The Way We Wore

A Life In Threads

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Extract

INTRODUCTION

THE WHISTLE was correct in all details.

Closing my eyes I see it now: petrol blue, wool and mohair, Italian cut, flat-fronted, side adjusters, zip fly, sixteen-inch bottoms, central vent on the jacket, flap pockets, ticket pocket, three button (only one done up of course), high-breaking, narrow lapels, buttonhole on the left, four buttons on the cuff – claret silk lining. On the record player in the corner, one of those beige and brown jobs with a thin metal spindle to accommodate a stack of 45s, just one single: 'Too Hard to Handle' by Otis Redding. As the soul man punched out his deep Memphis rhythms, so the boy in the suit did a slow-motion council-estate shuffle across the floral fitted carpet we'd recently bought on HP from the Co-op. The music was his soundtrack; the dance was strictly for display. The shoes that shone out from beneath this paragon of a two-piece were Royals. I was entranced. This, as my lovably idiolectic mum said, was 'all the go'. This was what you grew up for.

The suit didn't come as a surprise. Barry had been waiting weeks for this moment and we'd been with him all the way, getting reports back, getting excited as the day approached. It wasn't so much that a suit like this was worth the wait, more that the

wait was worth savouring. The process itself was sumptuous, the measurements and the fittings, meetings even, the discussion of cut, cloth and linings, with a tailor somewhere off the Edgware Road. In 1965, for a sixteen-year-old boy from Burnt Oak via Notting Dale, to have meetings and a tailor to call his own was quite something, but then Barry was something – he was a mod. He was one.

Leave school at fifteen, save for a suit at sixteen. As I watched my eldest brother, ten years my senior, display the sweet fruits of the first year of his labours, with a shimmy and a show, parading his standing and his allegiance, his status and his taste, somehow I understood that this was a path, a lineage. My dad, a dapper man when he wasn't wearing overalls, nodded approval. When he'd first asked my mum to jitterbug, he'd sported a chalk-stripe double-breasted at the Palais de Dance, looking natty with a Marcel wave in his ash-blond-hair and a carnation in his lapel. He was still with her later that night, when Al Bowley and his orchestra struck up the last waltz, and he'd been by her side ever since. As this new dance took place in our cluttered little north London living-room, I just sat mesmerized, silently enraptured by the lure of the look. I was in thrall to threads.

To this day I like clothes. I'm slightly wary of people who don't like clothes. What you wear is your interface, what you say to the world. But I admit that I'm a touch obsessive. When I was a boy I liked stamps, briefly, like most boys do, but deeply. It was the idea that you could master stamps, learn about them, own them, line them up in a book with hinges and that diaphanous paper to separate the sheets. People would look at your collection and be impressed. Stamps went away though: too fiddly, too national health spectacles. I still get a little frisson from stationery. Smyth-sons for example, where the paper has that weft on the surface, all crisp and sharp, edges lined precisely up, kept in a royal blue box. But really I like clothes. Clothes tell stories.

The room in which I'm writing has a wardrobe. It has a line of wardrobes, built into the wall, designed by my wife, who does that sort of thing, all smooth off-white and minimalist modern, brushed steel tubular handles, just the sort of thing she does. Sometimes, always when I'm on my own, so as to avoid charges of vanity and behaving like Richard Gere in *American Gigolo*, I open the one that contains the suits. They're soundless, these wardrobes, which is a good thing, as a creak would let everybody know that I'm 'at it' again, indulging in a spot of sartorial onanism. The suits – there's a dozen at the time of writing – are draped from identical wooden hangers in a line, and all I really see is their profile, the curve of the shoulder, the drop of the sleeve, the overlapping buttons arrayed on the cuff. The colours run through a strictly, maybe sadly limited palette of greys, blues and fawns – but they're all different. There's a muted check here, a sheen in the weave there. Occasionally I move them a little, space them out like some camply pedantic shop assistant. But mostly I just look. It makes me feel good.

