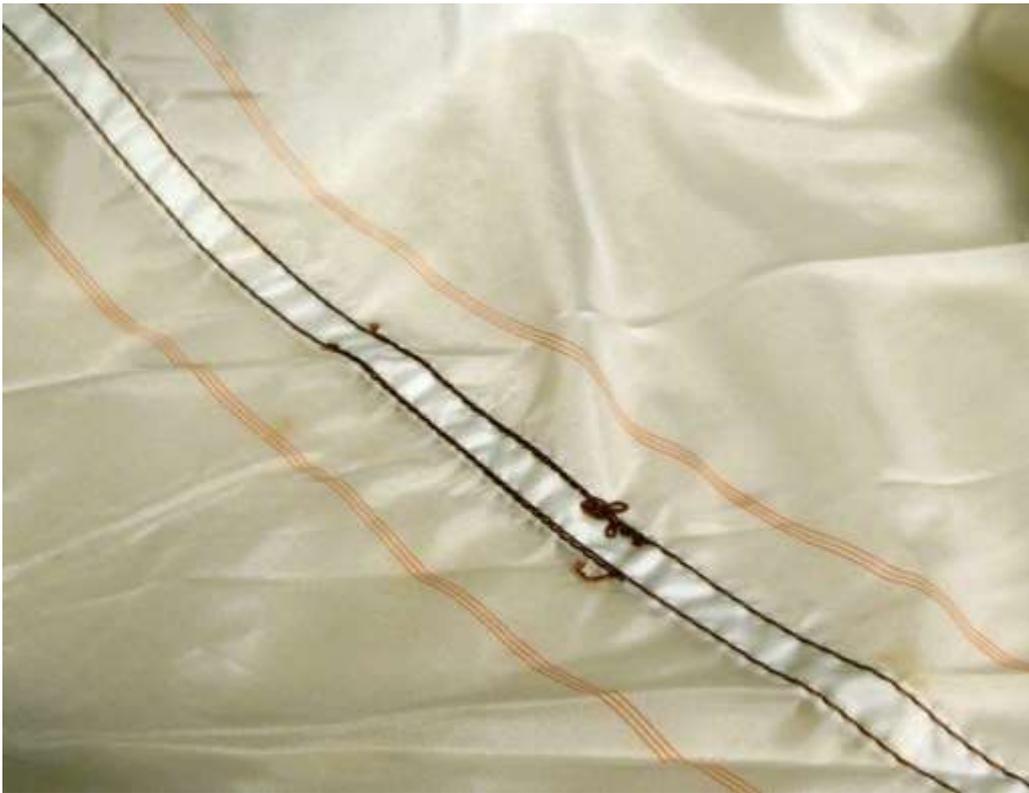


Figure 2: Parachute Panel. Worthing Museum Ref. 1999/103. Detail of seam stitching. Photograph by Stephanie Richards.

Some material was indeed spoiled; due to the debilitating effect of salt crystals on the fabric, parachutes that had ditched in salt water were not reusable.⁹ Other material may have been rejected for reasons of quality control. It is not recorded how the Worthing panel came to the hands of the owner, but close examination of the panel shows an imperfection in the seam stitching (Figure 2). Is it a rejected panel because of this? The stitching had to be 100% perfect to protect the life of the parachutist. Purchasing parachute silk was certainly a special treat, as Vera Sibley recalls, of her experience from 1941, in *Christmas On the Home Front*. 'I once bought a piece of blue/green parachute silk for 10/= [50p]', she notes, 'and made some lovely underwear which was pure luxury'.¹⁰ Perhaps the parachute panel entered circulation

⁹ Rose Heichelbech, "The Parachute Wedding Dresses Of The 1940s," *Dusty Old Thing* [n.d.].

¹⁰ Mike Brown, *Christmas on the Home Front* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, [2004] 2013) 95.

in the way that fashion historian Anna Vaughan Kett describes in her *Objects Unwrapped* essay, 'Escape and Evasion'. 'In 1945 parachute silk officially reached the public', she notes, when 'it was sold off-coupon through Army Surplus stores'.¹¹

However the fabric was obtained, transforming it into an item of clothing was aided by the publication of pattern sheets offering tailored guidance on turning parachutes into clothing (Figure 3). This Weldons pattern (c.1940/45) is also from the Worthing Museum collection. The detailed instructions aid the maker in maximising the fabric used and minimising any wastage. A clever needlewoman could incorporate the original seam of the parachute panel as part of the garment under construction. Henfield Museum in Sussex has in its collection a parachute silk nightdress with just such an example (Figure 4).

¹¹ Anna Vaughan Kett, 'Escape and Evasion: Dresses made from maps in the Second World War'. *Objects Unwrapped*. A University of Brighton/ Worthing Art Gallery research project.

