



THE COAT ROUTE

*Craft, Luxury & Obsession*

ON THE TRAIL OF A  
\$50,000 COAT

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MEG LUKENS NOONAN



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SPIEGEL & GRAU  
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*The Coat Route* is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed.

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*One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.*

OSCAR WILDE

*The woolen-coat ... is the produce of the joint labor of a great multitude of workmen. The shepherd, the sorter of the wool, the wool-comber or carder, the dyer, the scribbler, the spinner, the weaver, the fuller, the dresser, with many others, must all join their different arts in order to complete even this homely production.*

ADAM SMITH

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# INTRODUCTION

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Not long ago, I came across a website belonging to John H. Cutler, a fourth-generation tailor in Sydney, Australia. The entire site was devoted to one particular overcoat Cutler had made for a longtime client. The coat was, he wrote, “the ultimate expression of the bespoke tailoring art.” At the time, I had only a hazy understanding of what “bespoke” meant, though I had noticed the word popping up a lot lately. I had seen ads for bespoke bicycle tours and bespoke spa treatments. Virgin Atlantic airlines, I read, had even begun serving drinks in first class with what were called bespoke ice cubes, crafted in the image of founder Sir Richard Branson. I took it to be a *Masterpiece Theatre*-ish way of saying “customized.”

While that is basically true, “bespoke,” it turns out, is a much more specific term than that. The word was born in the tailoring trade in seventeenth-century England. When a customer went to his local tailor to order a garment, he would first select and reserve, or “bespeak,” a length of fabric. That cloth was then “bespoken” for. “Bespoke” evolved to mean one thing and one thing only: clothing made from scratch, using a pattern drafted to the precise measurements and wishes of one individual.

Four hundred years later, tailors, understandably, think of “bespoke” as their word. I wasn’t surprised to learn that they weren’t happy with the businesses that were using the word to inject their products and services with instant upper-crust British cachet. The tailors were also peeved that some apparel makers were advertising their clothing as “bespoke” when it was, at best, only partially made to measure.

On London’s Savile Row, the short side street that is the world hub of luxury custom tailoring, a complaint was brought against a company that opened an office there but was making its suits in Germany from only marginally tweaked standard patterns. The petition to stop that firm from calling its wares “bespoke” was rejected by a British advertising-standard regulating board, however, which said that, essentially, the word was too far out of the ballpark to be reined back in.

Vivaldi’s stirring *Stabat Mater* played in the background as I browsed Cutler’s website, scrolling through flowery text and clicking on evocative images. There was John Cutler, silver-haired, sixty-something, thick in the middle, with a tape measure around his neck, bent over a worktable. Here were close-ups of buttons and thimbles and pins, lit like still-life tableaux. A shot of a hand pulling a needle and thread through cloth suggested no less than Michelangelo’s hand of God. And then there was the coat itself, of course, buttoned onto the tailor’s dummy and photographed from every angle.

This was, I gathered, the overcoat to end all overcoats. The garment had taken months from concept to completion, and the tailor had used only the finest materials in the making of it. The coat was made of wool woven from the gossamer fleece of the vicuña, a small llama-like creature found only in the wild on the high plateaus of South America’s Andes Mountains. Softer, lighter, warmer, and far more rare than cashmere, it was, the website declared, the world’s most magnificent cloth—and its most expensive.

For the lining, Cutler had procured a length of the best Italian silk, created by a renowned

Florentine designer. The buttons were the ne plus ultra of fasteners, crafted of Indian water buffalo horn by a 150-year-old English button-making firm. The coat had even been trimmed inside with an eighteen-karat-gold plaque created by the same master hand engraver who was commissioned by the British royal family to craft a signet ring for Prince Charles and the wedding invitations for Princess Diana.

But that wasn't all. The tailor and his two-man workroom team had made the overcoat entirely by hand, one tiny stitch at a time.

"I made the coat as if machines did not exist," Cutler had written.

This, apparently, was highly unusual even in the bespoke-apparel world. The website didn't come right out and say how much the coat had cost—decorum, and all—but it wasn't hard to click through some links to press coverage to discover the price. The client paid \$50,000 for it.

I studied the photographs of the navy-blue overcoat. The plain, boxy, single-breasted number looked, to my untrained eye, like something you might find on Macy's clearance rack. I was stumped. And I had a lot of questions.

Why would someone pay that kind of money for a cloth coat that bore no luxury design label—no Tom Ford, no Burberry Prorsum, no Loro Piana? A generic, if you will. Where was the fun in owning something that was so under the radar that no one but you and your tailor knew how special it was? Who had the patience to wait weeks, even months, for a coat or suit when you wanted it today? How did bespoke tailors stay in business in an age of instant gratification and overnight shipping? And just who, in these times of economic turmoil, had a spare \$50,000 to spend on a wool overcoat?

I was still thinking about that overcoat a few days later, when I was putting away laundry, trying to jam clothes into my teenage daughters' closets and bureaus, which were already filled to capacity with dresses and tunics and jeans and skirts and sweaters from places like H&M, Target, ASOS, and Forever 21. My closet was in no better shape, overflowing as it was with not-so-great things.

What *was* all of this stuff? I fingered the fabrics and studied the labels. Much of it contained polyester or some subspecies of it—and almost every piece had been made in China. A lot of it looked worse for wear, but that was something I had come to expect. These were clothes with built-in obsolescence. They might as well have had a "use by" date on them, like a container of cottage cheese. When they split at the seams or pilled or went out of fashion, I would, if and when I got around to it, load them into big plastic bags and take them to a local thrift shop, or, if they were really not wearable, just toss them in the trash.

How did this happen? When did clothes become disposable? I know it wasn't this way when I was a kid. Like many of my generation, I grew up shopping with my mother basically twice a year, for spring-summer clothes and fall-winter clothes, mirroring what was, at the time, the traditional two-season cycle of designers and apparel makers. In the late 1980s, globalization started to alter that timetable. Looking for a leg up on the competition, some retailers began to bring in new inventory more frequently. At the same time, a widespread shift of production to China and other developing countries, where labor was cheap and plentiful, allowed apparel makers to reduce prices.

