The 1920s: Fashion and Nightlife

In this episode, fashion historian Amber Butchart discusses the fashion movements of the 1920s, from rising hemlines to ready-to-wear fashion. Then we tell the story of Kate Meyrick, the Soho Nightclub Queen. Meyrick's popular clubs were frequently raided, and the records of those raids reveal a lot about what a night out in London was like one hundred years ago.

To tie in with the release of the 1921 Census of England and Wales in January 2022, our 20sPeople programme explores and shares stories connecting the people of the 1920s with us in the 2020s. This exciting programme includes our new 1920s-themed exhibition in Kew.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: MEPO 2/4481, HO 144/17667

If you're interested in finding out more about records covered in this episode take a look at our research guides to Intellectual property: registered designs 1839-1991 and London Metropolitan Police. For help navigating our catalogue you can watch our top level tips on using Discovery.

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Transcript

[Teaser clips, montage from episode interviews]

Mark Dunton: This is On the Record at The National Archives: uncovering the past through stories of everyday people. I'm Mark Dunton.

Jessamy Carlson: And I'm Jessamy Carlson.

Mark and I are both historians at The National Archives in Kew, West London, where we research, look after, and help our audiences better understand the Archives' collections of historical government and public records.

Mark: In this episode, we're continuing our whirlwind tour through the 1920s, introducing you to some of the fascinating people and movements of this heady time.

Jessamy: Coming up, we'll be learning about fashion and nightlife in the roaring 20s. Our guests have some great facts and stories about flappers, dancing, nightclub queens, and more.
But first, we've had a quick chat with Barbara Borghese, Senior Conservation Manager here at The National Archives. Barbara and her team were integral to the creation of our new exhibition, "1920s: Beyond the Roar." Without our conservators, we wouldn't have been able to have so many great records and objects on display.

Mark: So Barbara, referring to this wonderful new 1920s exhibition, were there any items in that

exhibition that you found particularly fun or surprising? Or maybe challenging to work with?

Barbara Borghese: [Laughs] It's interesting you ask that because obviously, being a conservator, what we found interesting or fun to work on is rather different from the idea that perhaps other people would consider fun or interesting.
This exhibition in particular was visually quite captivating because some of the items that people will see when the exhibition will be opened are quite nice and visually interesting, for example, the posters. Now I particularly like working on posters. I'm a paper specialist, and they were all quite interesting to work on. If I have to tell you one, there was one that captured our attention. It's a movie poster.
This movie was censored so it doesn't really have a title. The poster, you will see, doesn't have a title because the title was censored. The movie was inspired by the book Married Love, which again was censored because it was the first book to discuss openly birth control. And the poster when we first saw it was inside an envelope folded up. And we had no idea what it looked like. And it's quite different from what it looks like now.

Mark: What did you actually have to do? I bet it wasn't as simple as just simply unfolding the poster, and hey presto. I bet it wasn't that simple.

Barbara: It wasn't. [laughs] I can assure you it wasn't. So this particular poster was folded inside an envelope inside of volume. When we first looked at it was fragmentary, very fragmentary. So imagine this is a poster that's being used, possibly in the street, so you can imagine it wasn't pristine in any way. So part of what we did included a full thorough cleaning and assessment. Before we could apply any chemical treatment we needed to make sure that the colours were

stable enough that there wasn't any other risk that we were not thinking of.
Because you know that some of the treatments that we use do involve the use of chemicals, the use of moisture in techniques that needs to be applied only when you're absolutely 100% sure that you're not making more damage than you’re trying to cure.
So we did quite a lot of investigation before we started, and then eventually we could also perform some repairs because there were tears, there were some missing parts, there were some fragments that we found in the envelope so that we could place them back together. And when all the treatment was completed, we framed it. So obviously if you see it in the frame, it's actually quite stunning, because it's a nice object. So to bring it from the envelope and the way that it took a good couple of weeks or work of two conservators at least.

Mark: Sure, yeah. I mean what you're talking about there is very, very careful. Very precise sort of work that needs to be carried out.

Barbara: And we can get it wrong. I mean, sometimes we can underestimate because it's only really when you start to work on a patient, as we call them, that you know the extent of it just so in. In that respect, we were quite spot on with this one because we did know that it would have included some hours of work.

Mark: Well, thanks Barabara for that insight. I hope when our listeners see the records in our exhibition they’ll consider the hours and hours of skilled work that goes into putting all these documents on display and keeping them safe for future generations.
Jessamy: Yeah, agreed, Mark. But now, let’s turn from paper to fabrics and fashion. Our next guest is a fashion historian who specialises in the cultural and political history of textiles and dress.

