TEDDY BOYS

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Post-War Britain and the First Youth Revolution

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For my mother Margaret
1938–2022

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INTRODUCTION

DON'T FEAR THE CREEPER

I grew up in Portsmouth, the dockyard city on the south coast of England. When I was a schoolboy in the 1960s and 1970s, Teddy boys were still a common sight, whether walking down the streets in full gear, or running the dodgem cars and sixpenny shooting galleries at the funfair on the seafront, the music blasting out in a time-warp world in which Del Shannon was always singing 'Runaway', and Eddie Cochran never got over the 'Summertime Blues'.

The Teds were an exotic breed. They were creatures from another planet – one that was dangerous and exciting and far removed from my grim daily grind of school, with its maths lessons, corporal punishment and wasted afternoons playing sport on swamp-like pitches as the freezing wind blew in from the English Channel. They were flash, and by the early 1970s already had an air clinging to them of a lost decade when things were different: a time before three-day weeks, electricity cuts and flared trousers. Teddy boys were older than me, and tougher, many of them first-generation originals who were by this point in their late twenties or early thirties, but had stuck with the style that defined them, and with the music – early rock'n'roll.

By the time I was at secondary school, successive waves of youth cultures had followed the Teds and were now mashing up against each other, sometimes with violent consequences. You

Teddy boy fashions advertised in the *New Musical Express* by a Portsmouth retailer, 1974

could often judge someone's musical allegiance by the clothes they wore, long before you spoke to them.

In the case of the early skinheads, it was generally considered best to keep your distance. Their chosen look was stripped-down, sharply functional and custom-built for anything which might transpire. You kept your head down, and crossed the road rather than pass them on the pavement.

Other teenagers of the day favoured the residual hippie look, or climbed aboard the glam-rock bandwagon which had just started rolling. I vividly remember sitting on the top deck of a bus in around 1973 when up the stairs came two girls who had splashed out a serious amount of pocket money to get their hair dyed Dayglo orange and styled to resemble David Bowie's cut on the cover of *Aladdin Sane*. They looked absolutely superb, and although they affected a deadpan expression of unconcern, they had clearly set out to make an impact in a grey world where looking different could lead to trouble. Shouted insults from strangers in the street were often the least of your worries, and if you stood out even slightly from the norm, there was very often someone – and probably a few of their mates – waiting around the next corner looking for any excuse to punch you. Clothing was a serious business, and could have consequences.

None of this would have been news to the Teddy boys. With their Edwardian drape jackets, velvet collars, elaborate waistcoats and drainpipe trousers, they were not only one of the most recognisable working-class youth movements, they had also been the first. Trailblazers for a long line of fashion-conscious teenagers who were accused of dragging the country into the gutter, they were the council-house inheritors of a dandy tradition stretching back to the eighteenth century, minus the money and the indulgent parents. To many, they were layabouts, thugs and criminals. In 1953, the year they were initially given

a name and provoked national newspaper headlines,[1] they had been the first in the firing line – a newly identified target for everyone to throw stones at. Long before the beatniks, mods, hippies, skinheads, glam rockers, metalheads or punk rockers, the Teds had run the gauntlet of public opinion. The sequence of events was similar in most cases: dressing up in front of the bedroom mirror, brushing aside parental mockery or barbed threats, then walking out of the front door to take their chances as a self-invented moving sideshow in a world which seemed to prefer conformity and muted colours. It wasn't a matter of life and death, but it could feel like it.

Blitz-era children raised among the bomb-sites of post-war London, the original Teds subverted the British tailoring industry's attempts to sell a revival of Edwardian styles to the wealthy. Instead, they stole them back from the upper orders in a two-fingered salute to a society that offered working-class teenagers little more than prolonged rationing, a repetitive job of manual labour after leaving school at fifteen and an overpowering sense that whoever else had the advantages in life, it wasn't supposed to be them.

The press had a field day with these young people, especially after they had acquired the name 'Teddy boy' in 1953 – from Ted, short for Edward, meaning someone who wore Edwardian-style clothing. Anti-social behaviour, burglaries, car thefts, grievous bodily harm, race riots and sometimes murder – all this was laid at their door, and 'Ted' became a multi-purpose shorthand for someone below a certain age who was causing trouble, or was considered likely to do so. More than sixty years after the event, when I contacted a gentleman who as a teenager had appeared in a very well-known 1950s Teddy boy photograph, he politely declined to be interviewed for this book, saying 'it was all a long time ago'; another who had appeared in a similar picture turned

me down specifically because of the mistaken assumptions people might still make about him today.

