

Womenswear Timeline

How M&S has dressed generations of women from head to toe



Collar support advertisement, 1913-1914

1910s

We sold haberdashery including buttons, thread and elastic by the yard for customers who wanted to make their own clothes at home.

Although we weren't yet selling garments, accessories such as gloves and jewellery were sold in our early stores.

1926

The 1920s saw the introduction of womenswear, with the opening of our Drapery department in 1926. In 1927, products sold included poplin jumpers, winceyette petticoats and tennis pullovers.



Women's drapery and hosiery, 1929



The Marks & Spencer Magazine, Christmas 1932

1930s

By the 1930s we were selling smart separates and overalls for busy housewives, along with glamorous, dressing gowns, party frocks and knitted swimming suits.

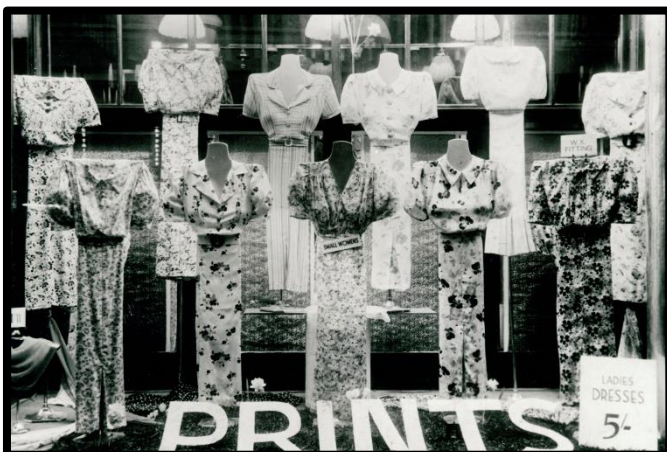
Stock control documents from 1939 included embroidered Hungarian blouses, sports skirts, Directoire knickers and Indiana capes.

1936

A central Design department was established to keep up to date with fashion trends, employing Parisian designers as consultants.



Textile Design department, 1930s



Prints featured in a store window display, 1937

1938

We began buying printed fabric designs from Paris studios – described by M&S director Harry Sacher as ‘Really genuine designs, produced by a Paris artist’.

1941-1945

We helped the Government develop Utility clothing standards, a set of rules for clothing manufacturers to ensure garment quality remained high. We produced a range of Utility clothing that was not only functional and hardwearing but stylish, all bearing the CC41 label.



CC41 blouse, c1944

Bestsellers at this time included women's trousers, or slacks as they were known, and heavy wool dressing gowns – both were considered ideal shelter wear.



M&S Technology laboratory, c1950

1946

After the war the primary concern of our technologists was to develop new fabrics to help make good design available to everyone.

A new textile laboratory opened to explore nylons, plastics and other synthetic materials, resulting in synthetic fabrics that were easy-wash, easy-care and fade-resistant.

1950s

Christian Dior had introduced the 'New Look' (as it was dubbed) in 1947 on the Parisian catwalk, featuring full skirts and narrow waists. Our customers wanted to replicate this high fashion look, so we produced full-skirted dresses in bright fabrics.

As demand for parachutes decreased following the war and nylon became more available, we began making garments with nylon fabric.



New Look style dress, c1955



Shorter woman, June 1953

1953

We launched our first petite range 'For the Shorter Woman'. M&S employees were asked to come up with a name for the new range, with a chance to win 5 guineas!

1955

Marspun was a spun rayon fabric developed during the war, originally known as Utility Schedule 1005.

Following the war it was rebranded, and by 1955 we were selling Marspun dresses in 2000 different colour combinations.



