

# Introduction

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From 15 to 17 September 2015, the British woollen mill Abraham Moon and Sons Ltd exhibited at *Première Vision* Paris, the prestigious juried trade fair for apparel fabrics. The mill was one of 1,924 exhibitors from fifty-seven countries that made their new ranges for Autumn/Winter 2016 available to some 62,000 visitors, three-quarters of whom were international. Held at the Parc des Expositions de Paris-Nord Villepinte, a convention centre near the Charles de Gaulle Airport, *Première Vision* Paris is a biannual trade show for the six major industries that supply the global fashion industry with ingredients and services: yarns, fabrics, leather, designs, accessories and manufacturing. Launched as a modest silk exhibition in Lyon in 1973 to give the customers a ‘first look’ at the new luxury fabrics, over the past forty years *Première Vision*, nicknamed ‘PV’, has become Europe’s most important textile trade show for apparel.<sup>1</sup>

In many trade shows, exhibitors have wide-open booths that advertise the products to the passers-by, but at PV, the vendors and their fabrics are all hidden behind tall white barriers. The idea is to keep the samples away from the prying eyes of competitors. Admission to a particular stand is limited to the customers, and people from rival mills are not allowed in. The customers—the fabric merchandisers, fabric buyers, apparel designers and other creative staff from retailers and brands—are identified by their badges. Besides the manufacturers’ stalls, the exhibition halls have public spaces with curated exhibitions, including a major display that forecasts the upcoming season’s trends in colour, style and texture.

Abraham Moon and Sons was one of a dozen English and Scottish manufacturers of tailoring cloth to exhibit in the PV Fabrics Hall. Italian mills dominated the tailoring fabrics section with more than sixty booths; there were smaller numbers of exhibitors from China, France, Japan, Mexico, Portugal, Spain, Turkey and a few other countries. Visitors could find the stand of Abraham Moon and Sons by looking through the exhibition map and directory, but they were also alerted to the booth by the Union Jack judiciously draped over the entrance. Over the three days, a stream of customers from apparel brands in Europe, North America and Japan dropped in to meet with the staff from the mill. The managing director, John P. T. Walsh, and agents such as Trevor Brann, who handles the home trade



I.1 Peeking into the mill's stand at Première Vision, September 2016. © Première Vision.

from London, wandered in and out. The sales team was a constant presence, as was typical at the stands of other woollen and worsted manufacturers and distributors such as Dormeuil of Paris.

But something unusual was happening on the stand of Abraham Moon and Sons. Five of the mill's six woollen designers—Martin Aveyard, Pam Birchenall, Judith Coates, Amanda Dougill and Claire Pearson—were a major presence. The designers were busy throughout each day, sitting at small tables and interacting with the customers (figure I.1). One such customer was Ivan Green, president of Canabrogue Inc., a fabric-sourcing company that serves private label menswear manufacturers from offices in Montreal, Canada, and factories in Hangzhou, China. Green, who spoke with a thick Irish brogue, was browsing through Moon samples in search of heritage fabrics for some vintage-inspired brands he was planning for North America.<sup>2</sup> Other customers included the president and the designer from Boden, an up-market British brand with a strong mail-order business and a sprinkling of high-street stores; representatives from the London couture house Alexander McQueen; selectors from the British high-street retailer Marks and Spencer (M&S); and fabric buyers from the children's division of Polo Ralph Lauren in New York.<sup>3</sup>

There was a respectful exchange of ideas between the woollen manufacturer and the customer, as the mill's designers interacted with the fabric buyers from all around the world. The designers watched the customers flip through the mill's sample cards

and compare them to their own swatches, sketches and notes. Sometimes two buyers from a brand talked quietly among themselves as the mill staff listened. They were poised to offer technical advice or trend opinions, sometimes fielding a steady stream of questions: does Moon have this herringbone in a darker grey? Can you make a slightly smaller check? Could Moon match this heather bouclé? Here in a nutshell was the creative process of the global fashion system in action.

