

THE  
TAILOR  
OF  
SAVILE ROW

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A MEMOIR

HENRY PEMBERTON

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OF  
SAVILE ROW



*A Memoir*

**HENRY PEMBERTON**

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*For my father, who taught me that a man's suit*

*is the architecture of his character.*



*And for every apprentice who ever pricked a finger  
and kept stitching.*

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# **Prologue: The Last Fitting**

*“A good suit is like good manners. It should be noticed  
only in its absence.”*

— My father, Arthur Pemberton

The morning light comes differently through the windows of Savile Row in November. It arrives late and at an angle, filtered through the grey London sky, and falls across the cutting table in a way that reveals every imperfection in the cloth. I have stood at this table for fifty-three years, and I still wait for that light before I make the first cut.

There is a ritual to it. The bolt of cloth—today it is a Super 150s worsted from Scabal, a midnight navy with the faintest whisper of a chalk stripe—is unrolled and allowed to rest. Cloth has memory, my father used to say. It remembers being on the loom, remembers being rolled, remembers being shipped. You must let it forget all that before you can ask it to become something new.

I smooth the fabric with the back of my hand. The nap is perfect—soft as a whisper, dense as a secret. I can feel the thread count through my fingertips, can gauge the weight to within half an ounce per running yard without consulting a scale. These are not skills I learned; they are skills that grew into me, the way the grain grows into wood, over half a century of touching cloth every working day of my life.

The customer for this suit will never wear it. Sir Malcolm Firth died three weeks ago, at the age of ninety-one, in his bed at his house in Belgravia. He had ordered this suit in

September—his annual autumn commission, a tradition that had continued without interruption for forty-seven years. When I telephoned his son to inform him that the cloth had arrived, there was a silence on the line, and then the younger Firth said, very quietly, “Finish the suit, Henry. My father would have wanted that.”

So here I am, cutting cloth for a dead man. It is not the first time. A Savile Row tailor accumulates ghosts the way his workroom accumulates pins—invisibly, inevitably, one by one, until the floor is thick with them. I have dressed kings and criminals, poets and property developers, rock stars and retired generals. Most of them are gone now, and yet their measurements remain in my books—the precise dimensions of men who no longer exist, recorded in my hand on cards that yellow slowly in the wooden filing cabinets behind my desk.

My name is Henry Pemberton, and I am the last of my line. My grandfather established this firm in 1923. My father inherited it in 1954. I took it over in 1978. And when I retire—which, if I am honest, cannot be many more years now—there will be no Pemberton to continue. My daughter is a barrister. My son writes software in California. Neither has any interest in the trade that has defined our family for a century.

This book is my attempt to set down, before the memory fades entirely, what it has meant to spend a life making suits on Savile Row. It is not a history of tailoring—there are many excellent books on that subject, and I defer to their scholarship. It is not a technical manual—the craft of bespoke tailoring cannot be learned from a book any more than the craft of surgery can be learned from a pamphlet. It is, rather, a memoir: one man’s account of a world that is rapidly disappearing, and of the extraordinary people—both the makers and the wearers—who populated it.

I make no apology for the fact that this is a sentimental book. Tailoring is a sentimental trade. We build our work around the human body, and the human body is the most sentimental object in the world. Every suit I have ever made has been a kind of love letter—to the person who will wear it, to the cloth from which it is made, and to the tradition that taught me how to make it.

Let me begin, then, where every suit begins: with the cloth.



# Chapter 1: Thread and Bone

*“Every boy has a moment when his life’s work reveals itself to him. Mine came in a fitting room, holding a box of pins.”*

—

I was born in 1951, in a flat above the shop, which in those days was at No. 14 Savile Row. My earliest memories are of fabric: the rough scratch of tweed against my cheek when my father carried me through the workroom, the whisper of silk lining as I hid beneath the cutting table, the particular smell of wool and steam and chalk dust that clung to everything in our world.

My father, Arthur Pemberton, was a quiet man who expressed himself most fluently through his hands. He could look at a man standing in the doorway and know, before a single measurement was taken, what kind of suit

that man needed—not wanted, needed. “Anyone can give a man what he asks for,” my father would say. “A good tailor gives him what he doesn’t yet know he wants.”