It was hardly a surprise that one of the late-fifties wave of novels featuring this new phenomenon was entitled *The Whipping Boys.*[2]

I Am One Hell of a Guy

'I hope you're not going to grow up to be a Teddy boy?'

Shop assistants are not supposed to make personal remarks to customers, but there I was, fourteen years old, in a sports shop in Havant, being forced to account for the item I was trying to purchase. This was 1974, and the shop was mostly a place to buy football boots, tracksuits and a selection of things that wouldn't have interested me much, but there by the till they had something different – a wire stand from which hung a selection of bootlace ties. I can't remember what the tie cost, but I still have it, with its stainless steel cow's skull at the centre. The lady behind the counter seemed convinced that wearing this particular object would set me firmly on the path to a lifetime of crime. Mumbling something incoherent, I handed over the money and made my escape, clutching this supposedly dangerous fashion accessory.

As it happened, Ted styles had been making something of a public comeback in the early seventies. Indeed, Ringo Starr was in 1973 shooting scenes at my local funfair on Clarence Pier while playing a Teddy boy for the film *That'll Be the Day*.[3] Meanwhile in London, Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood had been selling drapes, creepers and other essentials to the cognoscenti for the last couple of years from their shop Let It Rock at the unfashionable end of the King's Road. It also seemed for a while as if there was at least one glam-rock band each week on *Top of the Pops* in full retro velvet-collared regalia – not just

outright revivalists like Showaddywaddy, but groups such as Mud, and the finest of them all, Wizzard. The latter managed to combine long hair and face paint with authentic Ted gear and superb fifties-influenced music, as if turbo-charged with Phil Spector's Wall of Sound, just as Roxy Music managed to incorporate a great deal of pre-1960 references into their songs and visuals, while somehow still appearing to have come from several decades into the future. All these groups were beacons of hope in a wasteland of mass-market flared trousers and five-inch-wide lapels; living with the consequences of standing out from the crowd was not always easy.

Thirty years after I bought my subversive bootlace tie, John Peel recalled a similar instance during his 1950s schooldays in which the mere ownership of an item of clothing associated with Teds was considered equally shocking. 'I'm a nice middle-class boy,' he told me, 'but I had a pair of drainpipe trousers in the cupboard that I bought in Liverpool, and I never dared wear them. But just the knowledge that they were there was enough to make me feel, "I am one hell of a guy."'[4]

John wasn't the only teenager in Liverpool risking parental disapproval over his clothing. Local boy Ronald Wycherley – soon to become Billy Fury – took to hiding his Ted clothes in the outside lavatory in the family backyard to avoid detection, as he recalled in a 1970s television interview:

> Well, I had a lot of trouble in the beginning, wearing tight trousers and long jackets, velvet collars, because of my dear father. So what I used to do was go out in my baggy trousers. I used to dash up the entry, climb over the wall, into the toilet, change into my tight trousers etc and I was sort of out on the town for the night.[5]

The situation was the same across the Irish Sea, where Teddy boy fashions had spread from London as early as 1954, in part because of the regular flow of young men going over to Britain to work for a few months at a time and bringing the new clothing home with them. Ted Carroll, who went on to co-found the record labels Chiswick and Ace, was one such Dublin teenager when the first wave of rock'n'roll started to make an impression on this side of the Atlantic. He told me this:

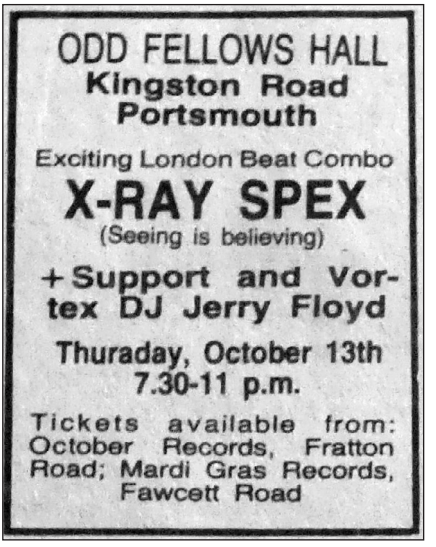
> Before Teddy boys came along there was just, *people*. For men, there was no such thing as fashion, and there was very little fashion for women as well, and teenagers. When you graduated from short trousers you started dressing like your father, with either a suit or a jacket and trousers with about twenty-two, twenty-four-inch bottoms – you know, bags – and there was no style at all, there was nothing.
>
> And then Teddy boys came along and because they were so different – I mean, they kind of grew out of the spiv thing in England, and there were sort of overtones of the zoot suit thing in America, but it was peculiarly their own thing, as you could see, but they stood out like a sore thumb. They had this kind of rebel vibe about them, they were different, and they were asserting themselves, and there was always an undertow of violence, although most of them weren't violent, but things could kick off from time to time. And a lot of it was to do with the fact that ordinary people were scared of them. They thought they'd get done up.[6]