Abraham Moon and Sons has been exhibiting at PV since spring 1981, when it first participated in a showing of British woollens and worsteds coordinated by the National Wool Textile Export Corporation (NWTEC). Established during the early part of the Second World War to promote British wool cloth and yarn abroad, during its heyday and before its cessation in 2009 NWTEC helped dozens of British mills display British fabrics and yarns at PV and other trade fairs in Europe, North America and Asia. Today, the mills independently arrange for their own space at international textile trade shows from New York to Shanghai. The British woollen industry, which boasted 3,000 mills and employed 180,000 blue-collar workers in the years after the Second World War, is now a slim shadow of its former self. Abraham Moon and Sons is one of the rare survivors.

## Past and present

This book uses the history of Abraham Moon and Sons to examine design and innovation in the British woollen industry from the 1830s to the 2010s. It is a history of a single firm—a business that originated in 1837 with two clothiers, Abraham Moon and his likely half-brother, William Moon—that reaches out from microhistory to macrohistory, from the local and the regional to the national and the global. It starts in a Yorkshire village called Guiseley and ends up on the stage of international commerce that connects a small mill in greater Leeds to the creative economies of major global fashion cities such as London, New York, Paris and Tokyo. This book is a narrative history, and narrative is about storytelling. The stories told here are about a mill, a town, a region, an industry and a nation whose fate for the past two hundred years has been inexorably linked to the international political economy and the global fashion system.

For many years, historical research on the British textile industry focused on dark satanic mills, management–labour conflict and industrial decline. With a few exceptions, very little historical research on the British textile industry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries examines the design process or connects cloth production and distribution to the fashion system.<sup>4</sup> This curious disconnect between the history of fabrics and the history of fashion is rooted in disciplinary biases and fragmentation. For many years, the mainstream academic history profession considered fashion to be

feminine, frivolous and generally unworthy of study. New fields such as design history, material culture studies and fashion studies emerged as alternative disciplines for researchers who value the material world and understand its place in history.

Yet for all of its accomplishments over the last quarter century, fashion studies remain mainly cultural in emphasis. Researchers primarily focus on the meaning of dress, the materiality of objects, debates on class and gender, or celebrity designers and luxury brands. The cultural and the economic have yet to meet in fashion studies, as they have in one of my fields, the new business history. The reality is that global brands like Alexander McQueen, Burberry, Chanel, Dolce & Gabbana, Gant, Hugo Boss, Paul Smith, Polo Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger cannot create luxury lines or lifestyle apparel without high-quality textiles. The same goes for up-market national brands and retailers such as Boden, L. K. Bennett and Hobbs in the United Kingdom; Brooks Brothers and J. Crew in the United States; and Beams, Ships, Tomorrowland and United Arrows in Japan.

The interface between the textile manufacturer and the fashion marketplace is centuries old. The historian John Smail has explained how Yorkshire woollen merchants served as intermediaries between weavers and the market in the eighteenth century. The merchant showed cuttings of fashionable fabrics to the weaver and asked him to adjust his patterns accordingly—so as to sell more fabric.<sup>5</sup> In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the interface between the manufacturer and market became more complex as large wholesalers, often involved in foreign trade, assumed a central role. The wholesale woollen warehouses of Bradford, Leeds and London served as mediating zones wherein merchants, textile manufacturers and garment makers could interact. The conversations often focused on quantity, price and delivery, but before they got down to brass tacks, the men talked about which patterns were selling and which were not. Over the course of time, major high-street chains such as M&S and Jaeger and mail-order houses such as Littlewoods and the Great Universal Stores came to exert a good deal of control over everyday fashion, and their selectors and technicians came to dictate the quality and the look of the textiles (figure I. 2). The design and sales staff at mills like James Ives & Company in Yeadon, another town that is part of greater Leeds, mainly worked to accommodate the demanding specifications of large retailers, especially M&S, which was their major customer for several decades after the Second World War.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, heritage-minded companies like Abraham Moon and Sons and Johnstons of Elgin, a cashmere mill in Scotland, have turned back the clock and adapted some of the older ways to contemporary practice. Developing a keener awareness of the market has been essential to the reinvention of the industry. The UK's remaining woollen and worsted mills have several common features. They are 1) family firms with 2) a penchant for refurbishing the physical plant