Meanwhile, the design and manufacturing process was speeded up, with instant communication and computerized machinery. Head-spinning turnaround times for produc-



created to meet demand—what manufacturers call JIT, “just in time”—were now possible. Styles that designers saw on runways one week could be in production, as cheap knockoffs the next. And shoppers, increasingly savvy about trends thanks to the Internet, lined up outside store entrances to get at the fresh goods.

So-called “fast fashion” retailers, like Sweden’s H&M, Spain’s Zara (which does most of its manufacturing domestically), the United Kingdom’s Topshop, and the United States’ Forever 21, were brilliant at training us—and especially our daughters—to adapt our shopping patterns to the new normal. What we learned from them, to borrow loosely from Ernest Hemingway, is that there is never any end to shopping.

They also taught us that the clothes we saw in the stores today would likely be gone the next time we came in. New inventory arrives twice a week in Zara’s more than seventeen hundred stores, for example. (One study found that the average Zara customer went into the store seventeen times a year—or about every three weeks.) The short life cycle of the store collections and the high rate of sell-through means very little merchandise is pushed to sale racks. That strategy keeps profit margins high.

Shoppers learned that snoozing meant losing. There was no time to give serious thought to a purchase—and, really, how much thought was required when it came to buying a pair of \$10.80 skinny jeans at Forever 21? Almost no financial or emotional investment was needed to walk out of a store buzzing with the pleasure of having made a purchase. Though the rush was short-lived, the next fix was never far away. And so what if our sweaters bagged or our zippers failed? That just gave us license to buy more stuff.

This hamster-on-a-wheel shopping pattern has serious consequences far beyond causing a lot of us to wish for more closet space. The production of synthetic fibers requires millions of barrels of oil. Conventional cotton-growing relies on huge quantities of pesticides. Workers are exposed to toxins and often subjected to poor factory conditions in the around-the-clock race to feed the fashion beast.

Meanwhile, we are running out of places to dump our castoffs. The Environmental Protection Agency says that Americans discard about thirteen million tons of textiles per year, four times more than we did in 1980, and only about 15 percent of it ends up being recycled. The United Kingdom, which tosses out about a million tons of clothing each year, has a similar rubbish-to-reused ratio. And the mountains of clothing we’re building in landfills are mostly made of non-biodegradable, petroleum-based synthetics. The natural materials we toss do decompose, but as they break down they produce methane, a greenhouse gas that is thought to contribute to climate change.

Besides clogging our dumps, depleting resources, and fouling the air and water, the fast-fashion model has helped obscure from view the path that clothing takes from raw materials to finished goods. I admit to being unsure if, during the manufacturing process, any human hands ever actually touched the things I’m wearing. I’m probably not alone when I say that I feel as blind to the route most of my clothing has traveled as I once did to the chain of events that landed those pre-formed ground-beef patties in the freezer section of my supermarket. Constant consumption has also distanced us from the idea that the things we purchase are special. The ubiquity of disposable clothing has led many of us to the conclusion that much of what we buy has little value.

That vicuña overcoat on John Cutler’s website, on the other hand, was obviously a keeper.

It was a *slow* coat—the very antithesis of most of what was being sold in the mall. It got me thinking.

I started reading books about the bespoke world—lovely books, full of black-and-white photographs of elegant people like the Duke of Windsor, Fred Astaire, and Katharine Hepburn. I read about tailors and weavers and shearers and silk screeners, many of whom were struggling to go on. I went down a rabbit hole of history and found that the story of cloth and clothing is, in many ways, the story of man. I studied the suits and coats men wore in movies and on television. I developed a deep sense of nostalgia for something I had never experienced.

And then it occurred to me that what I really wanted to do was go and see all of this for myself. So I emailed and called almost everyone who had a hand in the making of John Cutler's vicuña overcoat and asked them if I could visit. Some of them said okay right away. Others hesitated. Some probably thought I was a little strange. Eventually, they all said yes, and I started packing.

Well, let's be honest. First, I went shopping. Then I started packing.

Plato wrote, "Finally, I went to the craftsmen, for I was conscious of knowing practical nothing, and I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine things. In this was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I."

In my travels, I did find wise people. I also found some obsessive-compulsive types who spent an astonishing amount of time and money curating their own wardrobes. I got to peek behind the velvet curtain into the clubby, little-seen world of bespoke tailoring, where "knowing, not showing" is the unofficial mantra. I met men who share what Tom Wolfe, who knows a thing or two about sharp suits, calls the "secret vice"—men who pride themselves on being able to spot bespoke details, like working cuff buttons and hand-sewn buttonholes from across a room.

In the company of a renowned researcher, I went high into the Peruvian Andes in search of vicuñas, the skittish, long-necked animals with Kewpie-doll eyes that were almost wiped out by hunters for their valuable fleece and were brought back from near-certain extinction in one of the great conservation success stories of the century. I traveled to Florence to meet Stefano Ricci, the larger-than-life luxury-menswear designer and maestro of silk, who provided Cutler with the overcoat lining. I went to England and watched beautiful worsted cloth come off looms in 150-year-old mills, and saw mottled buffalo-horn buttons being shaped and polished on Victorian-era machines. I ate guinea pig in Lima and truffles in Tuscany.

I watched tailors at work in the basement workshops of Savile Row. I spent time in Sydney with John Cutler, whose personal closet was a museum-worthy collection of handmade sherbet-colored cashmere coats and silk trousers. And I shared some meals with his cast of quirky clients, who, I was relieved to discover, have a sense of humor about their oddball fastidiousness and addiction to bespoke clothing—especially when they are a little drunk on excellent champagne. And I went to see the vicuña coat. I found it draped over the back of a sofa in a penthouse apartment in a Vancouver high-rise.

I discovered a world that is, in many ways, as threatened by extinction as the vicuña was just a few decades ago. Tailors and other traditional tradesmen find it difficult to attract

young people into their professions, in part because of limited opportunities for apprenticeships and education, but also because few younger workers are willing to spend years toiling away in an unglamorous back room to become a master in *any* field. European trade-group leaders have speculated, with deep regret, that the current generation of expert artisans—weavers, leather toolers, carvers, shoemakers, and tailors—might very well be the last.

