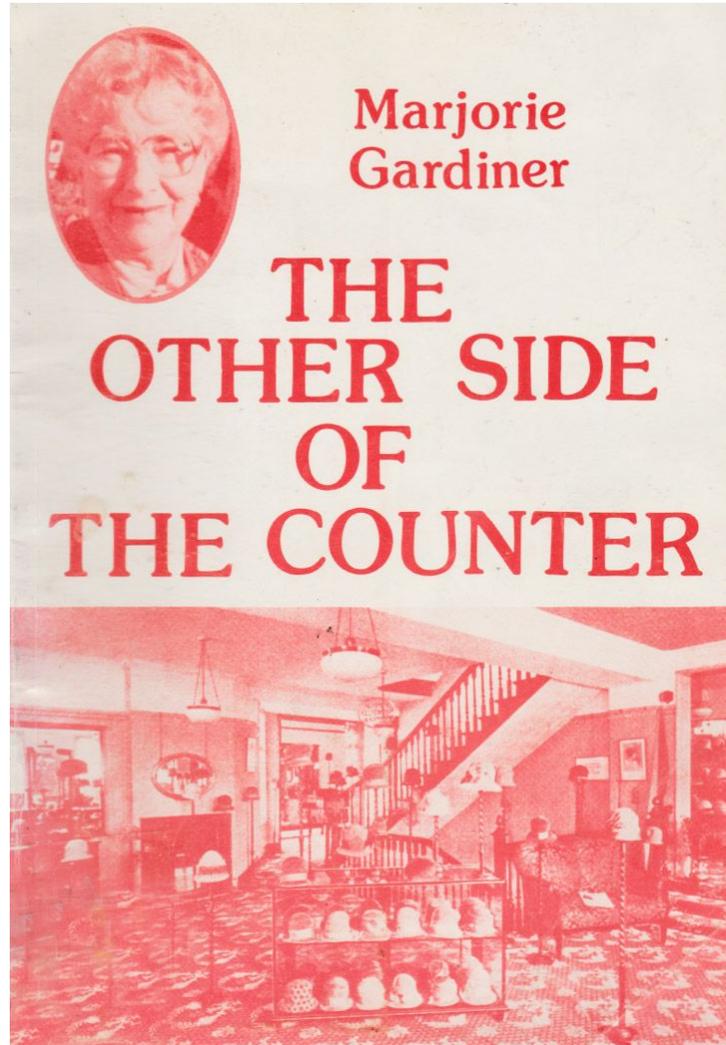


About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

More than one hundred books later, as part of our 45th anniversary celebrations, we are making the original texts of many of our out-of-print books available for the first time in many years.

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About this book

Marjorie Gardiner's 1985 autobiography looks at the working life of milliner from 1925 to 1945, including an account of her working life during the Second World War. Marjorie's story is told in a lively and evocative manner, and describes her experiences as a shop assistant working in a Brighton hat shop, where she met all manner of customers.

This personal history provides a fascinating first-hand insight into shop life in Brighton during the first part of the twentieth century, as well as memories of a young woman's social life and notable Brighton characters.

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Original 1985 foreword by Marjorie Gardiner

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COUNTER The Life of a Shop Girl 1925 - 1945

My life

I was born at 86 Coventry Street in 1908 and went to Stanford Rd School. I left at 14 and started work a year later. When I got married I lived in a flat in Millers Rd. That was a very happy time. After my husband's death in 1949 I moved to a little flat in Prestonville Rd and went back to work until I retired - first in millinery again, but ending up on a telephone switchboard in a big Western Rd store. Now I live in a small flat near Preston Park. It's a quiet life, I suppose - but I'm always busy, visiting people, friends and relations, going on trips or to the theatre, which I love. In fact, I'm never indoors.

About writing this book

Having read the books by Daisy Noakes and Margaret Powell about life in service when working days were hard, I thought I would like to write about the life of a shop assistant from 1925 to 1945, some thirty to fifty years ago.

They both write about hard times being in service. I thought well, we didn't have such a good time either. Those girls in service, they saw you serving in the bright lights of a shop, well-furnished with colourful merchandise, all made-up and looking glamorous - but life was far from easy behind the scenes - there was no glamour 'on the other side of the counter'..... Now I will tell the story.

The Other Side of the Counter

I was born in Brighton some few years into this century, in a road near Dyke Road Park, which was then just allotments. I spent an uneventful childhood in a road of friendly neighbours and school friends. I hated school, though, apart from sport and games, the only things I was good at.

