

Liberating the Slaves of the Needle: The Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners 1843-1863

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Between 1843 and 1863 the welfare of the needlewomen of London became the focus of considerable philanthropic attention. The Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners was the first charitable association founded in March 1843, followed by The Distressed Needlewomen's Society (1847), and The Milliners' and Dressmakers' Provident and Benevolent Institution (1849). Regional societies, including The Glasgow Milliners' and Dressmakers' Association (1861) were also established. This paper will focus exclusively on the activities of The Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners. It will examine the factors surrounding its inception, and how it worked to combat the hardships faced by needlewomen in London, including long hours of work and inadequate living quarters. It will also examine how the Association was viewed by needlewomen and the public at large, and what successes it achieved within the period. Through close examination and analysis of contemporary literary sources including *The Times*, *The English Woman's Journal* and *All the Year Round*, this study will aim to find a fresh perspective on the lives of nineteenth century needlewomen and how the Association established to help them affected those lives.¹

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¹ *The Times* is the predominant contemporary source used throughout this study, and its digital archive is a rich source for the dress historian seeking

The rise of an urban society - galvanised by the massive social upheaval due to industrialization, and the expanding fortunes of the middle classes, meant that, in business competition was fierce, labour was cheap, and any caprice of fashion could be satisfied quickly and at the lowest price. '[There is] a huge and constantly increasing class who have wide wants and narrow means. Luxury has soaked downwards and raised a standard of living among people with small incomes [which] has created an enormous demand for cheap elegancies...cheap clothes and cheap furniture, produced as they must be by cheap methods.'² The consequences of 'cheap methods' saw many trades, but especially the needle trades, heavily oversubscribed. Needle workers, skilled or otherwise, suffered depreciation of rates, which collapsed under the weight of workers desperate enough to work for almost no remuneration. This problem was amplified in the dressmaking and millinery trades; since workers were almost always young women with little money or family support, there was often no alternative to the needle trades - and certainly very few respectable alternatives. This scarcity of respectable work left young needlewomen vulnerable to abuses from employers who exploited their positions of relative power over them.

Historian Christine Bayles Kortsch writes that the Victorian dressmaker 'must starve by inches, and die over the shirt she makes. We are all perfectly acquainted with this picture.'³ The Victorians in fact, were perfectly acquainted with this picture; if not before 1843, then certainly after December of that year when Thomas Hood anonymously published *The Song of the Shirt* in the Christmas edition of *Punch*.⁴ *The Song of the Shirt* was a response to various 'articles in newspapers and periodicals, encouraged by attention in parliamentary reports.'⁵ It became 'an anthem for reformers,'⁶ and 'an enduring

contemporary views on the problems faced by dressmakers. Although there is bias, in as much as the readership, and therefore those in correspondence with the Editors, generally belong to the middle or upper class, it offers the historian an interesting perspective on philanthropy and the welfare of needlewomen in the period.

² Lou Taylor and Elizabeth Wilson, *Through the Looking Glass* (London: BBC, 1989): 18

³ Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009): 105

⁴ *Punch* was a satirical periodical which ran from 1841-2002.

⁵ T.J Edelstein, "They Sang 'The Song of the Shirt': The Visual Iconology of the Seamstress," *Victorian Studies* vol.23 no.2 (1980): 184

symbol for the Victorian populace'.⁷ It is this 'enduring symbol' from which we, as modern scholars, derive our basic understanding of the lives of needlewomen in the mid-nineteenth century. They were physically weak from poverty and overwork, and there was moral concern about the 'vulnerability and powerlessness of dressmakers as women.'⁸ This understanding is reinforced by the cultural material surrounding the figure of the dressmaker. Historian Helen Rogers suggests in her excellent article, "The Good Are Not Always Powerful, nor the Powerful Always Good": The Politics of Women's Needlework in Mid-Victorian London, that 'the distressed needlewoman was a commonplace of early nineteenth century fiction and drama, for she embodied the anxieties that different social groups had concerning the position of single women, women's work, and sexuality.'⁹ Less than six months after Hood published his song, Richard Redgrave's *The Sempstress* was displayed at the annual summer exhibition of The Royal Academy. It was the pioneer of a new genre, one that depicted the 'profoundly unstable' icon of the seamstress.¹⁰ The image of the poor dressmaker was by then engraved on the collective consciousness of the Victorian populace, as confirmed by a review in *The Times* on 8 May 1844: 'The subject of this painting is one peculiarly of our time; viz, the miseries to which the metropolitan needlewomen are subjected, and the motto is taken from Hood's admirable "Song of the Shirt".'¹¹