But I also found some who were thriving, against all odds. Having conceded the low and middle markets to the offshore megafactories, they had headed for the high ground of ultraluxury, which was proving itself, again and again, to be an astonishingly resilient niche. In tough times, the wealthiest of the wealthy—like the man who commissioned the vicuña overcoat—had become even more discerning. They demanded top-quality goods, expert craftsmanship, and, especially, things that no one else could have—all hallmarks of bespoke. Savvy manufacturers had also homed in on developing countries where freshly minted millionaires—many of whom were in Mao suits just a decade or two ago—were realizing that they would need to dress the part.

Of course, most people can't afford a \$50,000 bespoke vicuña overcoat, or even the \$6,000 version made of far more pedestrian sheep's wool, and dropping that kind of money on custom-made clothing might strike some as flat-out obscene. But the fact is that those who can afford such luxuries and choose to spend their money that way are keeping centuries-old trades alive.

I didn't know anything about tailoring when I set out on the coat route. The zenith of my own sewing career was the creation of a calico wraparound three-armhole dress in seventh-grade home-economics class. I came away from my travels in awe of what talented, skilled people can do with fiber and cloth and thread, and envious of the satisfaction they must feel spending their days crafting beautiful things from scratch. They are *makers*, something that fewer and fewer of us can claim to be. And they wish for nothing more than to have the good fortune to be allowed to carry on. I wish that for them, too.

*The Roots*



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John Cutler looked up from his cutting table as Keith Lambert walked into his ground-floor tailoring shop in the middle of Sydney's high-rise financial district. Lambert, a strapping forty-three-year-old wine-company executive with the symmetrical, square-ish good looks of a TV anchorman, was impeccably dressed, as always. The tailor recognized the navy pin-striped suit Lambert was wearing as one he had made for him a few years back. The fit, Cutler noted with satisfaction, was splendid. The shirt, too, was a J. H. Cutler creation of the best Sea Island cotton, and the tie—oh yes, he remembered that one—a luminous Stefano Ricci silk in an intricate blue-medallion print. Just right. Cutler greeted Lambert, who, as usual, was holding Rosie, his Jack Russell terrier. Cutler didn't mind. He was used to the dog by now.

The tailor put down his heavy shears and invited Lambert into the consultation room, a clubby space with robin's-egg-blue walls, tufted leather furniture, and an heirloom Persian rug. The paint color had been selected for its serenity and for the way it seemed to help quiet any twinges of doubt felt by clients as they prepared to spend large sums of money on themselves. The cut-grass smell of peony parfum d'ambiance, with which Cutler occasionally spritzed the air when he opened up in the morning, seemed to be soothing as well.

All around, little touches like the framed black-and-white nineteenth-century photographs of the original J. H. Cutler shop, the cylindrical glass case holding old ledgers listing some of his grandfather's first orders, and illustrated books, featuring the Duke of Windsor and Cary Grant and other sartorial giants, confirmed for the men who came in to discuss their wardrobe needs that they were part of a glorious tradition. And, in fact, they were. John Cutler was the fourth generation to take up the family trade.

Lambert settled into the green chesterfield sofa, and put the dog down by his feet. Cutler thought his client was looking quite well, despite all he had been through. It was no secret that Lambert had had a difficult stretch. He lost his job as the CEO of Southcorp Limited, one of the largest winemakers in the world, when the board of directors—including Robert Oatley, his own father-in-law and the high-profile billionaire founder of Rosemount Estate wines—sacked him after profusely nose-dived. It was the stuff of soap opera, a high-stakes family drama played out in newspapers and on the news. If Lambert didn't talk about it, Cutler, of course, would never ask. There was a mutual understanding between tailor and client; the relationship was not unlike that of doctor and patient, based, above all, on discretion and trust.

Lambert accepted the coffee Cutler offered—it was a bit early for scotch—and told him why he had come. He wanted a new overcoat. He was going to be spending more time in North America and needed something suitable for real winters. For the next hour or so, Cutler teased out Lambert's vision for the garment. Before he suggested a style or fabric, he always tried to understand how his client was feeling and how he hoped to feel when he had the garment on. For Cutler, tailoring wasn't simply a matter of disguising paunches or squaring off round shoulders. Sometimes it was about shoring up a wounded psyche, giving a man renewed confidence to take on the world—whatever the world was throwing at him.

"You fit a man's mind as well as his body," Cutler liked to say. "If you give the wrong suit to the wrong man, you fail as a tailor."

The same, of course, could be said of overcoats. There were so many possibilities—and each one made a different statement. Lambert could go, for instance, with a full-length chesterfield, with

*smart velvet collar, but Cutler, knowing Keith as he did, thought that overly formal. The tailor could make him a polo wrap coat, like the kind first worn by British cavalry officers in India to keep warm between polo-match chukkers, but that could come off as a bit rakish—not Lambert's style at all. Duffle, named for the Belgian town that made the heavy wool twill traditionally used for the toggled closure coat, would be far too sporty; a Raglan, with its diagonal shoulder seams, too slouchy; British Warm, too military; a car coat, too casual.*

*Lambert told Cutler that he wanted the fit to be relaxed, but not overly so. He needed something that would travel well. He wanted it to be elegant, unfussy, classic, and with simple lines. Cutler drew some sketches. Lambert made some suggestions. Cutler offered his opinion, and Lambert concurred. After a bit more discussion, it was settled. The coat would be single-breasted, with welted side pockets—and a neck that could be buttoned right to the top to keep out the cold.*

*Cutler wasn't called on to make many overcoats in Sydney; the climate was too mild. But he was indeed up to the task. He had forty years of experience and a degree from the world's best tailoring academy. Forbes magazine, in fact, had called him one of the best tailors in the world—right up there with the elite of London's famed Savile Row.*

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*I hold that gentleman to be the best-dressed whose dress no one observes.*

ANTHONY TROLLOPE

On a rare cloudless October morning in London's West End, I am in a cab, stuck in traffic. The problem is not the standard transit strike or a procession of minor royals or a road race for charity. The holdup today is due to sheep. By decree of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, this is British Wool Week, and, to celebrate, Savile Row is hosting a Field Day. The block has been closed to vehicles and turned into a barnyard, complete with a thousand meters of clipped sod, a rough-hewn barn, and two flocks of no doubt puzzled sheep.

