
FOREWORD

There are certain classic clothes which have a place in history, but a timeless appeal. Created in the past, they are still worn in the present. They have the look, the construction, and the tradition, which makes them absolutely *right*. These are the clothes in A Gentleman's Wardrobe.

Behind most items in a gentleman's wardrobe there lies a story. Classic men's clothes were not born from a designer's drawing board, or from the seasonal whim of a couturier. They have come down to us on the backs of practical men, whether sportsmen or soldiers, wealthy or working men. Classic menswear is not about designer names; it commemorates, among others, the Duke of Wellington, the Prince of Wales, Lord Raglan, the Earl of Cardigan, the Duke of Norfolk and the Earl of Chesterfield. Its history is as much about common sense as dress sense.

It's a history which explains not only what men wear, but the way it should be worn: why the bottom waistcoat button is always left undone; why some overcoats have black velvet collars; why brogues have holes and why lapels have notches. And perhaps it also explains why most classic menswear has remained unchanged for over fifty years, and much for a century or more. Like great-grandfather, like son.

The classic wardrobe is largely a product of what fashion historians call the Great Masculine Renunciation, when the Industrial Revolutionaries gave up the lace and brocade of the dandy, and established the sober, serious dress of the Victorian gentleman. It was a wardrobe which asserted the power, status and formality of the English –

and it established the idea echoed by F. Scott Fitzgerald, that 'Gentlemen's clothes are a symbol of the "power that man must hold, and that passes from race to race"'.

Once the Duke of Windsor had performed his personal transformation of the rules, the classic wardrobe was firmly established. As the French designer Yves St Laurent has pointed out, 'By 1930 to 1936, a handful of basic shapes were created that still prevail today as a sort of scale of expression, with which every man can project his own personality and style.'

Because they were worn by the most senior Englishmen, these clothes had to be the best. Quality materials and traditional craftsmanship combined to create items that were both flattering and functional, hard-wearing and well made. And they were also expensive – the only things top tailors don't cut are corners.

As gentlemen's dress became the uniform of the new, white-collar workers, cheaper versions began to filter into the menswear market. And gradually the old principles and the time-consuming details were ignored, by a generation of office workers with their synthetic suits and drip-dry shirts – by men with higher standing, but lower standards.

But classic clothes and accessories are still available today. They are investments, items whose look will last as long as their superior quality. They are still being worn and used by the senior English men.

The details incorporated by those original tailors have remained, as the hallmark of items which are still constructed with the same care and attention. Those details have become the sign of a gentleman who cares

about his wardrobe. Once you're aware of the details, they can never be ignored. 'Once you know about it, you start seeing it,' said the writer and social observer Tom Wolfe. 'There are just two classes of men in the world. Men with suits whose buttons are just sewn on to the sleeve, just some kind of cheaper decoration, or – yes! – men who can unbutton the sleeve at the wrists, because they have real buttonholes and the sleeve really buttons up.'

Traditional manufacturers have retained all these classic details. They are a symbol of a determination to uphold the standards of the past, the outward sign of a concern that also extends to the cloth and the construction. And the likelihood is that a manufacturer who ignores traditional details, who puts convertible cuffs on a button-down shirt,

or notched lapels on a double-breasted jacket, will have equally scant regard for the traditions of quality construction.

In the absence of seasonal fashions, these kinds of styling details signal a man's sartorial awareness. Only such tiny, distinguishing elements are permitted in the uniform of power and status. They reflect a man's income and his sense of tradition. And they show, in a discreet but emphatic way, whether he really understands the principles of classic menswear.

Of course, a gentleman can get by without understanding his wardrobe. He can also eat steak with a fish knife, or drink claret from a champagne flute. It would be terribly unfair to judge him by any of these things. But as Oscar Wilde once said, 'Only a fool would *not* judge by appearances.'

'A gentleman will take care that his clothes are of the best quality, well-made and suitable to his rank and position.'

PRINCE ALBERT