I had good parents and a devoted, much older brother, who married, when I was very young, a charming girl who was to be my friend for the rest of her life. I had quite a lot of school friends, some of whom I am lucky enough to know still, and a few of whom I meet regularly.

I left school the moment it was possible to do so (at the age of fourteen) and although I was keen to take some kind of job, my mother wanted me at home for a year or so. I was thus fifteen when in 1925 I started my working life.

I decided to go into millinery as my sister-in-law had been in the same trade in London and she told me it wasn't bad. I suppose in those days I was very fashion-conscious. There was little choice of jobs for women then, either domestic service, office work or serving in a shop of some kind, millinery, drapery or gowns.

My first situation was in a very small, exclusive shop at Seven Dials, where the window had silk drapes and was dressed with one gown, one hat and a vase of real flowers, beautifully arranged. All was changed every few days and everything had to be of the very best. Elite, like the customers.

There was only Madam, and myself as the apprentice. Madam was a lovely lady, very kind and quite young, perhaps in her late twenties, and I spent a happy three years there. By today's standards the wage was pitiful, two shillings and sixpence (12½ new pence) a week for the first year, and three shillings and sixpence a week thereafter. Unfortunately for me, Madam decided to get married to a tea planter and went abroad; the shop was sold and my first job came to an end.

The 1914-1918 War had been over for ten years. Brighton was now flourishing, the hotels and boarding houses were full in the summer and coaches came down daily from London, packed with people eager to enjoy the many amenities of the famous seaside town. These, apart from fashionable shops worthy of 'London by the Sea', included bands and theatres on both piers and pierrots on the beach and Punch and Judy for the children.

In an effort to find work I was soon studying the 'Situations Vacant' columns in the local paper and applied for the post of junior sales assistant in a very high-class millinery establishment in Western Road, Brighton. I was chosen out

of a large number of applicants, somewhat to my surprise as I had had no experience of working in a large and busy establishment. However, I did have three years' experience in a high-class shop, and Madam had given me an excellent reference.

My new Madam was big and blond, somewhat in the style of Mae West and I did not take to her when she interviewed me. I had heard she was a tyrant, but it was not easy to get a job and I was thankful to accept her offer.

I quickly found myself in a very different world from the one I had left; rigid rules and harsh discipline replaced the relaxed atmosphere of the little shop in Seven Dials and the kindly consideration of its owner, and if the girls had not been friendly I doubt if I would have stayed very long.

The shop had two very big showrooms, one downstairs and one upstairs. Above the latter was the work-room where the head milliner and four girls were kept busy all day making hats and working on alterations and trimmings.

There were always a number of assistants in a big shop: first the manageress, then sometimes an under-manageress or 'first hand', then six or more seniors, several juniors and two apprentices.

The workroom consisted of the head milliner, two under-milliners and an apprentice whose job it was to run errands, to 'fluff round Madam' and to get ribbons and other materials needed for hats being made for customers; she went out in all weathers.

Hats were made in those days from wire shapes or on a varnished wooden block covered by buckram, a kind of net stiffened and dried to the needed shape. Fe hats were blocked this way as well.

Customers who had hats made came in for a fitting before they were completed, as they had to be just what the customer ordered. And the milliners also had to account for their time on the work. Although some hats were made to order or altered by these shop milliners, most hats came from the wholesalers. The round-the-crown measurement varied from 6 1/2 inches to 21 inches.

In the showrooms there were four or five long counters with hat stands which had to be dressed out every day, with toning coloured hats decided on by the senior assistants, helped by the junior assistants who fetched and brushed the ones needed. The apprentices were told to bring artificial flowers and feathers for decorating the hats, making them look individual. The orders by the seniors were obeyed by the lower grades without question, and if they got under a disgruntled one they did not have a very happy time.

I worked in four shops prior to 1945. You did a two year apprenticeship, then you were a junior for two years before becoming a senior. As a senior, you were a saleswoman, and you could become the 'first hand' or deputy to the manageress. You had your own counter, with a junior to help you. When you worked in a millinery shop, you had to wear a hat to work. You generally got a little discount on hats in the shop. Later, when you became a manageress, the manufacturers might slip in a free hat when you went to pick up hats from the warehouse.

The shop opened at 9 a.m. but at 8.30 a.m. a stream of smart young ladies, all dressed in black, filed through the back entrance of the shop (in Clarence Square) and went up the back stairs to a shabby cloakroom. Here they put a last touch to their hair and faces, and took off their outdoor shoes, replacing them with black, high-heeled satin ones. They were now ready to descend to the showrooms where the apprentices were already dusting the 'sides' (counters) and stands ready for the day's 'dressing out'.