When I finally rush into the press reception at Sartoria, the restaurant that is serving Field Day Central, the welcoming speeches are already under way. I find a spot to stand at the back of the room, elbow to elbow with a sea of men in good wool suits. Most are in dark solids or subtle chalk stripes, but a few have broken out mossy plaids with matching flat caps—the kind of foggy-heath apparel that cries out to be accessorized with hounds. One after another, the speakers sing the praises of wool, farmers, and Prince Charles, who is himself an enthusiastic keeper of sheep.

Ten months had passed since textile executives, designers, carpet makers, and retailers sat on folding chairs in a frigid two-hundred-year-old beamed barn in Cambridgeshire to hear the prince outline his five-year Campaign for Wool, aimed at reviving the Commonwealth's moribund wool business. Charles had kept his double-breasted camel overcoat on as he stood in front of a small podium, backed by bales of hay and a red wagon full of raw wool, and bemoaned the state of the fiber that for centuries had been the glorious engine of England's economy. The cost of shearing sheep, he said, was higher than the price being paid for wool. Demand had fallen, and farmers were reducing or eliminating their flocks.

"The future for this most wonderful fiber is looking very bleak indeed," said the prince, who, following his comments, mingled for a time with attendees but left before the Mutton Renaissance Club served its signature mutton stew.

Committee members, many of whom are in Sartoria this morning, had worked hard since then to coordinate a week's worth of wool promotions and photo ops all over England, designed to remind people that wool was warm, natural, comfortable, and sustainable. Field Day was their marquee event and, it must be said, the one that seemed most likely to have taken shape over a second pour of Laphroaig. ("What's that? Sheep? On Savile Row? Smashing idea, old cod!")

Before dawn this morning, trailers arriving from Devon, in southwest England's moorland country, had deposited sixty bathed and fluffed sheep in their temporary pasture. They weren't just any sheep: one group was the U.K.'s last remaining flock of Bowmont sheep, developed by genetics researchers in Scotland in the 1980s by crossing Saxon Merinos with white Shetlands, with the object of producing a hardy, fine-fibered animal; the other was Exmoor Horn, a stocky, ancient black-nosed breed with elegant backswept horns and a long, dense white fleece. The farmers, too, had been groomed for the occasion. Two historical tailoring houses, Huntsman and Anderson & Sheppard, had outfitted them—and their dogs—

in bespoke attire using English wool woven on English looms.

“This is proper cloth,” a mill executive is saying to the audience in Sartoria. “It’s the cloth that, before Gore-Tex and Polarfleece, a gentleman would put on a tweed jacket with a storm pair of shoes and walk up Everest.”

The line gets a laugh, but nostalgia mists across the room as if it had been sprayed from a fine-nozzled hose.

I head outside to see the flocks and to get a feel for Savile Row, the quarter-mile side street that is as meaningful to men who are reverent about handmade clothing as Cooperstown is to baseball fans and St. Andrews is to golfers. A dozen or so of the block’s tailors are hosting open houses, and several have scheduled short presentations about some aspect of the business. This is, from what I have read, an extremely rare show of hospitality by a group that, for most of its history, has preferred to keep its activities behind drawn curtains and unmarked closed doors. Open-to-the-street windows, in fact, were unheard of until 1963 when maverick designer Tommy Nutter set up shop with master cutter Edward Sexton at 35 Savile Row, with the partial backing of Peter Brown, the managing director of the Beatles’ Apple Corps, whose headquarters were across the street.

Nutter was the darling of mod London. Mick and Bianca Jagger, Twiggy, Elton John, and John Lennon (who, according to the author and historian James Sherwood, was known in the Nutter workrooms by the code name Susan) all sported his signature three-piece suits, with their giant skate-wing lapels, nipped-in waists, and roomy trousers. Every Beatle except George Harrison wore his designs for the *Abbey Road* album cover. As if his designs alone weren’t enough to shake up Savile Row’s Old Guard, Nutter also dared to show off his wares in provocative window displays—one featured giant purple phallus-shaped candles and another taxidermied rats—created by a young Simon Doonan, who would go on to become the creative director of Barneys. Nutter not only allowed passers-by to see into his mirrored wall showroom; he also had the audacity to encourage them to come in and browse.

Nutter died in 1992, of complications from AIDS, but if he had lived he probably would have loved the spectacle that is Savile Row today. There are banker types teetering between vexed and amused as they make their way through the crowd; tourists in jeans and windbreakers posing in front of the CAUTION: SHEEP AHEAD sign; buttonhole makers and pressers, up from their basement workrooms, taking extended cigarette breaks; and film crews who can’t seem to get enough of Harry Parker, the tweed-clad, apple-cheeked, staff-wielding farmer who appears to be having the time of his life herding his Exmoor Horns from one end of the narrow corral to the other as the cameras roll. And at the top of the street, on a roped-off square of sod, there are several people drinking champagne inside what is apparently an invitation-only sheep trailer, painted a splendid Prussian blue.

Savile Row was developed in the 1730s, on what had been part of the third Earl of Burlington’s estate, a large manicured spread on Piccadilly Street in London’s then most rural West End. As Richard Walker explains in *The Savile Row Story: An Illustrated History*, Lord Burlington was a well-traveled sophisticate and a talented amateur architect who poured an obsession with ancient Rome into the construction of Burlington House, his neo-Palladian palace. Though he had wealth of his own and had married an heiress named Dorothy Savile, his extravagances left him strapped for cash. To raise money, he was forced to develop a chunk of his land. He laid out a handful of streets—Old Burlington, Cork, Clifford, Boyle



and, later, New Burlington and Savile (named for his wife in a bid, perhaps, for redemption after selling off her gardens). Lord Burlington oversaw the building of blocks of town houses which were soon occupied by aristocrats, military men, and surgeons. Naturally, they needed proper attire, and before long tailors had opened workshops nearby to serve them.

