The young man … dresses, when in London, in a neat dark suit, with well-pressed narrow trousers, cuffs to the sleeves of his jacket and possibly lapels to his waistcoat … he would feel uncomfortable in anything other than a hard collar and a bowler hat. His more daring companions may flourish a flowered waistcoat and a velvet-collared coat; but if I mention too eccentric examples I may frighten the reader out of my argument. Let us agree … that the average young man of position tries to give an air of substance without being stodgy: of having time for the niceties of life.¹

In 1954 London couturier Hardy Amies captured the wistful and undeniably elitist tone of mid-twentieth-century British fashion commentary. Amies belonged to a generation of designers who progressed from the duties of work on the wartime Utility scheme to a more glamorous postwar incarnation under the auspices of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers (ISLFD). Through its combination of traditional references (function-specific formal garments) with an ostensibly more utopian, democratic direction (new synthetic fabrics and an expansion of diffusion lines), their work was in tune with the dialectical tendencies of cultural production in 1950s Britain, which waxed nostalgically for prewar certainties whilst setting its sights firmly on the testing concerns of national reconstruction. With his fellow designers Norman Hartnell, Peter Russell, Charles Creed, Digby Morton, Michael Sherard, Victor Stiebel and John Cavanagh (the ISLFD was a clubby, all-male coterie), Amies tailored an Anglo-Saxon variation on the New Look, transporting the romantic escapism of Dior’s Paris confections from the Seine to the Thames. ISLFD photographic shoots featured models whose imperious demeanour hinted at an Albion unbowed by

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years of bombs and rationing. Typically, they graced the spaces of a seemingly unchanged capital city in the corsets and petticoats which announced an end to frugality. The patrician façades of Horse Guards Parade, Trafalgar Square and St James’s formed the backdrop for an astonishing display of female dandyism.

This juxtaposition of imperial London’s ‘manly’ topography with the silk and netting of the couturier’s salon is an intriguing one, for, as Amies’s opening comments reveal and as this chapter will go on to argue, it was in the arena of men’s rather than women’s fashion that the most significant postwar developments would take place. The distinctive framing of the New Look on London’s streets was perhaps suggestive of underlying concerns that the coming of an American-influenced mass-consumer culture, associated with feminine interests and desires, would further weaken London’s diminishing reputation as a political and economic centre of empire. Contemporary fashion promotions therefore presented the city as a contested landscape in which the gendered practices of production and consumption competed for prominence. Indeed, whilst the fortunes of the home textile and luxury goods industries were increasingly reliant on the patronage of middle-class women in the department stores of the capital – even as the docks and other traces of traditional masculine labour declined and the markets of the former colonies disappeared – London’s enduring status as the spiritual home to the gentleman appears if anything to have been strengthened during this transitional period. Such processes clearly demand a reorientation by the historian away from the usual concentration on women as innovators of fashionable style towards a consideration of the role of men in the operation of the fashion system.

Amies’s reflections on masculine clothing were inspired by his recent appointment as consultant for the tailoring firm Hepworth’s. His description of the dress-code of the aspirant young man is far more redolent of a long-established code for London life than the synthetic drafting of Parisian style on to the London scene that characterised the self-consciously patriotic activities of the ISLFD. The coordinates of what had become known as the Neo-Edwardian look are sketched out in Amies’s prose. This was a ‘revivalist’ style of dressing that is confidently displayed in Norman Parkinson’s 1950 photograph of a group of aristocratic Englishmen conversing in Savile Row. Tightly kitted-out in the products of that street, they have rejected the capacious hang of the Utility and Demob clothing that served their purpose in the drab circumstances of the recent past, opting for the panache of early twentieth-century sartorial styles – styles that in their original versions paid conscious homage to the Regency London of Beau Brummell. Bowler hats, polished shoes and rolled umbrellas hint at the glamour of
the regimental parade ground, a space which had always provided important inspiration for the London dandy, while velvet collars, embellished waistcoats, ticket pockets, covered buttons and turned-back cuffs recall the ostentation of the Edwardian race track and music hall. In its adherence to the accepted rules of dressing, its sentimental nostalgia, and its sharp sense of modernity, the look captured in Parkinson’s image also evoked dandyism’s dual capacity for conservatism and innovation. The rewriting of the dandy’s lexicon along revised class and territorial lines in the transformed and transforming London of the 1950s thus lent men’s fashion a heightened significance as a marker of change. This chapter aims to assess the consequences of this process for the formation of sartorial stereotypes which challenged gendered and class-based expectations, and to test its subsequent interpretation in ongoing accounts of the development of fashionable style in the capital.

As a city of concrete spaces and intangible atmospheres, postwar London figured as a crucible for such stylistic reinvention, but in the context of continuity. Roy Porter alludes to the period as an Indian Summer, with all the cozy possibilities that the phrase suggests: ‘the trams sailed majestically through pea-soupers; East Enders had their knees-up at the pub and went hop-picking in August; contented commuters … tended their herbaceous borders … variety enjoyed its swansong at the Hackney and Deptford Empires … The coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, when … neighbourhood parties were staged in bunting festooned streets, was the high spot of London as a prosperous, well-integrated, secure … city.’ Yet as the fifties progressed, premonitions of an unsettling modernity were more keenly felt. As tower blocks began to shadow church spires, new moral codes infiltrated the stuffiness of an official culture still run on Victorian lines, leading to ‘a rare alliance between youth culture and commerce, aristocratic style and a new populism’. This was felt keenly in the changes affecting men’s clothing. Popular historian Harry Hopkins, writing ten years later, pinpointed the social ramifications of a masculine style revival, whose expressive appeal seemed as rooted in the postwar cityscape as the new architectural grammar of plate-glass and steel which jostled for space with ‘the time-honoured observances of cornice and moulding, pediment and column’:

