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Exclusive London Shirtmakers Like Finest Swiss Shirtings

Text: Marie Scott
Photos: Pia Zanetti



What do Prince Charles, Ronald Reagan, Madame Pompidou and Paloma Picasso have in common? They all go to the mecca of bespoke shirtmaking, London's Jermyn Street, to have shirts made for them.

And where do the world's finest shirtmakers from the centre of excellence go for the best of shirtings? To Switzerland of course.

The association between these exclusive shirtmakers and Swiss textile producers is a long and lo-

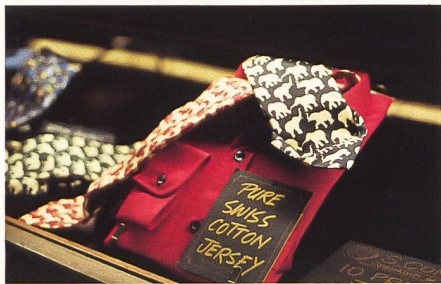
gical one. "If you are producing the very best and most expensive make of shirts, it obviously makes sense to have the best of fabric," one of Jermyn Street's craftsmen explained.

Jermyn Street is a narrow thoroughfare running parallel to London's famous Piccadilly and has catered to the rich and discerning for over three centuries, providing special services and craftsmanship of the highest order.

A tailor-made shirt from a shirtmaker in Jermyn Street, London, if possible of finest Swiss cotton fabric, is still an essential component of the well-groomed gentleman's appearance. Harvie & Hudson.

Yet it maintains an aura of reserve and its customers are largely "by introduction", many from one generation to the next. Essentially English, private and conservative, it has remained true to an old world code of conduct that has long since disappeared from most shopping centres in the modern world.

It began life as a desirable residential area in the mid-17th century, close to the Court of St. James, and gradually became adopted as



the most select address in London for gentlemen and their clubs. This in turn meant that the trading direction of the street at the outset was influenced by the local masculine clientele – encouraging bootmakers, barbers, tobacconists, wine merchants, shirtmakers . . .

Today, there is almost a village charm about the old establishments grouped here and in the adjacent small streets – but the scope and variety of goods and services is ultra-sophisticated and metropolitan.

Many are still run by the families which founded them generations ago – as is the perfumers, Floris, founded in 1730; and the shoe shop Tricker's now into its fifth generation of family directors; and the shirtmakers, Hilditch & Key, whose final family link with the partners who started the company in 1899 retires this year.

The masculine influence remains but with world-wide rather than parochial appeal and the female of the species has long since come to appreciate the Jermyn Street qualities.

Art galleries, antique shops, china and gift houses, watchmakers, jewellers and tapestry specialists all contribute to the character

of the street. But it is as a centre for the finest gentlemen's clothing and accessories and requisites that Jermyn Street and its environs remain most famous – and for shirtmakers in particular.

Most of the shirtmakers still have a bespoke service – made-to-measure – though all now also carry ready-to-wear selections. Bespoke customers are offered a wide selection of shirtings, which are then hand cut to the individual specifications and take around a

The designation "Swiss made" is obviously regarded as an effective promotional argument for the quality of the material.

Swiss voile is regarded as a noble classic among eveningwear shirting fabrics. Turnbull & Asser.



month to be ready. Orders are usually in dozens or half dozens.

Generally recognised as the most famous of the Jermyn Street shirtmakers is Turnbull & Asser, an august establishment through whose portals have passed a cavalcade of the world's top names – Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Sir John Gielgud, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Douglas Fairbanks, Kirk Douglas, Robert Redford, the King of Greece, the Prince of Wales . . .

Its clientele reads like an international Who's Who and it continues to attract royalty and show-bize, politicians and businessmen from around the world. Photographs of them and their signatures line the walls.

Boldly striped shirts in two-fold cotton poplins have become a T & A hallmark but they offer an extensive selection of shirtings for their bespoke shirts, including silks, voiles, wool/cottons and linens. In Swiss shirtings, the voiles are a

steady favourite for evening dress styles. "Our customer expect the finest of voiles for these dress styles," said Simon Hobbs of Turnbull & Asser, "and these of course are from Switzerland. We would also use them for our customers in warmer climes".

The company has shops and concessions in many countries, but apart from the licensing arrangement in Japan, all merchandise is made within their own workrooms. In addition to shirts, they also make



Most of the renowned shirtmakers in Jermyn Street also carry ready-to-wear shirts, from classic one-colour models to conventional or fashionable stripes and checks. Hilditch & Key.

pyjamas, robes, nightshirts, dressing gowns and ladies' shirts and blouses, and there is also a bespoke tailoring branch just off Jermyn Street.

