



The First World War and women's fashion: what to wear in an air-raid!

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Small details give a human touch to our understanding of what happened in London's first Blitz. For example, the typist whose life was saved because she dashed back to her desk for her handbag during a raid, and so missed the worst of a bomb blast. A mother whose celluloid hair comb caught fire and whose clothes were then set alight. An East End pupil from a wrecked junior school only identified by the unusual shirt button stitched on his cuff just the night before.

During the First World War clothes offer abundant evidence of the changes in class structures and women's roles. They also weave together anxieties about the upheaval caused by the literal impact of war on British soil through naval bombardments, Zeppelin raids, and the new terror of airplane bombings.

As a result of wartime austerity, the official attitude to clothes was initially one of thrift and economy. Clothes shopping, beyond the essentials, was considered 'bad form.' Increasingly, women swapped civilian fashions for uniforms and even trousers.

During the 1914 naval shelling of English coastal towns in the North East people had to forget etiquette and decency: they ran for their lives in a dishevelled array of hastily-donned garments. From 1915 zeppelins and airplanes raided the country. The impact was devastating and clothes told the story.

As well as a collapse of physical structures, there was a collapse of social order at times. This ranged from the mild alarm at seeing women dressing in the shelter of London tube stations, to serious scenes of looting and xenophobic mob violence. An imposition of structure was essential to avoid a serious, widespread breakdown in morale. Women in uniform played their part.



Fashion also provided a protection of sorts, by defying war and chaos. Some writers at the time sought to offer tips on what to wear in an air raid. One fashion editor raved about her new black silk pyjamas. She confessed, 'I do want a little Zep scare, so that I can wear them. Of course I don't want anyone to be killed.?'

On a more practical note, the first *onesie* was invented in WW1. It was called a 'slumber suit' and it was the forerunner of the famous Siren Suit of the next World War.

Extra defiance came from new mid-war fashions for shorter, fuller skirts supported by petticoats or hoops. Rayon or silk dance dresses were also popular for young party-goers wanting to live in the moment.

In a further twist in fashion's tale, many women doing war work were now earning decent wages and they wanted to flaunt their disposable income, even as upper class women gradually wore plainer and shabbier clothes.

In a world where traditional values and roles were in a state of upheaval, people clung to the concept of clothes as a sign of civilisation. This was in stark contrast to reports of bodies found in bomb raid aftermaths, with their clothes blasted from their bodies.

When the last bombs fell on London in May 1918, fashion had settled into a calm and simple style ' a rather shapeless shift dress that slipped over the head with minimal fuss and fastenings.

London dressmaker Elspeth Phelps, writing in 1916, predicted the freedom of future fashions in her thought-provoking statement:

?war is making women think, and I have an idea that when it is over people will cling to the simple lines and more practical models, and that for many years we shall see what influence war has had on fashion.?

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