And thus it came about that a … discreet fashion revival among young men … in the West End in 1948 … a very tentative riposte to the women’s ‘New Look’ … crossed the River and, exaggerated – almost consciously guyed – became the defiant uniform of what the newspapers were soon calling the ‘New Edwardians’. But most significant perhaps, was the ‘Teddy outfit’s function as the badge of a half-formed, inarticulate radicalism … A sort of half-conscious thumping-of-the-nose, it was designed to establish that the lower orders could be as arrogant and as to-the-manson-born as the toffee-nosed ones across the River … The uniform’s most important features lay, firstly, in the fact that … it was, in origin, English class-based,
Figure 1: ‘Savile Row’, Norman Parkinson, 1950. Courtesy of the Norman Parkinson Estate.
secondly in its cost which ... might exceed £100 ... The Teddy costume conquered district after district in those years, making the fortunes of many a little corner tailor – and hairdresser – astute enough to 'humour the kids'. But, finally ... the uniform gave way before the ... gentler, more civilised, immensely variegated Italian and Continental styles which seemed to confirm and usher the opening society. And in England, where male fashions had always been one of those 'understood' things – essentially aristocratic, fear-edged, inhibition inlaid – nothing, it seemed, could ever be the same again.3

Hopkins's account of the rise of the teddy style, which traces its origins as a whim of upper-class Mayfair playboys, its migration to the deprived boroughs of south and east London, its importance as a mode of social resistance, and its rapid commercialisation at the hands of a growing retail sector adapted to the desires of the teenager, has become an oft-repeated mantra of sociologists and historians of popular culture. In the unprepossessing frame of the newly fashion-conscious postwar adolescent, journalists and academics have been able to inscribe a range of narratives that position the teddy boy at the centre of debates whose subjects have been as various as the collapse of older working-class ideals, the inevitability of crime in times of affluence, the homogenising effects of American culture, and the impact of new forms of teenage consumption on all of the above. The teddy boy was indeed a significant actor on the postwar social scene, his features and actions almost immediately taken up for analysis by columnists, photographers, film-makers, and criminologists.

The post-mortems ensued before the teddy-boy style was announced dead by the novelist and chronicler of youth cultures Colin MacInnes, who stated in 1965 that, 'though caricaturists (who really ought to start looking a bit – even the best of them) still draw dated Ted stereotypes, the style, in its authentic pure absurdity, is now only to be found in outlying holes and corners (I last saw it in a caff at Goring-on-Thames)'.4 Sociologist T. R. Fyvel produced the first classic account of the mode in 1961. Noting their transference from Mayfair to Lambeth in the early 1950s, he identified in the dress codes of south London gang members a rejection of 'respectability' in preference for the easy attractions of a life passed on the borders between the legal and the illicit.5 For Fyvel this signification bore material consequences which linked the Tony Curtis hairstyles, 'slim jim' ties and crepe-soled creepers adopted by the hoodlums who terrorised his own north London habitat to a generalised deterioration of the physical environment of the inner city, and the passing of 'traditional' family values for a selfish celebration of short-term pleasure:

Each Saturday and Sunday ... I could see the small dark figures of boys and half-grown youths ... wearing the identical Teddy boy suits ... I sometimes thought that
one could see the social wasteland through which they wandered in actual visual terms ... Row upon row of squat nineteenth-century slum streets ... stood condemned and so were harshly degraded, like a whole way of life ... together with memories of worn doorsteps ... mother at the sink and father shirt-sleeved in the kitchen with his newspaper ... To the young ... it did not matter that in its back streets this was a dispiriting region of blank warehouses, untidy street markets and sleazy lodging houses. In the main streets at any rate, the young felt surrounded by a full tide of confident life ... reflected in the ultra-modern layout of the chainstores; in shop windows crammed with radios, television sets, record players ... This London, offering its pleasures freely to those with money, spoke with the only voice of authority that mattered. 

Fyvel proceeded to illustrate the destructive tendencies of urban modernity, and of capitalism in particular, through recourse to detailed case-studies of those ‘delinquent’ young men whose pleasures disturbed his world view. He listed their expenditure on clothing, graded their leisure haunts and analysed their social prejudices. His was a cynical mode of investigation that thrilled to the otherness of the life which it aimed to describe whilst reserving a palpable disdain for the material evidence that constituted the style itself (which was clearly assumed to be lacking in taste). Thus the trappings of working-class dandyism, though spectacular in their expense and visual effects, symbolised little more than a naïve trust in the power of consumerism to transform humdrum realities. Furthermore, this false consciousness was seemingly so pandemic that Fyvel felt it necessary to show how its consequences could be felt globally from the Soviet Union through to the United States. London was simply one amongst many examples of a local culture in retreat from a coarsening vulgarity.

Later academic interpretations, predicated on an understanding of ‘culture’ as a mediated practice, rather than a universalising instrument of value-laden comparisons, have taken a less totalising view of the teddy-boy phenomenon. Texts including Paul Rock and Stanley Cohen’s essay of 1970 have been more sympathetic to the idea that clothing and material culture might aid a negotiated sense of self-identification rather than disguise some older notion of authenticity. Yet in their clear celebration of the romantic ideal of the working-class rebel, Rock and Cohen came close to supplanting one skewed version of reality with another. Their concern was to highlight the way in which the trajectory of the teddy boy was as much a process of journalistic misrepresentation, as it was a sequence of commercial and social transactions which placed the sartorial choices of slum dwellers on a par with those of West End socialites. Theirs is a discourse based on a premise of ownership, both of the image of delinquency as it was propounded by reactionary journalists, and of an attitude which Rock and Cohen felt found its most compelling incarnation on the streets of Lambeth rather than in the bars of Mayfair.
Dick Hebdige in his influential deconstruction of British subcultural styles, published in 1979, took a similarly proprietorial tone in relation to a selective trajectory of musical and fashion-related trends. In the most successful, elements of ‘authentic’ black street culture had been appropriated by white male working-class pioneers to forge radical new identities. For Hebdige, the ‘uncompromisingly proletarian and xenophobic’ teddy boy represented little more than a retrograde denial of the ‘real’ roots of rock and roll.8