In addition to the proliferation of visual material representing the dressmaker in the years between 1843 and 1863, there was a significant amount of literary commentary. From journalists, authors, and social campaigners came a new genre of writing focused on the problems faced by the needlewomen of the country. Henry Mayhew's revealing series of interviews for *The Morning Chronicle* were shocking to the Victorian populace; the fictional accounts, including Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's social reform novel, *The Wrongs of Women* (1843), and George W. M. Reynolds's *The Seamstress, or The*

⁶ Helen Rogers, "The Good Are Not Always Powerful, nor the Powerful Always Good": The Politics of Women's Needlework in Mid-Victorian London," *Victorian Studies* vol.4 no.4 (1997): 598

⁷ Edlestein, 184

⁸ Rogers, 591

⁹ Rogers, 597

¹⁰ Rogers, 597

¹¹ Edlestein, 185

White Slave of England (1853), were equally outrageous but not so far removed from the truths of the lives of women working in the dressmaking trades. All contributed to the intense public debate surrounding the conditions faced by needlewomen and each new piece of writing or work of art aroused public support for the dressmakers.

This support was manifested early in the period with the founding of The Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners (hereafter referred to as ‘the Association’), which hoped to ‘diminish the gulf which absolutely yawned between those who made dresses and those who wore them.’¹² Its president was the noted philanthropist, Lord Ashley (later the Earl of Shaftesbury), and among its patrons was Queen Victoria who donated fifty pounds to the funds of the Association in 1844.¹³ Such distinguished patronage was testament to the deep concern surrounding the plight of dressmakers and milliners at every level of society. The Association was set up in response to the findings of R.D. Grainger’s Children’s Employment Commission of 1842, which exposed the full extent of abuses in the needle trades.¹⁴ At its inception the aims of the Association were:

1. To induce the principals of dressmaking and millinery establishments to limit the hours of actual work to 12 per diem, and to abolish working on Sundays.
2. To promote improved ventilation.
3. To aid in obviating the evils connected with the present system, by inducing ladies to allow sufficient time for the execution of their orders.
4. To afford pecuniary assistance to deserving young persons in temporary distress.
5. To afford to such young persons as require it early and effective medical advice, change of air, and other assistance in sickness.¹⁵

¹² *The Times* (London, England), Monday, May 06, 1844, 8

¹³ *The Times* (London, England), Saturday, Jul 06, 1844, 5

¹⁴ Christina Walkley, “Charity and the Victorian Needlewoman,” *Costume* vol.14 no.1 (1980): 136

¹⁵ Henry Mayhew, *The Unknown Mayhew*. Edited by E. P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo. (Penguin Books: London, 1973): 526

These aims were ambitious; if each was to be realised it would have constituted a revolution in the structure of the dressmaking and millinery trades. It would be an unprecedented achievement which would have far-reaching implications for all levels of industry. As it was, the Association only had limited means of executing its doctrine. Since it had no legal standing to enforce reduced hours or better conditions it could only hope to influence public opinion. This limitation proved to be its greatest obstacle and the source of much frustration for its members and for those it purported to help.

A letter was published in *The Times* on 25 March 1853, a full decade after the inception of the Association, which exposed the extent of the pressures still placed on needlewomen in ‘first-class’ houses, especially in relation to the hours of work.¹⁶

I have been engaged in this business for 14 years at different “first class houses,” and as my health is now suffering from the “late hour system,” I have been prevailed upon by this medium to give that information which experience has taught me, in the hope that some enterprising and humane individuals will exert themselves to break the chains of that slavery under which so many thousands of their country women are bound.¹⁷

Signed ‘A First Hand’, the letter goes on to mention the Association directly, but expresses disappointment in their progress; ‘The “Association” [...] has done all it could to curtail the hours of labour, but even the houses which it recommends deem from 7am to 10pm “easy hours”.’ In the face of this criticism, Lord Shaftesbury, on behalf of the Association, published his own response to the First Hand’s letter and the surrounding furore:

¹⁶ A mention must be made here of The Early Closing Association, which tried to put pressure on various trades to adopt a less strenuous system of hours, and to abolish working on Sundays. An assessment of The Early Closing Society is beyond the scope of this study, however, please refer to Helen Rogers, “The Good Are Not Always Powerful, nor the Powerful Always Good”: The Politics of Women’s Needlework in Mid-Victorian London,” *Victorian Studies* vol.4 no.4 (1997): 589–623 for a thorough assessment of charities involved in the reduction of working hours in the nineteenth century.

