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## *Our Best Dresses*

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**The Story of Horrockses Fashions Limited**

The Horrockses Fashions label is one of the best known fashion brands of the 1950s. The pretty, full-skirted, floral and striped cotton frocks are spoken of with much fondness by those who wore them. Women remember the quality of the fabrics, the vibrant patterns and the styling of Horrockses dresses. They recall the sense of pleasure in choosing, purchasing and wearing these dresses, and feeling like 'the bees knees'!

Horrockses (later Horrockses, Crewdson & Company Limited) was a vast cotton manufacturing business, founded in Preston in 1791.

It developed a huge mill complex, the Yard Works, and was a major employer in the town for almost two centuries. Their name became associated with the production of fine quality cotton cloth and they were particularly renowned for their sheets, towels and nightdresses. In an attempt to extend the successful Horrockses brand, the company launched a subsidiary - Horrockses Fashions Limited, with a ready-to-wear collection of printed cotton dresses, housecoats and beachwear, in April 1946. The launch was timely as the relaxation of war-time clothes rationing had led to a growing demand for good quality women's wear. The parent company had produced printed fashion fabrics for many years, so they had had some experience of women's wear, and Horrockses Fashions had a ready supply of plain cotton cloth woven in Preston.

In the 1940s there was great deal of activity to promote cotton, particularly as a fashion fabric, and to this end the Cotton Board was founded in early 1940 by an Act of Parliament.

Its Colour, Design & Style Centre opened in Manchester later that year. Like the Cotton Board, Horrockses Fashions were concerned with the elevation of cotton, which had been considered a relatively low status material for fashionable clothes, to something much more up market. Reactions to their first collection emphasised the 'glamour of cotton' and the fabric designs used were compared to those normally seen in more sophisticated fashions made from silk.



*Late 1940s shirtwaister dress, in an Alastair Morton fabric*

A key figure in the success of Horrockses Fashions was James Cleveland Belle, who was the first chairman of the Colour, Design & Style Centre and had been a buyer for the Liverpool branch of the department store Bon Marché. Initially he acted as adviser to the company and eventually became a director. Cleveland Belle surrounded himself with a group of talented staff, who together were responsible for the success of the firm. Horrockses Fashions had their headquarters in London in St. George Street, Hanover Square. Here the fashion designers Betty Newmarch, Martha Pirn and John Tullis created women's clothes that closely followed high fashion and they regularly visited the Paris fashion shows. However, the designers' names rarely appeared in publicity, as it was the brand that was all important. There was a showroom in the St. George Street headquarters, which provided a venue for fashion shows where potential trade buyers and the press were invited to view collections, rather in the manner of a couture house.

Most of the making-up was done in Manchester at Ivy Mill, where Kurt Lowit (the technical adviser) was responsible for converting paper designs onto cloth. He also worked closely with a variety of printers in the north west. The vibrant textile designs used for the clothes play a vital role in the Horrockses story. All the designs were produced exclusively for the Horrockses Fashions label and the cloth was not available for retail.

Initially, Alastair Morton, a designer of some reputation, was commissioned to produce fabric designs that included the horizontal coloured stripes with stylised flowers so typical of the Horrockses Fashions' style. The company also bought designs from up-and-coming fine artists such as Eduardo Paolozzi, Graham Sutherland and William Gear. From 1953 to 1958 the firm employed Royal College of Art graduate Pat Albeck to design for them. Working closely with the three fashion designers, she would often produce fabrics for specific garment styles.

Many of the designs were based on flowers but occasionally John Tullis would request something more unusual, such as a pepper and sweetcorn design and one of large pink lobsters. Purchasers of



*1953 Horrockses dress, in fabric designed by Eduardo Paolozzi. Photograph by Jay*