Historian Geoffrey Pearson punctured this residual understanding that subcultural activities can in any meaningful way be coopted to particular political and moral ends by their investigators. Such caricatures, he stated, ‘have offered a convenient metaphor of social change … The entrance of the dazzling war babies in their ted suits, understood as harbingers of irresponsible affluence and rootless materialism, seemed to fit the bill precisely.’9 However:

What was and is totally submerged in the conventional understanding of the Teddy Boys was that their style and demeanour was by no means unprecedented. Their rough fighting, territorial edginess, for example, is better understood as a continuation of earlier forms of gang-life in working-class neighbourhoods – rather than a sudden departure from tradition. So, too, the Teds had borrowed large parts of their supposedly unprecedented cultural equipment from earlier youth cultures … It is clear that the conventional picture of the sudden and unrivalled appearance of the ‘affluent’ and ‘Americanised’ Teddy Boys … must be seen as a gross distortion of the actual events.10

The phrase ‘territorial edginess’ stands out in Pearson’s account as the most suggestive route by which further investigation of the teddy-boy phenomenon might proceed. For in a geographical and temporal, as well as in a more conceptual sense, it is his location at the borders between north and south, central and inner, respectable and dangerous London, his emergence on the cusp of pre- and postwar social attitudes, and the manner in which he floats across the racial, sexual and class-based divisions of the capital that still make the teddy boy such a beguiling metropolitan figure. At the time of his notoriety, bohemian writers and artists as diverse as MacInnes, Denton Welch, John Minton and the young Joe Orton were fascinated by the possibilities which the bomb sites of working-class London held for erotic adventure and artistic inspiration.11 The proletarian dandy emerged as a ‘romantic’ hero of those spaces – an attractive focus for various desires that have persisted as a form of urban folk legend. A denizen of the edge, the teddy boy’s shifting characteristics are so contingent on these imaginative and spatial specificities that it is imperative for the historian to locate the broader contexts in which his identity was formed before attempting any more ambitious an interpretation of his elusive energies.

In all of the above explanations of the teddy boy’s significance, the working-class milieu of south London is cited as an important influence on the honing of subcultural identities. In attempting to show how these expressions of selfhood were more complex than the classic accounts have suggested, this section aims to interrogate the manner in which representations of the teddy boy overlapped with loaded descriptions of his environment, contributing to the construction of powerful sartorial myths and actual social practices. When director Karel Reisz and photographer Walter Lassally produced their essay on the lives of members of a south London youth club in the film *We are the Lambeth Boys* in 1958, they were attempting to portray their subjects in a manner which avoided the value judgements of the sociologist or the cultural critic. They strove to stimulate a visual and emotional liveliness through the ‘un-mediated’ directness of their technique, inspiring personal expression from subject and audience by their recognition of the poetic significance of the ‘everyday’. Reisz’s tender evocation of a week’s work and pleasure amongst the self-consciously fashionable working-class teenagers of Kennington (a district of Lambeth) provides a glimpse of a society in transition between the familial duties and work expectations of an older generation and the more fluid networks of friendship and pleasure which the modern city offered. Most startlingly the film is a snapshot of late Neo-Edwardianism as it affected living consumers. These are not the shadowy and threatening figures of Fyvel’s nightmares or the partisan hooligans of Hebdige’s thesis; instead they engage in a game of back-yard cricket, exchange flirtatious banter with female members of the club, discuss the cost of modern tailoring, pose on the edges of the dance-floor, and wheel their bicycles towards school assembly or first jobs. Reisz’s teddy boys, resplendent in the narrow ties and pointed shoes of their cult and choreographed against a (slightly incongruous) soundtrack of modern jazz, represent a mode of citizenship with far more positive overtones.

Other competing representations of the south London mise-en-scène were not so complimentary. Ten years before, in one of several social and economic surveys of post-blitz London commissioned in the late forties, Harry Williams had portrayed a district bedevilled by a grim sense of ennui. ‘Ugliness’, he stated, ‘was the dominant impression of our visit, tiredness the next. The white drawn faces of the women shoppers, picking over the rubbish on sale with dispirited fingers, the unnatural quietness of the children, the sullen brooding withdrawal of the men spoke of a state of affairs never approached during the worst moments of the war.’ This is a rhetoric of poverty inherited from the dehumanising accounts of the East End poor which had characterised touristic and philanthropic writings of the late nineteenth century. Williams relied on
the same dismissive terminology that had been employed by his forebears to describe the cheap offerings of the countless street markets which marked the territory for outsiders.\textsuperscript{14} Money, he implies, was not necessarily in short supply, though a ‘tawdry’ choice of goods and the lack of a will to spend compromised the desire to consume in any manner that would have made sense to a visiting middle-class journalist. More shocking still was the apparent lack of self-respect evidenced by the bodies of the locals: ‘Taken all in all they are a poor lot. Some of the young girls are fine and upstanding – the women are notably better than the men – and a handful of athletic young men may catch the eye, but look closer at the herd. Bowed shoulders, spindly legs, concave chests, weak eyes ... bad teeth ... small frames ... grey faces ... Look for yourself and see.’\textsuperscript{15} Though damning and unsympathetic, Williams’s repulsion sheds some light on the sense of threat which the ‘alien’ figure of the teddy boy aroused in observers who had perhaps come to expect only grey submission from the sad streets across the Thames. His topography of dingy markets and dowdy local shops maps a scenario in which working-class dandies might find copious and adaptable retail outlets for the purchase of their wardrobes together with a ready-made ‘outdoor’ theatre for their eventual display. Here was a longstanding culture of the street

\begin{figure}
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\caption{‘Gambling Group, Southam Street, North Kensington’, Roger Mayne, 1958. Courtesy of Roger Mayne.}
\end{figure}

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corner and the crowd, a gritty setting for shameless acts of sartorial delinquency.