Cloth is good. It's the perfect combination of the tactile and the visual: you feel cloth; it wraps itself around you. Made up into something as precisely prescribed, yet infinitely varied as a gentleman's suit, cloth becomes better than good, it becomes a piece. Leather is good too, but only for shoes. Shoes are undeniable. Shoe trees in place, the smell of wax and care. Shoes repay you. Shoes look back at you. Fantastic. Shoes are good, but suits are better.

I like clothes, and I like the fact that you're not really supposed to like clothes, that they are seen as somehow superficial, unworthy. Now that I'm a certain age, that I've arrived at a certain place, I like clothes much more than I like fashion. I like clothes for their own sake, divorced of any context or subtext. Underwear: white cotton boxer shorts please, still in the wrapping, sitting in a drawer. Having pristine, unopened two-ply white cotton underwear, made by a small, very traditional company in Derbyshire,

unopened in your drawer, piled neatly, waiting – well, that's a sign to yourself. You're doing all right, you're not in a mess.

But suits are best. Each of those crafted pieces, each of those, if truth be told, damn near identical suits, has a series of little tales to relate. That's the one I was wearing when I first met her. Those two were made for that television show I presented so badly. That's the lovely Savile Row number I'd dreamed of for years and spent that windfall on. That's the suit I got married in.

I'm planning a new one now, the perfect way to celebrate doing the deal for this book. I'm in preliminary discussions with a tailor called Nick, a young Anglo-Greek guy with a good and growing reputation who's recently moved up west, got a little place in Mayfair. We've talked about an early sixties, English cut, two-button two-piece – think James Bond in *From Russia with Love* – side vents, single pleat on the strides, neat but not mannered, manly in fact. I fancy a pearl grey. When it takes its place in the wardrobe it will sit there to remind me of writing this.

But in my memory there's a far larger wardrobe, groaning and buckling under the weight of all the outfits I've ever entertained, all the ridiculous get-ups, the fads and the fashions which have taken the boy with big eyes for his brother's whistle through every step. I've been there as mod begat skinhead, begat suedehead, begat Bowie boy, begat soul boy, begat punk, until all the begatting began to go mad and I ended up in a kilt. I've worn some clothes. And just about every bit of old tat, every precious piece of the clothes designer's craft, every shape of shoe, every variety of collar has lodged itself in my brain, with a million barnacles of association clinging to its threads. I recall events by what I was wearing, a button-down, chisel-toed, fly-fronted mnemonic.

What's worse is that not only do I carry round this stupidly over-stuffed wardrobe of mine, containing just about every item I've ever worn or lusted after, but I also have a mental inventory of what others were wearing too. Name a record and I can tell you

what you had on when you first heard it. All right, I might not be able to, but I can tell you what you should have had on, what was all the rage at that precise point in time. It's a party piece which has done me little good.

I was wearing one of my suits at a party recently. I'm now in that peculiar, inverted position where I loaf around in jeans and T-shirts all day, but get suited and booted to go out of an evening. This two-piece was midnight blue; Venetian gabardine, with a pearl tie-pin in the welt of the breast pocket, holding a silk hankie in place. The little band of material that runs across the top of the breast pocket is called a welt, and into that, as close to the centre as I could manage, I stuck a tie pin, with a little pearl head, and then pushed it down, so that all you could see was the pearl. The pin thus speared the hankie, thereby stopping that annoying habit silk handkerchiefs have of slipping down in your pocket. It's a very dandyish touch, I know, and my wife thinks it's a foppish affectation, but I can't help it. You see, my other brother, Reggie, the middle boy of three, wore just such a pin in the pocket of his Crombie, when he wanted to look particularly tasty. He was a skinhead, a 69 original. The idea was that the pin would keep your mandatory silk hankie – red to match the socks which sat inside the brogues, which nestled under the Levi's – in place, even if you were skanking to Toots and the Maytals or rucking on the North Bank at Highbury.