Marspun dresses, 1956

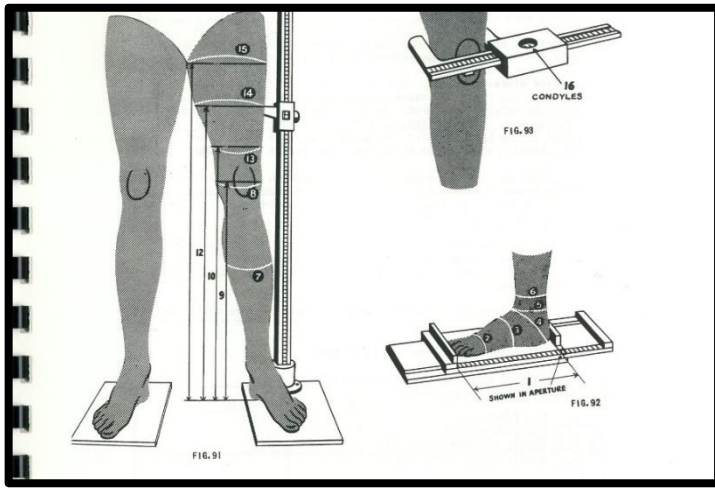


Diagram from 'A Scientific Approach to Stocking Sizes', 1957

1956

Following complaints that our stockings weren't satisfactory, our Research department undertook a huge survey.

The team measured the legs of 600 sales assistants, taking 17 measurements on each leg. Following the survey, a new range of stockings was launched and proved very popular with customers.

1958

In 1958 Chairman Simon Marks stressed the importance of synthetic fabrics: 'Not only do they provide attractive garments, but they also have the advantage of easing the housewife's daily burden'.

Fabrics such as Terylene, Orlon and Tricel were introduced to create drip-dry, easy-care garments that were hardwearing yet fashionable.

ORLON-FIRST BIG FABRIC NEWS OF '58

In a year which is already rich in possible merchandise development, comes news of major improvements in a synthetic which is still only a name to thousands of British housewives—Orlon.

Orlon, 1958



Workwear, 1965

1960s

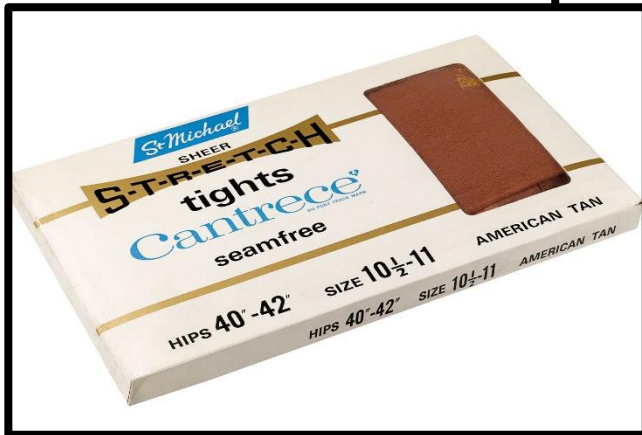
An increasing number of women were now going out to work. We produced stylish yet comfortable clothes to wear at the office.

1962

Womenswear in the 1960s was heavily influenced by our consultant – Michael Donnellan, employed by the Design department’s Hans Schneider in 1962. Michael was seen by The Times as the most ‘perfectionist of London designers’ and in 1966 M&S made it into their ‘Absolutely In’ list.



Hans Schneider and Michael Donnellan, 1965



American Tan tights, 1960s

1963

The changing fashion for shorter hemlines contributed to the successful trialling of tights by M&S. By the end of the 1960s, the Hosiery department reported sales were 80% tights to 20% stockings.

1966

The colour coordinates trend of 1966 was made possible by the in-house Colour Council’s work to standardise colours. They discovered, for example, that we were selling garments in 44 different shades of navy!



Colour coordinates, 1966

1966

An emerging teen market resulted in ranges 'designed to suit the tastes and figures of the in-betweens'. Ranges included 1962's 'Young Fashions' and a 'Junior Miss' range introduced in 1965.

In 1966 Twiggy made her first appearance modelling for M&S in a dress with a hemline 'well above the knee for the young go-ahead'.



Junior Miss dresses, 1968

1972

At the start of the 1970s synthetic fabrics made up over half of M&S textiles sales, however we saw a resurgence of demand for natural fibres such as wool, denim and cheesecloth. In 1972, we launched our first machine-washable lambswool and Shetland wool garments.



Washable lambswool, November 1972

1975

The highest selling woman's garment in Britain, as reported in The Times, was our black polo-neck jumper, which sold for £2.50.



Polo-neck jumper, c1975

1979

We launched Miss Michelle, a range aimed at 'the fashion conscious 18-25 age group'. The collection included dungarees, jackets, skirts, dresses and a velour jogging suit.



Miss Michelle, September 1979

The DALLAS look

EXECUTIVE dressing has come to M&S to add the Dallas touch to your wardrobe.