The West End was booming at a time when ideas about how gentlemen should dress were going through a radical change. After the French Revolution, there was widespread rejection of anything that smacked of Louis XVI–style self-indulgence and excess. There was also a surge in appreciation for the classic nude male body, as depicted in ancient Greek sculpture. Meanwhile, the English gentry were discovering the great outdoors, retreating on weekends to country homes, where they spent much of their time foxhunting and dale-walking and pursuing other activities that required unfussy, comfortable attire. When some of these squires wore their country clothes into the city, they helped fuel a desire, even among urban sophisticates, for well-cut apparel made from matte-finish fabrics in subdued colors.

“It happened quickly,” Richard Walker wrote. “One moment the average aristocrat was wrapped in velvet and lace and the next he was stepping out in rustic simplicity.”

Without the distraction of sheen and sparkle, the focus became the figure of the man himself. Skilled tailors were much in demand. Using shaping techniques and strategic placed padding, they could give almost anyone—pigeon-breasted or potbellied—that coveted V-shaped silhouette.

“The perfect man, as conceived by English tailors, was part English country gentleman, part innocent natural Adam, and part naked Apollo,” the art historian Anne Hollander wrote in *Sex and Suits*. “Dressed form was now an abstraction of nude form, a new ideal naked man expressed not in bronze or marble but in natural wool, linen and leather.”

The poster boy for this neoclassic austerity would soon be a young man named George “Beau” Brummell. The biographer Ian Kelly tells the story of the young man’s rise to sartorial legend in *Beau Brummell: The Ultimate Man of Style*. In 1793, the well-proportioned, Eton-educated teenager had a chance encounter with the Prince of Wales, the man who would become King George IV. The prince was so taken with the charismatic Brummell that he arranged a commission for him in his own Tenth Light Dragoons, a cushy regiment whose chief responsibilities were to wear snappy uniforms with tall tasseled boots and to tail the royal as he made his wine-soaked social rounds. Though the prince was twice Brummell’s age, he sought the younger man’s advice in matters of style and grooming, and Brummell happily dished it out—usually with his trademark shredding wit. The sensitive, chubby prince was said to have cried when Brummell told him that his pants did not fit.

Brummell was promoted to captain but resigned from the military when his regiment was assigned to the wilds of Manchester. Living on a modest inheritance, he occupied himself with maintaining and presenting his dandified self. In his Chesterfield Street home, he often had an audience of admirers—including the prince—who came to watch him go through his daily routine. Brummell advocated cleanliness above all, which in the grime and stink of late eighteenth-century London was a radical notion. He spent several hours shaving, brushing his teeth, plucking stray hairs, bathing in hot water or milk, and scrubbing himself pink with a stiff brush. (Biographers have suggested that the milk baths may also have soothed sores which appeared on his skin in the early phases of syphilis.) When his daily toilet was accomplished, he dressed, always with the guiding principle that less was more.

“To be truly elegant,” he said, “one should not be noticed.”

Brummell’s everyday attire was a simple, well-tailored dark-blue wool tailcoat, worn with buff or black breeches and tall black boots (which Brummell liked to say were shined with champagne). He finished off the look with a starched linen cravat, knotted above his high-collared white shirt. Brummell was so exacting that he was known to fling dozens of wrinkled neck cloths to the floor before getting one tied to his satisfaction. When he finally stepped out the door, he was the picture of unstudied elegance and the object of awe. A chance encounter with Beau Brummell could either make your day, if he deigned to greet you, or ruin it, if he mocked your choice of overcoat—or perhaps, worse still, ignored you altogether.

Eventually, Brummell’s relentless snarkiness got him into trouble with the sensitive and increasingly pudgy prince. The last straw came in 1813, when Brummell made a crack public about the prince’s weight. “Who’s your fat friend?” he said to the prince’s companion within earshot of the royal. (Brummell wasn’t the only one who harped on the prince’s girth. The essayist Leigh Hunt was imprisoned for two years for, among other things, calling him “a corpulent man of fifty.”) Booted from the prince’s inner circle, and with gambling debts mounting, Brummell fled England for France, where he went mad with syphilis, was institutionalized, and died alone in tattered clothes.

Brummell is considered by many to be modern history’s first celebrity, as well as the prototype for the public collapse we have come to expect from a certain kind of hot-burning fame. Despite his inelegant end, Brummell’s impact was huge. Lord Byron observed that there were three great men of his era—himself, Napoleon, and Beau Brummell—but that, of the three, Brummell was the greatest.

Brummell fascinated Virginia Woolf as well, even if she couldn’t quite say why. In a 1925 essay about him, Woolf wrote, “Without a single noble, important or valuable action to his credit he cuts a figure; he stands for a symbol; his ghost walks among us still.”

His most obvious legacy can be seen wherever there are men dressed in coats and ties. But he did much more than pave the way for modern business attire. He also helped change the idea of what it meant to be superior in a society that had rigid ideas about class. “His excellence was entirely personal, unsupported by armorial bearings, ancestral halls, vast lands, or even a fixed address,” Hollander wrote in *Sex and Suits*.

Brummell’s immense fame and influence demonstrated that rank and titles no longer made the man. All that was needed was some serious attitude—and an excellent tailor.

In the footsteps of Mr. Brummell, I set off down the east side of Savile Row, toward the terraced houses built by Lord Burlington, which house the street’s oldest tailoring establishments. My first stop is Henry Poole & Co, at No. 15. I know the public is invited inside, but as I push open the heavy door I have the feeling that a firm but terribly polite bouncer will turn me away. Inside, I find Angus Cundey, the hawk-faced chairman of the firm, gamely greeting visitors—even those of us who look as if we may not know the difference between a hacking jacket and a flak jacket. Cundey, a direct descendant of the original Mr. Poole, who started the business in 1806, stands near a low octagonal walnut-and-brass display case filled with silk pocket squares and shiny buttons. Behind him, half-barrel-shaped leather armchairs sit in front of a fireplace flanked by headless mannequins in embroidered military coats and ruffled-front shirts. On one side of the hearth, there is a wall

display of black Briggs umbrellas. (The top of the line, a very John Steed number with whangee bamboo grip, will run you about \$500.) Another rack holds a selection of shiny steel swords, available for rent or purchase, should one need to accessorize one's velvet frock coat. Tucked in a corner is a Victorian jockey scale—a leather-seated contraption once used by Henry Poole to discreetly settle disputes with customers who claimed not to have put on any weight since their last fitting.

