

# WHERE ‘THE LONDON CUT’ WAS BORN

To borrow a sentiment from Umberto Eco, “*We all stand on the shoulders of giants*”. Nowhere is this more true than on Savile Row where, for more than two centuries, the craft of bespoke tailoring has been practised by successive generations of tailors who are acknowledged to be the world’s best suit makers.

**A**s the global economy heads into rough seas, Savile Row can console itself that a year or two is a drop in the ocean of time that tailoring has survived in this short London street. The Row has survived two world wars, the Great Depression and Giorgio Armani to emerge in a surprisingly robust state in 2008. A brief look into tailoring history may explain why the craft will not be scuppered.



*Gieves & Hawkes's archive*

## ORIGINS OF ‘THE ROW’

One has to peel historical Mayfair like an onion to find the origins of bespoke tailoring on and around Savile Row. Legend has it that it was a street of surgeons who migrated to Harley Street as the house of Henry Poole & Co came to dominate ‘the Row’ from 1846. Henry Poole does indeed deserve the moniker Godfather of Savile Row, but his was not the first tailoring house on the block.

Tailors invariably follow wealth and fashion; hence the purveyors of gentlemen’s requisites gravitated around the great aristocratic houses built in the Mayfair-Piccadilly-St James’s axis

during the late 18th century. One of the grandest of these mansions was Burlington House (now the Royal Academy of Arts) that faces Piccadilly, with its orchards covering what we now know as Savile Row.

Names still familiar today such as shoemaker John Lobb, hatter James Lock, tailor Hawkes & Co (now Gieves & Hawkes) and barber Trumper were already the height of fashion in 1790 when the Prince Regent (later King George IV) and self-proclaimed ‘man of mode’ George ‘Beau’ Brummell led men’s fashion. But it wasn’t until 1846 – when Henry Poole made the decision to reverse the entrance of his famous tailor’s shop from Old Burlington Street to Savile Row – that the tailors began their colonization of the street they still dominate to this day.

Poole’s is not the oldest bespoke tailor in London. That honour goes to court and ceremonial tailors Ede & Ravenscroft (1689) followed by Gieves & Hawkes (established in 1785 and 1771 respectively). But Poole’s is the prototype purveyor of the London Cut in the grand, traditional style. ‘Old Pooley’ was what we would now consider a celebrity tailor. His magnificent premises at N° 36 Savile Row was as exclusive an address as White’s Club and attracted friends of Henry Poole such as Bertie, Prince of Wales, the man who was to become Emperor Napoleon III, the Crown Prince of Prussia, King Umberto of Italy and Tsar Alexander II of Russia, not to mention authors Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins.

The myths surrounding Henry Poole still bathe the house in an aura of glamour and lost splendour. It was he who, with

Baron de Rothschild, loaned Napoleon III £10,000 to advance his campaign for the throne of France. It was he who, in 1860, cut the prototype evening dress coat for the Prince of Wales; replicating it in 1886 for Mr James Potter of Tuxedo Park and thus giving America a new sartorial term. Though Henry died almost insolvent in 1876 after years of offering near-unlimited credit for his glamorous clientele and high living on a similar scale, the house survived and passed into the Cundey family in 1883, where it remains.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: ‘LONDON CUT’

The origins of the famed ‘London Cut’ of Savile Row bespoke tailoring can be traced back to the aforementioned Beau Brummell, the true spirit of the dandy, who rejected excess and embellishment in favour of a sober palette, clean lines and immaculate fit. One only has to look at boutique financiers around Mayfair today in their navy single-breasted one button suits and crisp white Turnbull & Asser shirts to see that British men’s style hasn’t moved so far away from Beau’s strategy of the early 1900s. The emergence of what we now know as Savile Row’s ‘Royal Family’ did not happen until almost a century later. In 1906, Anderson & Sheppard was established by Swedish-born Per Anderson who had trained under the legendary Dutchman Mr Scholte. The birth of Anderson & Sheppard coincided with the birth of the film business in Hollywood. Not coincidentally, the firm embraced screen idols such as Rudolph Valentino and went on to dress the unimpeachably chic Fred Astaire in the 1930s when the Prince of Wales’s tailor Hawes & Curtis refused to copy one of Prince Edward’s suits at the request of Astaire. ☺



*Typical English touches in Savile Row*



inevitable and selling a ready-to-wear line internationally, though they were by no means the first. As early as 1930, Hawkes & Co at N° 1 Savile Row were advertising a collection of ‘immediate wear’ garments.