It's a neat idea and one I was sporting with undeniable vanity. I can't remember the wheres or whys of that party, my brain is far too clothes-cluttered to hold such details for long. But I distinctly recall one of the other guests, a conservatively dressed gentleman about the same age as myself, standing, looking at me, clearly focusing on my left breast. I was aware of his gaze until finally he approached and said respectfully, '1970?'

I nodded and he smiled. Then out came a litany of looks as we played a verbal game of garment ping-pong. He'd serve Sta-prest,

I'd reply with channel seams. He would smash down a pair of smooths, I'd lob up a desert boot. He'd spin me a bowling shirt and I'd have to return a cheesecloth. Cap sleeves against tulip collars, Fred Perry countered by Gola, Budgie jackets versus Harringtons; back and forth it went, back and forth in ever more gleeful rallies of long-forgotten objects of sartorial desire. Or at least I thought they'd been forgotten by everyone but me. Yet here was a Liverpudlian, a lawyer, who was every bit as bulging with motheaten old clothes as I was.

Our pleasure at expelling all this pent-up, long-buried stuff was contagious, as we fed off each other's hunger to share our passion. For what seemed like and probably was hours, we talked in this semaphore of styles, conversing in a lost code. We weren't just talking clothes, we were running through our shared youths, our communal experience of growing up as working-class urban boys in a culture where what you wore determined who you were. Every outfit was a stage we went through together, every new type of footwear or brand of jeans, every silly haircut signalling a stylistic turning-point, was a major step we shared, not just with each other, but with our many hundreds of thousands of overdressed, under-valued contemporaries, who also ran the gamut of trouser tribes and youth cults that *were* our culture.

As our conversation bounced from one look, one craze or scene, to the next, it was actually leading us through our lives. Mention a particular pair of trousers and we were really recalling street games in crumbling terraced blocks and pugnacious school playgrounds. Talk of a shoe shop or a brand of trainer and we were actually discussing our emergence into teenage gangs and groups and bonding and fighting, our discovery of music and girls and drugs, our nights in clubs and days in college, our football teams and our families, our simultaneous and at times overpowering desire to fit in and to stand out. We'd grown up in that unsettled post-war Britain where council-estate kids, while encouraged by

the welfare state, were still marginalized by the class system. So the margins were bursting with creativity.

There was an energy and a passion among our young cohorts, a unique drive to excel at something, much of which manifested itself in an audacious creativity with hosiery and trousering and pins in pockets. We were talking fashion, but not fashion designers or haute couture; this was not salon style imposed from above, not a glossy magazine saga of effete clothes designers, or swanky celebrities with vast budgets and arrays of stylists. Our story was of great, unsung clothes-wearers. The restless elegance, the tribalism and dandyism of so many otherwise ordinary British kids in the second half of the twentieth century. That is what we were really celebrating with our little game. We were also lamenting a little, a nod to the knowledge that we now live in reduced times.

This contest of ours came to an end when my new-found, and I now had to admit rather well-dressed friend dug deep, and fired off a rocket from long ago. A winning shot before it even hit. With a slight grin on his face and a reverence in his tone, he said firmly and quietly, 'Salatio box-top loafers.' There was nothing I could do. You can't beat Salatio box-top loafers and we both knew it. I put out my hand, which he shook manfully. He did, though, have one last thing to impart before we both turned to return to the party. 'You know,' he said with a slight melancholy catch in his voice, 'that's an untold story.'

NOTTING DALE was the rapscallion neighbour of Notting Hill. I say was, because the area has been slum-cleared and town-planned away until even the name, usually the most tenacious aspect of a city community, is all but extinct. The fact that estate agents, always eager to exploit a quaint old moniker that might add a little villagey charm and a few grand to a former council flat by the motorway, haven't tried to resurrect the traditional title of my ancestral homeland could show just how lowly and unloved it was. This misshapen triangle which doesn't know if it's W10 or W11 is bordered by the railway lines and the Westway on two sides, and posh Holland Park and Notting Hill on the third. If there is any residual memory of this forgotten enclave, it's of these three things: rag-and-bone men, mass murder and race riots. It's a good place to start. Or at least it was in 1959.

