Much industrial and business history in Great Britain has been dominated by economic concerns.¹ The gendered characteristics of production, distribution and consumption have typically been ignored.² Conversely, fashion historians, while informed by the insights offered by several disciplines, including cultural and gender studies, have tended to neglect the potential that an economic analysis might offer to an understanding of historical transformations in dress.³ For example, in a recent surge of interest in the man’s suit, historians of fashion have focused on cultural issues to the neglect of material concerns. This paper aims to contribute to the body of literature on the man’s suit by integrating economic and gender approaches. Its findings are consistent with those of Christopher Breward, whose research on male consumption of clothing has concentrated on the late nineteenth century, and Frank Mort, whose focus is on the period after the Second World War.⁴ However, it differs from these important studies in two key respects. Firstly it is concerned with the supply of the garment as well as its purchase and argues that an understanding of the relationship between production and consumption is necessary to explain the ubiquity of the suit. Secondly it focuses on the early twentieth century, especially the interwar years which, so far, have been surprisingly overlooked in this context. The years between the wars were special not only in terms of developments in production and retailing, but also because the suit reached a peak of popularity among all social groups at this time and loosened its main association with the world of work.⁵

By the outbreak of the Second World War, the majority of British men of all social groups wore a suit for many occasions. The man’s suit, a
standard woollen two- or three-piece garment of sombre shade, was for several decades a symbol of mass male dress. It lost its universal appeal only from the late 1950s as less structured male clothing became increasingly popular and, for many, the suit became confined to ‘Sunday Best’ outings. This paper attempts to explain the emergence of the suit as a ubiquitous male garment by considering changes in tailoring production and retailing in their social and cultural context. The men’s clothing industry during the period when the suit became standard male attire provides an instructive case in which to examine the connections between consumption and production – processes which are typically analysed separately.6

The three main components of the menswear trade are examined below to reveal the importance of gender. First, the emergence of the core product – the suit – and its association with a specific male identity from the later nineteenth century is investigated. The process of production, and especially the gendering of the workforce, is then examined. The gender division of labour was vital to the shape, development and long-term success of the men’s outerwear trade. Finally, consideration is given to the distribution and retailing of menswear. This explores the mechanisms by which the consumer was constructed or reconstructed as male, and the way in which masculinity was sustained through the (traditionally female) act of consumption. These threads when woven together will show how the history of this particular industry and the explanation for its extraordinary success are imbued with gendered meanings.

The suit, which even today constitutes respectable and conformist male attire, became fashionable during the later nineteenth century and was ubiquitous through the 1920s and 1930s. The explanation for the replacement of more elaborate male costume by a sober and conservative suit through the nineteenth century has exercised fashion and social historians for years. The rise of the suit is often associated with industrialisation and a world in which work assumed a more central role, yet criticism of Flugel’s overarching notion of a ‘Great Masculine Renunciation’ of elaborate clothing from the early nineteenth century suggests a more complex interpretation.7 Colin McDowell, for example, argues that a shift to simplicity in dress pre-dated the French Revolution and represented a change to a more responsible way of life, rather than a mere alteration to clothing styles.8 Breward also believes that the connection between industrialisation and a dark unchanging uniform is overdrawn and that the reality was much more complex,9 while Tim Edwards argues that the spread of the suit did not anyway begin until the later nineteenth century.10 Despite the validity of such criticisms, there is little doubt that the relatively plain, tailored suit did supersede more decorative dress among men of high social status, during the course of the nineteenth century, and eventually became a staple of the male wardrobe of lower social groups as well.
The simplicity of the suit has encouraged suggestions that it was a functional, business-oriented garment. The appearance of functionality, however, was probably more important than its reality, yet its undoubtedly sensible look – in contrast to earlier forms of male dress – was relevant to the contemporary making of masculinity, the key features of which were respectability, rationality, sobriety and diligence. Appearance was paramount. Like any other garment, the suit made a statement about its wearer. In this case the sartorial message was honesty and rationality, seriousness and discipline. The suit was also important as a practical uniform of respectability. Simplicity in dress indicated that a man could be trusted, that he was serious, and that he meant business. It also meant that he was unlike a woman. Thus, as simplicity of men’s dress implied a serious approach to the world, women’s dress became even more elaborate and constrictive, in line with a more domestic and physically circumscribed role.

Consistency in gender role expectations was accompanied by uniformity in dress. The new technical and organisational procedures for the making of the suit, which developed from the later nineteenth century, permitted a standardisation of the product. Thus, men came to resemble one another, which, according to Hollander, was exactly what they wanted. Although such an assertion has been contested, the desire to look like other men became increasingly powerful by the early twentieth century. The explanation for men’s desire for conformity in dress is unclear, yet Paoletti’s analysis of late nineteenth-century cartoons suggests that the popularity of the suit was associated with the fear of ridicule. Once the suit had become a symbol of a stereotypical masculine role, anything else would become the object of derision.