Regardless of any tendency towards anti-social behaviour, at times it seemed as if just the clothing was enough to stir up anger in some people, such as the outraged writer of a letter to the

Newcastle Evening Chronicle in 1958, who insisted that the only way to 'wipe out this disgraceful class' was a thorough whipping.

> No young man of culture and refinement would allow himself to be associated with the name Teddy Boy. They go about dressed like 'undertakers'. Bits of black rags tight round their skinny legs, which are supposed to be trousers and black sacks hanging from the shoulders, half-way down the legs, which are classed as jackets. They make one sick to see them pull out a piece of dirty comb to do their hair up in the streets. Even their hair is dirty-looking, in general keeping with their appearance. They certainly look a dirty unkempt and brainless lot who seem incapable of any ambition towards a successful life. The 'Trap' is waiting for them to run into sooner or later – Prison![7]

I'm reminded of taking driving lessons in Portsmouth in 1977. When my forty-something instructor spotted a couple of inoffensive-looking teenage punks out of the window, he remarked to me in disgust, 'Jesus Christ, imagine the likes of them growing up and having kids.' I was dressed in the gear I wore to school so looked vaguely presentable; it didn't seem the right moment to tell him that I'd seen X-Ray Spex play at the Oddfellows Hall,[8] not to mention a double bill of Wayne County's Electric Chairs and Alternative TV at Clarence Pier Ballroom.[9] At the latter gig, one of the punk audience arrived wearing a grey Teddy boy drape with black velvet collar and cuffs which he threw on stage halfway through Wayne's set, and the singer immediately put it on and wore it for the rest of the performance. It was a good-natured gig, with no hint of the scary glass-throwing violence I encountered the following week at the same venue watching Sham 69.[10] A few months later, the



'Oh Bondage, Up Pompey', *Portsmouth Evening News*, 1977

Electric Chairs released a single called 'Eddie & Sheena' – the star-crossed tale of teenage love between a Teddy boy and a punk girl. In reality, when I emerged from the X-Ray Spex gig with the rest of the sparse audience, we were met by hostile groups of local Teds seemingly eager to engage in the King's Road sport they had been reading about in the tabloid press: punk-bashing.

I never quite understood why the Teds I ran into in the mid-1970s were so hostile to the younger punks, given that both groups had in their day been victimised by the media and the older generation on account of their taste in clothes and music. Even at that age, I didn't expect much tolerance from straight society, but the spectacle of one supposed outsider group taking offence at another simply because they didn't fit in seemed short-sighted and unnecessary to me. On New Year's Eve 1977, I caught a train to London to see the Ramones, Generation X and the Rezillos playing at the Rainbow in Finsbury Park.[11] Eleven

months later, I caught another train to London to see Jerry Lee Lewis supported by Duane Eddy at the same venue,[12] and four weeks later I saw the Clash back in Portsmouth.[13] To me it was all rock'n'roll music, and those remain some of the finest gigs I've seen. I had short hair in an era when the default style for men was still overwhelmingly shoulder-length. I had a black leather jacket, I had drainpipe jeans, I had some brothel creepers, and I'd cut up old shirts and written slogans on them; I felt a huge sense of freedom in making my own clothing choices after years of school uniforms and chain-store ready-mades.

Teddy boy and Teddy girl outfits were a startling sight when they first appeared in the early 1950s, as were punk styles twenty years later, but when viewed today, the reactions they provoked from wider society seem overblown and absurdly disproportionate.

As the decades have passed, a Teddy boy caricature has replaced the more complex reality, alongside the mistaken impression that they emerged in response to the first wave of US rock music. For some in the UK, the use of Bill Haley's 'Rock Around the Clock' over the title credits of the 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle*[14] may well have been their first taste of the new music, and the following year British newspapers eagerly published articles about seat-slashings and 'riots' at showings of Haley's own film, *Rock Around the Clock*: 'A youth danced on the roof of a parked car,' the *Manchester Guardian* reported, while 'another performed a "snake dance" in a dazed, hypnotised fashion'.[15] Yet the streets, dance halls and coffee bars of the East End and South London had been frequented by teenagers in Edwardian clothing for at least two years prior to this.

