





# Taken to the cleaners

Our investigation uncovers alarmingly poor standards at dry cleaners across the UK

**Y**ou might think a professional dry cleaner would be able to get simple, everyday stains off your clothes and return them to you in good condition. Well, think again.

We stained 48 identical skirts with red wine, double cream and vinaigrette and took them to chain and independent dry cleaners across the UK to be cleaned.

These stains come from the three main groups (vegetable, protein and fatty) and are among the most common marks found

on clothes. Treating them is part of the exam syllabus for dry cleaners and our experts said they were 'easily removable'. The results were unbelievably poor.

## Our findings

- Just four out of 48 dry cleaners returned the skirts in an acceptable condition.
- Thirty-one failed to clean off all the stains.
- Nine shrank or stretched the skirt (known as distortion) by an unacceptable amount, but they did remove the stains.

**One shop gave us a skirt back with more stains on than when we'd put it in**

■ Four failed to press the skirt acceptably, though they did meet the acceptable standard on stain removal and distortion.

■ One shop gave us back a skirt with more stains on than when we'd put it in to be cleaned! A second shrank the waistband by almost 3.5cm.

Our experts said: 'It's a serious concern that consumers are effectively being defrauded by cleaners that don't deliver the service for which they are charging.'

## The chains

The three main dry-cleaning chains are Johnsons Cleaners, Morrisons and Persil Service.

Two branches of Persil Service produced acceptable results – the only branches of any of the three chains to pass the test. However, other branches of Persil failed to impress. Eight failed to get rid of the stains; of these, three also badly pressed the skirt.

Five branches of Johnsons were good at getting the stains out (one was excellent). However, all five let themselves down by shrinking or stretching the skirt out of shape, or because of the poor quality of the pressing. The six other Johnsons branches we visited failed to remove the stains, and half of these also distorted it.

All nine Morrisons branches we visited were abysmal at tackling stains, although they were better at preventing the skirt from distorting.

## Time to take action

**The dry-cleaning industry has vowed to clean up its act as a result of this report**

We told the dry-cleaning chains and the Textile Services Association (which represents chain and independent cleaners) about our findings.

The Association said it will carry out spot checks anonymously on its members to tackle problems we've highlighted. It's also writing to members to stress the need to train staff who inspect and clean clothes.

Its Chief Executive, Murray Simpson, said it was difficult to talk in detail before seeing the report. But he said it did seem to show that the

'usual high standards of customer care and stain-removing skill' of professional dry cleaners wasn't achieved in all cases.

Johnsons Cleaners, Morrisons and Persil Service said they were disappointed with the results and asked for further details.

Each said they successfully clean millions of clothes a year. Johnsons promised immediate and corrective action once it had more details, while Morrisons and Persil said they would investigate further once they had more details.

## The independents

Independent shops make up the bulk of the market. We visited 18 and found that 14 failed to get rid of stains or distorted the skirt's shape. Another two did these well, but pressed the garment poorly. Two independents passed our test.

## Problems – what problems?

We found that customer service was sometimes poor, as well. The dry cleaner should examine the garment when you're in the shop and ask how the stain got there.

This is best practice, according to the industry's professional body, the Guild of Cleaners and Launderers, and will help choose the best way to treat it. Three quarters of the shops did examine the skirt, but this appeared to have little impact on how well they cleaned it.

When giving back the garment, the shop should explain any problems that there were in cleaning it. Of the 31 that failed to remove the stains, just ten told us about it. None of the shops mentioned the other problems that occurred during cleaning.

## What they should have done

Our experts said the results showed the poor standards of the industry in the UK.

They said: 'This shouldn't have been a challenge for a competent dry cleaner.'

All the stains were easily removable when pre-treated with an off-the-shelf dry cleaning stain removal kit. Most cleaners didn't do this or didn't do it properly.