Whatever the reason, the practice of suit wearing became widespread, suggestive of a more democratic and egalitarian society. Although the tendency for men of all social groups to acquire a suit is not proof of growing equality, key menswear producers at the time were apparently motivated by the idea of promoting democracy. Indeed the Leeds multiple tailors played an essential role in widening access to a standard product, especially in the interwar years. Known as ‘multiple’ tailors because they distributed their products – mainly suits but also separates and sometimes raincoats – through numerous nationwide branches of their own shops, they integrated the manufacture and retailing of their product. By far the largest and most enduring of such businesses was Montague Burton Ltd which owned 600 shops nationwide by the late 1930s. Close behind came Henry Price’s Fifty Shilling Tailors and Hepworths, with 200–300 shops apiece.

Henry Price believed that his business contributed to the revolution ‘in popular tailoring’, and described his ‘rational’ tailoring as a ‘social
movement ... [a] movement to make Britain the best dressed nation in the world’.22 Although Price’s role should not be underestimated, there is little doubt that Montague Burton did more than any other individual to enable the man of limited means to ‘dress like a gentleman’. Being committed to social justice, Burton believed strongly that dress constituted an agent of democratisation, and that access to good-quality, well-fitting suits generated a spiritual social equality.

Come for a moment to the high street on a Saturday afternoon [he wrote in the mid 1930s]. Who are those well dressed men you see? Do they work at the bench or at a desk or round the Director’s conference table? You cannot tell thanks to the tailoring evolution that Montague Burton set in motion ... today clothes no longer divide the masses from the classes. Masters and men rub shoulders in the crowd and nobody can tell one from the other. Better still nobody wants to. That is probably the most significant of the many big things Montague Burton have [done] ... By putting good clothes within the reach of all they have made democracy a living force.23

Burton’s philosophy was informed by the principle of self-help at least as much as by notions of social justice, however, and he strongly believed that, among those of limited means, spending on clothing should take precedence over that on drinking.24

Montague Burton and the other Leeds multiples who manufactured measured garments on a large scale, ensured that most employed men could afford a tailored suit of reasonable quality. Such increasing availability was associated with standardisation of product, a decline in distinctions in dress – which itself is suggestive of democratisation25 – and even what Montague Burton himself referred to as ‘style monotony’.26 In order to satisfy a wide market, the majority of tailors made available an inoffensive but inevitably unexciting garment that would have appeal to all. Standardisation made spectacular progress after the First World War as:

The miner used to insist year in and year out on bell-bottomed trousers, vest with clerical opening, shortish jacket, usually made with cloth with a prominent blue check, now the young miner dresses exactly like the bank clerk, and the same refined designs and styles which sell freely in a fashionable south coast town are also popular in the industrial areas.27

Such social and geographical consistency in men’s dress was crucial to the mass production, mass-marketing practices of the Leeds multiple tailors, yet at the same time, the multiple shop method of retailing itself encouraged standardisation in men’s dress.

Respectable working-class and lower-middle-class men were offered the opportunity to dress like gentlemen, but this did not mean that all were regarded or appeared to be equal or equally gentlemanly. It can be argued that the visual perceptions of class differences became blurred, while such distinctions themselves remained.28 Rather than constituting a
democratic garment, even though it was brought within reach of the majority of men, the suit can be interpreted less controversially as a popular garment. Such demotic dress – and there is little doubt that the suit was the garment of choice in the years between the wars – can be seen rather to represent collective taste or collective male behaviour within a society increasingly defined by the mass.

During the interwar years, therefore, the suit was socially- as well as occasion-inclusive. Although it was neither a comfortable nor a practical garment, memories and visual sources suggest that the bulk of the male population wore suits for work and for recreation, and thus it formed the basis of most male wardrobes at this time. For several decades from 1900, the suit played a social role. It provided its wearers with a sense of place in modern society. It was developed as mass masculine dress and men as a mass adopted it with enthusiasm. The popular practice of suit wearing can be seen as the outcome of a collective acceptance of the social requirement to adopt a distinct masculine identity, reflected through dress, which symbolised values of hard work and sobriety. Thus, manly ideals became less class-based and because mode of dress was part of the emerging popular culture, men of different social groups came to resemble one another in appearance. These common patterns of behaviour were supported by mechanisms of production and distribution by which reasonably priced clothing for the masses was made available. The process by which suit wearing became popular depended on the interaction of the economics and the gendering of production. This can nicely be illustrated through an analysis of the Leeds clothing industry which from an early stage specialised in the production of men’s tailored outerwear.