Rock'n'roll might have been adopted wholesale by the Teds, but these supposedly sinister young men in drape jackets were

the subject of hysterical media coverage long before this music made an impact in Britain. Once the two became linked in the public imagination, it was surely just a matter of time before dazed, hypnotised snake dancing would sweep aside everything in its path.

What follows is an attempt at clarifying things a little, accompanied of course by a selection of primal rock music and the bracing aroma of hair pomade floating on the breeze.

1

DRAPE EXPECTATIONS

Crêpe-Soled Shoes an Inch Thick

It started under the radar. In the early 1950s, increasing numbers of teenagers from the poorer districts of London began wearing a sharp-looking approximation of the styles of long-vanished Edwardian Britain. Long, fingertip-length drape jackets with velvet collars, narrow drainpipe trousers, thin ties and fancy waistcoats were the order of the day – a distinctly more flamboyant mode of dress than the baggier, nondescript fashions of the time. If you were wealthy, you could dress eccentrically or extravagantly, but everyone else was supposed to know their place and not draw attention to themselves. Yet although the general public may have seen this impulse among the Teds as a new development, the urge to branch out into something much more showy and provocative had actually been a recurring feature of working-class London life for many years.

In 1946, the writer Frank Norman escaped a loveless childhood spent in spartan residential homes for orphans, in which religion and corporal punishment held equal sway. He gained his freedom as a sixteen-year-old, sent out into the post-war world by his former guardians wearing 'an ill-fitting suit, shoes, two shirts, two sets of underclothes, socks, working boots and overalls'. As he later wrote, it was hardly the kind of clothing in which to make an impression on the northern fringes of London:

> Dressed far from elegantly in my discharge suit, I promenaded up and down Waltham Cross High Street in search of life and excitement. How very disappointing life can be at times: it was the dullest place on earth. I was very envious of the sartorial splendour of the local boys' clothes. Draped suits were just coming into fashion worn with white cutaway collars, loudly coloured ties and crêpe-soled shoes an inch thick – known as 'creepers'. They had all the girls, I did not get so much as a look-in. I vowed that one day I would acquire such an *ensemble* and devastate the world.[1]

This was the proto-Teddy boy look, but it would not have been called that at the time. The most likely words which might have been applied were *wide boy*, *spiv*, or *flash boy*.

To be *wide* was late-Victorian slang meaning well-informed or shrewd. In Arthur Morrison's 1896 novel of the Shoreditch slums, *A Child of the Jago*, the lawless residents of the area, whose first commandment is 'thou shalt not nark', proudly boast that they are 'as wide as Broad Street'. They also share an admiration for sharp clothes, although all but the most successful thieves in the area could not afford them:

> They and their friends resorted to a shop in Meakin Street, kept by an 'ikey' [Jewish, also meaning clever] tailor, there to buy the original out-and-out downy benjamins [coats], or the celebrated bang-up kicksies [trousers], cut saucy, with artful buttons and a double fakement [theatrical slang for a decoration or accessory] down the sides.[2]

Here was a true forerunner of the Teddy boy impulse for working-class flash clothes, more than half a century before its time.

A later novel which helped establish the term *wide* in the public consciousness was Robert Westerby's *Wide Boys Never Work* (1937), the story of Jim, a tough youth from out of town who falls in with a gang of racetrack criminals from London that wear sharp clothes 'with a Charing Cross Road cut'. This was the street where dance band musicians and petty mobsters could buy the kind of styles usually seen in Hollywood films or the pages of jazz papers like *Down Beat* and *Melody Maker*. Jim moves to the Smoke, where he hangs around Soho with some 'proper flash boys' who drive Buicks, gets into razor fights, and winds up at parties where people wear blue suede shoes (two decades before Carl Perkins made them world famous). Anyone looking for a happy ending would have retired disappointed, and Westerby – who later wrote film scripts for Disney – does a fine job of conjuring up the low-life scrabble for existence in the capital during the last years before war broke out:

