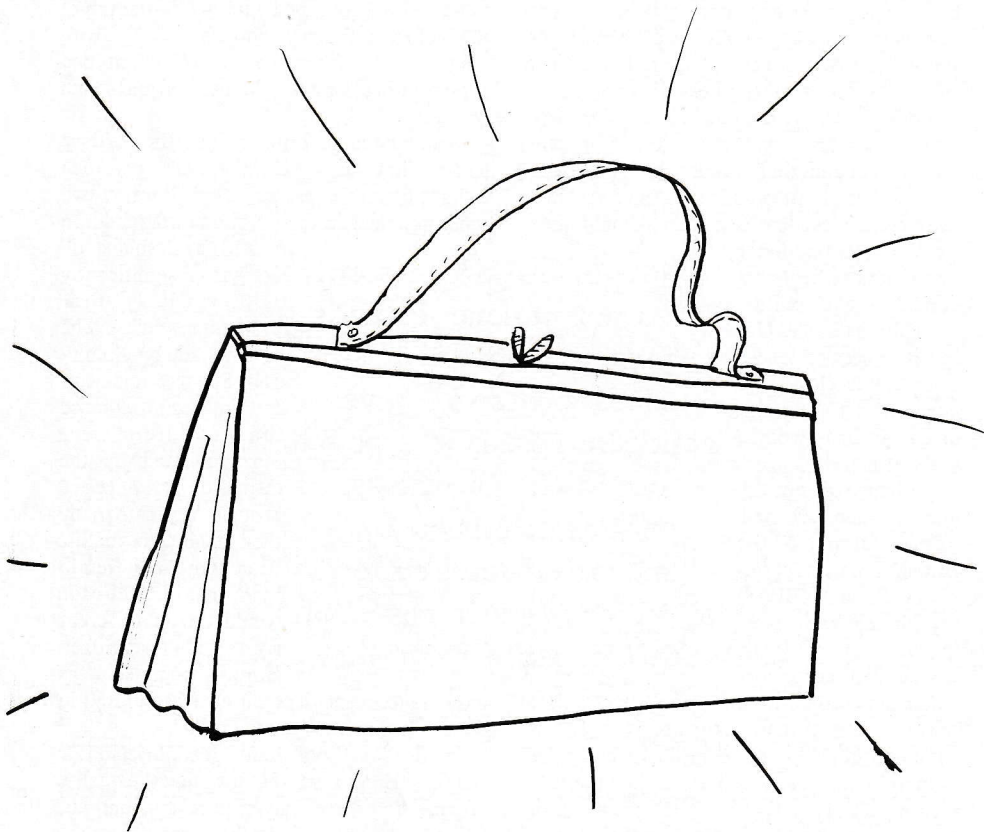


BEASTS OF BURDEN



Despite the origins of handbags in women's increasing independence they are far from liberating, argues **JULIA DEAKIN.**

The interview went well. I had made a good entry, got the clothes and the body language spot on, answered the questions with humour and insight and asked some of my own. I had made eye contact with one while stoically ignoring his bogey and kept a straight face when another treated me to a rendition of *I am the Very Model of a Modern Major General*.

For some reason, I still wanted the job. Felt I'd clinched it, too. Resisting the urge to leap over the desk and shake hands, I rose from my seat. As the foam cushion sprang back into shape, my handbag was catapulted across the floor. I watched, and they watched, my credentials scatter over the carpet tiles. I need not have bothered with the CV. "Julia Deakin equals Snoopy diary, fried egg keyring, yard of green loo paper and half a dozen Lil-lets" was etched on their memories forever.

For a while after that I fell out with my handbag, and began to question why I carried one, whether I could do without, and, if I could, why no one else did. Next to surviving an accident only to die of embarrassment at the state of one's underwear, revealing the contents of one's handbag apparently scores pretty high on the embarrassment meter. Losing it is also inconvenient. Having it stolen is distressing, and having it snatched can be dangerous. So why do we carry them? Come on, give me one good reason.

No don't. I've thought of two. Menstruating women need towels and tampons. But

we've always menstruated, and we haven't always carried bags. We went without until the late 18th century. The fact that most women had no transport, no money and nowhere to go doubtless had something to do with this. Fashion, too, played a part. Until then skirts were full enough to conceal loose pockets tied round the waist (that's how Lucy Locket managed to lose one). Large muffs were another place to hide things.

But as silhouettes became slimmer, draw-string bags called "indispensables" or "reticules" appeared. From these it was a short step, via railways and safer travel for women, to the albatross we're now cursed with.

In the 1880s, advertisers showed bags on railway benches. Independence was the product benefit — and women bought it. In 1907 *The Bag, Portmanteau and Umbrella Trader* announced the arrival of "hand bags" as "a novelty for the business woman, suffragette, lecturer or any lady who has private papers, notes, cards etc to carry with her." That same year the Army & Navy Catalogue offered us two intriguing contradictions in terms — the Tourist Chatelaine Bag and the Safety Underskirt Bag. Not surprisingly, we preferred the handbag.

Of course such growing signs of independence were mocked by the male press. And handbags were growing bigger by the season, as more and more women left home taking

bits of it with them. When still more mobilised themselves in the First World War, shoulder bags appeared, freeing our hands (almost). These re-appeared during the second surge of the women's movement in the late 1960s. But despite their origins, handbags are not liberating. And "Bum Bags", though sensible, will need at least a change of name before many of us will strap on a day-glo spare tyre.

Meanwhile menswear has always left both hands free. When sewn-in pockets appeared, men appropriated them. Besides, bulk is macho. "You can't have too much of a good thing" apparently. So men's jackets always have an inside breast pocket, women's never. Instead we're encouraged to emphasise our shape. Yet it's far safer to keep valuables on your person. Dangling the lot from one shoulder is like keeping heirlooms on the doorstep.

Men's handbags haven't caught on here because they are, as the Romans knew, impediments (the Latin word *impedimenta* means baggage). Ironically, it is only in Italy and some Latin countries that men are happy to carry their own paraphernalia. Elsewhere, women have become the pack-horses of the world. "Just put this in your handbag, will you dear?" As a last, back-breaking straw, we are mocked for what we carry, and the handbag itself has come to epitomise all that's unmanly. That's on top of the crude symbolism which links women to receptacles and makes "bag" an insult.

In Britain the most acceptable bag for a real man seems to be a tank-like sports bag. It's brandished as gauchely as possible, to decapitate passers-by, clear gangways and bash defiantly on desks. Championed by pimply 14-year-olds, it seldom contains more than a broken biro. But it is loaded with implicit messages. "I am strong (look, I can lift this)." "I play men's games." "I need a big bag for my huge jock strap." "I am hard and aggressive." "Think yourself lucky it's not your head in here."

Without it they would face the classic adolescent's dilemma of what to do with their hands. For a would-be man this is tricky. The angle of the wrist and hand must be braced (ready for fighting) with no suspicion of looseness. Hands may be thrust cockily in pockets, but to avoid ambiguity, fists must still be clenched and discernible.

Similarly, the handbag means salvation for many women. It gives us somewhere to look, something to do with our hands. Language reinforces this, from the helpless dependence of "clasp" and "clutch" bags to the ministering usefulness of "organiser" bags — those bottomless repositories of sandwiches, elastoplasts, bus timetables, pack-a-macs and parish magazines.

I said I'd give you two reasons for carrying handbags. The other is when we want room to breathe on public transport, they're handy for marking territory. Otherwise, they're just decorative accessories. And if men are credible without accessories, I'm sure I am.

I got that job. ■