Then followed an unvarying little ritual. The senior assistant announced the colours for the day's dressing out, then passed the hats selected for display to the junior assistants. They, in turn, placed the hats in the correct positions, with veils decorating the stands and flowers and feathers dressed in between to complete the day's colour scheme. The shop display changed every day, but the window display changed only once a week. On a given day each week, the windows were stripped and the window dressers would take over and change all the hats to new colour schemes.

By nine o'clock the door was open and even in winter remained open throughout the day, no matter how bitter the weather. The girls suffered acutely from the cold and most of them had chilblains for which mittens did little or nothing. Occasionally they tried to sneak a moment in which to warm their frozen fingers on the one tiny radiator which was all that the shop possessed in the way of heating. Incredibly, this was not allowed!

Neither were coffee or tea breaks, no matter how we longed for a hot drink to warm us up. We took it in turns to rush to the kitchen and grab a cup of tea, but as often as not had to leave it and dash down to the shop to serve. There was a small gas stove in the kitchen where we could heat our midday meal and - hygiene or no hygiene - we often used to put our feet in the oven to unfreeze them!

When the first customer of the day arrives, the head assistant dashes forward with a pleasant smile, murmuring: "Can I show you something, Madam?" She then places a chair in front of a dressing-table before bringing hats for approval, her sales technique watched closely by the Manageress. After trying on about two dozen hats, the customer is satisfied and the assistant sighs with relief. It is quite an expensive hat and her commission will benefit accordingly. She packs

the hat carefully in a box with tissue paper, ties it up and walks to the door, thanking the lady for her custom.

By now the shop is filling up and all the assistants are busy, the younger ones brushing the hats and arranging them in drawers between tissue paper.

Sometimes when we were busy we had to serve two or three customers at a time, but however busy we were, as soon as someone came through the doorway, we had to greet her and find her a chair to sit on while she was waiting, apologising for the delay and assuring her she would be attended to as soon as possible. There were many chairs around the show-rooms; in the big upper showroom there was also a large settee capable of seating at least four.

Occasionally a customer complained about having to wait, but even if the wait was seen to be inevitable, the assistant always got reprimanded. In those days 'the customer is always right' meant precisely that and we were never allowed to forget it.

Shop assistants always wore black dresses. Mostly we wore black satin in the summer and velvet in the winter. A little later we were allowed a touch of white such as a little collar or a frilly front known as a jabot. No jewellery was permitted, apart from a wrist watch and an engagement ring if an assistant got herself engaged. When the Second World War came, colours were allowed to be worn in the shops although the choice was limited as a rule to such colours as navy, brown or grey.

Hats were delivered by a portress on a bicycle. The boxes were tied on so that she could just peer over the top to see where she was going and she did this for hours every day in all weathers. Hats had to be delivered at the time specified by the customer, whose convenience of course was paramount. We did not deliver hats priced less than twelve shillings and elevenpence three farthings (approximately 60 pence); the cheapest being about four shillings and eleven-pence three farthings (approximately 25 pence).

We always had very expensive hats in stock, models trimmed with birds of paradise, mink, marmot, ermine hairs or other trimmings robbed from some unfortunate bird or animal.

Sometimes Madam arrives in her large chauffeur-driven car and sits in the cash desk watching every assistant, and woe betide one who allows a customer to slip out without making a purchase. If Madam is in a bad mood, we assistants quake in our shoes for to displease Madam can mean instant dismissal.

Dismissal would mean that the girl had to leave without a reference and without one there was little hope of getting another job. Furthermore, unemployment pay

could not be drawn for the first six weeks. Life was not easy for girls in this position, particularly if they were without a home and lived in 'digs' and it was no wonder that they sometimes ended up on the streets.

Shop hours were long, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. On Friday night we were supposed to leave at 8 p.m. and on Saturday at 9 p.m. but we were not free even then if there were still customers around. The only time closing hours were adhered to was on Thursdays when the shop had to shut at 1 p.m. for the half-day closing demanded by the law. There was no union strong enough to help shop assistants; there were no standard wages or hours, you just had to do the best you could for yourself.

During the week the 'followers' of the young ladies could be seen patiently waiting outside the back entrance in Clarence Square for the girls to come out.

We were allowed one week's paid holiday a year, but those who were lucky enough to afford to do so, could take a second week without pay.