The emergence of Leeds as the British centre of men’s tailoring – a position consolidated in the interwar years – can be explained not only by the local tradition in textile production and marketing in which female factory labour was common, but also by the specialisation in industrial engineering and a dynamic and fluid industrial structure. Leeds had also become an important retail centre by the turn of the century, when it was known as the London of the north. None of these features alone would have been sufficient to account for the extraordinary growth of the Leeds trade from the late nineteenth century, but in concert with the operation of the multiple tailors, they gave Leeds the edge.

The organisation of the industry in Leeds was complex. It comprised businesses of varying sizes but it was the large scale of many Leeds manufacturers, especially the multiples, who created a standard yet made-to-measure product, that distinguished the city from other producing centres. The majority of British multiple tailors were based in Leeds, where the largest six supplied about 50 per cent of the suits bought by
British men. Such an achievement derived from the integration of creative manufacturing and retailing practices. The resulting system – which operated at the intersection of production and consumption and was known as ‘wholesale bespoke’ – was first developed at the turn of the century but was extended and improved by Montague Burton and other Leeds multiples. During the interwar period when Leeds consolidated its position as Britain’s foremost producer of men’s tailored outerwear, the interplay of marketing and manufacturing became tighter. The shops and the factories of the multiple tailors effectively comprised a single system. Clients were measured for a bespoke suit in one of the many nationwide retail outlets. Their measurements were conveyed to the relevant Leeds factory, where the suit was cut out and made up according to the individual’s requirements. Within a week, the completed garment was delivered to the shop for collection by the customer.

The financing of the system – whereby the garment was partly paid for by the customer before it was produced – was important to the rapid and extensive growth of the multiples in the interwar years. Retail bespoke and other non-multiple tailors of the time, who felt their business to be threatened, complained that ‘the multiples conduct business on a strictly cash basis, requiring a deposit with every order’. The practice of Montague Burton was formally to require a 25 per cent deposit before the order was transmitted to the factory, and ‘strictly nett cash before delivery’, but sales staff were instructed to extract a larger proportion if possible. This was not only to enhance cash flow but also because ‘a good deposit has a steadying effect on an unreasonable customer’. Salesmen were taught to ‘ask if he wishes to pay for suit in full or leave a deposit of £2 or £3. This results in a good deposit.’ Such a practice was seen to be ‘one of the great fundamentals of our business which enables us to save customers half their money’, especially because it eliminated ‘all bad debts which OTHER customers pay for … We buy for cash, sell for cash, and save the customers cash.’ The multiples also gained by dispensing with the need to carry large quantities of stock and the associated burden of financial risk.

The manufacture of men’s suits among the Leeds multiples was founded on the basis of labour-intensive mass production. In the wholesale bespoke manufacturing units, each garment was cut out separately with hand-held shears according to customers’ requirements, and the remaining processes were mechanised as in the large-scale ready-made trade. Such a system was possible and profitable because of the standardisation of the product, the cheapness of labour and the detailed subdivision of tasks, which also depended on the patience and resilience of the female workforce. Indeed, the key to the growth of the industry’s output and productivity was the producer, but although women were integral to the
long-term profitability of the industry, they were not regarded as essential workers. Women, who comprised between 70 and 80 per cent of the labour force, were constructed or confirmed as secondary workers. The concentration of women in machining and other ‘unskilled’ operations, such as binding and buttonholing, in overcrowded conditions, undervalued their skill both symbolically and literally, and their contribution was deemed to be a simple extension of their domestic culture. Male workers, the small proportion of the total labour force, monopolised the skilled operations associated with the initial and final processes, including laying out, cutting, final pressing, and supervision, and enjoyed better conditions of work. Despite the limited history of craft tailoring in Leeds, its male clothing workers acquired craft status, even invoking tradition as they did so.

Women were poorly paid and, after marriage, were expected to cease employment, thereby sustaining a particular family form in which the male was assumed to be the primary wage-earner. Through their low wages, women were constructed not simply as undervalued labour subject to intense discipline, but also as having only a secondary association with the world of work. It was alleged that women were satisfied with a low fixed standard wage, and even that they did not aspire to anything more. For example, when the tailoring trade board proposed to raise women’s rate of pay to 3½d per hour, it was met with staunch employer opposition, on the grounds that, ‘we have found that a very large percentage of our female labour has not the slightest desire to earn more than 12/- per week’, and further that, ‘It is not necessary for these girls to earn more than a sufficient wage to clothe themselves and provide some small weekly [wage] towards the support of the home.’ From the outset, therefore, female labour was constructed as liminal, with only a marginal commitment to the workplace. Testimony of former clothing workers, and evidence of female support for a range of strikes in the interwar years and beyond, suggest that not all women accepted such a construction. Indeed, a number were angered at the extent of gendered pay differentials. Nevertheless, it appears that, in the interwar years at least, the majority of women were resigned, and rarely questioned the principle of the male breadwinner wage.