The walls are covered with ornate frames holding warrants, yellowed with time, certifying that Poole was an official supplier to an international cast of royals, from Emperor Napoleon III to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. Near the door, a small frame holds a canceled check written out to “Mr. Poole” and signed by Charles Dickens, who died in 1870, still owing the tailor money. Below that is a classic photograph of Winston Churchill wearing a bow tie, black jacket, and striped pants. Henry Poole made formalwear for Churchill and many other dignitaries. In fact, as Angus Cundey is scheduled to explain, according to my Savile Row Field Day program, it was Henry Poole who invented the tuxedo.

“In 1865,” Cundey says to a group that has gathered around him, “the Prince of Wales was quite fed up with changing every night into a dress coat. He wanted something more informal to wear at Sandringham, the royal family's country estate.”

Henry Poole made the prince a short velvet smoking jacket that was, at the time, shockingly casual that it could be worn only within the confines of the country place.

“When a couple from Tuxedo Park, New York—a James and Cora Brown-Potter—were invited in 1886 to spend the weekend at the estate, Mr. Potter inquired what might be appropriate wear. It was suggested he get Henry Poole to make him a dinner jacket like the prince's. So that's what he did. After his visit, Mr. Potter went back to America with the jacket—but without his wife. She stayed behind in England to become an actress. The mirror boggles.” Cundey pauses for his small audience to contemplate whether the garment was fair trade for Mrs. Brown-Potter. “At any rate, when Mr. Potter wore his new short dinner jacket back in New York, the Tuxedo Club members and others who saw it were quite taken with it and started ordering their own. Hence the name.”

From Henry Poole, I head down the street to Huntsman, at 11 Savile Row. Leaning against a black-scrolled wrought-iron fence is the firm's red Pashley courier bike, with a wicker hamper large enough to hold a new suit; it's still used to make local deliveries. Inside, Peter Smith, the general manager, a large man with floppy brown bangs, is standing near a well-worn broken-in leather couch set across from a marble fireplace. Two large stag heads, in full antler, are mounted on the wall on either side of the mantel. The room feels like a cross between a private shooting lodge and the lobby of a Nottingham bank. I ask Smith about the heads.

“Ah, yes ... well,” he says, looking delighted to have virgin ears for a story he must have told a thousand times. “In 1921, a customer came in and asked if we could hold on to the heads while he went to lunch. And he never came back.” After six months of waiting, the tailor hung the stag heads on the wall.

It was serendipity for the shop, which by then was well established among royals and the tweedy hunt set as the place to get one's riding garb. Fittings for pinks (scarlet equestrian coats) and patented seamless breeches were done in the back room astride a saddled wooden horse. Huntsman also became known for its use of bold plaid tweeds, woven exclusively for

the firm in an ancient mill on Scotland's Isle of Islay, and for its distinctive house style—on button, sharp-shouldered, with a sculpted waist—borrowed from equestrianwear.

Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Gregory Peck, and Rex Harrison were all fans of the distinct cut. In the 1980s, Wall Street traders discovered that the Huntsman silhouette set off the yellow power ties nicely—and didn't mind one bit that the firm was the most expensive tailor on Savile Row. (Sherman McCoy, the protagonist of Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was a Huntsman guy.) When Ridley Scott was making *Body of Lies*, he went looking for a wardrobe for the character of the debonair Jordanian intelligence chief played by Matt Strong. Huntsman showed him a cache of mid-1990s-era suits ordered and paid for by an Arab billionaire, who had died before he could pick them up. They were perfect.

I head back out on the street, where the tweed-clad shepherds are still urging their sheep up and down the corrals. My next stop is Gieves (that's a hard G, please) & Hawkes, where according to the Field Day program, a workshop tour is about to begin. The large store which occupies the corner white Georgian town house at 1 Savile Row—once the headquarters of the Royal Geographical Society—is the result of the merger of two successful tailors: Thomas Hawkes, a cap maker who opened for business in 1771, and James Gieves, who took over a Portsmouth naval outfitter in 1852. Each made his mark with military and expedition garb, and each had a gift for innovation. Gieves, Ltd. patented the Life Saving Waist Coat, which featured a built-in inflatable device and a pocket for brandy, sages, presuming that one would require a drink if one found oneself in the drink. Hawkes & Co. invented the solar topee, a cork-lined pith helmet that became de rigueur Great White Hunt headgear. Henry Morton Stanley was sporting one when he discovered Dr. David Livingstone in Ugogo, Africa.

Andrew Goldberg, Gieves & Hawkes's shiny-bald general manager, is gathering people for the tour. We follow him into the high-ceilinged atrium that had been the Royal Geographic Society's map room and now houses the company's ready-to-wear collection, and then through smaller rooms where pieces from the tailor's archives are on display. There are gold-braid-trimmed Rear Admiral dress coats, RAF tunics, swan-feather-topped helmets, ostrich-plumed busbies, and Captain Bligh-style bicorne hats (Bligh himself was a customer). Glass cases display swords and aviator caps and dog-eared guides intended to help naval officers determine which of their dozen uniforms they should wear when. Among their choices: band dress, ceremonial-blue undress, mess dress, and tropical mess undress—which, frankly, sounds like the most fun.

Goldberg leads the group single file down a narrow flight of stairs to the workroom, which is bright with natural light from a large window below street level. People on the sidewalk can peer down into the shop to see a dozen tailors at worktables cutting, sewing, and pressing.

"We have one individual concentrating on one aspect of each garment," Goldberg says. "The buttonhole makers make buttonholes. Waistcoat makers sew waistcoats. We have tailors down here who have made garments for the same person for thirty years and have never laid eyes on him."

The tailors don't need to see the customer, because, as in all bespoke establishments, it has been translated into two dimensions via measurements taken upstairs and transferred to paper patterns. Along one wall, I see hundreds of the brown-paper templates hanging from

racks, at the ready for the day their owner comes back for a new suit or an overcoat. On each pattern, names are scrawled in black marker. The one closest to me reads “HRH Queen of Tonga.” I’m no expert, but even I can see that the queen’s pattern implies some serious girth.