¹⁷ *The Times* (London, England), Friday, March 25, 1853, 5

A great improvement has, by the influence of the society, been accomplished. [...] speaking generally, the hours of work have been considerably curtailed since the Parliamentary inquiry instituted by the Children's Employment Commission; that labour on the Lord's day has been in most, if not in all, instances, entirely abrogated; that the young persons are rarely kept up all night; and that, on the whole, their health has improved.¹⁸

This self-assessment is optimistic in contrast with a leading article published in the same edition offering a more balanced appraisal. 'We doubt not that, to a certain extent, good has been effected by their exertions, yet we cannot refrain from noticing the fact that here we are, just ten years after the association has been instituted, as clamorously assailed by the complaints and groans of the sufferers as though it had not existed at all.'¹⁹

The problems of what the First Hand calls 'the late hours system' were myriad, and the Association's principal aim to reduce the hours of work confirms that long hours were seen as one of the greatest abuses of the trade. The Association made special concession for this by placing importance on using day-workers to assist salaried workers in busy times, for example, during the season. It set out to become an approved agency, where freelance needlewomen of good character and skill would register as day-workers, and when in need, the dressmaking houses could pick their day-workers from the approved register. In October 1850 Mayhew writes that 'there are upwards of 7500 names entered on the books of that establishment.'²⁰ By 1858, 'the number of persons registered [...] is 17,455 - a fact that needs no other recommendation.'²¹ Although some dress and millinery houses did avail themselves of this service, many more resisted citing concern over day-workers' morals. It is more likely, as the First Hand notes, 'for the sordid love of gain,' that salaried workers were required to do the work of several hands, and therefore work more hours, in the busy times.

¹⁸ *The Times* (London, England), Monday, April 11, 1853, 4

¹⁹ *The Times* (London, England), Monday, April 11, 1853, 4

²⁰ Mayhew, 527

²¹ *The Times* (London, England), Saturday, June 05, 1858, 9

Another letter bemoans the lack of regulation and addresses the possible effects of legislative interference in the needle trades:

If the ten hour principle were applied - as it might be by the addition of a few words to an act of Parliament - in the case of millinery and dressmaking establishments, would the seamstresses, whose cause we all of us have at heart, be really benefited by the change? Would not the proprietors of such establishments contrive to evade the vigilance of inspectors, by causing a considerable portion of their work to be done away from home?²²

Two months later a letter signed J.R.F. also makes a point of challenging the Association's stance on the long hours system:

I wish [...] you would ask Lord Shaftesbury whether he considers it quite consistent of The Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners, of which he is the president, to extend its countenance to this establishment - which it does - after telling you, as he did a few weeks ago, that to all establishments "which persist in exacting, as a rule, long hours of work, the registration book of the association is closed."²³

J.R.F.'s allegation that the Association 'extends its countenance' to houses enforcing long hours highlights again the boundaries of the Association's influence, and perhaps their naivety in understanding the mechanics of the dressmaking trades. In 1855, two years after these correspondences in *The Times*, Lord Shaftesbury spoke in the House of Lords in support of a bill for the Limitation of the Working Hours of Needlewomen, who were 'among the most helpless and oppressed of Her Majesty's subjects.'²⁴ The Earl of Malmesbury also spoke in support of the motion and 'considered, therefore, that Parliament ought to endeavour to devise some measures to protect the [dressmakers and milliners] from that system of overwork.'²⁵ Lord

²² *The Times* (London, England), Monday, April 11, 1853, 4

²³ *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, May 18, 1853, 6

²⁴ *The Times* (London, England), Friday, June 15, 1855, 4

²⁵ *The Times* (London, England), Friday, June 15, 1855, 4

Campbell, however, questioned the means of enforcing such a bill and believed that ‘the House ought not to enact a law only to be broken.’²⁶ That the House of Lords recognised the difficulties in enforcing such a law is important, however, no law was passed, and at the 1858 annual meeting of the Association, Lord Shaftesbury expressed a renewed hope for legal interference. ‘The public mind shall be aroused [...] by the power of the public press [and] that power will be binding on the legislature to pass a law which shall strike at the very root of the evil.’²⁷