> Over in Bethnal Green and Stepney cockroaches and bugs seep out through the damp plaster. In small rooms the children sleep, their paper-white faces too old for their bodies. And who cares about that, anyway? That's not your business. It's that fellow's over there – or isn't it? . . .
>
> In the back rooms off Lisle Street ageing tarts who are past it wish the hell they could just go to bed and sleep and sleep and sleep . . .
>
> Down in Fleet Street, the Presses roar. Ten million sheets of schmooge, pouring from the machines like vomit.
>
> Houses, buildings, straggling suburbs, new-brick factories. Miles after miles of them. Narrow, twisting alleys in the City – nightmares to turn old Wren over in his sleep. Tall, wide dignity near the Parks . . .
>
> Wotcher, London! How's the girl?[3]

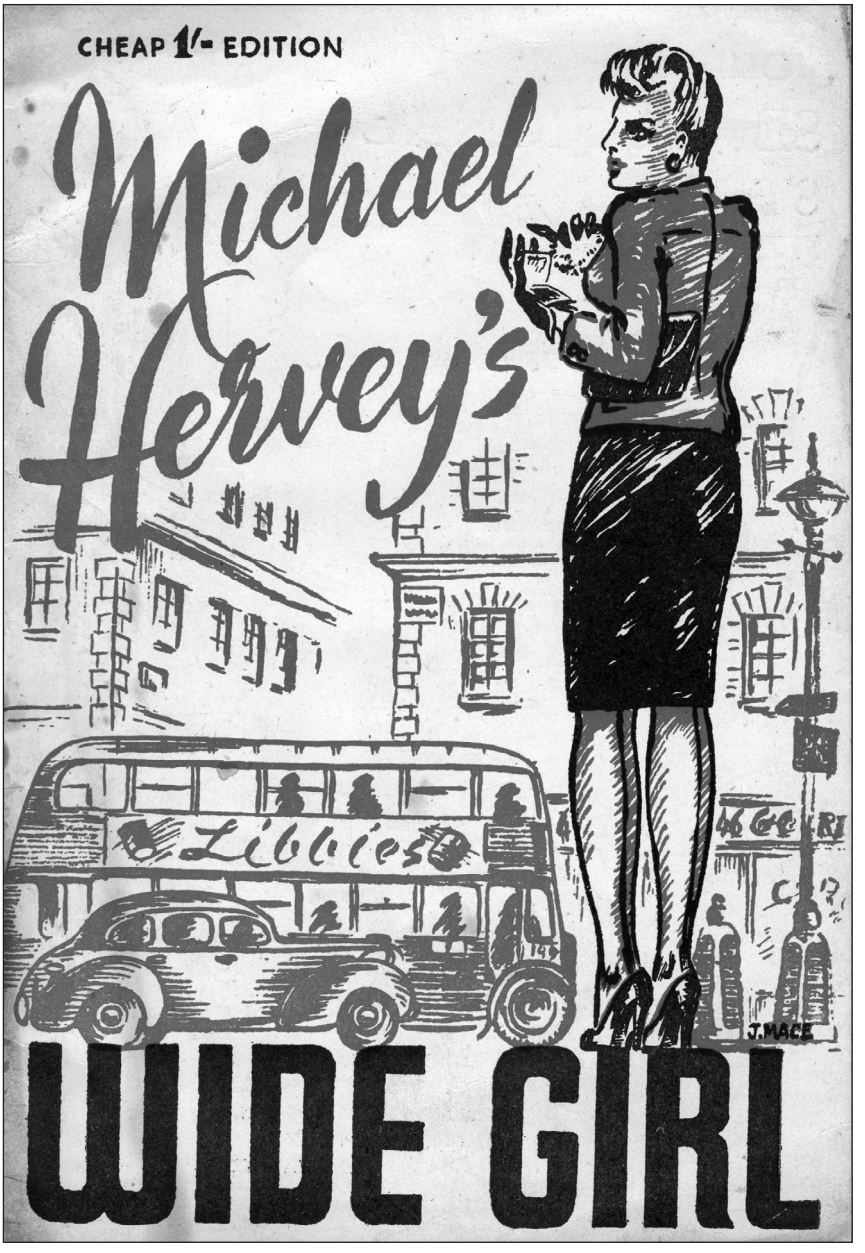
The Razor Boys of the Horse and Dog Tracks

The term 'wide' could apply to both sexes, and was recorded in a female context in another classic Soho novel of the time, *Night and the City* by Gerald Kersh (1938), in which streetwalker Zoë is taunted by the police for not knowing that her boyfriend was deceiving her: '"Love is blind," said the first detective. "Oh well, Zoë, and I thought you were wide. Why, didn't you know Harry's been carrying on with some tart from Phil Nosseross's club?"'[4]