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The three coats shown here are:  
Left. In all wool face cloth.  
Centre. In herringbone tweed.  
Below. In all wool gaberdine.  
Black, taupe or stone. Sizes: 10, 12, 14.

Sizes: 10, 12, 14.  
The colour is paprika with grey braided  
edging. Detachable bolero.  
Sizes: 8½, 10, 12, 14.

WESTMINSTER CITY  
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I.2 Jaeger put high-fashion woollens on the high street with stand-alone stores and the shop-in-shop, as indicated in this advertisement for their boutique within Robb Brothers in Birkenhead, near Liverpool. Courtesy of Jaeger Ltd and Westminster City Archives: 1327, Jaeger Archives.

and 3) a strong commitment to design. These private companies have no need to increase shareholder value, can hunker down during an economic downturn and can plough their profits back into the business, investing in new equipment—and even retail shops. Thirty years ago, Johnstons was a small tweed mill with a modest turnover. Several tactical moves generated successes that enabled the firm to see that ‘making big and selling small was profitable’. The company diversified into scarves in the 1980s and into knitwear in the early 1990s, and established retail shops to market its distinctive range of Scottish cashmere and woollen accessories. By 1997,

Johnstons was no longer shackled to the fickle ready-to-wear industry; apparel cloths accounted for a mere 20 per cent of the firm's annual turnover. Inch by inch, the firm discovered ways to get closer to the ultimate consumer, either in retail shops or through the internet, thereby increasing its profit margins. With 'patience and slog', the mill reinvented itself as a brand with a three-pronged product portfolio in apparel fabrics, scarves and knitwear.<sup>7</sup>

Creativity has been crucial to the reinvention of the industry. Historically, the British system of technical education and practical experience had produced outstanding textile designers, particularly in Scotland. But many mills put design on the back burner during the postwar era, when they could sell almost anything to the makers-up and when powerful retailers called the shots on large orders. 'Designers were tucked away in a little office in the back of the mill and didn't see the light of day', explained James Sugden, who managed Johnstons for more than thirty years. Those who believed they could 'sell anything' received a rude awakening with the rise of youth culture and Carnaby Street styles, the synthetics revolution and competition from Italy. The British woollen and worsted industries were forced to undertake some serious soul searching and, ultimately, had to relearn the benefits of linking design and sales. 'The designer came out of the shadows', Sugden said. 'You can't underestimate the power of design.'<sup>8</sup>

The revival of traditional patterns—tartans and tweeds—is the public face of this design renaissance. Far more interesting, however, is the process of innovation that is hidden behind the scenes. As we saw in the discussion of PV, the fabric buyers for major brands meet with the designers from Abraham Moon and Sons to their mutual benefit as a matter of routine during the procurement process. The woollen designers share their technical knowledge of the cloth, which often helps the fabric merchandisers, fabric buyers and apparel designers with their deliberations. These interactions are part and parcel of what John Walsh calls 'design-led' sales.<sup>9</sup> International textile trade fairs like PV are just one interactive zone. The Sales and Design Showroom at the mill in Guiseley, the customer's headquarters in New York or London, and the agent's offices in Milan or Barcelona are other spaces for collaboration.