Women’s pay was determined by a system of piece rates through which employers influenced the degree of worker intensity. This became the main source of profitability in the later stages of the industry. Employer control of female workers in Leeds was extended by routine fines for lateness and for mistakes in their work. Until the interwar years, deductions from women’s wages were made for the thread that they used, for the power that kept their machines running, for their scissors, and sometimes even for machine parts. The low wages of women,
combined with their greater work effort, were essential ingredients of the employers’ cost containment strategy and were more important in the industry’s short-term performance than the ‘rationalisation’ of production. Gains in efficiency, through improvements to the manufacturing process increasingly required elements of control and exploitation of the female workforce.\textsuperscript{46} Men had more control over their wages, which in any case were calculated more generously.\textsuperscript{47}

The construction of women as primarily associated with the home and family was also confirmed by the non-commercial activities of employers. For example, the welfare schemes of the Leeds tailoring businesses constructed men and women differently,\textsuperscript{48} as did the operation of an implicit marriage bar. There was no rigidly enforced requirement for women in the clothing industry to leave work upon marriage, as was the case in some other occupations, yet the expectation was clear. The firm operated a dowry scheme, whereby young women under the age of 30 contributed weekly amounts, withdrawing the total plus the firm’s contribution plus interest upon their marriage. If a woman did not marry, the amount, to a maximum of £100 would remain with the firm until her retirement.\textsuperscript{49} Other activities relevant to the construction of gender identities included the frequent and gender-specific beauty contest.\textsuperscript{50}

The feminisation of the Leeds tailoring workforce was a strategic success for menswear businesses, though the irresistible temptation to make intensive use of low-cost labour, while satisfactory in the short term, limited the options open to employers in the context of later structural changes in the industry.\textsuperscript{51} The process by which work became gendered was important to the industry because it created a small group of skilled workers who prioritised their own interests at the expense of the lower-paid and more exploited group, who thus became vital to the profitability of the industry.

While the contribution of cheap female labour remained crucial to the growth and survival of the Leeds industry, its exceptional interwar expansion owed much to the interaction of manufacturing and marketing, to innovation in retailing, and to the role of the consumer. Although the market for men’s suits was expanding, the success of the Leeds multiple tailors also depended on the making of an active male consumer. Consumption is widely accepted to be a gendered activity. Historians and sociologists draw evidence from the late nineteenth-century department store to suggest that the acquisition of goods was socially perceived to be the responsibility of women.\textsuperscript{52} Men’s relative insignificance in the process of shopping was represented by the separate male sections of the department store, which were both physically distant from the main female area, ‘with separate … entrances’,\textsuperscript{53} but also conveyed a different ethos with ‘distinct and sober décor, where the task of consumption could be

completed quickly and efficiently. Although women’s dominant association with the act of consuming has been challenged, and a more complex analysis attempted, it is still assumed that while men may engage in consumption, they do so with less enthusiasm and more rationality than women. The image of men as reluctant, unnatural and embarrassed consumers continues to form the basis of modern sociological studies.

The neglect of men’s historical position in the marketplace and masculine consumption habits is beginning to be remedied. A small number of studies has emerged in recent years which illuminate men’s historical engagement with shopping. Breward, for example, suggests that the meanings attached to the ‘task’ of consuming relied very much on the nature and type of consuming taking place, and, with specific reference to menswear, argues that in the later nineteenth century some men embraced consumption. Yet, the contemporary association between sartorial indulgence and homosexual tendencies inevitably deterred others. By the 1950s, as Mort’s study reveals, it had become commonplace for men to buy their own clothes. Thus it seems likely that it was in the intervening period that male consumption habits were encouraged. The case of the Leeds tailoring business tests this possibility. By examining menswear, and its key purchasers, it is possible to determine both the extent to which the male became an active consumer, and the type of consumer he was persuaded to become. During the 1920s and 1930s demand for men’s suits reached a peak. At the same time many tailors – especially the multiples – integrated the manufacture and retailing of their product. Thus, they were as concerned with the marketing of their product as with its manufacture. The unprecedented success of the multiple tailors during this period was undoubtedly founded on their ability to persuade the male person, reluctant or otherwise, to purchase their product. As will be shown below, there were other forces operating at the time which facilitated their ambition.