There had been Elmses in the Dale for as long as anyone can recall, which is not all that long really, as we aren't the sort of family to go in for genealogy. Chances are they arrived with the navvies who came in the mid-nineteenth century to dig the Hammersmith and City Railway, which cuts through this area. Its inhabitants were a rollicking mix of Irish and English peasants, who had left the hungry land and ended up mired in a clay pit, used to mine

and fire the bricks for the grand stucco terraces up on Notting Hill and to keep a few pigs. Hence the nicknames, the piggeries and the potteries, which were still just about current when we were there.

The other traditional inhabitants of Notting Dale were gypsies. This area, which had once had a race track and horse fair, was the centre of London Romany life, and there had long been a large travelling encampment on Latimer Road, which is as close to a main thoroughfare as the Dale ever got. The gypsies gave the area its reputation for rowdiness and scruffiness and bequeathed a tradition of street trading which became our game.

There's still a contemporary gypsy camp, all spick and span caravans, broken fridges and anorexic mutts, squeezed beneath the strands of stained concrete where they entangle at the northern end of the motorway confluence that is now much of the neighbourhood. You even get the occasional horse. But the most famous testament to the Romany street-trading past is the classic television comedy series *Steptoe and Son*. It was set in this tangled warren of 'Shepherd's Bush borders', and based on a real-life Notting Dale totter, Arthur Arnold, whose stables and scrapyard on Latimer Road, yards from the house where my dad, Albert, grew up, was just one of the many that littered the area. My family weren't rag-and-bone merchants, but Nanni Elms, with her flaming auburn hair, pipe between her lips and sleeves rolled to the biceps for a Friday night fight, was a proper gypsy girl, cursing and brawling with the best.

Or so they say. She passed on shortly after I arrived, but her husband, Grandad Weenie, as small a man as his sobriquet might suggest, was still around, the head of a sprawling mob who shifted a quarter of a mile south-west and now inhabited a large, crumbling, but always tumultuous terraced house in Norland Gardens, right by the market where they kept fruit and veg stalls. On the famous Charles Booth maps of *Life and Labour of the People in London*, that's a move from 'very poor' to 'fairly comfortable',

which is just about right. Grandad Weenie was a near-silent, always canny little man, an unofficial pawnbroker and street angler, who made sure his mob had a few bob. We were 'Gord blimey' London but always good for a drink in the Monkey House, the local and clan base.

There's a shoebox of portraits and holiday snaps going back to the end of the nineteenth century which substitutes for any real family record. And one of the most remarkable aspects of these yellowing black and white people is just how fiercely smart they are. Obviously, when it's a special occasion, a wedding photo or something, you'd expect them to be dolled up, but in almost every shot their sartorial brilliance shines like the Brylcreem in their hair.

There's a shot of Grandad Weenie as a young man. My mental image of Dad's dad was of a tiny old chap in a vest, or a collarless shirt, usually watching the racing with a pale ale in his lap and slippers on his feet. But here he was fifty years before, an Edwardian teenager with his four brothers standing in the street outside a pub on the Portobello Road. You can see that he's a short man, but his stature, expressed in his stance and his attire, not just smart, but almost terrifyingly sharp, is looming. Hair centre-parted and plastered down, three-piece suit with fob chain, gleaming black boots, countenance set. It was then I recalled long ago whispered tales of how Grandad Weenie, as a young man, would fight on the cobbles, take off his jacket and take on big men in the street for money. In this picture he was attired as a serious young fellow. Even further back there's one sepia shot of *his* father dressed for work, dragging a handcart through the streets, his waxed handlebar moustache preceding him, his uniform flawless.