Delinquency was a subject which concerned the respondents of a Mass Observation report of the same year (1949) who aimed to record the habits of ‘problem’ juveniles in similar inner-London slum districts. The language of the report had not yet picked up on the teddy-boy terminology favoured by the newspapers, so that descriptions of the clothing adopted by young gang-members were free of the familiar references to aristocratic or West End modes of dressing, preferring instead to cite the influence of Hollywood or more localised sartorial characterisations as the source of a collective look. Bored and pointless acts of destructive energy were bracketed with transgressive sartorial tastes, making sense of a blitzed and jagged urban landscape in which the presence of violence was constantly referenced:

Two youths, ages about 18, are standing outside a dairy. They pick up between them a large crate of empty milk bottles and throw them in the road, breaking all of them … they run across the road and join a gang of youths numbering about 15 or 16. Most of them are dressed very flashily – striped flannels and ‘house coat’ style of belted jacket; large, loosely knotted, plain coloured ties; and several of them are wearing the wide-brimmed American style of trilby. Long ‘side-boards’ are a prominent feature with the majority of them.

The wardrobe of these young men, with its belted jacket, loose flannels, bright tie and extravagant hat, paid homage to the enduring style of the gangster film, a source of inspiration to British adolescents since well before the war and not especially linked to London. Certainly it was a look which lent some force to the swaggering demeanour of the dance-hall habitués noted by the Mass Observers, its loose and flapping layers well-adapted to a slouching, street corner posture. More specific to the circumstances of working-class London was the choice of the epithets ‘Spiv’ and ‘Dago’ to describe a flaunting of garish accessories, a combination of formal and casual items and what was interpreted as an ‘effeminate’ obsession with the hair:

Three youths of a ‘spiv’ type have sauntered in. They are all wearing grey pin-striped flannels and the ‘house coat’ style of jacket. Two of them are wearing white shirts with a vivid paisley tie, whilst the other is in a brilliant open-necked sports shirt. All these have carefully cared for hair – long with artificial waves, and a heavily greased ‘Boston slash back’ in two cases.

The ‘spiv’ was a figure rooted in the realm of caricature, but whose extreme characteristics bore that sense of familiarity encouraged by an acquaintance with real versions on the street. Ubiquitous during the war years, his delineation provided a precedent for later descriptions of the teddy boy. Harry Hopkins recalled his presence in the life of the nation as...
‘an abstraction’. The spiv was ‘a figure in a modern morality play. The convention was rapidly established by the pocket cartoonists ... peaked shoulders, the wasp waist, the dazzle tie, the hoarse behind-the-hand whisper “Nylons”.’ In the developing Welfare State the spiv’s flouting of the rules (circumnavigating the restrictions of rationing with a ready supply of black-market luxuries) positioned his conspicuous delight in

Figure 3: ‘Charing Cross Road Shop Window’, Henry Grant, 1951. Courtesy of the Museum of London.
display as a taboo. Like the teddy boy, he established his patch in the backstreets of London’s poorer districts and marked out his distinctive identity through excessive grooming. But whilst the spiv adopted the sleek glamour of the Latin crooner in front of his bathroom mirror (good looks aiding his professional role as a swindler), the teddy boy called on a more extensive battery of styling techniques that placed his prouder narcissism firmly in the public sphere. As T. R. Fyvel remarked, hairstyles ‘were a source of particular pride and attention to their wearers and were acquired by appointments with special barbers, which involved the use of dryers and hairnets and cost between 7s 6d and 15s for a setting, a considerable outlay for young wage earners’.22

Thus by 1949, though Mass Observation doesn’t name him as such, the figure of the teddy boy was rapidly emerging as a particular working-class London type; Anglo-Irish or ‘cockney’ in his associations in contrast to the continental and American preferences of London’s sizeable Italian and Maltese gang members. Though he drew some inspiration from the ‘spivvy’ style for which Colin MacInnes coined the term ‘American Drape’ – a style that ‘hit Charing Cross Road in the late forties and constituted the first underground revolt against wartime uniforms and sackcloth and the whole Men’s Wear conception of English male attire’ – his look was far more negotiated, deliberately differentiated and consequently more subversive than that.23 Rather than lift an idea of sharp respectability straight from the movies or steal it wholesale from memories of GI magnificence, the working-class version of Neo-Edwardianism located its referents closer to home, in the greyness of the inner suburbs, amongst the stilted hair-cut photographs and pots of brilliantine that gathered dust in the windows of barber shops, or the tailors’ notices which announced the ease with which trousers could be tapered to the latest width.24 Almost parochial in their styled outrages against the accepted way of being, the young of Lambeth engaged in a struggle which ironically bound them closer to home. Local historian Mary Chamberlain demonstrates how working-class cultures south of the Thames positively encouraged this attention to surfaces, those proofs of selfhood which the teddy boy’s uniform so effectively communicated. Such details demonstrate the need to locate fashion practices within and against their local contexts, revealing nuances which contemporary and subsequent observers might well have overlooked:

Those dreamy acres were far … from monolithic. They were the battleground where a war of class and status was fought … It mattered if you took in washing, visited the pawn shop, if shoes were unpolished and clothing torn … It mattered because in those finer rituals … lay a definition of self … a way of circumventing and resisting the threat of destitution which lurked forever round every corner of working-class neighbourhoods.25

Journalist Douglas Sutherland claimed to have encountered as despondent a sartorial scene on returning to London’s West End in 1945 as Harry Williams had stumbled across in Lambeth. The indignities of clothes rationing seemed designed to embarrass any pretender who sought re-entry into London’s postwar social throng. Sutherland was only able to pass muster through his skilful adaptation of some cast-offs formerly belonging to a show-business acquaintance:

The two suits I took, not without some diffidence, to that most elegant of all tailoring establishments, Messrs Kilgour, French and Stanbury, in Dover Street. So it came about that, in shabby suited London, I suddenly blossomed into one of the best dressed men-about-town ... It was also quite fun, when envious acquaintances used to inquire the secret of my … magnificence, to flash at them the label sewn on my inside jacket pocket which still bore the name of Mr Oscar Hammerstein.26

