

## Introduction

It was in the 1960s and '70s that independent-minded young women moved away from the cookie-cutter styles of the high street to seek unique fashions from the past. I think of myself as being quite mainstream in fashion, but I fondly remember the mink fur coat I picked up at Paddy's Market in Glasgow. I remember feeling very Abba although I don't remember Agnetha ever wearing fur. But the fur coat was a hugely liberating experience because I could wear flimsy clothes in winter. The coat's warmth stretched from my neck to the heels of my boots so I had no fear of Scotland's harsh winter winds. I also remember buying a 1940s black chiffon dress that was eight sizes too big. My figure swam in it, but I loved the fabric and the style. I couldn't simply leave it in the charity shop. Thankfully, the shop's volunteer suggested I find a tailor and, without further consideration, I took it to a dressmaker who tailored the dress to my figure. I felt like the belle of the ball and called my charity shop dress a 'gladrag' because it made me happy.

The fact is that whatever you find in a charity shop is likely to be unique, no other shop will have it in stock – this year, at least! Another major consideration is that clothing from

previous eras was often better quality than that made today. For instance older silks don't wrinkle and the surfaces of older woollens don't erupt with tiny balls. Also women of yesteryear valued their clothes. They had to save hard as a dress cost a huge amount in relation to income. As a result, a fancy frock was truly for a special occasion. At home, women often wore older clothes, keeping 'good' clothing for trips outside the home. In addition, they knew how to care for fabrics. 'Good' clothing never went into the washing machine. That was an absolute no-no.

Also we can't forget that manufacturing isn't as good as it once was. Clothing manufacturers today know we will wear clothes only for a short time before tossing them aside. Previously far more man hours went into each garment; hence the price of clothing was high in relation to income.

Charity shops can be an Aladdin's cave of opportunity for those interested in fashion. But, for the uninitiated, it is hard to know where to start, what to look for and how to shed any stains and smells.

For those who want to give charity shops a try and possibly even alter what you buy, then read on, this books for you!

**Dee**

## Terminology

Retro – refers to clothes that are copies past fashions. These clothes are not in themselves ‘old’.

Vintage – definition varies from simply ‘past fashion’ to anything that is up to 100 years old.

Antique – technically an antique has to be 100 years old. Sales of antique clothing are generally made by collectors and dealers and they are not meant to be worn. The age of these fabrics makes them delicate, so care and storage is of vital importance.

## Types of old clothing

Haute Couture – designer quality of the highest kind. This was often hand made from the very best fabrics and has exceptionally detailed styling and tailoring.

Ready to wear – Also known as prêt-a-porter, this is bought from a shop.

Dressmaker – commissioned from a dressmaker and designed to fit a specific person

## Where to shop

Vintage shops are amazing places to browse. They are like dress museums except you can buy the clothes on display. Unfortunately, the clothing here is often very expensive. However vintage shops are great places to explore and learn about gladrag clothing.

Vintage clothing websites again are great places to browse and learn about former fashions. You can learn the styles of former eras as your fashion taste is broadened. A halter-neck jumpsuit might seem far-fetched at the beginning, but the more you look at it the greater the appeal.

Flea markets are a thing of the past in many cities. They were the domain of the old rag and bone man who used to ride our streets with a horse and cart, swapping old clothes for balloons and sweets. But now he buys in bulk from charity shops. He often sells his goods to traders in Africa and Eastern Europe. But you may still find a regular stall holder in a weekly market. Some of their clothing comes from house clearances. Many of these dealers know their fashion and often set prices high. So look for flaws in the garment and be prepared to bargain.

Also beware of fake vintage clothing at these market stalls. Casual glance may give it the look of past fashion, but take care to examine the seams and smell that garment.

Vintage clothing shops specialise in old clothes. Some people are turned off because they are over-stuffed with clothing, shoes, bags and jewellery but, for others, this is part of their charm. They offer fun when it comes to shopping for old clothes – not just because of what is on offer and the quirky décor they provide, but they also offer a serious opportunity to try out new shapes and styles.

However vintage clothing shops are expensive – sometimes exorbitantly so! But the clothing here is usually in good condition, clean and carries some panache. Owners of these shops work hard scouring estate sales and auctions to ensure they have stock worth purchasing. Vintage clothing dealers will starve unless their stock is chic and wearable. Many of these traders are not rich, they deal in these clothes because they love them. Visiting their shops will help you gain an appreciation and knowledge of what to look for in charity shops and market stalls.

Vintage clothing fairs bring together small dealers. Shoppers pay an entrance fee but once through the door you will find stalls of clothing and accessories from most eras. Trying things on often involves going behind a screen and sharing space and a mirror with other shoppers. Bartering can be done here because, having transported their clothes, stall holders often don't want to carry them home. Also the stall holders often love their clothes, and they love people who also love their clothes. Shopping here can be very personal and huge fun.

Online shopping offers simple access to a glorious array of clothing and, sometimes, the prices are better than in vintage shops. Online dealers aren't paying rent for a high street shop so their overheads are lower. But as with all online shopping – buyer beware! Ask about refunds if the item doesn't fit or isn't quite as perfect as the website claimed.

The following websites offer a wonderful collection of clothing.

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/vintage>

<http://www.vintage-a-peel.co.uk/>

<http://www.myvintage.co.uk/>

<http://candysays.co.uk/>

<http://www.marthascloset.co.uk/>

Charity shops offer a blend of all of the above. It's worth going to a posh area of town where the donations are likely to be of higher quality. But charity shop organisers are becoming more knowledgeable about fashion, and many charities now instruct volunteers on the type of clothing to charge more for.