Aunt Glad, the eldest of seven kids of whom my father was the youngest, had taken over control of the house and the family from her fiery-haired mother. Women ran things, and she was a woman and a half. Under five foot for sure and bone-juttingly thin, with a voice strangled by tar and time, and skin which looked like it had

served once before as parchment in some ancient civilization. I grew up thinking that Aunt Glad, despite always being called Aunt Glad, was actually my grandma. It was as if she was everybody's grandma. She had as good as raised my dad, her beloved little brother, dragging him round the streets as a toddler like some animated rag doll, fighting his fights, after a bout of rheumatic fever had laid him low. Aunt Glad was one of those women who cannot get thirty yards down a street without getting embroiled. If she took you out to the market, and she only ever went to the market, it was like an endless shopping odyssey in other people's lives, feeling their apples, reorganizing their display and nicking a grape to taste. She knew everything, everyone, and told them so in that singed voice laden with expletives which were positively Old Testament in their vim. Aunt Glad was Notting Dale. She was my grandma.

Mum, Eileen, came from a slightly more genteel area, albeit a council estate, over the railway tracks, a mile or two away in East Acton. But the male members of her family were no less dapper. There's a fantastic picture of Uncle Fred, my mum's eldest brother, aged about nineteen or twenty, out for a night back in the early thirties with his mates, and they look splendid. Fred, with a dark, dashing resemblance to my own brother Reggie, has on a broad-shouldered, tight-fitting double-breasted suit, high-collared shirt, kipper tie with pin, handkerchief in his pocket, trilby in his hand, a pencil moustache adorning his lip and a spivvy glint in his eye. He knows he looks great. My eight year-old-son Alfie enquired recently why they were so dressed up, and his grandma said, 'Because it was a Friday night.'

It was a dressed-up Friday night at the Hammersmith Palais when my sixteen-year-old mother first met my dad. No doubt her mother, a goodly, God-fearing woman, gently, piously spoken, was a bit perturbed at her daughter courting a rumbustious costermonger's son from the Dale. She once famously said, 'You don't

need to go to the pictures round Ladbroke Grove,' an expression of curtain-twitching distaste which became a catch-phrase in our family. But Mum, herself a mongrel mix, with the dark eyes and complexion of her secretly Jewish father, Isaac Zilas, had already fallen for the blond boy she danced with at the Hammersmith Palais. Go to the pictures they did.

This Albert Elms was actually a more serious young man than his platinum shock might suggest and his mother-in-law might have feared. He'd been dubbed 'the professor' by his six elder brothers and sisters, a boy so bright he'd been offered a scholarship at the prestigious, private Westminster School, unheard of for a market trader's son from the Dale. His mum, her gypsy blood riled from some perceived slight at the interview, refused to let him go. So instead he pulled on dun-coloured overalls as he worked on building sites, married his dark-eyed sweetheart, read political tracts, followed the lowly local team, Queens Park Rangers, wore his best at weekends and went about setting up a home.

It was 1946 and housing was in short supply. The Luftwaffe had done their bit to kick off the process of slum clearance, but Notting Dale didn't need too much help to collapse. Jerry-built as much as Jerry-bombed, and shamefully neglected, the area was crumbling and ripe for ruthless landlords who crammed more and more into less and less. Rachman time. Albert and Eileen, still in their teens but in an era before teenagers were invented, were lucky to have a room in the family home but they were eager to try and find a place of their own. Mum, who worked in Lewis's tobacconists on Norland Market, opposite the Elmses' pitch, spoke to one of her regular customers who she knew rented out rooms in his house round the corner. Number Ten Rillington Place.

It's part of our collective family mythology that none of us would be around if she'd taken up his offer of lodgings. 'I don't know why, he was a nice enough chap, quite jolly, but there was something about him that seemed a bit creepy.' Creepy Christie of

course, John Reginald Halliday Christie, murdered half a dozen people in Number Ten Rillington Place, his wife among them, gassing his victims then burying them in the back yard or bricking them up in the kitchen. Finally Mum and Dad found a couple of rooms in a safe house, moving around a bit, trying to better themselves, giving homes to three boys, the last of them in the last year of the fifties. But wherever they went, home was still that big old tumbledown terrace in the Dale, which apart from *Steptoe and Son* and Crippen and victims had one other cause of note. Which is where our story really starts.