Another London crime story, *Wide Girl* by Michael Hervey, was published in 1945 with the words 'Cheap 1 Shilling Edition' proudly displayed on the cover. That shilling bought you thirty barely coherent pages by the prolific author of other delights such as *No Crime Like the Present*, *Toughs Afloat*, *Murder Thy Neighbour* and *Dames Spell Trouble*. Hervey had already written a story called *Wide Boy*, and in this new one, the business of being a 'wide girl' seems to have largely involved taking the shortest route to various kinds of degradation:

> Her temperament was such that she couldn't bear restrictions – of any sort. Those of us who are, shall we say, more amenable in that respect, can never hope to understand the working and behaviour of such free souls. To us they will always remain queer, shocking, even depraved. Whilst we to them appear dull, unexciting, stodgy and clod-like. They waltz in the clouds whilst we slog in the mire – and who is to say that their mode of existence is wrong and ours is right? Of such people worlds are made. Yes, and Hell too . . .[5]

Unsurprisingly, the wide girl in question ends up at Piccadilly Circus, selling herself on the street.



'She couldn't bear restrictions – of any sort.' *Wide Girl*, 1945

If wide boys and girls had a somewhat cavalier attitude to the laws of the land – an accusation later often aimed at the Teds – then spivs were a similar breed. This type of character, first identified in the late 1920s, is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'a man who lives by his wits and has no regular employment; one engaging in petty black-market dealings and frequently characterized by flashy dress.' They were often associated with racetrack gambling, but in 1937 the word gained more publicity when John Worby wrote a book of memoirs misleadingly entitled *The Other Half – The Autobiography of a Spiv*.[6] The title of the US edition offered a truer indication of the work – largely an account of his travels as a rough sleeper – with the word 'spiv' dropped in favour of the phrase, *The Autobiography of a Tramp*. Indeed, in Britain his book was reviewed in *The Spectator* under the pointed headline, 'Love Among the Lice'.[7] Hardly a flashy dresser.

The following year, Walter Greenwood's novel *Only Mugs Work: A Soho Melodrama*[8] was introduced by its publisher with the words 'Gangsters in London! "Ponces", "Spivs", smash-and-grab men, the razor boys of the horse and dog tracks', which suggests that they believed that enough of their readers would be able to understand the word 'spiv'. These days, the term might conjure up an image of Private Walker in the 1970s TV series *Dad's Army*, the smoothly dressed wartime chancer adept at side-stepping all manner of food and clothing shortages. Yet while this helped reinforce the impression that the Blitz years were in some way the classic spiv era, a search of newspaper archives shows that the word essentially disappeared between 1939 and 1945 – except when recording the exploits of a popular racehorse named Spiv, which ran regularly at that time.

It may be that in the heavily censored wartime newspapers the term was suppressed on official instructions as being

counter-productive to the national interest. Whatever the case, within months of the cessation of hostilities, it swiftly reappeared in many written sources, as well as on radio. In October 1945, for example, the BBC broadcast a show about conmen called *It's Your Money They're After*; the *Birmingham Evening Despatch* wrote that it showed how 'the comparatively harmless fairground "spiv" and the suave high-power confidence trickster are cast from the same mould'.[9] Six months later, Hartlepool journalist Constance Noville informed her readers that she had uncovered the existence of a female equivalent:

> **EX-SERVICE GIRLS THINK OFFICE WORK TOO TAME**
>
> I have been learning about girl 'Spivs' from Dr J. Macalister Brew, educational secretary of the National Association of Girls' Clubs. Definition of a Spiv: a wise guy, who knows all the answers, who wears flashy clothes and lives off his wits. His feminine counterpart is the 'Good-time Annie'. She always has the latest film-star hair-do; wears a head scarf draped low at the back; uses heavy cosmetics on her legs, and chooses fancy shoes.[10]

The word 'spiv' was also thrown around in a jocular fashion in the House of Commons in August 1947, during a debate around extending the emergency powers available to the government under the Supplies and Services Act of 1945. Attorney General Hartley Shawcross complained to Quintin Hogg MP that the proposed amendment 'would make it necessary to have a debate in Parliament before an individual direction was given to an individual "spiv" that he was to engage in work useful to the community'. This prompted various members to ask, 'What is a "spiv?"', to which Hogg immediately replied, 'a Minister

without portfolio'.[11] In a similar way, 1950s MPs would use the Teds as a handy stereotype when criticising their political opponents, such as the occasion when Barbara Castle accused Harold Macmillan's Conservative government of introducing 'Teddy Boy economics'.[12]