The marriage of cloth and clothing sustains the global fashion system, whether the apparel is retailed on Oxford Street in London or avenue Montaigne in Paris. Fashion itself is an all-encompassing cultural *and* commercial phenomenon that knows no boundaries. There are fashions in interior design, pottery and porcelain, automobiles and architecture.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, Abraham Moon and Sons has acknowledged fashion's all-inclusive nature, and besides diversifying into scarves and throws, has ventured to make furnishings fabrics for interior décor—and happily watched Johnstons and other mills follow suit. In academia, there is a similar imperative for fashion history and design history to connect the dots: the coat and

the cloth, the fashion producer and the fabric designer, the history of clothing and the history of interiors, the cultural and the economic. As a narrative story about one British mill and its customers around the world over two centuries, this book is an attempt to nudge fashion history and design history in this new direction.

### Tweeds and cultural identity

Ever since the traders of the North Sea connected London woollen merchants to European markets, wool has been equated with British identity. The somewhat stereotypical example of British wool fabric is tartan, which has been associated with Scottish nationalism and Highland pride since the romantic era of the early nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, tartans found their way to consumers through retailers such as the Scotch House, which sold merchandise in traditional British styles at several London locations, and the souvenir shops along the Royal Mile in Edinburgh and in other Scottish tourist destinations. More recently, celebrities such as Rod Stewart and Madonna and superstar fashion designers such as Alexander McQueen and Vivienne Westwood have used Scottish tartans and plaids with irreverence.<sup>11</sup> But tourist shops filled to the brim with tartan throws and kilts, and rock stars strutting across stage in oversized tartan scarves to the sound of bagpipes, mask the real history of British woollens.

Over the past two hundred years, a variety of woven woollen fabrics made in various places in the British Isles—England (the West of England and West Yorkshire) Ireland, Scotland and Wales—have been sold globally under the rubric of British tweed. Historically, tweed was a type of hand-made Scottish fabric with a twill (diagonal) weave, but over time, the term came to describe woollen fabrics in either a twill or a plain weave with a check, twill or herringbone pattern.<sup>12</sup> The photographic evidence says it all. We only need look at *carte de visite* portraits from the 1880s (figure 2.4) or street photography from the 1930s (figure 4.5) to see North Americans and Europeans of all ages and income groups wearing everyday clothing sewn from ‘British tweeds’ or copies of it. The 1945 film noir *Brief Encounter*, a Noel Coward drama about Laura Jesson, a suburban housewife who falls in love with a married doctor named Alec Harvey, depicts the star-crossed pair in typical British tweeds.<sup>13</sup> In our own time, we can thank Rosalind Ebbutt, Joan Wadge and, primarily, Maria Price—the careful costume designers for the 2002–15 ITV series *Foyle’s War*—for thoughtfully dressing nearly everyone in the reimagined wartime Hastings and postwar London in a jacket, overcoat or suit made from warm British woollens.

Despite the historic ubiquity of tweeds, little is known about the web of connections that linked the British woollen industry to the fashion system and the wider world. In my other work on design and development in the creative industries,