This confident approximation of style gained through the author’s privileged access to elite tailoring provision and his surreptitious borrowing from the shabby-genteel world of bohemia, is as good a summary as any of the circumstances pertaining in ‘fashionable’ late forties London which contributed towards the success of the Edwardian look and its variants in both ‘upper-class’ and avant-garde circles. The combination of constrained means, a rather ‘raffish’ relaxation of moral and social codes, together with a nostalgic yearning for leisureed prewar lifestyles dictated a dress code which was by turns tightly controlled, impossibly presumptuous, often misleading and rather sentimental in its effects. Sutherland’s passage through the louche mews pubs of Kensington and Chelsea, the patrician afternoon drinking dens of Mayfair’s Shepherd Market and the exclusive clubs of Fitzrovia in the final years of the decade furnished him with a gallery of aristocratic rogues whose singular appearance set the context for a look which never strayed far from the theatrical or the deceptive. The Star Tavern, behind Belgrave Square was a typical Knightsbridge destination, home to:

a collection of undoubtedly rich, if reckless, spenders of their inheritances [and] others whose financial backgrounds were less impressive but who nonetheless were eager to be regarded as young men-about-town of good social background … what they had in common was a certain vagueness about their social background coupled with an insistence that they had enjoyed a public school education. They also shared a liking for Savile Row suits, and such ostentatiously displayed gee-gaws as Cartier watches, gold cigarette lighters and recently hyphenated surnames.27

Savile Row, whose well-crafted products finally made their way (by one means or other) onto the backs of Sutherland’s privileged voluptuaries, maintained a distanced froideur as the focus for a more respectable renaissance. This famous street of tailors located in the triangle between Regent Street, Piccadilly and Old Bond Street, had enjoyed a prominence
as the source of bespoke clothing for the aristocracy since the mid eighteenth century. Its fortunes had, however, experienced a levelling off in the interwar years owing to competition from manufacturers of mass-produced suits and the popularity of a more relaxed American mode of dressing. Immediately before the war the environs of Old Bond Street had witnessed the maturing of a home-grown couture industry whose opulence almost rivalled Paris. Fashion journalist Francis Marshall described what was left in 1944, noting that ‘the most famous salons are nearly all within a small area of the West End, many being in Bruton Street and Grosvenor Street. They range from elaborately decorated salons with the most modern decor of mirrors, glistening chandeliers, stuffed satin upholstery and baroque ornaments, to the dress shop which is little more than a small flat on a top floor of Brook Street.’ Hardy Amies’s move to Savile Row and the foundation of the ISLFD after the war continued the discreet glamorisation of this quarter of the West End, and though the focus was predominantly on the marketing of a very English and aristocratic version of femininity, the rising importance of men’s wear had some impact on the tenor of its streets. This can be measured through the demonstrable influence of classic tailoring techniques on the style of London couture, and also through the co-option of the reticent business culture associated with the world of the bespoke tailor by a wider constituency of West End retailers. In 1953 the British Travel and Holiday Association produced a guide to shopping in the capital which asserted that ‘Bond Street is to London what the Rue de la Paix is to Paris, but with this difference; whereas the Rue de la Paix is a broad and pretentious street that carries its distinctions with an … air of self importance, Bond Street seems to be concerned only with self-effacement.’ The good manners of the Savile Row suit thus lent a quiet restraint to the district and, though the profound luxury of its finish was never in question, the parading of those qualities would have seemed impossibly rude.

As a symbol of tradition the Savile Row suit still maintained a powerful grip on definitions of Britishness in the postwar era. A. W. Allon of the tailoring trade press stated in 1949 that ‘in an age of tremendous industrialisation it is good to know that one craft at least retains its position in the general scheme of things – as solidly important as ever. Indeed the craft of tailoring has become more than just the means of making a living: it has become a fundamental part of the British way of life.’ In the context of a sartorial sense of Britishness, London tastes played a distinctive role. An R. J. Pescod writing in the same tailoring compendium as Allon paid appropriate homage to the superiority of ‘West End’ cutting techniques which in the nineteenth century distinguished the clothing of the ‘upper ten’ from the provincial styles of
the middle classes. A combination of factors, including a well-judged sharpness in the making-up of seams, creases and darts, high-quality textiles and a relaxed ease of wear, identified the Savile Row pedigree of a suit and whilst distinctions had since become less easy to spot, to the trained eye of the artisan or the discerning consumer there was ‘a difference – difficult as it is to define. There is a subtle quality about the suit which emanates from the West End today which sets its seal upon the place of its origin as the indisputable mecca of good tailoring.’ Pescod attempted to delineate precisely what that quality constituted in terms of a specific style, though clear definitions were elusive in a system of meaning that protected its adherents from ‘vulgar’ emulation through the circulation of deliberately vague and socially exclusive codes. The single-breasted waistcoat boasted ‘narrow shoulders, deep armholes, and rather long points’. The single-breasted lounge jacket was marked by its ‘gracefulness of outline’ and ‘comfort’. ‘The waist is moderately defined and the hips are fairly close. A medium amount of drape is provided.’ Finally, in the evening dress coat, Savile Row saw its finest product. ‘In no other garment … is there such scope for the cutter’s skill … many of the finest examples of evening dress wear have come from houses in the West End; and London is proud of such work. The long sweeping lapels, the tapering skirt – these are the main points of style that should be noted.’

Though essentially conservative and locked into a long tradition of understatement, it is clear that the components of the Savile Row suit in 1949 were adaptable to the subtle exaggerations that would constitute the Neo-Edwardian style. The editorials and letters pages of the trade journal *Men’s Wear* traced the ways in which its flamboyance was a combative response both to the deprivations of textile shortages, and to a desire for distinction and display amongst those who sat at the edges of the establishment or in the demi-monde which was as powerful as that felt by young working-class men across the Waterloo Bridge or along the Mile End Road. In 1947 the frustrations of austerity were causing concern. Under the shocking header ‘Burlington Arcade had pyjamas at 11s’ a correspondent reported:

‘The East End has come to the West End’. In these words a representative of Noble Jones, hosiers and shirtmakers in London’s exclusive Burlington Arcade, W1, described the appearance of considerably cheaper than usual lines in West End hosiers’ windows. A *Men’s Wear* reporter saw utility pyjamas at 11s, ties at 4s 6d and shirts at 9s 11d in the famous shopping thoroughfare … ‘We can’t get much else’ a leading hosier said … ‘It is a complete stalemate’ he went on. ‘People with taste just won’t buy this stuff, and yet it is the only type of thing we get these days.’