If the consumer were perceived as female in the retailing environment of the later nineteenth century, it appears that the consumer was repackaged during the interwar period to include the male. An inclusive construction was developed which embraced a novel culture of masculinity, in which ‘real’ men could shop without appearing effeminate. Evidence from contemporary advertising indicates that men were at least potential customers, and the content of interwar magazines confirms men’s essential participation in the ‘new consumerism’ of the 1920s and 1930s. Lifestyle magazines facilitated the commercial development of masculinity and suggested that male interest in fashionable clothing was the result not of vanity but of utility and practicality. Within this context, men were shown that having a suit made for them should be a pleasant and leisurely rite. Thus, men were to become consumers during the interwar years, but it was recognised
that gender differences in purchasing practices would persist. The success of the multiple tailors was largely attributable to their own creative strategies, especially the style and organisation of their shops, but was clearly sustained by a wider context of active consumerism.

During the interwar years the retail menswear outlet became a common feature of the British high street. The centre of even the smallest towns contained at least one (Leeds) multiple tailor’s shop, and very often several were grouped together in close proximity. The outlets of the Leeds multiple tailors conveyed a particular style, encapsulating masculine good taste. The appearance, fittings and commercial transactions of these shops ‘were loaded with cultural significance’. The shops constituted a space in which men would be comfortable shopping for suits. It had been noted by an informed observer in the early twentieth century that, ‘with our knowledge of the masculine temperament teaching us that men as a rule hate shopping, our chief motive became to provide for our clients, salons for fitting and choosing where they would find in all the appointments …

Figure 1: One of Burton’s Leeds city centre shops, 1931. Although less minimalist than later windows, this display – consisting mainly of lengths of cloth – was relatively sparse and tasteful. The firm’s claim that a ‘5 guinea suit to measure’ could be had for 55 shillings, however, was hotly disputed by contemporary retail tailors and brought Montague Burton close to legal action.
the comfort and good taste of their club or home. An integral component of the multiple tailors’ strategy, therefore, was to attract the male consumer unaccustomed to shopping by constructing the shop as an egalitarian masculine sphere, but not necessarily one in which the act of consuming appeared to predominate. Montague Burton, whose vision and command of the market established a standard to which others might aspire, placed the ‘shop’ at the centre of his business strategy. He masterminded both the design of the shops and the code of behaviour of the sales staff. As retail outlets, Montague Burton’s shops were striking, with uniform external and internal architecture. Externally the ‘outstandingly handsome’ stores were finished in terra cotta, empire stone, granite, bronze and other fine materials, and were ‘of a quality which was immeasurably superior to any other building in the country’s high streets in those days’. The simple and tasteful exterior was matched by an equivalent internal décor ‘of oak and gunmetal, quiet and dignified’, without doubt a ‘manly’ interior which bore little resemblance to a shop as traditionally understood. Indeed, Burton’s shops operated as ‘order points’, since the customer selected from a pattern book or rails of cloth rather than from a choice of finished articles. Although some ready-made stock, especially raincoats and sports jackets, was increasingly carried, initially Burton’s shops were uncluttered, typically containing only a counter, some lengths of material and books of styles and patterns. Burton’s clearly wished to convey the impression of being an old-style bespoke tailor. The inscription ‘cutting room’ on the door to the staff rest-room, for example, was intended to deceive. Customers were led to suppose that their suits were to be tailored on the premises and not in a unit of mass production.

The masculine structure of the shops was complemented by a specific gendering of sales staff in which all employees, except the ‘invisible’ female cashier, were men, and by the conventional masculine demeanour required by the male sales and managerial staff. The duties, responsibilities, and codes of dress and behaviour for all involved in the selling of suits were specified in great detail in various guides which provided the basis for the six-week course of classroom instruction for apprentice tailoring salesmen. Recruits to the sales staff were carefully selected. Potential apprentices ‘of good appearance and education’, ‘who are bright, alert, likeable, courteous, and smiling’, were sought in order that they could be trained to become ‘a refined type of assistant’, and ‘those who are not likely to make good’ were dispensed with rapidly. Training in ‘measurement methods’, ‘textile technique’, ‘scientific selling’ and ‘window display’ was provided, together with advice on self-presentation. Much of the learning, however, took place ‘on the job’ as the style of experienced salesmen was observed and imitated. The ‘Manager’s Guide’, the Burton staff bible, contained upwards of 700 exhortations for male employees.
Figure 2: Sales assistant F. W. Alcock poses in the spare surroundings of a typical Burton shop (in fact King Street, Huddersfield) 1937, where the lack of finished garments on display confirmed this as a tasteful, even ambiguous, masculine space.
Appearance and smartness were essential ingredients of Burton’s blueprint for the creation of masculine good taste in his shops. ‘Resolve to be always well groomed and suitably dressed in dark clothes’, sales assistants were admonished. Typically, the sales staff, from the manager to the apprentice, worked in ‘black and stripe’ suits over white, stiff-collared shirts. Such garb, standard among lawyers and bankers, helped to create a male, non-shopping atmosphere. Courtesy and politeness were considered as crucial as ‘energy, virility, sparkle and buoyancy – these are the positive [and very male] qualities to be looked for in the ideal sales assistant’.