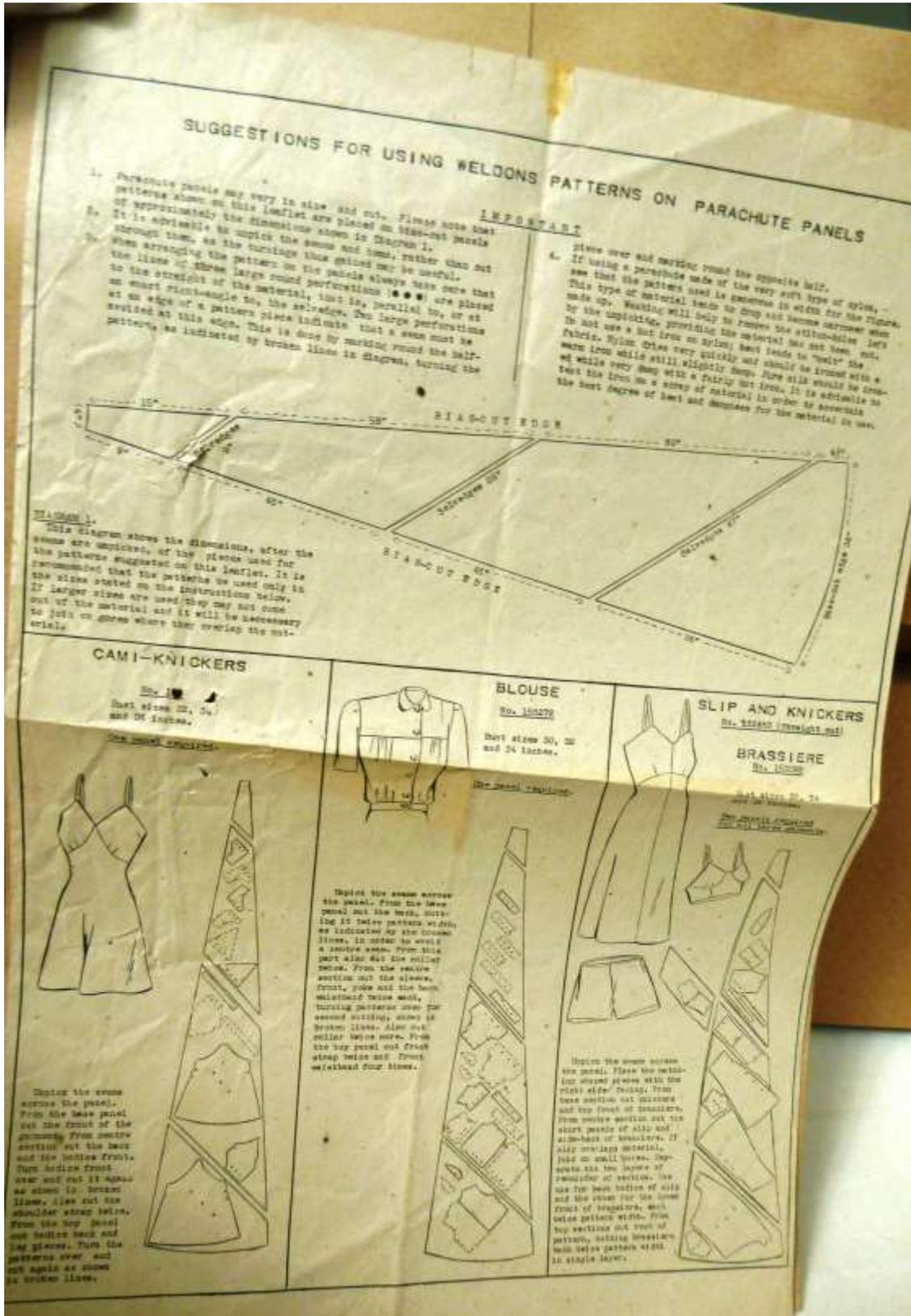


Figure 3: A Weldon's Pattern. Worthing Museum Ref. 1996/585. Photograph by Stephanie Richards.



Figure 4: Nightdress. Henfield Museum Ref. 2016/12a. Photograph by Stephanie Richards.

To illustrate the completion of the journey from parachute panel to a piece of clothing, it is interesting to compare the pair of French knickers in Worthing Museum's collection made from parachute silk (Figure 5). These c.1943 French knickers represent a popular style of the time and show a combination of hand and machine-stitching. They have a three button fastening at the left hand side, with only two buttons present, and have two darts on the rear waistband. Beautifully decorated with embroidery, they show skill in manufacture and evidence of much careful repair on the gusset.



Figure 5: French Knickers. Worthing Museum Ref 2006/716. Author's photograph.

Why the Worthing Museum panel was never used in dressmaking is a mystery. Its existence as an untouched piece of parachute raises many questions but also offers an opportunity to review the parachute silk clothing story. War-time shortages helped create the climate that led to the production of clothes from parachute panels. Resourcefulness and a fierce determination to raise standards and spirits created the clothes. As a final bonus, no coupons were needed from the ration book.

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