The abuses and lack of improvement in the dressmaking trades were exposed again ten years later in 1863, when Mary Anne Walkley, a young seamstress employed at the court dressmaker, Madame Elise, died in her sleep.²⁸ The death was revealed in a letter to *The Times*, signed ‘A Tired Dressmaker’:

Sir, - I am a dressmaker living in a large West-end house of business. I work in a crowded room with 28 others. This morning one of my companions was found dead in her bed, and we all of us think that the long hours and close confinement had had a great deal to do with her end.²⁹

The inquest into Mary Anne Walkley’s death on Saturday 20 June 1853 was considered a sham, and the resultant letters to *The Times* expressed dismay. ‘The language of the verdict is not strong enough,’ claimed one letter signed ‘M.D.’, ‘Can any sane man, with the depositions of the inquest before him, doubt the fact that this girl had been murdered?’³⁰ Another letter, published in the same edition, and signed ‘A’, goes further to assert that

The evidence and the verdict are mere tautology. The same horrible and disgraceful story has been repeated over and over again; and to save himself the trouble, the coroner would do well to stereotype the present proceedings, and

²⁶ *The Times* (London, England), Friday, June 15, 1855, 4

²⁷ *The Times* (London, England), Saturday, June 05, 1858, 9

²⁸ For an in-depth analysis of the Mary Anne Walkley case, the author recommends Christina Walkley’s *The Ghost in the Looking Glass: The Victorian Seamstress*. (London: Peter Owen, 1981.)

²⁹ *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, June 17, 1863, 5

³⁰ *The Times* (London, England), Monday, June 22, 1863, 7

reserve the documents without further inquiry for a large proportion of the young persons engaged in these poisonous workrooms.³¹

Once again the Association made its own contribution to the debate on the letters page of *The Times*, in empathising with the fate of needlewomen and this time expressing sorrow for its own failures. The letter is signed Harriet Ellesmere, and she identifies herself as a member of the Association and a member of the original committee that devised its aims:

The association I refer to was formed, the main object of which was to induce the principals in the millinery and dressmaking businesses to diminish their hours of work, to ventilate their workrooms, to put an end to Sunday work, and to treat their young women well. [...] But, I repeat it, our great and main object was the diminution of the hours of work. I lament to say that our efforts met with little or no success. Difficulties and objections met us on all sides. [...] But let it not be said that the society has not tried its hand. It has tried, and failed.³²

The debate surrounding the stagnant conditions within the needle trades following the death of Mary Anne Walkley was not limited to the letters pages of *The Times*. The weekly periodical, *All the Year Round*, founded and edited by Charles Dickens, published its own anonymous comment on the appalling conditions endured by dressmakers and milliners. The writer of the article is brutal in his assessment of the progress made since 1843 and the formation of the Association, ‘while the talk [of Mary Anne Walkley’s death] lasted, we learnt that, with a few exceptions, all is as it used to be twenty years since, when the evidence taken led to the formation of an “Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners.”’³³ In interview with working dressmakers the article goes on to describe the familiar living conditions within houses, and the

³¹ *The Times* (London, England), Monday, June 22, 1863, 12

³² *The Times* (London, England), Tuesday, June 30, 1863, 14

³³ Anonymous, “The Point of the Needle,” *All the Year Round* September 5, 1863, 36

hours of work extracted by proprietors, including a particularly unsettling account from ‘one who made the plunge into it [dressmaking], and withdrew only half-killed, with a resolve to try no more.’³⁴

Friday, we commenced work, as usual, at eight o’clock, and went on till between four and five on the following morning [...] At midnight we had a cup of coffee brought to us. I am sure something improper was put in it to keep us awake, as when we went to bed none of us could sleep.³⁵

The implication that the West End houses would resort to drugging their workers is shocking, but perhaps unsurprising in light of the abuses documented in the press. The writer goes on to make some suggestions for how conditions could be improved, but these rest on an ideological dismantling of the fashion system, rather than on legislative or practical means:

Who is this tyrant, Mode? The men of England have had their own sensible revolutions; now let us have a revolt of the Englishwomen against French domination. [...] It is no question about trifles of fashion; it is a question of life and happiness to thousands whether we shall submit to all the sudden freaks of very bad French taste, or whether we shall some time set up an honest and reasonable standard of our own.³⁶