Five years later, as the spectre of clothes rationing faded, London’s resurgent social calendar clearly dictated a greater degree of formality and an attention to self-presentation amongst men which bordered on the
extravagant. In April 1952 the headline boasted “Men now Dress-Clothes Conscious at West End Restaurants” says Berkley West, Men’s Wear Style Critic.’ The article continued:

Eighteen months ago London’s Savoy Hotel put a ban on admittance … unless one wore dinner jacket … or tails. Within six months the ban was lifted. The attempt to restore pre-war sartorial standards failed … partly because it was made too soon after the end of clothes rationing; and partly because it was impractical to enforce the rule on foreign visitors … Only a few of London’s … restaurants and clubs now demand tenir-rigueur. Perhaps it is for this very reason that men now, quite voluntarily dress for dinner in the West End … At private parties too, men’s styles are attracting … more attention than women’s gowns. When the … Marquis Pardo de Santayana gave a party recently at his Hyde Park Gate flat, men’s styles were so outstanding that they were commented on by several consumer newspapers. Reason, on this occasion, was the array of coloured and embroidered waistcoats worn with single breasted dinner-jacket suits.35

Throughout the coronation year Men’s Wear journalists continued to hail the return of formal styles of dress. Features like the embroidered waistcoat or the turned-back cuff were at first associated by commentators with ‘the top end of the trade’, although the wider take-up of the trend was gathering pace. In October ‘a Pathé pictorial film in Technicolor, featuring the clothes worn by sporting, stage and radio stars’, was released with great anticipation. As Men’s Wear proclaimed, ‘the four minute feature, entitled “Man About Town” … will focus the attention of millions of cinema goers on men’s clothes … designed and styled both for comfort and appearance, and not just produced to standard patterns … Filmed at the Victoria and Albert Museum, among the treasures of the past, the picture suggests … that the colourful male costumes of bygone days have not given place completely to body covering which has no creative genius, but, rather, that they have been succeeded in this age by a new and modern conception of styling.’36 The lubricating effects of show-business played a crucial role in both popularising and to an extent neutralising a masculine look that veered dangerously towards the stagey, for in its theatrical incarnation the Neo-Edwardian style was increasingly read as sexually subversive or ‘camp’. In their most extreme variations the contrived bodies of Savile Row’s more prominent followers paid allegiance to a dandified philosophy of life in which elegant repose and a certain withdrawal from the humdrum bother of modern living could be summed up in the placing of a button-hole. Cecil Beaton and Kenneth Tynan celebrated the arch ‘Edwardian’ outlook in their publication Persona Grata of 1953. As an apt example, the theatrical entrepreneur Hugh ‘Binkie’ Beaumont sprawled in profile on a chaise longue across one of Beaton’s photographs. Tynan’s acerbic prose described the effect:

His social manner is flawless, twinkling without smugness, shining without slickness; the gestures are soft and self-effacing, inducing a gentle hipnosis [sic] … as he talks

he smokes, insatiably but smoothly … His trick of holding his cigarette between the middle two fingers while wearing a monogrammed signet ring on the little one, represents his only homage to dandyism. [He] … favour[s] a lazy, glazed, leaning tenor, which irons out its sentences as if they were so many silk shirts. ‘Terrible’ is the universal epithet.37

Ultimately it was Beaumont’s body, as much as his clothing, which marked him out as a dandy, the softness of his voice deputising for the luxury of silk shirts. But perhaps this was the logical destination for an elite sartorial practice which lost its visible potency at a moment when refinement, modernity, outrage and all those other dandified preserves were opened up to a teenage market on an unprecedented commercial scale. In such a context distinction could only be marked by rather than on the body. As pop journalist Nik Cohn stated almost twenty years later, ‘the Edwardian look … lasted ’til about 1954, by which time it had been taken up and caricatured by the teddy boys, who made it so disreputable that even homosexuals were embarrassed to wear it. Nothing could have been more ironic: having started as an upper-class defence, Edwardiana now formed the basis for the first great detonation of male working-class fashion.’38

Giving credence to Cohn’s retrospective analysis, *Men’s Wear* anxiously attempted to retrieve from the hands of ‘degenerates’ and hooligans what had been a tailoring godsend, even as Beaumont drew gracefully on his cigarette. In an extended article of October 1953 the debate was a semantic one, aiming to differentiate the sartorial slang of south London thugs from the received pronunciation of Savile Row. In July of that year a stabbing case on Clapham Common had aroused the interest of the press, largely on account of the dress of the perpetrators. During the trial the *Daily Mirror* reported of the ringleader that:

he took great pains to look like a dandy. Like most of his companions, nearly all his money went on flashy clothes and just before the murder he borrowed twelve pounds from his uncle to buy a suit … This man was a born coward beneath his … gay dog clothes.39

Though the words teddy boy were not used by the newspapers at this stage, *Men’s Wear* both recognised and tried to refute a connection:

Mention of Edwardian-suited youths in the recent … trial … at the Old Bailey has created the impression … that this style has been adopted generally by that section of young men who parade in groups around the streets. Inquiries I have made reveal that nothing could be further from the truth. The broad shouldered, draped jacket suit, usually in gaberdine remains the mode. Those who chose Edwardian suits for their visits to Clapham Common did so because they wanted to be different from the rest, whose main concern is to dress like their favourite screen tough guys.40

The article went on to note how tailors and outfitters close to the Common either expressed indignation at the suggestion that they
specialised in ‘spiv’ clothes, or freely admitted that they catered for local teenage tastes. Mr Leonard Rose, the manager of tailoring chain Maxwell’s defended his customers, claiming that ‘the general run of lads in Clapham are no worse than anywhere else. They believe in colour and appearance.’ And Mr Harry Avoner who traded on Clapham High Street confirmed that this parochial taste for ‘colourful apparel’ fell short of *Men’s Wear*’s definition of the Edwardian: ‘We notice that a few of our younger customers drift to shops outside the locality which specialise in “more fashionable” styles, but the phase soon passes and they come back.’