Amber Butchart: So my name is Amber Butchart. I'm a dress historian and curator and lecturer. So everything I do essentially involves the research of fashion from the past and how the clothing that we used to wear can teach us about history.

Jessamy: Yes, it sounds like an absolutely fascinating job, and so I appreciate that 1920s fashion is quite a big topic and to be honest we could probably do an entire series about this, so I wonder if you could give us a short introduction, perhaps touching on the themes and changes happening in the 1920s so that people who are interested in fashion in this period might be able to investigate further.

Amber: I think everybody has an idea of what 1920s fashion looks like, and for women especially, we do see hemlines higher than they ever have been before. And that's I think the overriding thing that people consider. You've got these hemlines by around 1926 reaching to just below the knee. Very exciting, never happened before, and also links in with what people are doing in their spare time: dancing, going to nightclubs. This era is often called the Jazz Age and, you know, there's a reason for that. People are going out, people are partying, and the dresses that people are wearing are really feeding into that as well. Lots of beautiful light fabrics and lots of shimmering textures, lots of beads that really move and shimmer when you dance.

Jessamy: I'd be really interested to know how these changes emerged in the wardrobes of everyday women. You’ve talked about the Jazz Age and nightclubs, but for lots of people, the 1920s is a really hard decade. There's a lot of poverty, there's a lot of deprivation, a lot of people out of work. So it’d be really interesting to hear, but more about how this sort of couture fashion,

these high-end dresses start to infiltrate into the wardrobes of everyday women.

Amber: Well, the 1920s is also a period when we start to really see the mass manufacture of clothing and fashions develop. This is partly a reaction to the First World War. Huge amounts of uniforms are needed during the First World War, and so you start getting systems in place that really speed up the mass manufacture of clothing, and then this then continues throughout the 1920s. So women's fashion really since at least the 17th century has taken its cues from Paris, from Parisian couture. And so if you're wealthy, you're going to be going to couture salons and or even, you know, visiting a dressmaker who can create clothing that you have in mind - which you want to get made.

But the 1920s is also a period where these styles are becoming more available from a much wider section of society. Now, it also helps that the styles in this decade are much simpler than what's come before. We see this classic silhouette that's much more straight up and down. You know, there's no curves, we've lost that Victorian, Edwardian matronly corseted figure. It's much more boyish, much straighter up and down, which makes pattern cutting and clothing manufacturing much easier. So this means that the mass-manufactured techniques that have developed during the First World War can be implemented to create women's fashions, and you can get much more affordable versions of these couture gowns.

It also means that there's an explosion in home dressmaking as well because these styles are so much easier for women to make at home themselves, many, many, many women at this time have the skills to create their own clothing at home, and you see a real circulation of dressmaking patterns in the 20s given away in magazines; there might be whole dressmaking magazines themselves as well. So people are making their own clothes. It's much easier to create clothing that is following the latest fashions, so we really see it spreading throughout society.

Jessamy: Yeah, we saw in the 1921 census that dressmaking is one of the most commonly listed occupations for young women, so that absolutely ties into what you're saying. So for our 20s People season, you've developed a talk called “Radical Fashion.” What was radical about fashion in this decade? And how does fashion intersect with the changes we've already talked about in this post-war society and politics.

Amber: Well, I believe fashion is radical at this time because we're starting to see women dress in a way that we've never before seen them dress in history–this is Western women, women in European women in America. The clothing is much less restrictive than we've seen previously. Women are still, of course, expected to wear foundation garments, but we're starting to see newer materials, things like rubber and elastic, things like that replacing the older materials that have been used to shape women's bodies, things like whalebone, even metal, you know tight like lacing for corsetry.
Now as well as this, there are a number of quite exciting art movements that are developing and flourishing through the 1920s, things that have been in place since you know earlier in the 20th century. And we see this really around the world. So in Russia, for example, you have constructivism. In Weimer, Germany, you have the Bauhaus art school. All of these places are thinking about design from different concepts. And fashion is part of that, whether it's weaving at the Bauhaus workshop, whether it's again clothing for mass manufacture in constructivist-led factories in places like Moscow. So you're seeing these quite interesting modern art-inspired design movements, really impacting the way that women are dressing.
Also, you have this emancipation– slow, gradual emancipation, or move towards emancipation–for women, especially in the political arena. And this is often seen as something that's reflected in the

fashions of the time. Clothing is much looser, and it's much shorter. As we've said, the hemlines are much shorter, and so there's this idea that women are much freer to dance to, to move, just, you know, generally to be sort of comfortable in the world, I suppose.
Feeding into that as well, there's a real rise in sport throughout the 1920s. Previously, sport has been quite a contentious area for women, I suppose. But it's really in the 1920s that you have this flourishing of the idea of physical exercise and physical culture. And this starts to impact the way that women are dressing as well. You start to have designers having sportswear lines. It's not quite sportswear the way we think of it today. It's not like athleisure or loungewear but it is sporty by the standards of the day and you know things that women might wear on the links to play golf, for example, or on the tennis court, things like that, and so these are all infiltrating ideas of fashion as well. Suddenly sport is not just acceptable for women, but it's also become fashionable and you really see that impact.