Blaming the consumers of fashion for the abuses in the fashion houses was not a new idea. ‘It was fatally easy for the customers to plead ignorance - if they were promised a dress for the next day, how could they know at what cost it would be ready?’³⁷ The customers of these ‘first-class’ houses, it was thought, wilfully ignored the brutality caused by their insatiable lust for clothes. Following the death of Mary Anne Walkley a leading article published in *The Times* is scathing in its criticism of ladies demanding dresses at short notice. ‘A young

³⁴ *All the Year Round*, 37

³⁵ *All the Year Round*, 37

³⁶ *All the Year Round*, 39

³⁷ Walkley 1980, 137

creature sacrificed to the exigencies of fashion - a life wasted because a dress has not been ordered soon enough, or because the owner will have a trifling alteration made at the last moment - a home darkened for the sake of satisfying the caprices of feminine criticism.³⁸ The Association, however, believed that the power held by the aristocratic customers of dress houses could force improvement in conditions under threat of withdrawal of custom. This too, was problematic. ‘A lady ranking very high in our aristocracy once excused herself to me for not doing anything in the matter in these words, - “We cannot unfortunately interfere: we owe our dressmakers too much money, and are, consequently, too much in their hands.”’³⁹

The matter of ladies not paying their bills, or delaying payment ‘to a more convenient season’⁴⁰ is two-fold. It allowed large West End establishments with plenty of retained capital to hold power over their customers, as illustrated above, and to impose interest on late payments at twenty percent.⁴¹ It also proved ruinous for smaller houses, and the matter of late payment of bills is held responsible for the numbers of failed houses, and therefore distressed needlewomen. In a Times editorial of 1859: ‘It is [...] a fair and legitimate business, and one that should afford means of honest livelihood to thousands of women. It would do so but for the downright and lamentable dishonesty of the customers who keep these poor creatures waiting for their money for indefinite periods of time.’⁴²

In the years after 1853, the First Hand, the original writer to The Times, was revealed to be Jane Le Plastrier, ‘a long-standing skilled worker and briefly an unsuccessful but enlightened employer.’⁴³ In 1863 The English Woman’s Journal ran a series written by Le Plastrier entitled A Season with the Dressmakers, or The Experience of a First Hand. It is a compelling series that offers enlightened solutions to the problems faced by women engaged in the needle trades and a generous assessment of the Association’s impact on the lives of needlewomen. In August 1863 she introduces her manifesto, which is dominated by the abuses wrought by long hours:

³⁸ *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, June 24, 1863, 11

³⁹ “A Season With the Dressmakers” *English Woman’s Journal*, vol.12 December 1863, 276

⁴⁰ *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, July 23, 1856, 5

⁴¹ *The Times* (London, England), Thursday, December 8, 1859, 6

⁴² *The Times* (London, England), Thursday, December 8, 1859, 6

⁴³ Rogers, 615

The existing system of late hours and working all night, I shall endeavour to illustrate by cases which have come under my own experience, and to this portion of my work I invite special attention, as the horrors attendant upon such barbarous practice can never be too much exposed, or those who are the authors of them too severely punished.⁴⁴

Her years of experience, both as an employee and an employer make her a particularly valuable witness to the realities of conditions throughout the period under examination in this study. She is, by her own definition, educated, and makes reference to her ‘advantages in scholarship’.⁴⁵ Her account, she believes, is an accurate reflection of life within the dressmaking trades; ‘None can speak so correctly as those who can speak from experience, and I have purchased mine at a very dear price.’⁴⁶ She emphasises the importance of her testimony and her desire ‘most forcibly to expose the evils which actually exist.’⁴⁷

In reference to the Association, she claims that she ‘pointed out at the time it was founded that very large sums of money⁴⁸ were being annually subscribed by the ladies of our aristocracy, without those for whom it was subscribed really deriving any benefit.’⁴⁹ She also makes a revealing point about how the Association was duped by some of the establishments:

The before-mentioned Association used to give a Benefit Concert, generally held at the Hanover Square rooms, the price of tickets being from 2s. 6d. upwards. I could mention several houses, who, to blind their wealthy patronesses, would make a great display by taking a certain number of their young people to these concerts, for they liked to be told afterwards that they had been seen there with some of

⁴⁴ *English Woman’s Journal*, vol.11 August 1863, 409

⁴⁵ *English Woman’s Journal*, vol.11 August 1863, 407

⁴⁶ *English Woman’s Journal*, vol.12 September 1863, 10

⁴⁷ *English Woman’s Journal*, vol.12 September 1863, 16

⁴⁸ A critical assessment of the Association’s financial arrangements are beyond the scope of this study, but such an assessment would offer excellent opportunities for further scholarship.