The workroom at No. 14 was on the first floor, a long room with high ceilings and north-facing windows that admitted the even, shadowless light that tailors prize above all others. Along one wall stood the cutting table—a vast oak surface, scarred and polished by decades of use, that was the altar of our trade. Along the opposite wall sat the tailors: six men on a long bench, cross-legged in the traditional manner, their laps covered with the garments they were sewing, their fingers moving with a speed and precision that never failed to hypnotize me as a child.

These men were the backbone of the firm. Tommy Ashworth had been with us since before the war; he was the coat maker, and his buttonholes were considered the finest on the Row. Mickey Flanagan was the trouser maker, a Dubliner with a wicked sense of humor who could cut a pair of trousers to hang with a perfection that defied geometry. Albert Chen, who had come to London from Hong Kong in 1949, was the waistcoat specialist—a quiet, meticulous man whose work was so fine that even his colleagues would sometimes stop to admire it.

I learned the names of stitches before I learned the names of kings. A basting stitch, loose and temporary, holds the world in place until you're ready to commit. A pad stitch, small and invisible, gives shape to a lapel the way character gives shape to a face. A pick stitch, the tiny decorative stitch that runs along the edge of a collar or a pocket flap, is the tailor's signature—as individual as handwriting, and just as revealing.

## **My Grandfather's Hands**

My grandfather, William Pemberton, had started the firm in 1923 with a loan of forty pounds from his wife's brother and a single room above a cobbler's shop on Maddox Street, just around the corner from the Row. He had learned his trade at Henry Poole & Co., the oldest tailoring firm on Savile Row, where he served a seven-year apprenticeship that began when he was fourteen years old.

Grandfather's hands were extraordinary. Even in his seventies, when arthritis had begun to bend his fingers into claws, he could thread a needle without spectacles and execute a buttonhole that was geometrically perfect. I remember sitting on his lap as a very small child, watching his fingers work, and thinking that they moved like the legs of a spider—quick, purposeful, and somehow separate from the rest of him, as if they had a life and intelligence of their own.

He told me stories as he worked. Stories about the old days on the Row, when every house employed dozens of tailors and the pavement outside was thronged with cutters and coat makers during the lunch hour. Stories about the customers he had dressed—diplomatists and

duchesses, film stars and fraudsters. “Every man has a story,” he would say, his needle never pausing, “and every story has a suit.”

It was my grandfather who taught me the most important lesson of the trade, though I did not understand it until many years later. “Henry,” he said to me once, when I was perhaps eight or nine, “a tailor’s job is not to make a suit. A tailor’s job is to make a man feel like himself.”



# Chapter 2: The Row

*“Savile Row is not a street. It is a state of mind.”*

— Hardy Amies



Savile Row is shorter than most people imagine. It runs for barely two hundred yards, from Vigo Street at the south to Conduit Street at the north, a quiet corridor of Portland stone and Georgian brick tucked between the commercial bustle of Regent Street and the residential elegance of New Bond Street. It is not a grand street. There are no monuments, no statues, no plaques commemorating great events. The buildings are

handsome but modest—three and four stories of the restrained Georgian classicism that is London’s native architectural idiom.

And yet this short, unassuming street has exerted an influence on male dress that is disproportionate to its size by several orders of magnitude. For the better part of two centuries, Savile Row has been the global center of bespoke tailoring—the place where the art of making a suit was perfected and from which its standards have radiated to every corner of the world. When a man in Tokyo or New York or Lagos speaks of a “Savile Row suit,” he is invoking not just a geographical location but an entire philosophy of craftsmanship: the belief that a garment made by hand, to the precise measurements of an individual body, from the finest materials available, represents the highest expression of the tailor’s art.

I first walked the length of Savile Row under my own power at the age of four, holding my father’s hand. It was a Saturday morning in the autumn of 1955, and the street was quiet—the tailoring houses did not open on Saturdays, and the only movement was a cat sunning itself on the steps of No. 11 and an elderly gentleman in a

bowler hat making his way toward Regent Street with the careful deliberation of a man who knows exactly where he is going.