#### ONE LEITMOTIF: HANDMADE

Pride in the purity of bespoke tailoring – suits measured by hand, pattern cut by hand, fittings sewn and finished by hand – is unshaken on Savile Row. However, only Anderson & Sheppard, Welsh & Jefferies, Davies & Son, Henry Poole & Co and Dege & Skinner restrict their UK production to bespoke. Great historical houses such as Gieves & Hawkes and Ede & Ravenscroft retain their bespoke workrooms but have also developed ready-to-wear and made-to-measure collections for entry-level suits that may, in time, grow into bespoke custom.



Anderson & Sheppard went on to dress Gary Cooper, Noel Coward, Ronald Coleman, Sir Laurence Olivier and Cary Grant. The house favoured a softer shoulder than is traditional at, say, Henry Poole & Co, and a more draped coat that caresses rather than constricts. It is a shape that continues to fascinate the Hollywood market, which still chooses Anderson & Sheppard as their preferred Savile Row tailors.

The artist formerly known as Kilgour, French & Stanbury is perhaps the most radical streamlining of what was formerly a bespoke giant established in 1923, when Kilgour & French united under one roof. The house’s history on the Row is as revered as Huntsman or Anderson & Sheppard but it’s relentlessly modern putsch under creative director Carlo Brandelli has taken Kilgour closer to fashion brands such as Lanvin or Bottega Veneta than to Poole’s and Dege.



H. Huntsman & Sons opened its doors in 1849 but arrived at its present address on the Row in 1919. Notoriously the most costly Savile Row tailor, the Huntsman bespoke block is one of the most distinctive. It is also the cut most associated with Savile Row tailoring: sharp shoulders, a slightly long coat, the one-button that is so notoriously difficult to balance and the emphasis on a clean, fitted line. This heroic shape was developed by the great Huntsman Managing Director Colin Hammick, who died earlier this year. 1981 saw Huntsman bowing to the

Kilgour retains bespoke workshops but the cool, minimal facades of N°s 5 and 8 Savile Row sell ready-to-wear and made-to-measure, designed by Brandelli and shown biannually at the runway shows in Paris. Brandelli aspires for Kilgour to be an international luxury men’s fashion brand. He’s not the first.

#### WHEN BESPOKE MEETS FASHION

In the early 1990s, a trinity of bespoke tailors gave Savile Row the kiss of life by bringing fashion and craft together



1970

for the first time since the glory days of Nutter and Sexton. Richard James, Ozwald Boateng and Timothy Everest all made a lot of noise in the fashion press and brought the attention back to bespoke with creative stock models such as a two-piece camouflage suit (James), a purple single-breasted one button with acid yellow lining (Boateng) and Nutteresque Prince of Wales three-piece suits from Everest, who trained under Nutter. The fact that these names are still called 'new boys' may irritate the new establishment tailors but it's a testament that a decade or two isn't so long on Savile Row. In the interim, Nick Hart and Richard Anderson have both opened own-label operations on the Row, led by bespoke, while Boateng and James have super-sized to being the owners of shops with the largest floor space on the Row. In James's case he cleverly split his bespoke and ready-to-wear operations between shop sites that face each other across Savile Row/Clifton Street. In Boateng's, it was the audacious opening of his headquarters on what was formerly Anderson & Sheppard's corner of Savile Row.

Somewhat ironically for a business that relies so heavily on City money and US trade, Savile Row's bespoke tailors huddled together on this short street are in better shape in the global recession than the luxury-goods giants



1980

with flagship stores scattered across the globe. Fashion has once again turned to the London Cut, with designers as diverse as Bottega Veneta's Tomas Maier and Tom Ford referencing classic Savile Row style. While these designers are charging upwards of £5,000 for ready-to-wear, Savile Row's entry price of £3,500 for bespoke starts to look positively frugal.

As the world becomes increasingly obsessed with carbon footprints, there's Savile Row cutting, sewing and finishing bespoke suits within a mile radius of cloth that's woven exclusively in the UK. It was inevitable that consumerism could not spin the world around any faster and, thus, Savile Row's stately three-month period to cut a bespoke suit seems less objectionable as fast fashion slows down. There's also sustainability to consider. With care, a Savile Row bespoke suit lasts for life and encourages one to keep the shape it was originally cut for. All the above combine to create the conditions for a perfect storm that will fill Savile Row's sails and drive them forward for another 200 years.