We each had a book in which we recorded every sale; these were collected at night and if the amounts were not satisfactory, there was a severe 'telling off'.

Among our regular customers were several 'old tabs' who came week in, week out, and tried on innumerable hats with no intention of buying. They were well-known to us and we used to try to dodge away when we saw one of them come in. The Manageress - or Madam if she happened to be present - knew perfectly well that a sale was impossible but nevertheless the unfortunate girl who got 'landed' with one of these old dears got reprimanded for not making a sale. It was a cardinal sin not to sell to EVERY customer.

We had some odd customers at times. I well remember one who announced that she wanted a black hat, "the most expensive in the shop". I got the key to unlock the case where the model hats were kept, those with dyed birds of paradise, which she tried on. Finally she chose the most expensive and I was thrilled, as we got extra commission on the model hats.

As I was packing it in a special hat box, I remarked that it was lovely, and, a little diffidently, "I suppose you want it for a special occasion?"

"Yes", she replied, "I want it for my husband's funeral. He gave me a bloody awful life while he was here, so I am giving him a bloody good send off!"

I shall never forget the occasion when an elderly, grumpy customer exhausted an assistant's patience by trying on two or three dozen hats and impatiently rejecting them all.

"They make me look old", she complained finally.

The girl had had enough. Besides, she was about to leave work for good.

"But, then, Madam *is* old!" she said to the delight of the girls as the furious customer left, never to return.

Not all our customers were trying, of course, and we were always pleased to serve the late George Robey's wife, a charming lady who was later to become Lady Robey. Kathleen Marsh (who later married Max Miller) was another and pleasant regular customer, and actresses appearing at the local Theatre Royal often bought their hats from us, providing us with an exciting feeling of being on the fringe of show business.

Sometimes when we couldn't produce the particular style a customer required, one of us had to go out to the wholesale milliners - there were quite a number in the vicinity - and bring back a selection, hoping this would result in a sale. Nothing, but nothing, was too much trouble to please a customer.

Madam preferred Jewish girls as assistants because they were considered to be the best saleswomen; she also liked her staff to be good-looking. I was not beautiful, in fact I considered myself quite plain, but not unattractive, with petite figure and good legs. I think my blond hair helped to make me a bit noticeable and I always managed to dress well in spite of the poor pay, thanks to a friend who always made my clothes and who had a fashion sense.

At one time we had a really beautiful girl who was very popular with the men. One day she failed to turn up for work and as she lived in a bed-sitter in the Square behind the shop, Madam sent an assistant along to find out why. The assistant knocked, but getting no reply, assumed the girl was ill in bed and walked straight in to find she was indeed in bed but not ill, and not alone. The girl hastily covered her companion and said she was not well enough to come to work as she was in bed with laryngitis. Madam was not told the real cause of absence and for a long time afterwards the gentleman known as 'laryngitis' was a (very private) joke amongst the girls!

Madam was always driven by a good-looking chauffeur and woe betide any of us caught casting an eye in his direction. I nearly got the sack once for doing so, but I managed to meet him, nevertheless, well away from the shop!

Our Manageress, who managed both shops where I worked in Western Road, was a most attractive woman, very strict, who kept us busy all the time. We were not allowed to sit down and had to find something to do, always, even when we were not serving. Because she was so strict many of the girls were frightened of her but she was really very kind and gave us a splendid Christmas Party after

closing time when the bosses had gone home. She supplied drinks and lovely food and gave us all a lovely present, bought with her own money. Away from business she would help any of us in trouble and I kept in touch with her until she died. I remember she even gave up her lunch hour to come to my wedding.

Needless to say we were not permitted to look out of the front shop windows, but the back ones overlooked Clarence Square and among the well-known characters who passed by was Max Miller on his bike, in the days before he was famous. He would wave to us as he passed and if Madam wasn't looking we waved back.

We did a considerable trade in mourning millinery. Widow's weeds, a black hat draped with black veiling, were almost compulsory when I first went into the business. Widows wore them to their husband's funeral with the veil over their faces and continued to wear them for several months afterwards. However, 'weeds' went out of fashion fairly soon, although we continued to do a tremendous trade in black hats as everyone who went into mourning wore black from head to foot. It was only when clothes rationing came in during World War II that this custom started to die out.

When King George V died in 1936, buyers from everywhere were dashing to buy up every available black hat from the manufacturers as nearly everyone, it seemed, wanted a black hat for his funeral and windows everywhere were draped in black. We did terrific business that week.