Jessamy: And you've alluded to how fashion houses in the UK have, you know, looked to Paris for inspiration. You talked about these movements within art and within culture, but are there particular people who influenced fashion in the 1920s?
Amber: There are loads of people who influence fashion in the 1920s, and you're seeing people from spheres that have never really influenced fashion before. One of the huge sort of overriding influences becomes Hollywood. You get this real growth of the Hollywood film industry while Europe is, you know, distracted, shall we say, with the First World War. By the 1920s, you're starting to see a real sort of production industry around Hollywood, not only the films themselves but film and fan magazines, these always feature fashion as well.
So suddenly you get these movie stars who are looked to for their style choices, and as well as that you start seeing female sports stars as well. Like I just mentioned, sport is becoming incredibly

fashionable, so women like Suzanne Lenglen, who was a French tennis player. She's featured in so many fashion magazines, she has a very distinctive look. She wears this fantastic bandeau keeping her hair in place; she wears dresses designed by the designer Jean Patou. She even branched out into her own designs for tennis dresses later in the decade as well. She's often photographed for magazines like Vogue actually playing tennis, so this idea of her being really active is intrinsic to her fashion influence.
As well as sports stars you have–like I mentioned–Hollywood, but people like Josephine Baker, for example. She's a star of the stage before she's a star of the screen. She's an American performer who comes over to Paris and stars in revues in Paris in the 1920s, and she has such an enormous influence on the way that people are dressing. She's an African American performer, and immediately artists and fashion designers in Paris, people like Paul Poiret are just completely smitten with her, and they're creating clothes for her, they’re dressing her.
She also starts to create her own range of products, things like Baker Fix, I think it was called…like a hair pomade so you could do your hair like Josephine Baker. It's said that she becomes the most photographed woman in the world at one point in the 1920s, and so she's having these huge influences on the way that other women are dressing as well.

Jessamy: That's absolutely fascinating. I think Josephine Baker is such an interesting woman as well. So it's really interesting to learn that about her. Finally, I'd love to know more about how you research this history. I mean, with our collections at The National Archives, we have some fabric design samples in our copyright application, that sort of material. But what sources do fashion historians use to find out what people were wearing and making and admiring in the 1920s?

Amber: Well, the collection at The National Archives is absolutely fantastic. The design

registrations. I took a trip into The National Archives to have a look at some of the pieces you're putting on display. What I love about what you're using in the show and about the collection as a whole is that you've got this real mix of different sort of socioeconomic categories, I suppose, in the textiles that you have. You have some from the Calico Printers Association which has this huge company by the 1920s based up in Manchester that's supplying hugely different types of fabric for different economic levels basically, but then you also have pieces by Chanel as well, so it's this real kind of cross-section of society, which is fantastic.

Other places you connect to research is fashion magazines from the time. This is an era of hugely increased print publications; there's a flourishing of fashion magazines during the 1920s, and again, this is kind of driven by technological improvements in the print publication area. A few years ago I wrote a book for the British Library, so I got to spend loads of time looking through the fashion magazines that they have there and again what's brilliant is that you can get a real cross-section so you're not only looking at things like Vogue, which is obviously showing what the very wealthiest women in society are buying and wearing, but you also have magazines like Harmsworth's Fashions for All which are aimed at, you know, middle-class women. Even working-class women by this point are getting fashion magazines targeted at them and you might have some tips on thrift and things like that and making your own clothing alongside what is fashionable and what fashionable women are wearing.

And of course, we have a plethora of museums in this country where you can see incredible dress collections. The V&A...lots of local museums always feature clothing. I would always recommend people hunt out their local museum in their nearest town or city and go and have a look around it because they usually do feature some kind of fashion or textiles and you have the textiles in The National Archives and then this great amount of fashion magazines that we can look at as well.

Jessamy: I did A-Level Textiles, and I remember vividly being sat in the costume museum at Bath and taking sketches from collections there and there are some absolutely beautiful pieces of clothing in their collection, so it's great to hear you talk about those local and regional collections. Thank you so much, Amber. It's been fabulous to talk to you, so thank you for your contribution.

