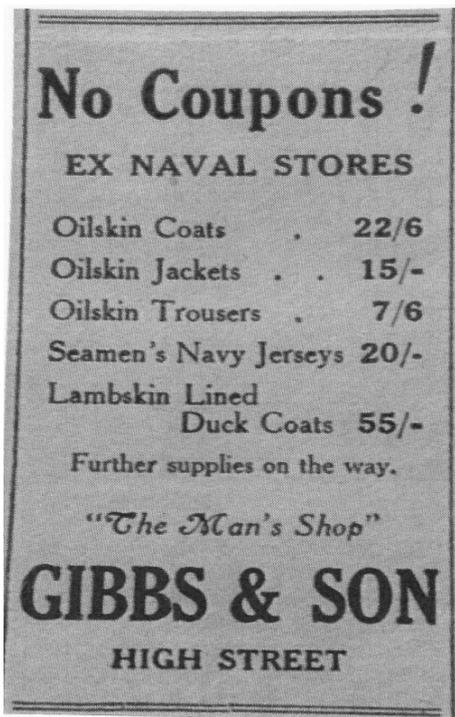


Government Surplus Clothing in Ventnor in the late-1940s

Returning from the mainland via hovercraft a few weeks ago, one could not help but notice the small army of shoppers laden with large Primark bags, all filled with purchases from the company's large clothing store in Commercial Road, Portsmouth. It was a reminder of a time, seventy-five years ago, when such expeditions would have been impossible. This was not just about far lower consumer incomes and higher degrees of relative poverty, but a function of clothes rationing that had started on June 1st 1941 and remained in place until March 15th 1949.

Early on in the Second World War, there was a shortage of materials to make clothes for the ordinary population. The task of making uniforms for the vastly expanded armed forces and making things like parachutes was soon displacing regular clothing manufacture. To effect a fair distribution of the little new clothing that could be produced, all individuals were issued with ration books that contained what were known as clothing coupons. Pages of coupons came in a series of different colours as a way of ensuring that people did not try to use all of them at once. The government would announce when coupons of a particular colour became valid. Initially, adults were allocated 60 coupons a year, but this was later reduced to 48. Lists were then published indicating the number of coupons needed to buy particular items of clothing. A woman's nightdress, for instance, used up 6, while a man's pyjamas used up 8. It is not hard to see that new clothes under rationing quickly became a rarity. The stock phrase used by the Ministry of Information was 'make do and mend'. Underwear and socks were perpetually darned to eradicate holes, while those who had sewing skills soon found all kinds of inventive ways of re-using old pieces of material.



In the infamous 'austerity' years of the later 1940s, when the war was over, a glimmer of light appeared on clothes rationing. As the armed forces were run down towards peacetime levels again, it became clear that there were vast stores of unused clothing. These were slowly made available to retailers to sell WITHOUT COUPONS. The adjacent advert is one of many that soon appeared in Island newspapers. This one is from the *Mercury*, Ventnor's newspaper, dated January 1947. Here, ex-naval stores were being offered to the public at Gibbs & Son, High Street outfitters. By December 1947, there was a dedicated Government Surplus Store on Grove Road, selling, among other items, duffle coats in all colours. Sadly, it was the men and older boys of the town who gained most from this clothing windfall. The women and daughters had largely to 'make do and mend' by comparison.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre. An exhibition about wartime experiences on the Home Front in Ventnor and the Undercliff can still be viewed at the Centre, but please check the website or pages of the *Chronicle* for winter opening times.

Ventnor & District Local History Society is a registered charity, working to preserve and record the history of our area and make it available to the public in the Ventnor Heritage Centre. The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

www.ventnorheritage.org.uk / telephone 855407

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