My father pointed out the names above the doors. “Poole,” he said. “The oldest. Established 1806, or thereabouts. They dressed Napoleon III and every British monarch since Victoria. Gieves & Hawkes—they made Nelson’s uniform, and Wellington’s, and they’ve been dressing the military ever since. Anderson & Sheppard—that’s where the Prince of Wales goes. And there”—he squeezed my hand—“that’s ours.”

## **The Apprentice’s Day**

My apprenticeship began, formally, on the first Monday of September 1966. I was fifteen years old. I had wanted to leave school and start immediately, but my father had insisted that I complete my O-levels first. “You’ll need your letters,” he said. “A tailor who can’t write a proper invoice is only half a tradesman.”

The apprentice's day began at half past seven. My first task, every morning for the first six months, was to sweep the workroom floor. This was not mere housekeeping. A tailor's floor is an archive of his recent work—littered with thread ends, chalk shavings, pins, and tiny scraps of cloth. By sweeping carefully, I learned to identify fabrics by their off-cuts, to distinguish hand-sewn threads from machine-sewn threads, and to develop the systematic tidiness that is the foundation of all good tailoring.

After sweeping, I pressed. For hours. The art of pressing a suit is as complex and as critical as the art of sewing one, and it was the first real skill I was taught. Pressing is not ironing. Ironing pushes fabric flat; pressing shapes it. The press iron is heavier than a domestic iron, and it is used not to smooth wrinkles but to set shape—to mold flat cloth into the three-dimensional curves of the human body.

I burned myself constantly in those early weeks. My left hand, which held the damp pressing cloth, was perpetually blistered. But gradually, as with all things in tailoring, the skill became physical intuition. I learned to gauge the temperature of the iron by the sound of the steam, to feel through the pressing cloth the moment

when the cloth beneath had accepted its new shape, to distinguish the different pressing requirements of wool, silk, linen, and cotton.



# Chapter 3: The Cut

*“Cutting is courage. Every cut is irreversible.”*

— Tommy Nutter

There is a moment in the making of every suit that I have never ceased to find terrifying. It is the moment when the shears first bite into the cloth.

Everything before this moment is reversible. The measurements can be retaken. The pattern can be redrawn. The chalk marks can be brushed away. But the cut is final. Once the shears close on the fabric, the cloth is committed—it will become this particular suit for this particular man, and it can never become anything else. The cut is the point of no return, the moment of maximum risk, the instant when the tailor’s judgment is tested against the unforgiving reality of the material.

My father taught me to cut, as his father had taught him. The education took seven years—seven years of watching, assisting, and gradually being trusted with garments of increasing complexity and value. I began with trousers,

which are the simplest garment to cut (though by no means simple). I progressed to waistcoats, then to jackets, and finally—the summit of the cutter’s art—to overcoats.

The cutter’s tools are few and ancient. A tape measure, graduated in inches and fractions of inches. A set square, for establishing right angles. A French curve, for drawing the arcs and sweeps of the human body. Chalk—white for dark fabrics, colored for light ones. And the shears: heavy, long-bladed, sharp enough to cut silk without dragging, strong enough to cut through eight layers of overcoating.

My shears were made by Wilkinson Sword in 1952, the year after I was born. My father gave them to me on the day I cut my first suit unassisted—a two-piece in grey flannel for a young solicitor named Barrington who had just been called to the bar. I have used no other shears since. They have been sharpened so many times that the blades are visibly narrower than they were originally, but they still cut true, and the weight of them in my hand is as familiar as the weight of my own fingers.

## **The Language of Measurement**

A bespoke suit begins with measurement, and measurement begins with looking. Before I pick up the tape, I study the customer. I note the way he stands—whether he lists to one side, whether his shoulders are level, whether he carries his weight forward or back. I observe the relative lengths of his arms, the slope of his shoulders, the depth of his chest, the prominence of his shoulder blades. I watch him walk, if I can, because the way a man walks tells you how his suit needs to move.

Then I measure. A full set of bespoke measurements comprises between twenty-five and thirty individual dimensions, depending on the garment. Chest, waist, seat, shoulder width, arm length, back length, front length—these are the basic structural measurements. But there are subtler ones: the precise angle of the shoulder slope, the depth of the scye (the armhole), the amount of “suppression” at the waist, the length of the lapel roll. Each measurement is taken twice, to guard against error, and recorded on a card that will remain in our files for as long as the customer lives—and often longer.