#### SCABAL AND SAVILE ROW – A LONG STORY

Scabal couldn't have chosen a better year to open its now iconic store at N° 12 Savile Row than 1970. On St. Valentine's Day the previous year, visionary designer Tommy Nutter



2008

and cutter Edward Sexton opened Nutters of Savile Row and brought the energy and swinging hip of the late 1960s/early 70s 'Youthquake' to a previously sedate Savile Row. Rupert Lycett Green's Blades boutique on Burlington Gardens (now Ede & Ravenscroft) introduced high fashion ready-to-wear under the slogan 'for today rather than the memory of yesterday' while characters such as Bobby Valentine brought a flamboyance not seen in men's style since before World War II. Thus, Savile Row was rocking when Scabal took-up residence at N° 12; cleverly bringing luxury menswear cloths woven primarily in Huddersfield to the heartland of British bespoke tailoring. The social and financial temperature on the Row was perfect for the introduction of a Scabal presence while fashion was firmly in favour of the more esoteric and extravagant cloths that Scabal was already noted for.

A man who witnessed the growth of Scabal in Savile Row almost from the beginning is Mr John Harvey who joined the firm in 1975 and retires this year. He has been in cloth as man and boy, having left school at 16 and worked for 15 years at Hunt & Winterbottom, a British cloth merchant, before joining Scabal. He reflects on 33 years of Scabal and Savile Row. ☺



*The Savile Row Scabal team. From left to right: Terry Brown, Ricky Sahota, Hazel Edmonds and John Harvey. Missing from picture: Chris Brown*

**'SAVILE ROW IN THE 70s HAD A CERTAIN MYSTIQUE BUT I'D AGREE THAT THERE'S A SIMILAR SENSE OF OPTIMISM ON THE ROW TODAY'**

## INTERVIEW

**BESPOKEN: Mr Harvey, can you tell us your earliest impressions of the Row when you arrived in 1975?**

**JOHN HARVEY:** *I wasn't a stranger to the Row because my brother was a director at Anderson & Sheppard – one of the grand old houses along with Henry Poole & Co, Kilgour, French & Standbury and Gieves & Hawkes – and it was he who recommended me to Hunt & Winterbottom. When I arrived at Scabal, Tommy Nutter was across the road (where Davies & Son was). He was a lovely chap, no side to him, but more importantly he came into Savile Row and did something a little bit different.*

**What was Scabal's business in the 70s?**

*We sold cloth; more than 200 suit lengths in the shop at one time. In those days, there was a big business for foreign visitors who'd buy a cloth from us and take it back home to be made up by a local tailor. At that time, they couldn't take the cloth to a tailor on the Row. Now, that's where the tailors made their profits. They had to supply the cloth.*

**We see echoes of that Nutter era on the Row today with designer-tailors such as Nick Hart, Ozwald Boateng, Richard James and Richard Anderson bringing flair and a level of high fashion to bespoke tailoring.**

*Savile Row in the 70s had a certain mystique but I'd agree that there's a similar sense of optimism on the Row today. I think it's nice to see made-to-measure companies coming in to complement pure bespoke. It combines well to have all levels of top-end men's tailoring available on the street.*

**Can we time-travel a bit more? Was Scabal very well known when you first worked for the house?**

*Well, Scabal wasn't really sold in the UK previous to the Savile Row shop. We had to build the business from the ground up. You may find it hard to believe, that in those days, Lebanon was the centre of the fabric-buying business. It was the troubles in the Lebanon that made the cloth business relocate to London. Well, Scabal suddenly took off. We did extremely well producing the finest cloth in the world. We still do. The magic words are still 'made in England'.*

**Did you have a lot to do with the designs of the cloth?**

*I would definitely relay requests from men who came into N° 12 Savile Row to the mill at Huddersfield. That's a very important factor in Scabal's success. We own our own mill and can control design, creation, manufacturing and marketing of the fabrics.*

**How has fashion in men's suiting-fabric evolved?**

*Designs such as pinstripe, chalkstripe and Prince of Wales check will always be there. All we do as a company is make them in higher and higher qualities. But Scabal is equally famed for its innovations such as 'Gold Treasure' (a Super 150's with 22-carat gold pinstripe), 'Diamond Chip' (the first cloth producing diamond fragments), Summit (made from Super 250's wool) and the pure Vicuna suiting.*

**The London Cut of Savile Row bespoke suits tends to demand a heavier weight of cloth. How can suiting fabrics get ever more refined and be built to last?**