Distortion was probably caused by the cleaner not using the right levels of chemicals or trying to press the skirt using steam, despite its care label specifically advising against this. We gave an identical skirt with the same stains to a dry cleaner that we knew followed the correct procedures. It cleaned the stains with no problem.

## Which? says

Anyone can open a dry cleaners. There is no law requiring staff to be trained or for service to be regularly inspected. We believe that this report has revealed the vital need for such training. The three chains and many independents are members of the Textile Services Association (TSA), which may be best placed to see this happens.

# Getting clothes cleaned properly

Our tips on making sure you get the service you want

### ■ When a stain happens

Dab the garment with a clean, damp, white cloth. Never rub it or use a coloured cloth (the dyes can be more difficult to remove than a stain). Wetting the stain causes a water mark, that can be difficult to remove.



### ■ Act as soon as possible

Old stains are harder to tackle. Make sure the cleaner knows where the stains are, what caused them and whether you have tried to remove them.

### ■ Matching parts

**together** Clean both parts of a matching outfit together –

changes in colour and texture occur during dry cleaning.

### ■ Pockets and lining

Check these before you hand an item over for cleaning.

### ■ Inspecting the garment

Give the cleaner the chance to look for existing damage and issue any disclaimers in writing. If this isn't done, a cleaner could claim damage caused by the cleaning was there when you brought it in.

### ■ Give them enough time

A one-hour 'express' service may not be enough to remove stains properly.

### ■ If there's a problem

Complain as soon as possible. Send written complaints by recorded delivery. Keep copies. The Textile Services Association offers an informal dispute resolution service if you can't agree what caused



the problem. If this fails, or the cleaner isn't a TSA member, you may have to pay about £120 for an independent report. If the complaint remains unresolved, write to the cleaner repeating the issue and the steps you have taken. Say you're giving it 14 days to resolve the issue before considering legal action.

### ■ When you get it back

Check the garments carefully. Take off the polythene cover and examine them in a good light, looking at the pressing, seams and any areas of double thickness.

## OUR TEST

The checks we put each dry cleaner through

### Best cleaned



### Most distorted



■ We bought 50 identical dry clean-only skirts with labels that showed what they were made of and how to clean them. We applied three small (25-50mm across) stains to each, and measured the skirt. We took 48 to dry cleaners, sent one to an independent cleaner we knew followed the correct procedure, and kept one as a comparison.

■ We had six tests of how well a skirt was cleaned: stain removal, distortion (how much the skirt shrank or stretched), pressing (whether it had bubbles, creases or wrinkles), drape (how clothes 'hang'), odour, and matting and felting (a hairy look from poor cleaning).  
■ Each test had a five-point scale from useless to excellent.

### Worst cleaned



A dry cleaner should achieve at least a three (acceptable). For stain removal, this meant stains were largely removed, with only a shadow left. Completely removing stains would score a five (excellent).

■ The most common faults we found in our investigation were stain removal, distortion, pressing and drape.



## POOR CARE LABELS ON CLOTHES

**David and Jane Jarvis**, 66 and 54

Jane had a shock when her husband's virtually unworn and expensive coat was dry-cleaned: 'I'd intended to sell it on eBay, but the lining had come unstuck and the leather trim on the belt and fastening buckles had been shredded beyond use.' She complained, but the cleaner said he'd only done what had been asked – to clean it.

Our expert said the cleaner could have done more to protect the buckles, but the label was the main problem: it failed to tell the cleaner not to use a chemical he was

using. This damaged the lining. It's irreversible, so there's little point pursuing the cleaner for damage to the buckles. The coat is more than six years old, so there's no basis for a claim against the retailer under the Sale of Goods Act.

There is a voluntary international standard for labels, but not everyone uses it. Some labels, like that on the coat, just say 'dry-clean only'. If you can't see any of the common dry-cleaning symbols on the label of clothes you've taken for dry cleaning, make sure the cleaner knows what to do.