The measurements are the raw data. The pattern is the interpretation. A pattern is a set of paper templates that, when laid on the cloth and cut around, will produce the pieces of a garment. Drawing a pattern from a set of

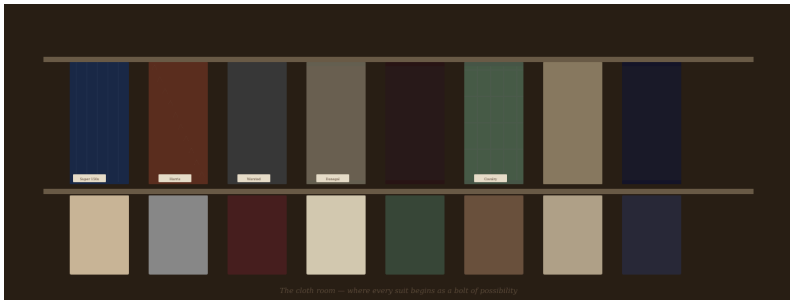
measurements is the most intellectually demanding task in tailoring—it requires the cutter to translate a three-dimensional body into a two-dimensional plan, accounting for the way cloth drapes, stretches, and molds when it is sewn and pressed into shape.



# Chapter 4: Cloth and Character

*“Cloth is the tailor’s vocabulary. The wider the vocabulary, the more eloquent the suit.”*

— My father, Arthur Pemberton



I have touched more cloth in my life than most people will ever see. I have run my fingers over Super 200s merino so fine it felt like water, and over Harris Tweed so robust it could have stopped a bullet. I have handled silk from China and linen from Ireland, cashmere from Mongolia and vicuna from Peru. I have seen cloth in every color that

human ingenuity can produce—from the deepest midnight navy to the palest dove grey, from the rich burgundy of an old port wine to the subtle lavender of a summer evening.

And in all that handling, I have learned one thing above all others: cloth has character. Not metaphorically—literally. Every fabric has its own personality, its own behavior, its own preferences and prejudices. Some cloths are cooperative; they drape willingly, press easily, and forgive small errors in cutting. Others are stubborn; they resist being shaped, spring back from the press iron, and punish the slightest imprecision with visible flaws.

The great English worsteds—the cloths from mills like Holland & Sherry, Dormeuil, and Scabal—are the aristocrats of the fabric world. They are woven from long-staple merino wool, combed until the fibers lie parallel and smooth, and then woven on power looms that have been producing cloth of extraordinary consistency for more than a century. A good English worsted has a firm hand, a subtle sheen, and a resilience that allows it to be worn hard and still look fresh.

Tweeds are the country cousins—rough, honest, enduring. A Harris Tweed, woven by hand in the Outer Hebrides from locally dyed wool, has a texture that is almost

geological in its complexity. Every inch of the cloth contains variations in color, weight, and density that give it a depth and vitality that no power loom can replicate. I have a jacket made from Harris Tweed that I bought in 1974. It has been worn hundreds of times, in rain and wind and sun, and it looks better now than it did when it was new.

## **The Bunch**

When a customer comes to us for a suit, the first thing we show him is the bunch. A bunch is a collection of cloth samples—small swatches, perhaps six inches by four, clipped together and organized by type, weight, and color. We keep between three and four thousand swatches in the shop at any given time, representing the current offerings of the major cloth merchants.

Choosing a cloth is, for many customers, the most pleasurable part of the bespoke experience. I have seen men spend hours with the bunches, comparing swatches in different lights, rubbing fabrics between their fingers, holding samples against their skin to judge the color. Some know exactly what they want; others need gentle

guidance. A tailor's skill in cloth selection is not merely technical but psychological: you must understand not just what will look good but what will make the customer feel right.



# Chapter 5: The Fitting Room

*“In the fitting room, a man stands before himself. The tailor’s job is to make the introduction.”*

—



The fitting room at No. 14 is a small, wood-paneled space at the back of the ground floor. It contains a full-length mirror in a gilt frame, a low platform on which the customer stands, a hard-backed chair, and a small table

that holds my chalk, my pins, and my tape measure. The lighting is carefully controlled—bright enough to see clearly, but warm enough to flatter. There is no clock.