Just across the road from Turnbull & Asser is New & Lingwood. This house started life in 1865 as suppliers to the famous school of Eton (which boats more British Prime Ministers amongst its old boys than any other school). It still provides everything required by Etonians, from sporting caps to cuff links and rowing socks, with the exception of the traditional tailored tailcoat still worn as uniform by the boys.

New & Lingwood's headquarters remain in Eton, but they opened a branch shop in Jermyn Street early this century and now have others in the City of London and in Cambridge.

A gentleman from South Africa recently acquired this old family firm. Since then, an entire new collection has been put together, covering knitwear, ties, clothing,

leathergoods, hats etc – but with shirts still the pre-imminent line.

As with all Jermyn Street shirtmakers, the classic business shirt is the mainstay of New & Lingwood business. But in the new collection, they have included some more fashionable designs, including horizontal stripes and bright zinging colours. Swiss shirtings are important here, including two-fold 160 cottons, voiles and wool/cottons. These ultra-fine wool/cottons are used for shooting/country shirts, designed to be worn with a tie.

"As we are producing an expensively made shirt, it makes sense to use the best of shirtings," said Mark Paterson of New & Lingwood. "For us, that means Swiss. We buy largely from representatives here, with some designs exclusive to us."

Hilditch & Key is another classic Jermyn Street shirtmaker. Whilst aware that men's shirts remain its core business, this company recognised the growing importance of female customers. Such recognition was spurred by custom of Marlene Dietrich, who had all her shirts made here on classically masculine lines.

Other famous female clients followed and a ready-to-wear collection of ladies shirts was introduced ten years ago. Such has been its success that this now includes blouses, as well as shirts, all made

in the finest of Swiss fabrics.

"To justify the price of our ladies shirts, which have all the attention to detail of our men's shirts, we have to use not only good fabrics but ones that are a little different, won't be seen everywhere – and which we can obtain in relatively small amounts", explained designer Danielle Smallburger. We have found Swiss materials the best for us and the women's collection is now very successful. On the men's side, we use some voiles for the dress shirts and I hope we may be able to use more of the cotton poplins in the future."

Customers include the Princess of Wales, Paloma Picasso, Madame Pompidou, Joan Collins, and on the men's bespoke side, there are all manner of Lords, Dukes and Earls, plus such showbiz names as Sinatra, Tom Cruise and Mel Brooks. They are particularly proud of the fact that Karl Lagerfeld has his shirts made by them to his designs.

Adjacent to Jermyn Street in the nearby Savile Row, is Bowring &

For shirts and pyjamas a wide selection of Swiss fabrics from Albrecht & Morgen, Hausammann & Moos and Fischbacher is available. New & Lingwood.





Blouse-shirts and even fashionable blouses are also available, supplementing the shirt assortments. Almost exclusively, Swiss fabrics from Eugster & Huber, Fischbacher, Hausammann & Moos and Mettler are included in the Spring '93 collection of Hilditch & Key.

The selection of shirts for eveningwear available from a bespoke shirtmaker is situated within the traditional style range, as reflected by the interiors of these establishments. Turnbull & Asser.

Arundel, the most exclusive bespoke shirt house. Though they do carry some ready-to-wear shirts, their main business is in made-to-measure and they carry an amazing stock of some five to six hundred shirting designs.

Established in 1860, the business was family run until taken into the New & Lingwood stable some three years ago. It remains the quintessential English bespoke house, restrained, reticent about its clientele, conservative. Yet such is its continuing charm that sons continue to be brought along by fathers, many from America, to be introduced into the bespoke shirt wearing habit. It is not an inexpensive one, by any means. Only the finest of shirtings are used, a lot of them Swiss, including the very finest two-fold 170 poplins. Of these, Swiss shirtings are predominant. "Feel these superb 170 poplins", said Robert Whittaker of the company. "We use a lot of Swiss cotton poplins and voiles, some wool/cottons. These represent the really top level. For our sort of quality level, these are the cream".

They benefit from a close association with many of the surrounding tailors, who may recommend them and vice versa. Their clientele is illustrious, their order books are full, their future quite secure.

It is a measure of the enduring quality of the Jermyn Street area

that, even in the present economic climate, sufficient numbers of gentlemen continue to prefer to have their shirts made to order here. It just goes to show that service does have an enduring appeal, particularly when backed up by the tradition and charm.

One of the most exclusive tailor-made shirtmakers offers his customers a selection of five to six hundred shirting fabrics, among which the finest wool poplins come from Switzerland. Bowring & Arundel.