Gieves & Hawkes has dressed hundreds of other royals, including King George III and even the King of Pop. Michael Jackson’s iconic gold-trimmed military jackets were sewn in the workroom. But most people who have clothes made here—or at the other bespoke tailors’—are not royalty. They are regular men (and some women)—maybe a little paunchy, maybe a little round in the shoulder—who are willing to pay almost any price in order to feel good in their clothes.

“It’s really not about the money,” Goldberg says. “Money is the trigger mechanism. What they are interested in is getting a suit that fits properly.”

I leave Gieves & Hawkes, on my way to Anderson & Sheppard, a tailoring firm that has been a fixture on Savile Row for nearly a century until 2005, when rising rents forced it to relocate to a smaller space on Old Burlington Street, one block away. As I cross the Row and pass the sheep enclosures, I smell warm hay and lanolin, and then, just before rounding the corner onto Burlington Gardens, I smell something else. It is a familiar, if hard-to-identify scent—rosewood, maybe, with undertones of fir and Creamsicle. It triggers memories of being in crowded malls with my two teenage daughters—both giddy with the transformative promise of piqué cotton and distressed denim. Of course, I think, when I make the turn and see clusters of kids in hoodies checking their phones and holding shopping bags adorned with the black-and-white image of a chiseled naked male torso. It is the smell of Abercrombie & Fitch.

When Abercrombie & Fitch, the nineteenth-century American hunting-and-expedition outfitter turned purveyor of sexed-up teen casualwear, announced in 2005 that its first foray off North American soil would be in a nearly three-hundred-year-old mansion on the corner of Savile Row, there was a collective gasp from the longtime tenants of the neighborhood.

“I admit to being horrified,” Henry Poole’s Angus Cundey told me.

For a year and a half, as the building’s 18,000-square-foot interior was revamped to suit its new tenants, Cundey and his colleagues had to walk past a two-story construction wall plastered with the retailer’s signature Olympian pecs and abs. The former Queensberry House—later home to a branch of the Bank of England and then a Jil Sander boutique—was a tricky space. The bright lights and white walls of Sander’s minimalist showroom had to be scrapped and the former bank vaults had to be converted into shadowy nooks for T-shirts and jeans. The walls along the grand staircase had to be hung with Mark Beard’s giant faux-vintage portraits of half-naked, well-muscled sportsmen, and the twenty-seven-foot-high ceiling, which would have reverberated the A&F house music into aural mud, had to be compensated for with 125 strategically placed speakers. Once the army of beautiful young sales help was hired and the moose heads were hung and the atomizers were primed to pump out Fierce Root Spray, the store’s signature vaporous catnip, the store was ready for its March 22, 2006 opening.

Two hundred people stood in the cold rain that day, in a line that snaked down Savile Row. They could probably hear the driving techno beat as they waited their turn to walk through the stone-columned entranceway, past the two shirtless male greeters in faded low-slung jeans who flanked the door. Once they were inside, and had allowed their eyes to adjust to

the cavelike darkness, they would be free to fill their arms with \$100 polo shirts and \$200 jeans. And, for a short time, they would feel that they had been granted membership in an exclusive club where teeth were straight and white, and bodies were toned and depilated into sculptural perfection.

The eager customers came the next day, and the next, and the next. Lines for the dressing rooms were sometimes forty-five minutes long. Buoyed by its success in the U.K., Abercrombie, which had reached saturation point in the lackluster American market, would soon build stores in Paris, Madrid, Singapore, Brussels, Copenhagen, Tokyo, Hamburg, Munich, Düsseldorf, Hong Kong, and Milan.

After the initial shock, the tailors of Savile Row tried to look for the upside. The store was certainly bringing new foot traffic to the area. Perhaps, one day, Abercrombie & Fitch customers would be ready to ditch their baggy jeans—and they would know where to go. After all, hadn't Mike Jeffries, Abercrombie's flip-flop-wearing CEO, come to Norton & Sons to be fitted for a bespoke suit?

"People who are going to go into Abercrombie & Fitch aren't going to come in to see us," Barry Tulip, Gieves & Hawkes's design director, told a *British GQ* reporter. "But we do want them to look into the window and say, 'Crikey, that's amazing! As soon as I've got rid of my hankering for Abercrombie, I'm going to grow up and come to Gieves.'"

I make my way past the groups milling around outside Abercrombie & Fitch and round the corner to Anderson & Sheppard. Inside, a hushed front room glows with an amber light, as viewed through a glass of sherry. The butternut walls, the parquet floors, the etchings of hounds, the half-shaded wall sconces illuminating the nougat-colored marble fireplace—these are all enough to make me want to lie down on the leather couch, put my feet up, and dive into a book about topiary or tea cozies. On tables near the large-paned front window, ledger books have been left open to pages with handwritten orders from Rudolph Valentino, Marlene Dietrich, Duke Ellington, and Fred Astaire—all devotees of Anderson & Sheppard's easy, soft-shouldered suits.

Down a short hall is a bright sky-lit workroom, where John Hitchcock, the firm's managing director and head cutter, creates what many consider to be the ultimate in bespoke menswear. Ralph Lauren and Tom Ford have both come to watch the trim, dapper tailor at work—and Ford had Hitchcock make him a suit. Alexander McQueen started his career here as a sixteen-year-old apprentice. Prince Charles, Graydon Carter, Fran Lebowitz, and Manolo Blahnik are just some of his more recent customers. I ask him how he feels about having Abercrombie & Fitch as neighbors.

"I popped in once. I thought I should see it," he says. "It's nice, really. Ask any young guy where Savile Row is and now they know. They wouldn't have known a few years ago. They usually have a young man with no shirt on in the door. David and I keep our shirts on, don't we, David?" he says with a laugh to David Walters, the firm's head trimmer, who is on the other side of the room.

Abercrombie is, in many ways, the antithesis of Anderson & Sheppard and the other heritage tailors.