*Well, the pure Vicuna suit is only*

*accessible to the man who has every other suit imaginable in his wardrobe and would thus wear it on particularly special occasions. When I came into the trade in the 1960s, the typical suit weight was an 18-ounce flannel. Scabal still produces the 15- or 16-ounce range because certain clients still want that weight but, by and large, the trend is towards lighter weights.*

**How important is the Savile Row connection for Scabal?**

*Very important and particularly relevant to our largest international markets like Japan, India, China, Korea and The United States, who revere Savile Row tailoring.*

**Scabal is an important name in the made-to-measure market. How has the relationship with the tailors of Savile Row evolved over the years?**

*As I said, in the 1960s and 70s, the tailors would only cut suits from cloth that they supplied. Very few can afford to hold the stock on the premises now, hence the importance of our bunches. What hasn't changed is that everyone helps one another on the Row. We're all in the same business and it is in everybody's interest to be seen to be buoyant.*

**What will you miss most about Scabal and Savile Row?**

*The characters that this business attracts – both the tailors and the customers – and a pride that we are selling, without question, the finest fabrics in the world.*

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Scabal today in Savile Row



## GOURMET RECOMMENDATIONS

When you visit Savile Row to discover Scabal, why not take time to try two great restaurants, as recommended by Bespoken?

### SARTORIA

In 1997, *Vanity Fair* declared 'London Swings Again' with a now-iconic portrait of New Establishment tailors Oswald Boateng, Timothy Everest and Richard James on Savile Row. Sir Terence Conran opened Sartoria a year later, capitalizing on the new optimism around the Row. Though no longer Conran-owned, Sartoria has changed little. The decor is Tokyo-meets-Manhattan minimal, the service is impeccable and the modern Italian menu from head chef Alan Marchetti is seasonal and simply elegant: rich, creamy asparagus risotto, veal Milanese with rocket salad, lobster spaghetti and king scallops, pancetta, young beetroot and celery.

The tailoring theme is not laboured, but two amusing Jessica Worrall obese tailor's dummy sculptures and Sir Rex Harrison's patterns for *My Fair Lady* (1964) hang discreetly in the private dining room. Now that smoking is banned in London's restaurants, most of Sartoria's tape-

measure ashtrays have found their way into Savile Row's workrooms, where they are used to hold pins and chalk. Regulars at Sartoria include Welsh & Jefferies Managing Director Malcolm Plews – one of the greatest cutters of his generation – who likes to order the antipasti menu from a table at the bar that offers an eagle's eye view of his competitors on the Row.

*Sartoria*  
20, Savile Row  
London W1S 3PR  
Lunch served Monday to Friday 12-15h  
Bar menu served Monday to Friday 12-1h  
Reservations: +44 (0)207 534 7000  
[www.sartoriabar.co.uk](http://www.sartoriabar.co.uk)

### NOBU BERKELEY

The legendary Nobu Matsuhisa is revered worldwide for his new Japanese cuisine and first conquered London with Nobu on the 1st floor of Christina Ong's Park Lane hotel, The Metropolitan. Within six months of opening Nobu Berkeley in 2006, the restaurant earned its first Michelin Star. Whereas Nobu Metropolitan is stark and ascetic, David Collins' designs for Nobu Berkeley are lush and sinuous with eau de nil leather banquettes that curve like the road to

Monte Carlo, silver columns and wrought iron chandeliers reminiscent of a petrified forest. The 200-seater space combines Deco decadence with immense charm. All of Nobu's signature dishes are present and correct (not least the now clichéd blackened cod) but executive chef Mark Edwards also presents dishes such as roast whole poussin with jalapeno, ponzu butter and yuzu lemon garlic cooked in a Japanese wood-burning stove. Sushi and sashimi from Nobu is arguably the finest you'll taste in London, but more creative dishes such as shiitake mushroom salad, king crab claw tempura and tuna tataki with ponzu are not to be passed over in favour of the raw material menu. Somewhat eccentrically for London, Nobu Berkeley does not take reservations, except for tables of six or more. The Hibachi table seats 12.

*Nobu Berkeley*  
15, Berkeley Street  
London W1J 8DY  
Dinner served Monday to Wednesday 18-23h,  
Thursday to Saturday 18h-midnight and  
Sunday 18-21h15  
Reservations: +44 (0)207 290 9222  
[www.noburestaurants.com](http://www.noburestaurants.com)

James Sherwood