The subservient role of women in the stores of Burton and the other multiple tailors, confirmed the space as a man’s world. Women were employed as poorly paid cashiers, and as such they recorded measurements and dealt with payments and accounts in a back room. The extent to which they were undervalued can be illustrated by their extremely low profile in the ‘Manager’s Guide’. In contrast to the carefully structured and constructive message for men, the code of conduct for women was confined to a single disrespectful sentence. ‘The cashier’, it read, ‘should not do her knitting, sewing, novelette and magazine reading, or similar unbusinesslike performances during business hours.’ Invariably, ‘she’ was kept well out of sight, behind a hatch, both to spare the possible discomfiture of the clientele, and above all to preserve the masculinity of the place.

The comfort of the male customers was thus prioritised. It was acknowledged that at this stage not all men willingly embraced their role as consumers, and they were to be enticed. ‘Let Burton dress you’ was emblazoned on the windows of Burton’s shops and conveyed a multi-layered message, which included a hint of seduction, an element of male ignorance, but above all indicated the passive role that men were expected to play in the purchase of a suit. Burton’s guide emphasised the importance of creating a rapport with potential clients. ‘Make your customer feel he is welcome … avoid the severe tone of the income tax inspector, and the smooth tongue of the fortune teller. Cultivate the dignified style of the “Quaker tea blender”, which is the happy medium.’

The strategy was clearly to coat the undoubted hard sell with a veneer of politesse. ‘The prefix [sic] “Sir” after “Good morning” or similar conventional courtesies’, it was suggested, ‘appeals to your average man, whether your intellectual, social, economical superior or inferior.’ Salesmen were also encouraged to ‘cultivate the art of listening … do not interrupt the customer’; and to be succinct, stick ‘to a few important points – drive them in and clinch them. But tell him what he wants to know.’ Not all men were to be accorded the red carpet treatment, however. Indeed, unfortunate individuals with a waist or chest measurement greater than 44 inches were to be discouraged. ‘Such customers are
usually very faddy and difficult to fit ... avoid serving a customer of over 50"
chest or waist measures if you have a reasonable excuse, such as if he
enquires if his order can be made in a week, reply at least a month."89 Such
an apparently sizist attitude was founded on simple economics. Profit
margins, already tight even for the man of ideal physique, would be
completely eroded by a man of corpulent proportions.

Figure 3: This portrait of immaculately presented 15-year-old
R. McDonald was taken on 8 July 1935 soon after he was taken on as an
apprentice tailoring salesman, in the Regent Road, Salford, branch of
Burton’s. In November of the same year, it was recorded that ‘this lad has
the makings of a good man if unforeseen events do not alter his standard
of interest and enthusiasm’.

The taking of customers’ measurements was a potential minefield. Unless procedures were strictly followed, especially when measuring the inside leg, the carefully rehearsed welcome could be compromised. Strict protocol was to be observed to minimise embarrassment. Burton’s guides were less diffident than those of the nineteenth century described by Breward, yet still emphasised tact and diplomacy. ‘Before taking [outside leg] measure, notice if the top of the trousers customer is wearing is in the correct position. If you think it is too high or too low, consult him on the matter.’ With respect to the thorny issue of the inside leg measurement: ‘ask customer to pull his trousers well up; then using the long metal end of your tape, place it as high up in the crutch as possible and continue to the shoe heel’.