It was the Edwardian look’s expensive reliance on a perfect fit that protected its direct appropriation by ‘undesirable’ constituencies, though even the bespoke trade could not retain copyright in Mayfair for ever. During the same year the ready-made industry was beginning to respond to the inevitable shift in taste that followed such events as the International Wool Secretariat’s show of men’s apparel at the Festival Hall in May 1952 and the aforementioned Pathé documentary. *Men’s Wear* noticed some hesitation on the part of mass-manufacturers to jettison the more standardised drape coat for the intricate sizing demanded by Edwardian lines, but the potential for renewal hidden in the new style, its bridging of modernity and tradition, positioned its clean silhouette as a symbol for London’s returning confidence. As Berkley West announced, ‘1953 was the turning-point in reviving clothes-consciousness’:

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The tense juxtapositions of elite display and street-violence which echoed the dual meanings of Mayfair hauteur and Lambeth bravado were perhaps not as unexpected or shocking as *Men’s Wear* journalists liked to claim. The playing out of London’s social ferment in the leisure and entertainment scene of the 1950s encouraged a degree of fluidity and sartorial exchange, promoting scenarios whereby players from both worlds could rub shoulders and borrow some of the glamour that attached itself equally to aristocratic profligacy and underworld criminality. Alan Markham’s 1959 guide for visiting roués revealed a sparkling night-time
map of burlesque bars, casinos and dance halls which traced those streets that during daylight hours gave themselves over to the sartorial trades:

London now has many more ... entertainments and cabaret shows to offer the visitor than has Paris ... The man ... responsible for this change of front is Percival Murray ... proprietor of the world famous Murray's Cabaret Club. His ... lead in the 'glamour plus' type of floor show has been very ably followed by many of his colleagues ... Edmundo Ros, for instance, the celebrated band leader ... welcomes visitors to his exclusive club in Regent Street. Bob and Alf Barnett control the highly successful and lush Embassy Club in Bond Street – established there since the early 1920's and Jimmy O'Brien is personally responsible for the destiny of that gay spot with its delectable show the 'Eve' in Regent Street.

Plush interior spaces like these provided a platform for display well removed from the grey austerity which marked open-air London. In the gilt and candlelight of the nightclub the elegance of Berkley West’s ‘new formality’ could be shown off to greatest advantage, whether the wearer hailed from Park Lane or Peckham.

Part of the attraction was clearly sexual, drawing on the established reputation of the West End as an adult playground which dated back to the Regency adventures of Tom and Jerry and beyond. Douglas Sutherland recalled how ‘the years immediately after the war saw the heyday of London as the vice capital of Europe ... In the West End, when the lights went up again, the prostitutes lined the streets.’ In this context Cohn’s comments on the status of Neo-Edwardianism as a transitory trend that passed from SW1 playboys to ‘homosexuals’ to petty criminals takes on a heightened resonance, though it is likely that the style transference which he claims as a linear and socially declining one was in effect more simultaneous, cutting across class constituencies in a dangerous and exhilarating manner. Frank Mort has provided a detailed analysis of the years preceding the Wolfenden Report, when the nature of vice in the West End (both hetero- and homosexual) penetrated the rigid structures of London life, linking the political and the cultural in a radical metropolitan network of barely suppressed desires. In a material form these connections manifested themselves in examples such as the pornographer John S. Barrington’s easy movement between social groups and photographic genres, facilitating his priapic and professional adventures along the length of the Charing Cross Road and encouraging a relish in self-reinvention that saw him adopting a series of outrageous sartorial disguises ranging from the bohemian to the dandified. Similarly on tin-pan alley, Jon Savage has shown how the manufactured personas of early English pop stars such as Adam Faith, Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard played on the gold-lamé camp of ‘revue culture’ and an eroticisation of the working-class lad – transactions which were the daily bread and butter of the Savile Row clad impresarios whose financial clout
and underworld connections re-formed the sprawling pleasure-zone south of Oxford Street. In other words, illicit carnal activity had something of a lubricating effect on the social relationships of postwar London, forging, behind a thin façade of respectability, channels through which new fashionable identities could emerge. The attendant frisson of life ‘Up West’ acted as an incentive for the gang members of south and east London to chance their arm in more glamorous territory, their own engagement with the centre bolstering its edgy reputation. Mass Observation singled out Jack, the son of a bookmaker and a shoplifter, as a typical denizen:

Jack, aged seventeen … has never had a job since he left school … His clothes are made for him by an expensive West End tailor, and he also wears hand-made shoes. His mother meets these bills and invites more. ‘About time you got yourself some new clobber, ain’t it Jack?’ she has said almost every time I have met her. In spite of his almost dandyish appearance he has no respect for these clothes and is quite frequently involved in typical West End ‘rough and tumbles’ … His days are spent lounging about the West End back streets with the ‘boys’, evenings in pubs and cheap West End clubs.

The mythical streets of Soho formed the epicentre for aimless boys like Jack, though Daniel Farson’s homage to the bohemian credentials of the district suggests that the attractions for young libertines were hollow: ‘the few places to go in Soho were wholesome to the point of boredom with a whiffle of skiffle on the washboard and a hiss of frothy coffee from a clean machine’. Furthermore, within its courts and alleys the opportunities for social mixing were more constrained in practice than they were in legend. It is notable that for all his bespoke polish, Mass Observation’s Jack confined his rambles to the cheaper clubs, suggesting that access to particular venues was still carefully policed. Certainly the familiar mythology of Soho appears to favour its reputation as a haunt for public school drop-outs, slowly pickling their artistic and literary talents in smoky upstairs drinking dens and fiercely exclusive members’ clubs. The brash and commercial concerns which fronted its pavements may have added local colour, but largely signified only ‘vulgarity’ to its self-appointed chroniclers.

