

# WOMEN'S FASHIONS IN WW1

In 1914, women's fashions were a stylish 'directoire' look, well corseted, with long hobble skirts, tailored long jackets, wide 'cartwheel' hats and slim high heeled shoes. For working women and housewives, it was much simpler – a blouse and skirt with an apron and shawl (often hand-knitted) and clogs or boots.

Women had always taken paid employment, mainly in shops and in domestic service, but also in the textile industry, on farms (the Women's Land Army was formed in 1917), in transport and even in coal mines. By the end of the war almost 1 million were working in some aspect of munitions: some were in the services including the police, some worked on buses, even as drivers, and numbers on the railways had increased from 9,000 to 50,000. Breeches had long been worn in the mines and now they became essential for railway engine cleaners, motorbike despatch riders and for those in the Women's Land Army. As soon as the war was over and women became relegated back to home duties, trousers became unacceptable. At the Front, the Service Corps with the huge logistical problem of keeping uniforms clean, disinfected and deloused, had vast fields of washing lines which had to be moved as battles fluctuated.

Textiles were required in quantity to clothe the troops and wool, especially, became expensive and difficult to get hold of. Local women behind the front lines were employed to sort through the clothing collected from the battlefields and hospitals. Any too damaged to be mended was sent home to be recycled. The new "Pure New Wool" label became sought after as it meant the article had no distressing history. The army commandeered the entire British wool clip in 1918.

Frontline women were under strict orders not to use powder and paint, scent, earrings or other jewellery but Rimmel and Maybelline created their cosmetic brands in 1915 and Coco Chanel introduced the idea of costume jewellery.

With more and more women forced to work, shirt waisted and tailored suits came in with a military look; cumbersome underskirts had been abandoned and skirts had risen to knee length. As early as 1915, *Gazette du Bon Ton* were showing full skirts (called 'war crinolines') at calf length. Generally, the reduction in social events and the increase in mourning, meant darker colours and simpler cuts. By 1916, fashion was aping military cuts with shorter A-line skirts and looser jackets and by 1918, trench coats became fashionable. The shorter skirts made stockings more important and gaiters were worn in winter. Shoes became sensible lace-ups with low wedge heels and rounded toes.

The tight laced corsets gave way to much freer undergarments. The manufacturers responded by developing a range to suit all activities such as dancing and sport.

To begin with, women in the services were expected to provide their own knickers, but once it was realised that poorer women had never worn knickers, they became standard issue although sizing was haphazard.

Before the war, underarm hair was seen to be erotic – a hint of what was hidden (although Queen Victoria disliked it), hence the wide off the shoulder style for evening dress, which exposed the handsome bosom, but hid the underarm hair. The shorter skirts introduced the idea of shaving legs and body hair began to be seen as unhygienic and unfeminine. Gillette introduced their Milady Decollitee razors in a pretty box.