The location of Burton’s and other tailors’ shops also featured in the successful construction of the consumer as masculine. Recognising that men were busy, and sometimes reluctant to engage in a specific shopping expedition, stores were commonly sited near workplaces with opening hours to suit. ‘As we cater for men who work up to 6 o’clock’, the ‘Manager’s Guide’ stated, ‘an hour in the evening is worth more than the rest of the day.’ As always, ‘the customer should be attended to in a businesslike way. His time should not be wasted.’ Other aspects of the Burton strategy conversely attempted to catch the potential customer – especially the young man – at leisure. Every effort was made by the company to let surplus floor space for male recreational pursuits. Where possible, the storeys above or sometimes below the shop floor were used for billiards, or less commonly for dancing lessons, which served partly to catch the passing trade, but also to confirm the edifice as one in which respectable manly activities took place. Both offered alternatives to the drink culture that Burton disliked. As an advocate of the Temperance movement, Burton sought to encourage dancing in unlicensed premises, as a means of escape, and neither drink nor women were permitted in the Billiard Halls. Within purpose-built Burton shops, ‘the upper floors were designed as Billiard Saloons’; but otherwise managers and inspectors were advised to ‘make a special effort to get a tennant … In case the property is large enough for billiards, please ask for Billiard Hall To Let posters.’ Such was the success of this strategy that it quickly became common knowledge that a game of billiards could be enjoyed ‘above Burton’s’. It was quite possible, therefore, to visit Burton’s without necessarily aiming to make a purchase, and a diffident potential consumer could be lured to the building without being identified unambiguously as a ‘shopper’.

In the years between the wars, men bought suits in unprecedented numbers. Burton’s and the other Leeds multiples helped to construct men as a particular type of shopper. That they were ‘manly’ purchasers – both
rational and purposeful – was emphasised not only by the invisibility of women employed in the stores but also because ‘wives or lady friends’ of male customers were not encouraged until the 1950s, when they were distracted with tea and biscuits. Nevertheless, if women did accompany a man in search of a suit, salesmen were encouraged to listen to their suggestions and to ‘appeal to them for their opinion – they will side with you’. Women as customers were discouraged; ‘you are requested not to introduce that department when ladies call in connection with men’s garments’, but if pressed or in order to expedite the sale of a man’s suit, measurements for a ‘costume’ were taken and the making up subcontracted.

The interwar growth of the Leeds multiple tailors and the spectacular success of Burton’s can be attributable not only to a creative synergy of making and selling but especially to a cleverly devised retailing strategy in which shops were constructed as masculine spheres and where the male customer felt at ease. The multiples recognised that business turnover and profitability were enhanced when a masculine form of shopping environment was created. This continued a trend established at the turn of the century when ‘the male parts of the department store accorded closely with received notions of the commercial masculine interior’, and, as a contemporary observed, ‘it will be found that the business of an outfitter will increase when men’s outfitting is kept quite separate’. Therefore, the annexing of male concerns into separate branches allowed for the development of a distinctively innovative and exclusively masculine form of shopping environment.

Men became well suited during the interwar years, through the democratic diffusion of male clothing and by a careful, detailed construction of a masculine consumer. In mass marketing and mass production, the men’s clothing industry encouraged the shopping experience of male consumers, ‘who, theoretically, were assumed to stand aro from its blandishments’. Although the suit itself, a ubiquitous garment in the interwar years, turned out to be a blip in the history of demotic dress, the male as consumer of his own garb persisted for much longer.

Business history and industrial history have been relatively late among academic disciplines to incorporate ‘culture’ into their analyses. An important facet of the culture of a business or industry is that of gender, especially ideas about masculinity and femininity. This paper has shown how the gender of the actors within the Leeds tailoring trade had a strong impact on the shape of the industry’s development. The interplay of manufacturing and marketing was critical to the sustained growth of men’s tailoring between 1890 and 1940, but especially between the wars, and the key to its success lay in the relationship between the producer and
the consumer. The gender of both producers and consumers was important to the business of making suits. Indeed, the industry depended on them as gendered beings. The dominance of women in the manufacturing component of the industry was integral to the cost containment strategy pursued by its entrepreneurs and provided the foundation for short-term or even medium-term profitability. Of equal importance to the industry was the way in which masculinity permeated the retailing sector as both shops and consumers were constructed as male.

Gender historians with an interest in the cultural context of economic activity have provided the foundation for a dialogue between the disciplines of industrial history and feminist history. Scholars such as Joan Scott and Sonya Rose have shown how gender operates as a cultural process through which men and women make sense of economic activity, and how the pursuit of business goals is perpetuated through gendered practices. In the case of the Leeds tailoring trade, there is little doubt that gendered practices existed and shaped the course of its development. Industrial history, like business history, needs more than economic analysis for its complete understanding. Gender may lack tangibility, yet it provides valuable insights into the operation of enterprise in the past.

Notes
This article is related to a larger study of the Leeds tailoring trade published as *Well Suited: A History of the Leeds Clothing Industry 1850–1990* (Oxford University Press, 2000). Many thanks to Barbara Burman, Carole Turbin and the participants in the history seminar at the University of Central Lancashire, April 2001, for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this work.


