

lars rindsig's view from the right



I'm a bit of a fogey. I dress like an old man and I particularly appreciate British clothes. Harris tweeds and Northampton brogues for the country and flannel and black Oxfords for the city. One of my particular fancies is Jermyn Street shirts; the sort with double cuffs, two-piece split yokes, matched stripes, mother of pearl buttons—and all that. But most of the (otherwise venerable) names in the old street have moved their production facilities to Eastern Europe or even the Far East where labour is cheap. And they'll cut costs by using fewer stitches per inch (so the cloth goes quicker through the sewing machine allowing more shirts to be produced in less time) and fusing collars with glue. So they're hardly Jermyn Street quality. The remaining two or three highest rated companies have their garments made in Scotland or Northern Ireland (and to better specifications). But not in Mayfair. So are they Jermyn Street shirts?

We've heard in this issue about the trouble with the appellation of wine and cheese. Similar issues are at stake if we look at fine clothing that is closely connected to a specific location like Jermyn Street—and particularly the mighty Savile Row. I don't go to the Row because I haven't yet managed to sell my mother to raise the funds (although I am taking offers). Like Champagne—but to an even greater extent—the Savile Row 'brand' is not only very valuable, but is so specific in its geography that you can find it in your A-Z. Bespoke suits, of course, don't grow out of the ground like grapevines, but since the training regimes and stylistic traditions are so firmly grounded on the Row the comparison isn't at all off. The Savile Row Bespoke Association is a trades association created in 2004 to protect the Row's tailoring tradition. It defines 'Savile Row' as any location within 100 yards of the actual street—as a number of tailors have workshops that extend to neighbouring properties.

Quite unlike the Champagne district, however, Savile Row isn't located in the countryside. It's in London W1 where property is dear. Companies like Holland Estates who own the majority of the properties on Savile Row could do better by renting the expensive space above the shops to solicitors or bankers, instead of tailors with ancient sewing machines. A number of the properties have stipulations that limit their use to sales and manufacture of clothes. But that definition also covers American purveyors of trendy Chinese-produced fashion clothing.

At the same time, Savile Row alumni like Edward Sexton and Thomas Mahon have moved out; Sexton to the—still posh—nearby area of Knightsbridge, while Mahon works out of an old Cumbrian manor house, and meets his clients in London. Both are Savile Row trained but decided rent was too high. "You can take the boy out of the Row but you can't take the Row out of the boy," says Sexton. And he's probably right; his work is highly regarded—but is it 'Savile Row'? The quality's still there, and the pedigree, but that coveted direct link to Savile Row isn't.

The tragic irony of truly-fine men's clothing is that Savile Row has marginalised itself because it's on Savile Row. Because the massive rents of the city centre workshops are channelled into the price of the suits, it makes more economic sense to go to a tailor in, say, the North, than to Henry Poole. Savile Row (and rent) is killing Savile Row.