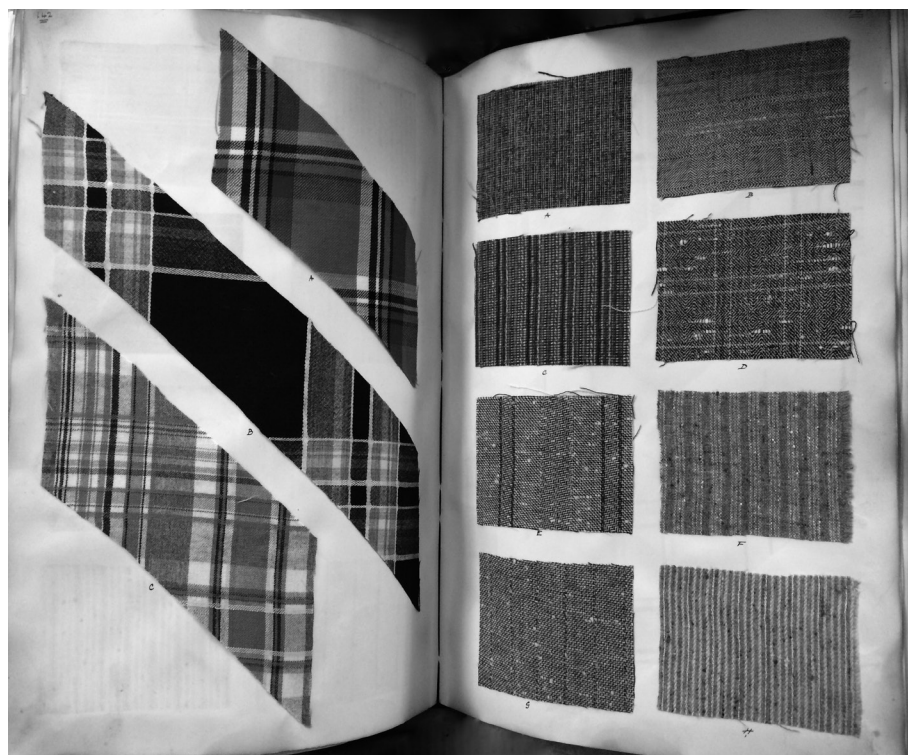
I have highlighted nodes in the ‘fashion-industrial complex’—the intricate web of people, companies and organisations that produce fibres, design textiles, make garments, forecast trends and sell fashion—and have urged historians to look beyond the canon of ‘great designers’ to develop an understanding of the ‘fashion intermediaries’ who labour behind the scenes to make the system work: managers, designers, forecasters, stylists, agents, merchandisers and distributors.<sup>14</sup> The history of design, production and distribution in textiles should not be isolated from the history of retailing, fashion and consumer culture, as it so often is. The beauty of a case study is that it allows the author to explore the many cultural, social and economic interactions within the fashion-industrial complex.

Exactly why has one hand been clapping, silently? The first generations of historians who studied British manufacturing were preoccupied with the technological achievements of the Industrial Revolution, and focused their research on landmark inventions, the division of labour and the rise of factories. In the early twentieth century, historians of the Yorkshire wool textile industry looked back to the advent of mechanisation and documented the transition from craft to industry. Yet all about them—everywhere in Birmingham, Bradford, Huddersfield, Leeds, London, Manchester and Glasgow—were the signs of seismic shifts in the textile and clothing industries. The ready-to-wear manufacturers had started to buy fabric directly from the mills and were pushing the powerful woollen merchants out of business, and the mills themselves scrambled to find more foreign customers as the home market was flooded with cheap imported fabrics. In the mid- to late twentieth century, the rise and triumph of high-street multiples wreaked havoc with the supply chain and, in the relentless drive to offer lower prices, laid the groundwork for the offshoring of textile production. In the midst of these changes, the wheels of fashion whirled away, generating the constant need for new patterns and colours. In mills all around Yorkshire, pattern designers laboured over their point papers and weavers watched over their looms, while salesmen crossed the English Channel to chase after Continental customers. Squirrelled away in libraries, archives and universities, early historians of the Yorkshire textile industry fixed their eyes on the distant past and averted their gaze away from the significant, if unsettling, transitions of the moment.<sup>15</sup>

The silences of the past can be a powerful testimony to the most important realities of the past. Few people took the time to write down what everybody knew; there was no reason—and no time—to document the commonplace. The textile collections in museums and historical archives hold countless textile-range books that were created by mills as a permanent record of their output and as reference tools for the design staff.<sup>16</sup> Technical schools assembled similar pattern books for teaching. Everyone knew what types of fabrics each mill made, so no one bothered to label the swatches in the books. Today, nobody knows which mill made which piece of cloth,

or if it was a bestseller or not. Historians are a bit like Agatha Christie's detective, Miss Marple. The fictional sleuth lurks in the background and watches, knowingly, as the protagonists reveal their true character. Historians have learned to work with limited evidence to peek into the lives of the dead and to construct a reasonable facsimile of what may have happened. Artefacts and documents provide the clues.