11. For the limitation of the tailored suit as demotic garment, see Claudia Brush Kidwell and Valerie Steele (eds), *Men and Women: Dressing the Part* (Smithsonian Institution, 1989), p. 17.


14. This ceased to be the case from the 1920s but by then, nothing could shift the maleness of the suit.


20. Other large multiples included Jackson the Tailor and Alexandres. By the end of the 1930s, the Leeds multiple tailors together controlled around 1,500 stores.


27. Montague Burton’s address to shareholders at the 1932 AGM, reported in *Men’s Wear*, 30 July 1932.


32. In the early stages of the system’s operation, customers’ measurements were taken in a tailor or drapers shop and then conveyed to a Leeds factory, of unrelated ownership for making up.

33. It was reckoned that, by the 1930s, 90 per cent of Burton’s orders could be filled through stock garments with alterations to sleeves and leg lengths. (‘Manager’s Guide’, 1932, pp. 17
and 22–3, Burton Records, item 201, West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS), Leeds City Archives.)


35. For trade press hostility to the multiples’ success, see for example Men’s Wear, 17 October 1925, 7 November 1925, 24 June 1934, 8 June 1935, 12 October 1935, 26 December 1936.


43. Margaret Kirby, machinist at Burton from mid 1930s, then supervisor and then finally responsible for the machinists’ training programme at Burton’s. Interview recorded 1 June 1993 at the informant’s residence.

44. A number of former clothing workers were interviewed for the larger study of which this is a part, and few seemed unhappy about their pay at this stage. Margaret Kirby, however, believed that she, a single woman with a widowed mother to support, should earn more than a young lad living in the parental home.

45. Although this was made illegal by the Trade Boards Act, a number of firms continued to cut costs in this way.


47. Cutters, for example, were paid by the ‘log’ system, a means of calculating pay that only they understood or were party to. The details were kept secret from employers and enabled cutters to control the pace of their work. The other male workers were typically paid according to a time rate, which, like the log, permitted some scope for varying the intensity of their work.

48. Burton’s staff handbook referred to the company as a family, which indicated the nature of the mutual commitment. (Burton Records, item 128, WYAS, Leeds City Archives.) See also Bennett, ‘Gendering Cultures’, pp. 199–203.

49. Men’s Wear, 8 September 1951. Also described in the News Chronicle, 4 October 1950.


51. Lack of investment in its human resources meant that the required flexibility in workers’ skills was inadequate.

52. Such a position permeates the literature. See, for example, Rita Felski, The Gender of Modernity, pp. 61–2; and Colin Campbell, ‘Shopping, Pleasure and the Sex War’, in The Shopping Experience, ed. Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell (Sage, 1997), pp. 166–76.


64. Kelly’s Directories of Leeds, 1921–40, show the multiples’ complete dominance of prime high street sites in the city. (Honeyman, ‘Tailor-Made’, pp. 302–5.)


67. For more detail, see Honeyman ‘Montague Burton Ltd’, pp. 186–216.


70. Racks of cloth were placed in the lobby of Burton shops as a device to encourage the uncertain customer to enter the store. (Interview with Arnold Burton, 15 November 2001, Leeds.)


72. There were several of these, the most important being the ‘Manager’s Guide’ and the ‘Inspector’s Guide’. First published in 1922, these were highly confidential documents to be kept away from competitors’ eyes. (Burton Records, item 201, WYAS, Leeds City Archives.)


77. These were the titles of the texts which contained the core elements of the requisite knowledge. The timetable of instruction was specified in ‘Clothing Classes Curriculum’.

78. Sometimes this consisted of very rudimentary tips on cleanliness of nails and hair. (Interview with Arnold Burton, 15 November 2001, Leeds.)

79. It remained largely unchanged thereafter, although Frank Mort, who uses a later edition, appears to discuss it as a postwar document.
80. ‘Manager’s Guide’, p. 44.
82. ‘Manager’s Guide’, p. 60.
85. ‘Manager’s Guide’, p. 44.
86. ‘Manager’s Guide’, p. 44.
88. ‘Scientific Selling’, p. 10.
89. ‘Manager’s Guide’, p. 43.
91. ‘Measuring Methods’ by A Designer, 1948, p. 6, Burton Records, item 255. WYAS, Leeds City Archives.
92. ‘Manager’s Guide’, p. 34.
96. This was consistent with the intention of the company, who never used the term ‘shopping’. (Mort and Thompson, ‘The Culture and Politics of Consumption’, p. 120.)
104. The manufacturing side of the industry declined and ultimately collapsed. See more on the causes of failure in Honeyman, *Well Suited*, ch. 11.