'They weren't the Notting Hill race riots, they were the Notting Dale race riots. I should know, I was in them.'

It's only very recently that I heard this revelation from one of my cousins. Chances are it was over light ale and sausage rolls at a wedding or a funeral, and almost definitely it was me who instigated the conversation. I harbour an insatiable urge to know more about the old neighbourhood, the old ways, and so whenever the scattered clan gathers, which is pretty rarely, I tend to niggle and pick away at its recollections. This time I opened a sore.

The so-called Notting Hill race riots of 1958 have rightly gone down in infamy as a nadir in race relations in Britain. For four consecutive nights gangs of white youths in drape coats, urged on by Mosley's British Union of Fascists, fought pitched street battles with groups of young West Indians in trilbys, who had recently settled in the area in search of cheap accommodation and been persistently goaded and abused. It was a national scandal, and propelled Notting Hill to dubious prominence. But according to my cousin, the arena where the battles actually occurred was not bohemian, arty Notting Hill, but down in the lowly Dale, with Latimer Road and Lancaster Road the centre of the action. My cousin put me right on this and put me in a right spin. I have an Anglo-Chinese wife and three mixed-race London kids, and I now discovered that I have a close family member who was part of a

seething racist mob. I pushed him a bit. 'I was seventeen, I was a Teddy boy, we ran with the pack. There were lots of problems in the area and we picked on the wrong people. We were wrong. Those young West Indian guys were fantastic, and they looked so cool.'

As well as being shocked and appalled, I was excited. I took no pride in the prejudice, but here was proof that I could trace my family shoe-tree back to brothel-creepers and towards the very start of the story. I'd been chased by Neanderthal second-generation Teds plenty of times in the 1970s, and had little time for their arch, Brylcreemed conservatism, or their silly pink socks, but this was different. The rioters on the streets of West London in 1958, on both sides of the divide, were part of the first flowering, the seething outburst of energy and often wayward creativity that is the true current of this story. Too many times throughout this tale sartorial brilliance and brainless violence will coincide; they come from the same entangled stem. Working-class teenage British boys liked to dress up; working-class teenage British boys liked to fight. And those young Londoners, both black and white, tearing it up for all the wrong reasons on the streets of our dilapidated and soon to be demolished homeland back in the late fifties, were kick-starting something extraordinary.

Colin McInnes, always the most eloquent literary chronicler of this strangely affecting in-between time in London's development, neither pre-war, nor truly after it, was speaking specifically of Notting Dale in his novel *City of Spades* when he said, 'The kids live in the streets, I mean they have charge of them.' An even more powerful evocation of this emerging independent republic of Teenlandia is to be found in the photography of Roger Mayne. Obsessed with the street-life of working-class west London, this educated, quiet soul in a duffel coat spent most of 1956–61 snapping feral packs of wild-eyed boys on bombsites and exhausted, monotone terraces, where they frolicked and fought, posed and

paraded unchallenged. These are not the cartoon Teds of later incarnations, but diminutive dandies patrolling their shabby domains in the best they could possibly muster.

White shirts with cut-away collars clean and pressed, narrow ties held in place with clips, hair pompadoured, oiled and quiffed, jackets draping down past their knuckles and held apart to display their many-buttoned waistcoats, trousers tapering to a layered break. And the shoes. The shoes positively shining from those grimy gutters like some evangelical song of cobbled-together salvation. These boys had seen the light and it reflected off their uppers. Ironed shirts and polished shoes when they were living four to a room with an outside toilet shared between four families in a condemned building. That is devotion to a cause. Their look, whether they knew it or not, was an act of proud sedition, a cheeky pilfering of an Edwardian revivalist style originally favoured by homosexual Guards officers and louche Mayfair mercenaries. These no-good, know-nothing herberts from a slum dared to look like that. The judge who famously described such oiks as 'Little Caesars'* was right; they'd nicked the emperor's new clothes and were going to revel in them.