A bespoke suit requires a minimum of three fittings, though some garments—particularly those for new customers, whose bodies I am still learning—may require four or five. The first fitting, called the “baste,” is the most critical. At this stage, the suit exists only in its roughest form: the pieces have been cut and basted together with long, loose stitches, but nothing has been finished. The baste fitting is the moment when the tailor’s paper pattern meets the reality of the customer’s body, and it is invariably a moment of adjustment.

No pattern, however carefully drawn, can perfectly anticipate the idiosyncrasies of a living body. One shoulder may be fractionally lower than the other. The left arm may be slightly longer than the right. The chest may be fuller on one side, the hip slightly more prominent. These asymmetries are invisible to the untrained eye, but they are immediately apparent in a baste fitting, where the loosely assembled garment reveals every discrepancy between the tailor’s assumptions and the customer’s reality.

The first fitting is also the moment when I learn how a customer inhabits his body. Some men stand very still, almost at attention; their suits need to accommodate formality. Others fidget, shift their weight, gesture when they speak; their suits need room to move. Some men cross their arms habitually; their jacket sleeves need a fraction more length. Some men carry a wallet in their inside pocket; the left chest needs a touch of extra width.

## **Conversations at the Mirror**

The fitting room is a confessional of sorts. Over the decades, I have heard more secrets in that small paneled room than a priest hears in a lifetime. Perhaps it is the intimacy of the physical contact—a tailor's hands are all over your body, after all—or perhaps it is the vulnerability of standing in an unfinished garment, pins sticking out at odd angles, that loosens the tongue. But men tell their tailors things they tell no one else.

I have been told about divorces before the spouse knew. I have been told about promotions before the board was informed. I have been told about diagnoses, about affairs, about bankruptcies and windfalls and deaths in the

family. I have been told things that moved me to tears and things that made me want to laugh out loud. And I have held every one of these confidences in the same place I hold my customers' measurements: in the file, in the book, in the silence of the fitting room.

A tailor is, in this sense, like a barber or a bartender—a professional listener, a keeper of secrets. But the tailor's relationship with his customer is, I think, deeper than either of those, because it is conducted through the medium of the body. I know things about my customers that their doctors may not know: which shoulder aches in cold weather, which knee is starting to stiffen, where the weight is settling as the years accumulate. I have watched men age, suit by suit, fitting by fitting, and I have adjusted the cut to accommodate each stage of the journey.



# Chapter 6: A Suit for Every Man

*“I have dressed men who ruled nations and men who robbed banks. The chalk and shears make no distinction.”*

—

I have made suits for a reigning monarch, three prime ministers, half a dozen cabinet ministers, several high court judges, innumerable barristers, a Nobel laureate in physics, two Booker Prize–winning novelists, a Formula One champion, the lead singer of a band that I am too old to have heard of, and a man who was later convicted of the largest insurance fraud in British history.

I will not name most of them. The relationship between a tailor and his customer is, as I have said, a confidential one, and I would no more identify my clients than a doctor would identify his patients. But I can speak, in

general terms, about the kinds of men who have passed through my fitting room and what I have learned from dressing them.

Politicians, in my experience, are the most difficult customers. Not because they are demanding—most are too busy to be fussy—but because their bodies are in constant flux. The stress of office, the irregular meals, the relentless schedule of travel and public appearances all take a physical toll that shows up immediately in the fit of a suit. I have remade suits for prime ministers three times in a single parliamentary session because the occupant of the garment had changed shape so dramatically that the original measurements were useless.

Military men are the easiest to fit and the most satisfying to dress. Their posture is good, their bodies are maintained, and they understand instinctively the relationship between dress and authority. A well-tailored uniform projects command; a badly tailored one undermines it. Military customers know this, and they bring to the fitting room a seriousness of purpose that I find deeply gratifying.

Actors are unpredictable. Some are vain beyond measure, insisting on cuts and proportions that flatter their self-image rather than their actual bodies. Others are

surprisingly indifferent to their appearance off-screen, treating the fitting as a chore to be endured rather than an experience to be enjoyed. The best actors—the ones whose work I most admire—tend to approach the fitting as they approach a role: with curiosity, intelligence, and a willingness to be guided.