Designed for smart 'day into evening' wear, these two outfits from the lightweight sets and dresses departments are available in selected stores next month.

"The garments epitomise the broad-shouldered, slim hipped look favoured by 'Dallas' and 'Dynasty' and if our two outfits are successful, we will be carrying the look forward for spring" said lightweight sets assistant selector, Tracey Kyte.

Tops are priced £27.50, skirts £19.99 and the dress, pictured right, is £45.

'The Dallas Look', December 1985

1980s

Designers such as Betty Jackson and Bruce Oldfield were enlisted as consultants to develop our womenswear ranges. Power dressing and Dallas-inspired shoulder pads featured heavily.

1987

We launched a dedicated Plus range for women up to size 24, later 28, and a Maternity range offering both a formal working wardrobe as well as casual garments and nightwear.



Maternity leaflet, February 1987



Yasmin Le Bon, 1995

1990

The first model of superstar status – Claudia Schiffer – is introduced to our print advertising campaigns. Other campaigns later include Linda Evangelista and Yasmin Le Bon.

2000

We phased out the St Michael brand name, and introduced new sub-brands to help customers find a style that suited their taste and budget.

The Autograph range was launched in 2000, with contributions from designers such as Katherine Hamnett and Julien Macdonald. 2001 saw the launch of the per una collection.



Autograph, 2000



Bridalwear, 2007

2007

We launched a bridalwear range including bridal gowns and bridesmaids' dresses as well as children's outfits and formalwear.

2008

We collaborated with designer and stylist Patricia Field on what would become a sell-out collection of womenswear and matching accessories, grouped together under the banner Destination New York.



Destination New York, 2008



125th anniversary polka dot dress, 2009

2009

We celebrated our 125th anniversary with vintage-inspired limited edition pieces, including a 1940s style grey spotted dress and a 1950s-inspired party dress.

2009

Prints produced in collaboration with Zandra Rhodes appeared in the 2009 collection.



Zandra Rhodes Collection, 2009



Twiggy for M&S collection, 2012

2012

After modelling for us for 45 years, Twiggy designed her first collection for M&S. This silver sequin jacket sold out within two hours of going on sale.

2013

A coat from the AW13 collection became a sell-out hit. Before the coat was in the shops, our Marble Arch store had a waiting list of 100 customers.

The Best of British range was launched in 2013 combining M&S's heritage with modern styling and British manufacturing. Garments were made with premium fabrics from Scottish cashmere to Yorkshire cloths.



Duster coat, 2013



Leading Ladies, 2014

2013-2014

2013 saw the launch of the Leading Ladies advertising campaign, featuring 12 well known British women photographed by Annie Leibovitz.

2016-17

We collaborated with author, presenter and model Alexa Chung who explored the archive and reinterpreted her favourite pieces. The range was inspired by garments including a 1930s dressing gown, a 1940s man's shirt, and a 1990s blazer.



1940s apron, and the dress it inspired, Archive by Alexa, 2016



Holly Willoughby, September 2018

2018

We began working with presenter Holly Willoughby. The new campaign Holly's Must Haves initially featured a 20-piece edit including a sell-out navy boiler suit.

2018

January 2018 saw the launch of the Curve range, available in sizes 18 to 32. The collection was developed in consultation with more than 2000 customers and was designed on a size 24 block (rather than a usual size 12).



Curve range, 2018



M&S Insider @marksandspencer_nicola, 2019

2019

We rolled out the M&S Insiders project - specially selected colleagues from across the business who modelled and shared our clothing via Instagram.

2020

As a result of the pandemic, more customers began working from home. We saw a customer shift towards casual clothing during lockdown, so we increased our loungewear range. We promoted stylish shirts and tops as perfect for video calling.



Loungewear, December 2020

2021

We launched Brands at M&S, selling guest brands on M&S.com including Hobbs, Joules and Phase Eight.

Following the purchase of the Jaeger brand by M&S, we now offer a Jaeger womenswear collection brimming with premium pieces that the heritage brand is loved for.



Jaeger jacket, 2021

2023

Sienna Miller was announced as the face of M&S autumn womenswear campaign, she commented: 'I have always had a genuine love for Marks & Spencer. It's a brand that is part of the fabric of British life and holds special associations for so many people



Autumn 2023