⁴⁹ *English Woman’s Journal*, vol.12 November 1863, 181

their assistants. [...] But their tickets, as with their dress, all had come out of their hard earnings; and though they might be seen at the concert, probably two o'clock the same morning saw them still poring over their needle.⁵⁰

Le Plastrier does not suggest that the Association, or indeed, any charity set up to relieve needlewomen is without merit. She laments their naivety, but praises their energy and is optimistic about their future, urging collaboration between workers and charities with 'God speed them and crown their efforts with success!'⁵¹ What is different about her approach to the issues faced by needlewomen is her belief that in order for improvement to progress, dressmakers and milliners must act for themselves and use the charities as a moderator of relations between workers and proprietors:

"Union is strength;" and as these fashionable houses cannot carry on their business without properly qualified first hands, I would say then, let these unite, and each render monthly [to the Association] an exact return of the hours they, and those under them, have been required to work, and such other little details of their treatment as may be necessary.⁵²

This sentiment is in accord with that of Dr William Ord, who, in his 1863 report on *The Sanitary Circumstances of Dressmakers and Other Needlewomen in London*, cautiously suggests that some form of unionisation could be a solution:

The scarcity of skilled hands suggests that workers have it in their power by combination to fix their own hours of work, but their isolated position and close confinement in houses of business appears on the other hand a bar to associated action; and, at the present time, when the operation of trades' unions are doubtfully regarded by the

⁵⁰ *English Woman's Journal*, vol.12 November 1863, 182

⁵¹ *English Woman's Journal*, vol.12 December 1863, 271

⁵² *English Woman's Journal*, vol.12 December 1863, 272

public, the formation of similar associations among women cannot with propriety be recommended.⁵³

By 1864, and the publication of W.H. Lord's Second Children's Employment Commission, many of the charities and societies set up to help needlewomen had become redundant.⁵⁴ Despite Lord Shaftesbury's efforts in the House of Lords to bring about statutory change, his belief that 'public opinion, when vigorously enforced, is more penetrating, more binding, more fearful and more constant than the most stringent law,'⁵⁵ proved misguided. The reality was that the lack of any legal standing or formal influence crippled their efforts; 'the Association, it must be recollected, have no legal power to interfere; they can only act by force of opinion.'⁵⁶ Harriet Ellesmere summarises the Association's failings eloquently; 'we had been baffled, [...] competition on the one hand, and fashion on the other, had been too strong for us.'⁵⁷

Conditions within dress and millinery establishments remained difficult, and the coming of the mass-market and advances in technology simply amplified the problems and shifted them to department stores and factories, where, until 1871 and the genesis of legally recognised trade unions, abuses of labour were typical. It is true that The Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners worked hard to alleviate what it saw as the injustices inflicted on the women of the needle trades, and there is little doubt that their efforts were genuine, but 'it was beyond the power of a benevolent society' to remedy such long-standing abuses.⁵⁸ That they were perceived by contemporaries as ineffectual or impotent is understandable, but unwarranted; without legislative change, or any meaningful unionization of the workforce, their efforts were stunted. From 1843 until 1863 the Association attempted to lift a passive workforce of needlewomen out of the appalling conditions

⁵³ Walkley, 1980, 142

⁵⁴ While the Association continued beyond this date, the regional charities, The Glasgow Milliners and Dressmakers Association, and a similar association in Manchester had ceased to operate.

⁵⁵ "The oppressed dressmakers: speeches delivered at the second great meeting at Exeter Hall, 9th of February, 1857" *LSE Selected Pamphlets* (1857) 18

⁵⁶ *The Times* (London, England), Tuesday, June 30, 1863, 14

⁵⁷ *The Times* (London, England), Tuesday, June 30, 1863, 14

⁵⁸ Walkley 1980, 137

documented in the art, journalism and fiction of the period. By 1863 and after the publication of Ord's report and Le Plastrier's *A Season with the Dressmakers*, the passive workforce was beginning to understand that the power to liberate itself from the slavery of the needle was in its own hands.