His Clothing Out-Stares the Mid-Day Sun

On the music hall stage, comedians from humble backgrounds had been appearing in lavishly draped, outlandishly patterned and spivish suits since the 1930s. The theatre critic Ivor Brown offered the following description of Max Miller's performance at the London Palladium in 1943: 'He is full of meat and mettlesome. His clothing out-stares the mid-day sun.'[13] Three years later, when reviewing the variety show *Piccadilly Hayride* at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Brown wrote the following about Sid Field, another music hall giant: 'Give me Field, whose pastoral name so richly belies his genius for showing us the essence of nark and spiv, the flash and sparkle of a town lit up.'[14]

Another working-class type who dressed extravagantly was the illegal boxing arena betting tout, identified by Ralph L. Finn in a December 1945 article for *The People* entitled 'Flash Boy':

> He is not a Spiv. The Spivs originated in trying to imitate him. But where he is flash, they are cheap. He is the Flash-Boy: they are the Spivs. His clothes are beautifully made, either by some perfect craftsman of an East End tailor sitting crossed-legged in his back room, or even by Savile Row. But they are too beautiful. You can appreciate their quality and style and cut and choice of material a hundred yards away.[15]

The idea was gaining ground that you didn't need to have been born wealthy to cause a stir with your choice of clothing, and that you should not care whether it offended society's conceptions of good taste or appropriate behaviour. Similarly, in America during the early 1940s, jazz figures such as Cab Calloway popularised extravagantly draped zoot suits, which also became heavily associated with Latino youth movements in Los Angeles.

As Britain slowly gained some respite from wartime restrictions on clothing materials, especially after cloth rationing finally ended in March 1949, sartorial self-expression became more possible, yet money was often scarce. Cultural life had taken a battering during the war, and continued to do so during peacetime austerity. As the historian Robert Hewison pointed out, 'In the depths of the winter fuel crisis of 1947 the Ministry of Fuel and Power decided that the entire periodical press was not an essential industry, and for a fortnight no magazines of any kind, from *Punch* to pornography, were published. For good measure the BBC's Third Programme [forerunner of BBC Radio 3] was taken off the air.[16]

A Blessing in Disguise

Many of those Londoners of the 1930s and early 1940s who the press termed 'spivs' and 'wide boys' would have gone on to have children themselves, raising them in a city that had been hit hard by German bombing. Indeed, the post-war landscape of many inner London districts in which the future Teddy boys and Teddy girls grew up was marked by significant areas of complete devastation. As the writer John Pearson later put it, 'during the massed raids on the docks, whole districts died. In Bethnal Green alone, ten thousand dwellings were destroyed; the heart of the East End became a wilderness.'[17]

Walter Musto lived in South-West London, worked in Millbank, and kept a diary throughout the war. His entry for 17 April 1941 describes the stricken landscape he witnessed during his morning commute:

> Last night London had its fiercest blitz of the war. With transport badly disorganised, by train I could travel no nearer the office than Clapham Junction and thence by tram only so far as Wandsworth Road station. For the rest the two-mile walk in bright spring sunshine would have been enjoyable but for the havoc caused by enemy bombing, which everywhere was a gruesome reminder of the horrors of war in this bitter struggle for mastery. For almost two miles a continuous line of hosepipes, fire brigades and ambulances, the scores of tired firemen attested to the intensity of the attack and its effects. So spent were the firemen, I found some asleep in doorways and corners amidst the ruins of burnt-out buildings.[18]

Once peace finally came, however, significant areas of the city still lay in ruins. Here is how architectural writer Harold P. Clunn described the fate of a typical East End district in his 1947 survey of the capital, *London Marches On*:

> Most of Shoreditch High Street was destroyed in the early air raids of September, 1940, and the buildings which still remain are all at the northern end. On the east side the huge dry goods store of Messrs Jeremiah Rotherham & Co., Ltd, which stood next to the former London Music Hall, was completely demolished and so also were most of the buildings on the opposite side of the High Street. Bethnal Green Road has shared the same fate and

> whole roads of buildings at the western end have been destroyed.[19]

It may sound as if Clunn was writing a lament for the old city, but this hardly seems to have been his intention. In fact, like many other cultural commentators at the time, he adopted the view that most of the surviving old buildings should also be torn down and replaced wholesale by 'modern' flats – preferably high-rise – and he comes dangerously close to cheering on the Luftwaffe for their pioneering efforts in overhead town planning:

> Although the destruction of many of our ancient and beautiful churches, hospitals and other historical buildings by enemy action is a loss which every Londoner cannot but deeply deplore, on the other hand the disappearance of large areas of mean property, totally unworthy of this great and proud imperial city, will ultimately prove a blessing in disguise.'[20]

This was hardly a minority opinion, at least among those in charge, who were often writing from their homes in affluent districts like Hampstead or Chelsea, rather than any of the areas they were keen should be razed to the ground. Many of those in positions of influence in post-war Britain seemed to have loathed the buildings constructed by previous generations, whether the classic terraced houses of the working people or the large-scale dwellings of the rich.