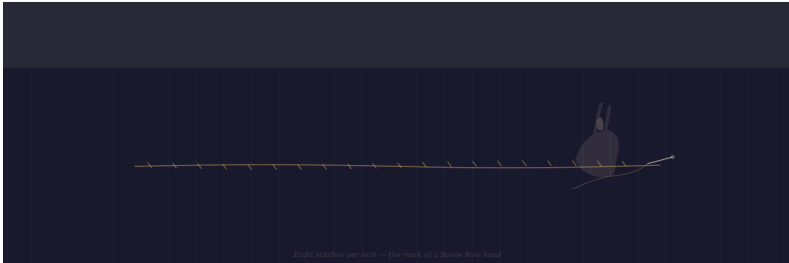
But the customers I remember most fondly are not the famous ones. They are the ordinary men who came to Savile Row for the first time, often with a look of nervous awe, and who left wearing a suit that made them stand straighter, walk taller, and face the world with a confidence they had not possessed before. That transformation—from uncertain customer to assured man—is the deepest satisfaction of the tailor's trade, and it never grows old.



# Chapter 7: Needle and Thread

*“The hand stitch is the soul of the garment. Without it, a suit is just assembled. With it, a suit is made.”*

---



A bespoke Savile Row jacket contains between twenty thousand and twenty-five thousand individual hand stitches. Each stitch is placed by a trained human hand, using a steel needle and a length of silk or cotton thread. Each stitch serves a purpose: to join two pieces of cloth, to reinforce a seam, to shape a curve, to secure a layer of canvas or wadding that gives the garment its structure.

The cornerstone of bespoke construction is the canvas. Unlike a machine-made suit, which uses a fused interlining—a layer of synthetic material bonded to the fabric with heat-activated adhesive—a bespoke suit is built on a foundation of horsehair canvas that is sewn into the garment entirely by hand. This canvas, cut and shaped by the tailor, gives the jacket its structure: the roll of the lapel, the drape of the chest, the clean line of the shoulder.

The canvas is attached to the outer fabric with thousands of tiny pad stitches—each one a small, diagonal stitch, barely visible on the surface, that holds the canvas to the cloth while allowing both layers to flex and move independently. It is the pad stitching that gives a bespoke jacket its distinctive quality of seeming to float on the body rather than being attached to it—a quality that no amount of machine stitching or fusing can replicate.

I was taught to pad-stitch by Tommy Ashworth, who had been pad-stitching since 1938 and who could produce eight perfect stitches per inch with metronomic consistency. Tommy's hands were enormous—rough, scarred, swollen at the knuckles—and yet they produced work of a delicacy that seemed impossible. He told me once that he estimated he had put more than fifty million

stitches into garments during his career. Fifty million tiny acts of precision, each one contributing to a garment that someone would wear as an expression of who they were.

## The Buttonhole

If the pad stitch is the foundation of bespoke construction, the buttonhole is its signature. A hand-made buttonhole is the single most visible indicator of bespoke craftsmanship. Machine-made buttonholes are uniform, characterless, and flat. Hand-made buttonholes are three-dimensional—they have depth, texture, and an irregularity that is not imperfection but life.

Making a buttonhole takes between fifteen and twenty minutes. The thread is silk, and the technique—a variant of the blanket stitch, with a gimp (a thick core thread) to give the edge definition—has not changed in centuries. A good buttonhole maker can produce perhaps forty buttonholes in a day. A great one—and Tommy Ashworth was the greatest I have known—can produce buttonholes that are works of art: perfectly symmetrical, densely stitched, with an eyelet at one end that is as round and clean as if it had been cut by a machine.



# Chapter 8: The Changing Silhouette

*“Fashion changes. Style remains.”*

— Coco Chanel

I have watched the male silhouette transform itself four or five times during my career, and I have adjusted my cutting to accommodate each transformation without ever abandoning the fundamental principles that make a Savile Row suit a Savile Row suit.

When I began my apprenticeship in 1966, the prevailing silhouette was the “Edwardian” look that had been fashionable since the late 1950s: broad shoulders, suppressed waist, flared skirts, high-cut armholes, and trousers that tapered to a narrow cuff. It was a dramatic, sculptural silhouette—almost baroque in its emphasis on shape and proportion—and it required considerable skill to execute well.

