

WAISTCOATS

'The King hath yesterday ... declared his resolution of setting a fashion for clothes which he will never alter,' wrote Pepys in his diary on 8 October 1666. 'It will be a vest, I know not well how.'

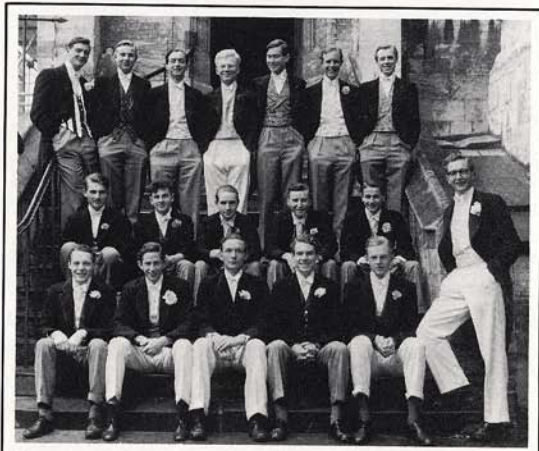
After the Great Plague and the Great Fire of London, King Charles II was easily persuaded that there was divine displeasure at the extravagant behaviour of his court and country. So, in place of the ever-changing, lavish French fashions of the day, he sought a more permanent, moral and sober dress, and turned to a garment which derived from Persia. The new 'vest' was to be thigh length, and cover up all sight of undergarments under plain material. 'It is to teach the nobility thrift,' wrote Pepys, 'and will do good.'

To insult the new English fashion, Louis XIV put his footmen into vests. But within four years the new fashion had spread across the Continent, and had become firmly established among the nobility. Perhaps, though, this had something to do with the fact that notions of thrift and sobriety were swiftly forgotten. Vests became one of the most decorated items in the male wardrobe, and Louis XIV himself eventually owned one bearing 816 gems. They became waistcoats proper when they were shortened above the abdomen in an eighteenth-century display of masculinity; Regency dandies would wear two at once, the upper unbuttoned to reveal the lower. King George IV reputedly owned 300 decorated in silk and brocade.

But when Charles Dickens went on an American tour in 1842 his bright, decorated waistcoats were criticised as being 'somewhat in the flash order'. By the end of the

nineteenth century Oscar Wilde was complaining: 'I find an ever-growing difficulty in expressing my originality through my choice of waistcoats and cravats.'

Yet, despite the pressures of the cloth shortages of the Second World War and the advent of central heating, the waistcoat has survived. So, too, has the rule that the bottom button must always be worn undone – perhaps because the original full-length vests had to be left unbuttoned for walking, or perhaps, as popular legend has it, because Edward VII, while Prince of Wales, inadvertently left his undone, and everyone followed suit to avoid embarrassment. And the word 'vest' has survived too, not only in American speech, but in the way that Savile Row tailors refer to the garment.



Pop go the waistcoats – one of the privileges of belonging to Pop, the self-electing élite among Eton pupils, is the right to wear patterned waistcoats. The results, like the pupils themselves, are in a class of their own.

Fancy silk waistcoats,
'somewhat in the
flash order'.



Formal day in
double-breasted grey



Plain grey, for
town and around.



Scoop lapels –
right for the night.



Classic country – check
the pattern and flaps.

City pretty –
smart but artful.