An artefact can open the door to the alien world of the past, where people looked like us but did things differently. A pattern book dated 1889 from the Yorkshire College of Science—the precursor to the University of Leeds—sheds light on the marvellous creative world of Victorian woollen design (figure I.3). Established in 1874 during the heyday of the British wool fabrics industry, Yorkshire College was a school for training designers, dye chemists and mill managers for the woollen and worsted mills in Bradford, Huddersfield and Leeds; the surrounding valleys of the West Riding; and faraway places like Germany, Japan and the United States. Yorkshire was home to the world's most advanced wool textile industry, which exported wool, yarns, woollens and worsteds to the four corners of the earth. The pattern book contains the



I.3 Pattern book, 'Class C. Woollen & Worsted Dress Fabrics, Autumn 1889', Yorkshire College of Science. Courtesy of ULITA: 1999.361; photo by Tracey Welch Photography.



A. W. Hainsworth & Sons Ltd wrote home from Milan, Italy, where he was meeting customers and studying the market:

I spent all the morning with Mr. Carlo Imperiali ... Enclosed is a pattern of Herringbone shewn by Dormeuil Frères ... The enclosed patterns were bought from Garnetts last season @ 9/- per yd. He intended them for coats but sold mostly in trousers. Something after this type of colour in various makes would interest him. I mentioned herringbones,—this is a rather popular design in Italy—The Bedford cord might also be of interest. It appears just under 300 grammes is the best weight to make—Over this weight pay 15% extra duty. *It's a very important dividing line* ... I don't think there is *much* business to be done in Italy but a little in specialities ... When it comes to cheapness we're simply not in it.<sup>18</sup>

Here we glimpse the reconnaissance mission of one British mill seeking new business from the Italians. There was an air of sophistication, an awareness of which fabrics were in fashion and a knowledge that economics and trade policies mattered. If the cloth was over a certain weight, it would incur extra customs duties at the border and all profits would be lost. Then, as now, the British mills had higher labour and production costs than manufacturers in a low-wage economy. Back then it was Italy, today it is China.

In a world connected by free trade, instant communications and container ships, we seldom think twice about the continuous flow of raw materials, ingredients and finished goods from Australia to Europe, Europe to China, and China back to Europe. The phrases 'supply chain' and 'supply chain management' are part of our daily lexicon. But the supply chain is a relatively new concept, dating back to the closing decades of the twentieth century. For much of their history, British textile mills sold fabrics to wholesale merchants or garment manufacturers with little thought of the end user. Today, a mill like Abraham Moon and Sons is necessarily fixated on the needs and expectations of the apparel brand that will sew up its cloth into a heritage tweed jacket, and that brand is concerned to know more about the fabric's place of origin. The fast fashion sold in Primark and Zara is underpinned by anonymity, but heritage apparel brands such as Boden, Brook Taverner and Paul Smith appreciate and tout the identity of their suppliers. At the upper end of the market, there is value in unpacking the supply chain and in being able to point to the British mill that made the fabric. Heritage mills like Abraham Moon and Sons, in the words of Peter Ackroyd, a long-time executive at the NWTEC, 'tick off the boxes that people want to have at the upper end of the market'.<sup>19</sup> Those mills that survived the dramatic changes that transformed the woollen and worsted industries in the 1980s and 1990s did so by focusing on three elements: the history, the product and the design.

## Fashionability

This book traces the history of Abraham Moon and Sons from its beginnings in 1837, through the heady days of the Victorian craze for tweeds; two global wars that saw unprecedented demand for military cloth; the postwar rise of consumer culture and the boom in man-made fibres; the transformation of the British high street with the triumph of multiples and chain stores; to the rise of a new global fashion system in our own time. It discusses the history of design, innovation and entrepreneurship through a series of stories about one tweed mill and its major customers: woollen merchants in Leeds and London, ready-to-wear manufacturers, high-street retailers such as Jaeger, M&S, C&A Modes and Next, and global brands such as Polo Ralph Lauren and Dolce & Gabbana.