Then came the 1970s, and everything changed. The new silhouette—pioneered on Savile Row by the brilliant and iconoclastic Tommy Nutter—was wider, softer, more relaxed. Lapels broadened. Shoulders softened. Trouser legs widened. The waist suppression that had defined the 1960s silhouette was relaxed, producing a shape that was more natural, more comfortable, and more forgiving of the human body's imperfections.

The 1980s brought another revolution. The power suit—broad-shouldered, double-breasted, aggressively structured—was the uniform of a decade that worshipped money and the appearance of strength. I made many such suits, though I confess that I never loved them. The padded shoulders and rigid construction seemed to me to work against the cloth rather than with it, producing garments that looked impressive on a hanger but uncomfortable on a body.

The 1990s and 2000s brought a gradual softening, a return to the more natural silhouette that the Italians had championed and that Anderson & Sheppard had never abandoned. Shoulders became softer, construction lighter, fabrics more flowing. The suit began to look less like armor and more like a second skin—which, I would argue, is what it should always have been.

And now, in the 2020s, we have arrived at a moment of extraordinary diversity. There is no single prevailing silhouette. My customers ask for everything from the sharpest, slimmest Italian cut to the fullest, most relaxed American drape. Some want structured shoulders; others want no shoulder padding at all. Some want their trousers slim; others want them wide. The only constant is quality—the desire for a garment that is made with care, from fine materials, to last.



# Chapter 9: The Women of the Row

*“Behind every great tailor, there was a woman with a needle who taught him everything he knows.”*

—

The history of Savile Row is conventionally told as a history of men. The cutters, the coat makers, the proprietors, the customers—all men, in the traditional narrative. But this narrative is incomplete, and its incompleteness is a disservice to the women who have been essential to the craft of bespoke tailoring since its earliest days.

My grandmother, Edith Pemberton, was the real financial brain behind my grandfather’s business. While William cut and sewed, Edith managed the accounts, negotiated with cloth merchants, chased unpaid invoices, and made the strategic decisions that kept the firm solvent through the Depression, the war, and the lean years that followed.

She never picked up a needle in her life, but without her, Pemberton & Sons would have closed its doors before my father was born.

My mother, Margaret, played a similar role in my father's time. She managed the shop floor, dealt with customers, and trained a succession of young women who served as receptionists and bookkeepers. But Margaret also had a remarkable eye for cloth. It was she who selected the fabrics for the shop's seasonal displays, and her choices were invariably more adventurous and more commercially successful than my father's would have been.

In the workroom itself, women have always been present, though their contributions have often been invisible. The finest finishers—the people who sew the linings, turn the buttonholes, and execute the delicate hand-stitching that gives a bespoke garment its final polish—have historically been women. Their work is the last thing to be done and the first thing to be noticed, and yet their names rarely appear in the histories of the great tailoring houses.

Today, the Row is changing. Several of the major houses now have women cutters—something that would have been unthinkable in my grandfather's day. The first woman to complete a full Savile Row apprenticeship did

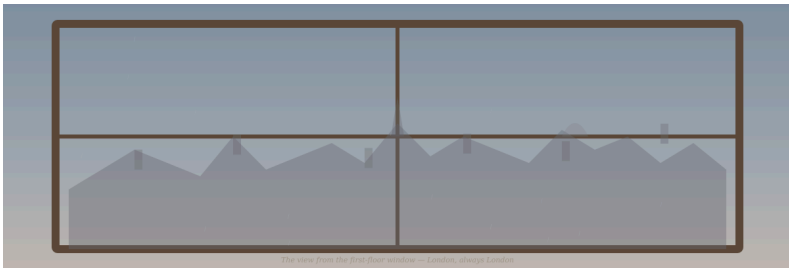
so in the 1990s, and since then, the number of women in the trade has grown steadily. They bring a precision and a sensitivity to the craft that is, in my experience, at least the equal of their male colleagues, and they are helping to ensure that the traditions of the Row will survive into a future that my grandfather could not have imagined.