Mark: Now, we don't want to leave our episode all dressed up with nowhere to go, so let's head out to London's nightclub scene one hundred years ago. If you've visited our Beyond the Roar exhibition, you'll have an advantage in picturing the scenes we're about to describe, because our team has actually recreated a famous Soho nightclub in our gallery space.

Katie Fox**:** My name is Katie Fox. I'm a Digital Engagement Manager here at The National Archives. Actually, it's my team that manages this podcast and I'm also one of the three curators of our exhibition The 1920s: Beyond the Roar.

Jessamy: So at The National Archives is the government's archive and the government archive might not be the first place that people would expect to learn about nightlife in the 1920s. So could you talk a bit about what the collections at The National Archives can tell people about how people mixed and mingled and partied 100 years ago?

Katie Fox: Yeah, it is surprising, isn't it? But actually, they can tell us a lot, so for a few nightclubs on a few nights, we have lists of staff and customers who were there, including their full addresses and occupations, which is just an incredible resource. And we have an inventory of alcohol that was on the premises. And we have plans of nightclubs and how they were sort of set up and arranged and we even have descriptions of the atmosphere there. And so I've got one for you

actually. And so it says:

“The basement is used as a dance hall. It has a polished floor and is about 45 feet by 15 feet. There was a band consisting of three performers: piano, banjo, and a drum with symbols. About 30 couples of both sexes were dancing, shouting and singing, and many were under the influence of drink. I saw several women dancing who I've noticed in the West End at various times. Several were known to other officers with me as prostitutes.”

So this is from a police record about The 43 nightclub which was at 43 Gerard St in Soho and the police report is dated the 19th of February 1922. And from that report, we find out that there were stars of the stage at the nightclub, and there were sex workers, and then from other records, we know that there were aristocrats and politicians and even royalty that visited the clubs. You can imagine all of these different people mixing and mingling on any given night, which is kind of incredible when you think about it. And so that particular club, The 43, it's the club that we have based our recreation of a 1920s nightclub on.

However, it's really important to say that not all nightlife is as richly described within our collection. First of all, we have a London bias so we have records of the Metropolitan Police, but we don't have records of local police forces around the country. So for example, we can't tell you what it was like in a nightclub in Liverpool or Manchester, for example. You'd need to go to a local archive to see whether these records have survived. Also, we only have records of nightclubs breaking the law because by their very nature the police aren't going to investigate or raid or put under surveillance a nightclub that was perfectly law-abiding.

There's that difference as well, and but lastly, and most importantly, is that quite simply not everyone went to nightclubs. We know that for many people they wouldn't have been able to afford to attend nightclubs, but dancing and having fun and socialising with friends was something that was available to kind of the majority in society but in a different way. So village and town halls

would put on dances quite regularly where young people and you know also older people as well, would get dressed up and go out and have a night out with their friends. So whilst we know that this nightclub scene and lifestyle wasn't available to everyone in society there are similarities that you can pull across all different strands and walks of life.

Jessamy: So as you've told us, one of the reasons that The National Archives has these records relating to nightlife and to social venues in the 19th and the 20th century is the result of police actions and the records that accompany that activity. Could you talk a little bit about the challenges in researching these sorts of accounts?

Katie: As I've already mentioned, there is that London bias and there's that bias around nightclubs that were breaking the law, but also they are very much one-sided in the sense that they show a state perspective or they show a police perspective. So what we're missing there are the voices of individuals and in their entirety now we can kind of get that because there are interviews with, for example, staff who worked in the nightclubs who did kind of describe their role.
But really, we should take that with some caution, because these interviews are then within a police file, the fact that they were taken in quite a stressful and pressurised situation. So we don't know how people might have responded differently if they were perhaps talking casually to their friends in the nightclub or elsewhere. So there's that to consider. But also, you know, interviews would have been edited and the police officers would have written up their reports. So we do need to have a bit of caution there.

Jessamy: So The 43 Club was run by a woman whose reputation really preceded her in London society at this point in time, and I believe she was known as London Nightclub Queen, but her real

name was Kate Meyrick. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how Kate contributed to 1920s nightlife.