The Teds were pointing two ways at once. They were simultaneously harbingers and hold-outs, a glimpse of the future with its increasingly cosmopolitan collection of teen-driven looks and sounds from far and wide, but also aggressively rooted in the age-old monoculture of the white working-class ghettos. But another Roger Mayne shot from the same streets at the same time gives an even better taste of changing times. This one shows a group of black guys sauntering along the middle of the road with

* Julius Caesar was himself a noted dandy as a youth. His chin was clean-shaven and the rest of his body carefully plucked and tweezered; he wore long fringed sleeves and wore his belt loosely draped around his waist. His enemy Sulla called him 'that boy with the loose clothes'.

a nonchalance and a sway which sings out from a still photograph, their immaculate shirts buttoned to the wrist, but undone at the neck, their trilbys and derbies tilted at impossibly jaunty angles, their razor-pressed strides stopping half an inch too short, to reveal natty socks above shoes that are just as radiant. Cool and insouciant, casual in a way it would take white Londoners generations to master, they had a flair and a brio which you can see reflected in the eyes of the locals, gawping at them with something between envy and awe. Those English Teddy boys and those Jamaican rude boys promenading and colliding in those streets where my family lived were between them the basis for all that was to come.

They had their music too, of course. In Notting Dale, in 1959, the year the third of Albert Elms's sons emerged, you'd have heard rock'n'roll ripping out of dance-halls and Dansettes, Little Richard leaping from a wireless in a crowded second-floor bed-sit. Mento and ska and calypso and jazz wafting up from the many illicit blues and shebeens which had colonized basements on Lancaster Road, making these dreary blocks shuffle and sway with their exotic vibrations as curls of curious tobacco swirled within them. Changes were afoot and feet were dancing strange new steps.

ROCK MUSIC had been part of the urban soundtrack for some time. Bill Haley's *Rock Around the Clock* had first upset cinema commissioners five years earlier. But six months before Bill Haley or any rock'n'roll reached these shores there was the first Best-dressed Teddy Boy Contest, held in Canvey Island Essex and won by a twenty-year-old greengrocer's assistant. The look predated and perhaps even predetermined the sound. This is always the way; music, for British kids at least, is secondary to fashion. Very few youngsters can pick up instruments; even records and record players were once expensive items beyond the reach of many. But everybody wears clothes. They can all pull on a pair of strides or colour their hair from a bottle purloined from Boots. The way

they look is one of the few things teenagers can control, one of the few statements they can make. Today we are told that teenage girls, pushed by peer pressure, driven by the urges of adolescence, suffer from eating disorders in a crazed desire to control their body image. Well, maybe from the fifties onwards many teenage boys suffered from some sort of clothes obsession, some undiagnosed epidemic of sartoria nervosa, for very similar reasons. I should know – I was one.

In his brilliantly clear-headed book *Hooligan – a History of Respectable Fears*, sociologist Geoffrey Pearson dismantles the notion that antisocial, tribal or violent gang behaviour by overdressed young British males is somehow a phenomena unique to the second half of the twentieth century. He argues that there have been groups of stroppy, disaffected boys, with a uniform to call their own, roaming the ill-lit alleys and cobbled streets of London from time immemorial. The mid-Victorian period in particular, when the term 'hooligan' first emerged, after a notoriously pugilistic and rowdy Irish family, the O'Hoolihans who terrorized the Elephant and Castle area of south London, had a distinctive youth cult to call its own.

This was precisely when the first Elms was likely to be settling in the Dale, perhaps flogging a few apples from a barrow to the pig farmers or clay cutters. Just possibly he was a 'street Arab', the lurid term of the time for an urchin who cared more about his clothes than he should have done and hung around music-halls and boxing-rings, showing off his fancy duds. Likely he'd have been sporting a pair of hobnail boots, the nails in the heel sending out a ringing sound as they scraped along the cobbles, and perched above them a pair of 'narrow-go-wides', a wonderfully literal name for what we would now call flares. In extreme cases street Arabs tied string just below the knee to make the trouser flare out even more. Above that would be a fancy waistcoat and, as a banner of his ne'er-do-well affiliations, a white silk scarf. This was originally

a garment worn by West End swells as a totem of toffish superiority, but one purloined by working-class kids to flout their lowly social standing, just like the Teds and their appropriation of upper-class Edwardian motifs. There was even a specific street Arab haircut, where the head was cropped close to baldness but with a distinctive 'donkey-fringe' of longer hair sprouting out over the brow.