## What to look for

### Dry-cleaning symbols on clothes labels

- P** = Dry-cleanable in hydrocarbon or white spirit or perchloroethylene
- F** = Dry-cleanable in hydrocarbon or white spirit
- P** = As P above, but with temperature and other restrictions
- F** = As F above but with some restrictions
- A** = Dry-cleanable in any dry-cleaning solvent
- = Do not dry clean

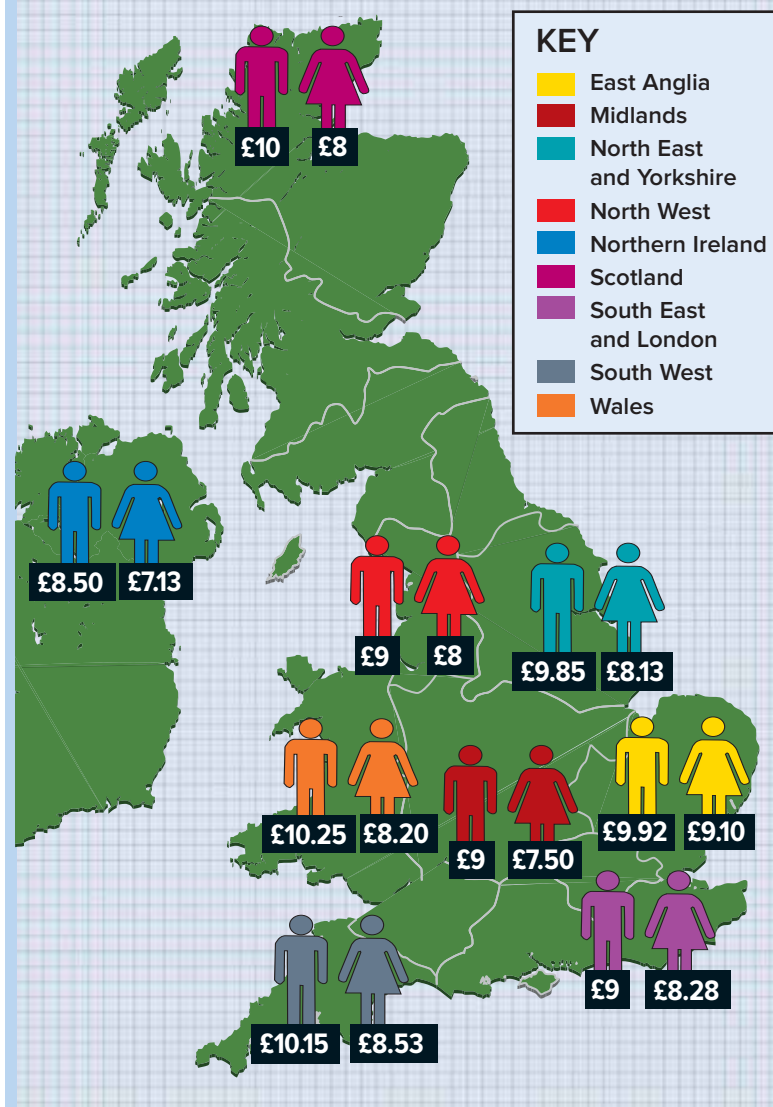
## THE COST OF CLEANING

**Where are the cheapest and dearest places across the UK to get clothes cleaned? We took a snapshot of prices**

You'll generally pay more at a chain than an independent cleaner.

Of the chains, Morrisons quoted the lowest price for a suit (£9) and coat (£8). There was no variation in the prices that it charged across the

country, whereas the other chains both charged different prices in different areas. Johnsons was the most expensive place to get a suit cleaned (£11.40) and Persil Service was priciest for a woman's coat (£11.75).



### OUR RESEARCH

In November 2007, we called 200 independent and 71 chain dry cleaners across nine UK regions for the cheapest price to clean a two-piece man's suit and

a three-quarter-length woman's coat. All the prices quoted are the average (median), excluding the highest and lowest 25 per cent to get a mid-range.