Katie: Absolutely, yeah. So Kate Meyrick was known as the nightclub Queen of Soho, or some called her Ma Meyrick, even some of her customers. But the real lady behind this persona is a woman called Kate Mason, who was born in Ireland in 1875, and she moved to England in the early years of her marriage to a doctor called Ferdinand Meyrick. And the couple had eight children in total, but it wasn't really a happy marriage.
And whilst they never did divorce, they separated at around the time that Kate's nightclub career began in 1919 when Kate was in London nursing her oldest daughter who had caught influenza while studying at college to become a doctor. And it was then while she was in London that she saw an advert looking for a partner to run tea dances, so she joined up with that person, and–after gaining another business partner–they opened their first nightclub, Daltons Club, in Leicester Square, right in the centre of London. And just two months later, they opened a second club in Bedford St. And Kate was a prolific nightclub owner. So over the course of her career, she ran 8 nightclubs in London and one in Paris, which is just a considerable feat. And her longest-running business was The 43. So that's the one that we have the most records about, which was open from 1921 to 1933 at, as I've mentioned, 43 Gerard St in Soho.
And whilst Kate's regulars always referred to the nightclub as The 43, in fact, it changed its name many times, and those name changes weren't unusual for Kate's businesses. She was frequently breaking licensing laws, which meant that her premises were raided quite regularly by the Metropolitan Police, and upon being convicted, what she would do is she would be ordered to close the club, but she would often just reopen it under a new name and a matter of weeks later. And it is Kate's frequent lawbreaking and these subsequent raised by the police which mean that

we have such a wealth of information about her at The National Archives.

So over the course of her nightclub career, Kate, and also those associated with her– her family were involved with running her businesses, and some of her staff and also got caught up in these brushes with the law–she was convicted of multiple offences such as selling liquor without a licence or selling liquor outside of permitted hours. And at the start of her career, a fine and one of these orders to close the club would sort of be the usual punishment, but she became a habitual offender. And also the Home Secretary at the time, William Joynson-Hicks, decided to crack down on nightclubs. And he was interviewed in newspapers a lot talking about this big crackdown; it is one of the large aspects of his career. And so as a result, the consequences of Kate breaking the law became more severe and over the course of her career, Kate received 5 prison sentences, which totalled over three years. And the longest prison sentence she received was 15 months hard labour at Holloway Prison, and she served a year of that sentence. But interestingly, this spell in prison wasn't for selling alcohol without a licence; it was for something much more severe, I would say, which was for paying a police officer, a man called George Goddard, to warn her when they were going to be in raids on her premises. And I should say Kate wasn't alone in this bribery. There were other people caught up in this situation, and she also wasn't alone in breaking licensing laws. When you read some of the things she's written, that was how she rationalised her lawbreaking: It was a way to keep up with their competitors.

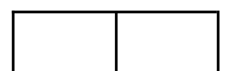
Whilst Kate certainly flawed–she was breaking the law and did so on multiple occasions–she was also a significant businesswoman. By her own estimation, £500,000–so half a million pounds– came through her hands and went over the course of her career. By her death, pretty much none of that was left. But it does show the success she was having. Another measure of success is whether Kate achieved her aims, and she states that one of her aims was to support her family. So she had these eight children and all of them went to private school and after the separation from

her husband–whilst he did pay her and some money to help look after the children–she states that her main motivation was to give her children the best life possible. So the fact that all eight of her children received that private education and three of her daughters even married into the aristocracy, I think shows that she was achieving some of the things that she set out to do. So whilst Kate and also her autobiography, Secrets of The 43–which is an invaluable resource–tell us much about Kate's career, they've also enabled us to recreate that world that she was inhabiting and that nightclub scene, which is what we've done in the exhibition, and the facts that we can have lists of customers who were there on anyone nights or we can actually name her staff who works there, you know, a lot of these people were from very working-class backgrounds, so the fact that we can pinpoint them and we can find out more about what they were doing is just absolutely fantastic.

Mark: Thank you, Katie. It's been great to learn more about Kate Meyrick. Besides being remembered as the nightclub queen of Soho, she also inspired two Evelyn Waugh characters and is mentioned frequently by historians of inter-war society and nightlife. So she also had quite an impact on popular culture as well.

[outro music plays]

Jessamy: Thank you for listening to On the Record, a production of The National Archives at Kew.
If you want to learn more about nightlife and parties in British history, check out our recent LGBTQ stories episode, where we told the story of an 1880s Manchester drag ball and a 1920s queer gathering space in London.
If you want to learn more about the 1920s, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/20s-people. There you'll



find 1920s-themed blog posts, audio and video content, exhibition information, research guides, and more.

Mark: Our new exhibition, “1920s: Beyond the Roar” will be open to the public until June 11, 2022. To find out more about The National Archives, follow the link from the episode description in your podcast listening app or visit nationalarchives.gov.uk.

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Jessamy: Thank you to all the experts who contributed to this episode. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Hannah Hethmon for Better Lemon Creative Audio.

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