Floral sundress, in fabric designed by Brigitte Dehnert, c. 1960

Horrockses dresses were attracted not just by the attention to design, but also by the quality of the cloth and construction. The firm monitored the quality of their product at all stages. In terms of raw material they favoured the use of cloth made from an extremely high quality cotton yarn. Printed patterns on the cloth were carefully considered in terms of design and fastness and the finished fabric was treated with various processes which helped maintain the crispness of the fabric and facilitated washability and minimum ironing. The finish used by Horrockses was known as 'Quintafix', developed by The Bradford Dyer's Association, who advertised the process using Horrockses Fashions. Similar finishes such as 'Everglaze' and 'Calpreta' were also available. All were heavily promoted, with swing tags attached to

garments detailing the treatment the fabric had undergone. Although Horrockses Fashions concentrated on cotton, in order to have a market all year round they also produced a limited number of outfits in rayon jersey, silk and nylon, cloth which was bought in from other firms. By the early 1950s they had also launched a children's wear brand, Pirouette. Despite the fact that Horrockses Fashions were mass produced they went to great lengths to foster a sense of exclusivity in their garments, advertising in the quality fashion press, such as *Vogue*, using sophisticated models often photographed in exotic locations. They also paid careful attention to details of styling and to producing one style in different fabrics, thereby limiting quantities of each garment.

In a report in the *Daily Mail* in 1953 (called 'I'm marooned and it's lovely') the fashion editor Iris Ashley reported from Madeira that Horrockses Fashions were well represented. She had counted 41 of their designs on tourists and only three were identical! Horrockses Fashions were relatively expensive with retail prices ranging from £4 to £7 for a cotton day dress in 1950, a week's wages for many young women. However, in spite of high prices many women saved up their hard-earned cash in order to acquire one; often for use as a honeymoon going away outfit. While Horrockses Fashions were sold in most towns in Britain (between 1956 and 1958 over

900 outlets in England alone had accounts), they were careful not to flood towns with their products and limited which retailers were allowed to sell their clothes. Such was the demand for Horrockses Fashions, that some smaller retailers would allow special customers to preview the new Horrockses Fashions collections before they were put out into the shop. This sense of exclusivity was also promoted in the 'specials' which Horrockses produced for some department stores and multiples such as Harvey Nichols in London and the Cresta chain of shops, as well as in the promotion of fabrics designed especially for them. Other forms of promotion included the supply of dresses to film companies. The actress Dinah Sheridan wore several Horrockses Fashions dresses in the 1951 Royal Command Performance film -

Ealing's *Where No Vultures Fly*, set in Kenya. Examples of Horrockses Fashions were displayed in the foyer of the New Victoria Cinema, Preston, prior to the film's screening - more useful publicity. Extensive coverage in the press was guaranteed by the adoption of Horrockses Fashions by members of the royal family. The Duchess of Kent wore them on her 1952 Far Eastern tour and in 1954 in Canada, while Queen Elizabeth II wore several on her 1953 tour of the Caribbean and again on a visit to Nigeria the following the year.

Horrockses Fashions mixed the glamorous with the practical. Their outfits were particularly popular for honeymoons and holidays and could be seen worn by British women living in Commonwealth countries; in



A night out in Torquay, 1953, wearing a Horrockses dress in fabric by Alastair Morton

act it has been commented that you could tell an English woman abroad by her Horrockses' frock. Practicality and durability were important to Horrockses Fashions' customers. Women have commented on just how easy these dresses were to look after; you could wash and wash them and the cotton still kept the crispness. So delighted were the company's customers that they regularly sent letters of praise. Irene Ashwin-Naylor wrote on her return from a tour of the Middle East that she had taken three Horrockses frocks with her, amongst others, and that due to the heat



*A cool, crisp Horrockses dress in Malaya, 1952*

they all had to be washed frequently in 'primitive conditions' - only the three Horrockses dresses survived and in 'perfect condition'.

In 1958 James Cleveland Belle left the company to pursue other commitments and a number of his colleagues chose to follow, including Pat Albeck. The brand was sold to Steinberg & Sons in 1964 and whilst the label continued until 1983, it never experienced the reputation it had enjoyed in its heyday in the 1950s. Increasing competition, the replacement of cotton with synthetic fibres and the dominance of a youth market where fashionability replaced quality, meant that the Horrockses name gradually faded from the limelight. However, many women have treasured their Horrockses dresses and it is these privately owned garments which have been lent to the Harris Museum and Art Gallery that provide the bulk of the exhibition. We hope that this will be an excellent opportunity for those who remember Horrockses Fashions to take a nostalgic look back and a chance for everyone to learn more about the story behind the brand.

Dr Christine Boydell  
De Montfort University  
2001

**HARRIS**  
MUSEUM & ART GALLERY

Market Square, Preston, PR1 2PP  
Tel: 01772 258248 Fax: 01772 886764  
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