When I was in millinery, everyone wore everything to match; coats, hats, gloves, shoes, etc. Almost always they brought bits of something they wanted matched up. I had one customer who produced a green jug saying she wanted a hat that colour!

We were mostly asked for basic colours - black, white, navy, brown, green and grey, but more and more new shades were produced every year, making it more difficult to get a good match.

As a fresh colour was brought out every season, the old stocks had to be got rid of in the sales as naturally customers mostly wanted the latest colour.

We held two sales a year, at the end of January and the end of July and there were never any reductions during the rest of the year. We had to get in very early in the mornings on sale days as there were always long queues waiting for the doors to open, and then there was a real scramble for the bargains. On such days we were lucky to get to a meal any time of the day.

Madam had a beautiful house in Hove, with a large staff of servants who rarely stayed long, as they were terrified of her. She owned racehorses and

greyhounds and this, luckily for us, took her away a good deal as she went to all race meetings held not too far away. Sometimes she would be gone for a week at a time. Occasionally, when her horses won and she had a really big win, she would buy us cakes for tea, if she was in a good mood which, alas, wasn't often.

Sometimes when Madam went to Ascot she would take the Manageress and the Head Milliner with her to study the fashions. If anything took her fancy, she would have the design copied.

The wages were a few shillings a week for the younger ones and not very much more for the older ones, and some girls who did not live at home were forced to supplement their wages by taking jobs in the evenings. Sometimes they would get a job as hostess in a dance hall (which occasionally implied more than dancing) in order to pay for their digs and a little over for modest extras.

Despite the miserable wages and the long hours of work, we girls managed to enjoy ourselves. We were all very friendly and spent a good deal of our free time together, sometimes taking along our boyfriends as well.

In the summer we often took a picnic on the beach and occasionally on the river at Barcombe Mills. I remember a friend and myself made dresses for one such outing. The material, voile, cost one shilling and three farthings (about 5 ½ pence) a yard, and we thought we looked a million dollars!

On our half-day we could go to tea dances where, for the price of a pot of tea and a cake, one could dance for an hour or two to a small string orchestra.

The Regent Dance Hall, now demolished, was a very popular place for Saturday night dances and we went when we could afford it. Everyone was in evening dress then, and looked very elegant.

A friend of mine made nearly all my dresses for me. She worked for a court dressmaker, so all I had to do was to sketch out what I wanted, and she would cut it out and make it up. Often we used to copy dresses worn by film stars - I remember her making me one which Ginger Rogers wore in one of her films. We also went to look in all the posh shops for ideas, then I would sketch the fashions and give my drawings to my friend. We had very little money in those days, though some of my friends did used to buy patterns to make clothes, and those who were better off even bought their own for under a guinea a time at the 'Guinea Shop' on Western Road - where nothing was allowed to cost more.

We used velvets, taffetas, voile, crepe, organdie, satin and silk - pure silk - all made up in long and very voluminous styles. We did not use man-made fibres much until later on. The material cost about 2/11d or 3/11d a yard (15 pence or 20 pence approximately), according to what it was. The best places for buying

material were Hetheringtons or Wades along the Western Road, or Vokins, or a shop called Sopers at the top of North Street near the Clock Tower. All gone now, except Vokins. The cheapest material of all was cotton, but it was not so popular then except for dresses for the beach or going on the river. We paid about one shilling and three farthings a yard for cotton, but we would never have worn it to dances.

There were also dances in the Aquarium Hall, the Dome - and Sherrys, but we seldom ventured there as it was sometimes frequented by questionable characters.

We often went on the West Pier to the Theatre to see plays by the Rex Leslie Players, who performed a different play every week. Admission cost us one shilling and we treated ourselves to a glass of sherry in the interval for sixpence. There was also Jimmy Hunter's Follies on the Palace Pier, where Tommy Trinder started in Brighton.

At that time there was a choice of over a dozen 'picture palaces' in the town and we would often go, in the 'ninepennies' unless a boyfriend took us, when we sat grandly in the 'two-and-sixpennies'.

The Brighton Hippodrome was in its heyday as a Variety Music Hall and we saw many artistes, like Gracie Fields, who were relatively unknown at the time. Needless to say we sat in the cheapest seats up-stairs and very uncomfortable they were, too. At that time the gallery had no individual seats and we had to sit as close together as possible, being exhorted to do so by a large gentleman who kept shouting "Move along there!" No use to protest that we were already squashed as close together as we could possibly get. He evidently knew just how many each very long 'form' *could* hold, and saw to it that it did, no matter if it was a sweltering evening and we were packed like sardines.

