



SHARP SUITS: SAVILE ROW'S TRADITIONAL TAILORS

Savile Row is famed the world over for its use of the humble woollen cloth to capture and project the physical majesty of monarchs, generals, film stars and business leaders. Yet one only needs to walk down the east side of the street and look into the brightly lit basements to see that the glamour is wholly derived from real people with bent backs and busy fingers, each person wearing a tailor's thimble, holed at the end for a quicker push of the needle. The necessity for speed is real, but quality is paramount for the dozens of cutters, coat makers, trouser makers, pressers and finishers. If ever there was a place on earth where absolute perfection is strived for every day, it is Savile Row.

The Row's existence as a tailoring street is entirely indebted to the Englishman's long love affair with the suit. Fashion historians can actually trace this phenomenon to October 18th 1666, a few weeks after the Great Fire of London. According to the diarist Samuel Pepys, Charles II "in Council declared his resolution of setting a fashion for clothes," and on October 18th, Pepys was there to record, "This day the King begins to put on his vest, being a long cassock close to the body and a coat over it... It is a very fine, handsome garment." John Evelyn

likewise approved, noting the King's "resolving never to alter [the new dress] and to leave the French mode." Behind that resolution laid the rumour that the Great Fire had been started by a Frenchman, making the birth of the three-piece suit, unquestionably, a political act.

Fast forward to the late 18th century, when French revolutionaries adopted the English country squire's cutaway coat, necessitating a wrestling back of the garment by none other than Beau Brummell. Through endless consultations with his Mayfair tailors, Brummell turned that cutaway coat into a thing of tailored beauty, darted into the body so that the wool was stretched and shrunk to sculpt his chest, shoulder and waist. A great admirer of Brummell, the poet Lord Byron once remarked, "you might almost say the body thought," on Brummell in his Schweizer coat.

Thus, the idea of the dark-suited gentleman was born. Tailors did not gather on Savile Row until the mid-nineteenth century, when Henry Poole was able to earn the royal warrant of Napoleon III and had the audacity to decorate the front of his tailoring house with a giant eagle and coronet to announce it. The Emperor was soon followed by the Prince of Wales and throughout the rest of the





The cutters from Davies & Sons



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century, royalty from all over Europe and the Middle East found time for appointments with Henry Poole’s tailors during their visits to London.

These days Savile Row continues to cater to as much of an international clientele as a British one, with its tailors hailing from all over the world too. The chestnut that British tailoring is more structured than Italian tailoring is, only roughly, true, as any style possible can be made here and the amount of variation in styles between houses is quite wonderful. The number of tailors has decreased over the last few decades, largely thanks to egregious rent rises, but those that remain — around two dozen or more in the general area — carry on making beautiful suits almost entirely by hand just as they always have done. They take anywhere from 60 hours (Cad & the Dandy) to 130 hours (Maurice Sedwell) to construct a suit, depending on each house’s style and methods, and the prices (ranging from £2,000 to £6,000) are partly determined by the chosen materials and the hours involved.



Cindy Lawford gives fashion heritage tours of Jermyn Street and Savile Row as well as history and art gallery tours of St James. She can be reached at cindy@cindylawford.co.uk and www.cindylawford.co.uk