The stories in this book focus on the creative processes and the marketing innovations that made British tweeds the most desirable woollens in the world. The text interrogates the silences of the past and poses a stream of small questions about design, continuity and innovation within the fashion system. Who decided what types of patterns to make? When did the designer first appear in the Yorkshire woollen industry? How much say did the customer have in the look of the fabric? When did trade fairs like PV come to be major sites for knowledge exchange between the mill and its customers? When did brands and branding become part of the picture? These small questions are building blocks for the book's larger query: what constitutes *fashionability*, and how do entrepreneurs, firms and industries create fashionable products? To explore this greater question, we can pull back the curtain on the global fashion system and turn to the history of Abraham Moon and Sons.





1 Ladies' tweed costume by J. R. Dale & Company, tailors and habit makers, London, c. 1900–10.  
Courtesy of Museum of London: Costume Collection, 85.238A–B.



2 The earliest known fabrics by Abraham Moon and Sons are these two striped dress fabrics deposited in the Design Registry in 1875; they may represent the firm's early use of synthetic dyes. Courtesy of The National Archives: registered designs 297231 and 297232.



3 The Isaac Moon memorial window, 1909, in St Oswald's Church, Guiseley. Photography by author.



4 Andersons' 'Rainthorne Weatherproofs' for Ladies, Gentlemen, Girls & Boys, Manufactured by Andersons' Rubber Co. Ltd., Pattern Book No. 966, Season 1927-8. Courtesy of Museum of London: Costume Collection, 71.117/53.

54 [TEXTILE YORKSHIRE SUPPLEMENT] **The Drapers' Organiser** February, 1927

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5 Heatons (Leeds) Ltd advertisement for Alwetha coats in waterproof tweeds, which could have been made by Abraham Moon and Sons. © The British Library Board: *Drapers' Organiser* (February 1927), 54.



FOR SEPTEMBER 1931

55

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Novel weaves and colour effects enhance smart designs in our range of Coats for Autumn and Winter. We invite you to visit our Showrooms during September. Inspect the entire range and

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All wool Novelty  
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twill, in  
fauns, browns,  
black and white.  
Women's and  
Maids'.

2611—price 47/11  
All wool Diagonal  
Velour lined  
best art. Silk  
twill. Collar and  
cuffs in Nutria  
Lamb. In all latest  
colours. Women's  
and Maids'.

6 As indicated in this advertisement for Dickson Millar & Company, a Moon customer, the stylishness of inexpensive tweeds was a boon to cost-conscious consumers during the Great Depression. © The British Library Board: *Drapers' Organiser* (September 1931), 55.



7 Close-up of a herringbone uniform for the Women's Voluntary Service, 1942, made in Leeds by John Barran & Sons, using the type of cloth produced by Abraham Moon and Sons. Courtesy of Museum of London: Costume Collection, 80.416/2.



8 A pattern book from the mill's extensive design archive shows the variety of patterns during the postwar era. Courtesy of Abraham Moon and Sons.





9 Ladies' woollen suit with fur trim, purchased at C&A Modes, 1960s. Courtesy of Museum of London: Costume Collection, 70.131.1-2.



10 This woollen suit was bought at Matthias Robinson—a small chain of department stores owned by Debenhams—by a young Yorkshire woman who needed something nice to wear at a friend's wedding in 1966 or 1967; costing around £20 (a week's wages), it was a special purchase for the owner, aged 22 or 23, who normally made her own clothes. Courtesy of Yorkshire Fashion Archive: gift of Marion Ackroyd of Keighley, West Yorkshire.





11 Mood board by Martin Aveyard, c. 1980. Courtesy of Abraham Moon and Sons.



12 The mill's Sales and Design Showroom Suite, showing the arrangement of throws in a rainbow effect, 2016. Courtesy of Abraham Moon and Sons.