We also went to the Theatre Royal sometimes to see plays for which we uncomplainingly queued for hours. We occupied the gallery there, too, but the seating arrangements were more civilised.

Before the outbreak of World War II, Madam died, so I had to find another job. Fortunately, a milliner's opened nearby and quite a number of us found a position there, including our Manageress. I stayed there for some time and then went to manage a small shop in a different part of the town.

By then, war had broken out and life soon became very different. We had a lot of troops billeted in the town, including many Canadians, who livened up the town quite a bit - and left some permanent reminders of their stay.....

We had a few raids on Brighton and one day I heard that bombs had been dropped on the railway behind my home. I phoned through for permission to go home and see if my parents were all right and on arriving was alarmed to see all the windows were out and the slates blown off the roof. I rushed indoors to find my father completely unworried about the damage. He said there was no gas and the back door had gone, but what was upsetting him was that he couldn't find the tortoise! It was subsequently found in the garden, quite unharmed, but buried under the slates from the roof.

At the outbreak of war, when Brighton was regarded as relatively safer than London, the refugees started arriving. I had two little girls, one from Limehouse and one from Stepney, who stayed until invasion looked imminent, when they were taken away.

Women had to work during the war unless there was good reason for exemption, and I had to go to working. I was now married and continued in my job until the end of the war.

Life was now getting easier for shop girls. The hours were not so long and the pay was increasing a little, but it was never very good. Even when I was Manageress of a shop my wages, until the day I left, were only three pounds a week, and commission.

Then World War II ended, and with it, my working life on the other side of the counter from 1925 to 1945.

The death of the millinery trade

The trade started to decline when the war came, as some girls had to go into the forces, so wore uniforms. Others went into factories and into the land army and wore head scarves. The older women were too worried with rationing, war tragedies and bombing to be too interested in clothes. When war ended the younger people coming out of uniform were not so interested in hats. Also, elaborate hair-styles came into fashion and they did not want to cover them; furthermore, hat prices had increased.

A more casual style of dress was now arriving, fashion was changing and the time was gradually coming when, in these latter years, anything goes. In the 1980s you could walk down the road in a nightdress and wellies and it would not cause a stir!

Postscript

Looking back at the hat trade

Marjorie Gardiner writes here about a particularly interesting period in dress history - the 1920s and 1930s - which in Britain was marked by the development of an increasingly style-conscious wholesale and ready-to-wear dress industry.

This period saw a widening demand for cheaper, more fashionable clothes, not only amongst the more affluent middle classes but also for the first time, amongst better-off working class women. Girls just like the author were able in the 1920s to make their own clothes up, in stylish cut and out of cheaper fashion fabrics like rayon. Marjorie Gardiner's favourite afternoon dance dress cost her one shilling and three farthings (between five and six pence).

A shop such as this one in Western Road (Marjorie's second job, and the one from which most of her experiences in this book are drawn) was in competition with department stores such as Hanningtons and Vokins, and more exclusive millinery shops. It would thus cater for women from different classes and with very different amounts of money to spend on hats. Customers like Mrs. George Robey would be able to buy new hats seasonally and for special occasions as a matter of routine. Others, with stringent financial problems were looking for hats which were long-lasting and inexpensive, rather than just elegant. They would have to save up for a 'funeral' or 'wedding-cum-Sunday-Best' hat which would probably have been bought at the sales. Mrs. Gardiner comments on the fact that the shop was really busy at sale time. These hats, in safe, classic styles, were kept often for years in the bedroom cupboard and resurrected for special occasions.

The turnover of this shop must have been large, to judge from the number of salesgirls employed. It must be remembered that the wearing of hats by women of all classes in the 1920s and 1930s was an absolute social necessity, in both summer and winter. A hat was a mark of respectability, at the very least, and a signal of elegance and social grace at the richer end of the social ladder. This remained true until the 1950s, but the ever-increasing informality of fashion since then has steadily eroded the demand for millinery. This particular shop closed down in the 1950s. There is not now even one wholesale supplier of millinery left in Brighton and hardly one economically viable hat shop.

Marjorie Gardiner's memoirs preserve, in this little time-capsule, the atmosphere of the inter-war period, when the shop-girls' fingers ached with chilblains caused by the draught from the ever-open door, and when the customer could buy a fine feathered hat for 12/11 ³/₄d.