# Chapter 10: Bespoke in a Ready-Made World

*“The world will always need people who make things with their hands. The question is whether the world will remember to value them.”*

—



The bespoke tailoring industry has been declared dead so many times that its continued existence is itself a kind of miracle. Every decade has brought a new threat—ready-

to-wear, casual dress, the decline of formality, the rise of fast fashion, the financial crises that periodically empty the fitting rooms—and every decade, the Row has survived.

But survival is not the same as flourishing, and I would be dishonest if I pretended that the trade I love is in robust health. The number of bespoke tailoring houses on Savile Row has declined from over sixty at its peak in the early twentieth century to fewer than twenty today. The number of working tailors—the skilled craftsmen who actually make the garments—has declined even more sharply. When I started my apprenticeship in 1966, there were perhaps a thousand working tailors in the Savile Row area. Today, there are fewer than two hundred.

The economics of bespoke tailoring have always been challenging. A single bespoke suit requires between eighty and one hundred hours of skilled labor. At current London wages, the labor cost alone of a bespoke suit is substantial, before accounting for the cloth, the overheads, and the margin that the business needs to survive. The result is a product that is, by any standard, expensive—and that can be produced, in its essentials, by a good ready-to-wear manufacturer for a fraction of the cost.

And yet, people continue to come. Not in the numbers they once did, perhaps, but in sufficient numbers to keep the tradition alive. They come because they have experienced the difference that bespoke makes—the way a garment that has been made for your body, and your body alone, fits and moves and feels in a way that no off-the-rack garment can replicate. They come because they value craftsmanship in an age of mass production, because they appreciate the human connection of the fitting room, because they want something that is made to last in a world of disposable everything.

They come, in the end, because the bespoke suit addresses something that no algorithm, no supply chain, and no factory can address: the desire to be treated as an individual. In a world that increasingly sorts us into categories and serves us standardized products, the bespoke experience—in which every detail is considered, every preference accommodated, every asymmetry addressed—is a quiet act of resistance against uniformity. It is a declaration that the particular matters, that the individual is worth the effort, that craft and care and human judgment still have a place in a world of machines.



# Epilogue: The Measure of a Life

*“We are all of us in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the cloth.”*

— With apologies to Oscar Wilde

I finished Sir Malcolm Firth’s suit on a Thursday afternoon in early December. It took me longer than it should have—not because the work was difficult, but because I found myself unwilling to hurry. Every stitch was an act of valediction, a goodbye to a man I had dressed for nearly half a century, and I wanted each one to be perfect.

When the suit was complete, I pressed it one final time, hung it on a wooden hanger with our name embossed in gold on the cross-bar, and placed it in a suit bag. Then I sat down at my workbench and did something I have done only a handful of times in my career: I wept.

I wept not only for Sir Malcolm, though his death had touched me deeply. I wept for the trade itself—for the world of Savile Row as I had known it, which is passing away as surely as the world of the horse-drawn carriage and the hand-set letterpress. I wept for Tommy Ashworth and Mickey Flanagan and Albert Chen, all of them gone now, their extraordinary skills dissolved into the air like the steam from a press iron. I wept for my father and my grandfather, who had given their lives to this trade and who would have been bewildered by the world in which I now practice it.

But I did not weep for long. There is too much to do. There are suits to make, customers to fit, apprentices to train, cloth to cut. The shears are sharp, the iron is hot, and the light through the north-facing windows is good. As long as there are men who want to look their best—and as long as there are tailors who know how to help them do it—the Row will endure.

I picked up my chalk, I smoothed a length of fresh cloth across the cutting table, and I began again.



*The needle pulls the thread.*

*The thread holds the cloth.*

*The cloth makes the man.*

*And the man, in time, makes the tailor.*

# Acknowledgments

A tailor works with his hands, but a memoirist works with the patience of others. I am grateful to more people than I can name, but I will try.

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To my customers, past and present: thank you for trusting me with your bodies and your confidences. It has been the honor of my life.

To my wife, Catherine, who has tolerated fifty years of chalk dust on every surface and thread on every carpet: I love you, and I am sorry about the sofa.

And to my father, Arthur Pemberton (1920–1997), who taught me everything that matters: I hope this book is worthy of your name.

*Henry Pemberton*

*London, January 2026*