Every single aspect of the street Arab's attire, with the possible exception of the string round the knees – though even that found a brief echo in punk days – would reappear in one way or another in the next 150 years, sported by one of the numerous teen tribes that were destined to follow in their wake. And all of these cults, whose sartorial brilliance burned brightly and threateningly, would have bowled their exaggerated walks along Latimer Road. This is an urban story. Cities are places of trade and theft, innovation and agitation; they're restless, insatiable, tawdry places where showing off is part of the daily interaction. Street fashion relies on all of those, and on precisely the kind of proximity between rich and poor that cities in general and Notting Dale in particular – where the sumptuous villas of Holland Park are within spitting distance of the slanted slums – could provide. No wonder it was a place where kids who had nothing wanted to look like they had it all.

But the 1950s Teds of W10 were doomed. As the new decade emerged, so sleeker styles were bubbling under, waiting to make Teddy boys everywhere appear lumpen and stuffily out of date. More specifically, the area was about to be bashed to oblivion. It's too easy to get sentimental about the good old days, and there was little good about the rancid, insanitary conditions most of the people of Notting Dale lived in, but whether it was right to completely demolish what had been a distinctive and cohesive community is another question. The old terraced streets, with their jerry-built, third-rate Georgian terraces, divided and divided

again into suffocating bed-sits, the tiny rows of one-up, one-down railway cottages and the ramshackle totters' yards, with their scruffy stables still smelling of horses. These were to be replaced by the new-fangled high-rise blocks which were beginning to pierce the London skyline, Trellick Tower, Erno Goldfinger's emblem of engineering modernity, leading the way. Even more shockingly, a swooping new thoroughfare, a daring motorway on stilts dubbed the Westway, was to be driven right through the neighbourhood.

This super-highway was supposed to symbolize the white heat of Harold Wilson's technological revolution, to make London a city fit for car-owning sophisticates, which in reality meant a few Hillman Imps heading for Perivale. The Westway, later to star in so many fabulous Clash songs, wanted to go exactly where our family home stood. And as I drive along it now, usually to see the poor unfortunate football team my father loved, I tell people we used to live in the fast lane, although more likely it was the hard shoulder.

The Elmses, along with so many of the families who had thought of these streets as their own, were compulsorily purchased and packed off in the deeply unromantic Notting Dale diaspora, which would see our extended family scattered to the corners of London Town and beyond. Some managed to stay in the area, signing up for the boxes in the sky, or edging over towards Shepherd's Bush or North Kensington, scraping together the cash to buy rotten old houses which are now worth not-so-small fortunes and meeting up at football matches and funerals. Another cousin worked for years as the secretary of the new Holland Park Comprehensive – a school which stood for all the radical, egalitarian modernity of the swinging sixties – and became a well-known character in the area, with its ever more cosmopolitan mix. Others, like my mum and dad, found refuge in 'overspill estates', vast corporate housing projects on the

periphery of the city which were filled with exiles washed up from slum-clearance schemes throughout old inner London.

I can distinctly recall standing with Aunt Glad, whose eyes shone to the last, while we watched a giant ball swing the old family home to dust. I must have been about four and she seemed about four hundred, a lady who had lived for ever in a land which was about to vanish, but who rarely succumbed to cheap romanticism. With her grandson in all but name holding tight to her bony, brilliant hand, we watched. She had no tears in her eyes as the bricks tumbled and the last traces of flock wallpaper and ancient anaglypta floated in the air. Pulling on an unfiltered, unapologetic cigarette, she said, 'Don't worry, Robert, it's all for the good. We're going modern.' Aunt Glad, you weren't wrong.