"All of their money is in marketing—merchandising, promotions, advertising, PR—and hardly any is in the product," Anderson & Sheppard's Anda Rowland told me. Rowland is the elegant strawberry-blond former Parfums Christian Dior executive who in 2005 inherited the

tailoring business from her tycoon father, Tiny Rowland. “In our case, all of our money is the product and very little in the marketing.”

For most old-school tailors, marketing has always been as alien as sweatpants. Business was built on word of mouth or inheritance; either someone in your club admired your coat and asked who had made it for you or your father took you to his tailor for your first suit and you were expected to mate for life. The closest the tailors came to self-promotion was with their display of framed royal warrants. Even garment labels were seen as being just a tad too show-offy. At Anderson & Sheppard, for example, labels are sewn inside inner pockets, where no one can see them—even if the coat happens to blow open in a gale.

“Those who know, know” is the Savile Row mantra. And there really was no need to shout. Anderson & Sheppard had all the work it could handle.

“In actual fact,” Hitchcock said, when he appeared in a BBC documentary, “at one time, we had a problem—we had too much work and we took a salesman on to stop the customers from coming in.”

Things, however, were changing. Mass production of apparel, which gathered steam after World War I, continued its growth. A man who wanted a decent suit no longer had to pay a tailor a visit. The Old Guard was aghast. An article on the front page of a monthly leaflet produced by the cloth merchant Dormeuil in 1927 stated the objections succinctly: “He who wishes to be dressed, in the real meaning of the term, must have clothes designed and wrought for him. Nature made individuals; bespoke tailoring assists in retaining individuality. The choice is clear. One may live and die a man. Or, with personality destroyed, the epitaph shall read: He was born a man; he died a 36 regular.”

But there was no going back. As mass production ramped up, a shift in style also pulled men away from the sturdy English Cut (and Ivy style, its baggy American fraternity brother) to Italy’s new, slinky Continental Look, first made famous by the Rome-based Brioni. A 1950s *Life* magazine article called the appearance in American department stores of Brioni’s slim-cut styles “a trap for men” aimed at “outmoding their wardrobes.”

Italy became even more dominant in the late seventies and eighties, when Giorgio Armani’s fluid, easy-to-toss-on, unstructured jackets were adopted by Hollywood’s chin-stubbled elite. The Armani look also bridged “the gap between the anti-Establishment sixties and the money-gathering eighties. It made the wearer seem simultaneously more at ease and more powerful,” as Woody Hochswender observed in a 1990 *New York Times* piece about the Italian icon. The Armani suit, he said, was just “right for a new generation of men slipping back into the office routine after a decade of countercultural copping out.”

From the informal ease of Armani, it wasn’t a huge leap to Casual Friday, which by the late nineties had created a generation of otherwise intelligent men who believed that dressing well meant putting on a clean pair of Dockers. It didn’t help that the era’s tech tycoons wore sartorial duds: Bill Gates was most often seen wearing what *GQ* called the “lazy preppy” look while the late Steve Jobs made a uniform of Levi’s 501 jeans and black Issey Miyake-designed mock turtlenecks. (Who could have predicted that they would look like Gordon Gekko compared with the world’s next digital mogul, Mark Zuckerberg—he of the ubiquitous hoodie?) Personal computers, meanwhile, made it possible to work at home, where there was no reason to ever get out of one’s pajamas, let alone put on a coat and tie.

Back in the West End, the tailors were further rattled by the arrival of two young fashion

forward, image-conscious upstarts—Richard James in 1992 and Ozwald Boateng in 1999. Both broke the unwritten codes of Row decorum by cultivating famous clients and seeking out publicity (James ran advertisements in glossy menswear magazines; Boateng staged a catwalk show of his ready-to-wear collection at Paris Fashion Week). Like Tommy Nuttall before them, their interpretations of classic English tailoring were presented in jarring color palettes and quirky silhouettes. While the old schoolers were fretting about the young arrivals, they were also surveying their own workrooms and seeing a sea of gray hair. The few younger workers they did have were unlikely to stay more than a year or two. Most were more interested in being famous designers than in being anonymous “makers”—and were unwilling to put in the years it would take to become expert trouser or coat makers. And for the tailors, who could afford to pay a trainee that long, anyway?

Then there was the infuriating hijacking of the term “bespoke.” Tailors felt that it was *the* word, and suddenly it was popping up to describe everything from insurance to ice cream. Even worse were the retailers trying to muscle in on the Savile Row cachet by setting up shops in the neighborhood and advertising what they called “bespoke” garments, when what they were actually selling were clothes being made by machines in offshore factories—and then shipped back to London. They weren’t necessarily terrible suits, but, the tailors claimed, the most definitely were not Savile Row bespoke.

They decided the time had come to fight back. Led by Mark Henderson, the deputy chairman of Gieves & Hawkes, a core group of tailors banded together in 2004 to form the Savile Row Bespoke Association. They also hired a PR firm—a remarkable step for people whose purpose had always been to draw as little attention to themselves as possible. They registered the trademark “Savile Row Bespoke” and created a label that set out to do for tailored garments what France’s terroir-designating *Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée* did for wine and cheese. To be worthy of the label, the garment had to meet the association’s strict criteria. Among other things, it would have to be from a shop that offered a choice of more than two thousand fabrics and had an expert cloth consultant on the premises. It also had to be produced with at least fifty hours of handwork and several fittings, made from scratch from an individual pattern created by a master cutter, and sewn by tailors who were based in England.

To address the skills gap and the aging of the tradesmen, the group launched an apprenticeship scheme designed to get young people to take up the tape measures and shears. They inaugurated a bespoke tailoring course in association with a local college, upon completion of which students could apply for an SRBA-funded apprenticeship on Savile Row. They also appealed to the local government to acknowledge Savile Row as a national treasure worthy of special zoning laws.

“We’re one hundred yards off Bond Street, which is the most expensive retail space in the world,” Henderson told me. “And we had working tailors in our basements. We had to figure out a way to stop development.” After a lengthy study, the Westminster Council concluded that Savile Row should be designated a Special Policy area, which meant that workshop space would be protected for the use of tailors only.

An attempt to legally reclaim the word “bespoke” was less successful. A disgruntled customer brought a complaint to the British Advertising Standards Authority against a Swiss-owned company called Sartoriani, which had set up a small office and showroom in the



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