In 1966 Frank Norman and Jeffrey Bernard could cite the 2i’s coffee bar in Old Compton Street as a fairly longstanding feature of the Soho scene, though their sense of alienation at its fashionable ‘show-biz’ surfaces is clear. Run by ex-stunt man Tom Littlewood and ex-wrestlers Paul Lincoln and Ray Hunter, the café launched the career of Tommy Steele and touted all the credentials of criminal connections, a well-defined ‘pop ambience’ (capitalised upon by the makers of the television music show Six Five Special who used its downstairs dance floor as a location) and a reputation as a meeting place for resting rent-boys,
necessary to qualify as a significant influence on the emergence of a recognisable, if highly romanticised, London 'youth style'. It was perhaps in spaces like these that the geographical, social and mythical overlap of masculine styles forged new and challenging identities. Yet the impact of such venues has arguably been written out of histories which aim to produce a spuriously ‘authentic’ version of Soho’s ‘bohemian’ past. Even Dick Hebdige seems to favour an analysis which annexes the ‘materialist’ gratifications of music, fashion and sex that drew the teddy boys across the bridges:

subcultures were in fact literally worlds apart. The college campuses and dimly lit coffee bars and pubs of Soho and Chelsea were bus rides away from the teddy boy haunts deep in the traditionally working-class areas of south and east London. While the beatnik grew out of a literate, verbal culture … and affected a bemused cosmopolitan air of bohemian tolerance, the ted was uncompromisingly proletarian and xenophobic.53

In his more astringent study of entrepreneurship and working-class style in the East End, historian Dick Hobbs presents the most convincing account of the haphazard ways in which the collision of classes and attitudes in the West End of the 1950s resulted in those bizarre new codes of cultural and sartorial behaviour that marked the following decade. These were codes which were also locked into older patterns of consumption and social habit that raise the context and status of the Neo-Edwardian suit and its wearers above the narrow and reductive connotations of posthumous interpretations. As Hobbs states:

Important in the formation of style was the cultural overlap of the East and West Ends of London that occurred … as a result of alterations in gambling laws, the resultant indiscreet manifestations of East End villains in West End clubs, and the fashionable 1960s notion of classlessness. Conversely show-business personalities and members of the aristocracy flirted with East End pubs and drinking clubs, and a cockney accent became de rigueur for acceptance into bourgeois society as pop stars, hairdressers, and photographers rediscovered their humble roots. For young East Enders, this opened up a privileged and exotic domain.54

It was this potential for personal reinvention that invested the neon lights of Soho with such promise, drawing acolytes from both ends of the social spectrum. Hobbs quotes former criminal John McVicar, who in his autobiography recalls his fascination with the actors in this twilight scenario of billiard hall, coffee bar and public house:

their rakishness, their flamboyant clothes, their tough, self-reliant manners, their rejection of conventional attitudes to sex and money … I unconsciously modelled myself on the more successful representatives of this new society.55

This productive crossing of boundaries between the respectable and the dissolute, the bespoke and the commercial, the elite and the popular, the
East and the West Ends clearly fuelled the emergence of a highly loaded and varied register of London-specific masculine styles which dominated the fashion scene between the end of the war and the beginnings of ‘the affluent society’ that defined the cultural tenor of the 1960s. The complex patterns of its formation endorse Angela Partington’s recent call for a fashion history of the period which rejects the simple logic of ‘trickle down’ theory for an understanding that ‘post war culture is not one in which distinctions and hierarchies collapse, but a “horizontalized” one in which differences multiply’.56 And its chameleon-like character made possible Colin MacInnes’s 1966 observation that:

a vogue for camp, rather too pretty garments ... has also spread from shoplets in north west Soho into the most unlikely places. And the pop-drainpipe line of Spitalfields is suddenly echoed, Chelsea-wards, by fawn ‘cavalry’ twill slacks you have to amputate both feet to get into … As has often been noted by dress sociologists, ‘top’ and ‘pop’ clothing are usually closer in style (and influence each other more) than either is to the wide intermediate ranges of bourgeois and petty bourgeois dress.57

Most importantly, we should recognise that the seemingly conflicted beginnings of this ‘menswear revolution’, as represented by Hardy Amies and his ilk, led inexorably through Mayfair, Soho and Lambeth to a cultural moment which Roy Porter sees as one of London’s finest:

A culture materialised that was irreverent, offbeat, creative, novel. Politically idealistic and undogmatically left-wing, it broke through class-barriers and captured and transformed many of the better elements of traditional London: its cosmopolitanism and openness, its village quality, its closeness, its cocktail of talent, wealth and eccentricity. There was a rare alliance between youth culture and commerce, aristocratic style and a new populism. It was a breath of fresh air.58

The association of Neo-Edwardianism with a reactionary and elitist Mayfair clique, a West End sexual subculture and inner-city recidivism seemed at the outset to hold few such promises, but their distinctive patterns and blurred edges demonstrate the need to consider the progress of fashionable style both as part of a longer continuum, bound up with the ongoing formation of social positions, cultural identities and spatial networks, and as a channel through which new and differentiated manifestations of sexuality, class and taste are engendered.

Notes
12. *We are the Lambeth Boys* was the most enduring of a series of films produced by Reisz and other young film-makers as part of the experimental project ‘Free Cinema’.
24. I am grateful to Madeleine Ginsburg of the Daks Simpson Archive for sharing her memory of these notices with me.
33. *Men's Wear* was a London-based trade periodical oriented towards the needs of the outfitter, the hosier and the high-street retailer of ready-made suits. Established in the late nineteenth century, its content was more concerned with innovation and directional fashion than that of the more conservative *Tailor and Cutter* which concentrated on issues of professional education and manufacture.
40. *Men's Wear*, 3 October 1953, p. 34.
46. Cohn, *Today*, p. 27.