It is odd to read such things from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, where surviving houses of that era have mostly long since been restored and now command high prices. British novels of the 1950s also routinely referred to 'hideous'

or 'absurd' Victorian and Edwardian architecture. In the sixties, this led to an overwhelming urge to 'modernise' those buildings that were not pulled down – ripping out original fireplaces and stained-glass decoration or covering panelled doors with hardboard. In London districts such as Islington or Notting Hill, one ironic result of this was that the building trade who made money removing all of those fireplaces then made a killing by putting them all back once such 'original features' had become desirable again twenty years later. We can only guess what the Teds of the 1950s who grew up in such houses when they were working-class dwellings might have made of this.

The Up-Ended Packet of Fags

For thirty years following the war, an entire generation of British planners and architects were seemingly in thrall to the modernist doctrines of architects like Le Corbusier, who in his own career variously sought the patronage of Stalin, Mussolini and collaborationist Vichy France, and breathlessly wrote to his mother in October 1940 that 'Hitler can crown his life with a great work: the planned layout of Europe.'[21] Large sections of historic Berlin were also destroyed in the latter stages of the war, as Ian Fleming noted when visiting the city at the end of the 1950s. 'The seventy million cubic metres of rubble in Berlin are gradually being made into mountains,' he wrote. 'The total operation is known as "Hitler's Collected Works".' Viewing one of Le Corbusier's new developments there, 'vaunted as the "new face" of Berlin', Fleming was less than impressed:

> This 'new face' is the 'new face' we are all coming to know – the 'up-ended-packet-of-fags' design for the maximum number of people to live in the minimum amount of space.

> This system treats the human being as a six-foot cube of flesh and breathing-space and fits him with exquisite economy into steel and concrete cells. He is allotted about three times the size of his cube as his 'bed-sitter', once his cube for his bathroom and once for his kitchen. So that he won't hate this cellular existence too much, he is well warmed and lighted, and he is provided with a chute in the wall through which he can dispose of the muck of his life – cartons, newspapers, love-letters and gin bottles – the last chaotic remains of his architecturally undesirable 'non-cube' life. These untidy bits of him are consumed by some great iron stomach in the basement.[22]

When the British cheerleaders for high-rise developments were eyeing up the post-war landscape, they didn't have to look far to find rubble-strewn bomb-sites in post-war London, Portsmouth, Coventry, Hull and Liverpool. For architects and builders these sites represented a business opportunity, but for ordinary people, they had simply been home.

The writer Sally Worboyes was born in 1945 in working-class Stepney, and recalled the war-torn London landscape of her childhood in her 2006 autobiography, *East End Girl*:

> Times were hard for us back-street children. We were under-nourished and at risk from illness and malnutrition as it was, never mind the fact that we ran wild during those early post-war years living in bomb-damaged areas – especially in and around Stepney and Bethnal Green. Even when I was a tiny child, just a toddler, I played on the streets in broken houses. It was a depressed and confused time when scrawny girls wore faded frocks and spindly boys lived in patched trousers, old jerseys and hand-me-down boots.[23]

Whichever architect, town-planner or politician was charged with re-shaping it, this was the world from which the Teddy boy generation emerged. They grew up in a society where peace had arrived but rationing continued; housing was scarce but jobs were increasingly easy to come by, not least because the population was depleted by wartime casualties. The wholesale slaughter of a generation of working-class males led to a situation which favoured the jobseeker and not the employer – in contrast to the desperate pre-war years of the Depression. As a result, businesses had to be more careful about how they treated their staff, who might resign on a Friday knowing they could easily walk into a similar job with a different company on Monday morning.

In this, and countless other ways, the rules had changed. And with many of the old pre-war assumptions looking increasingly unreliable, a nostalgia for earlier days began to take hold in late-1940s Britain.

Is It the Muff-Like Draping?

Teddy boys did not arrive out of a clear blue sky. Theirs was a far more gradual evolution, most of which happened under the radar.

The post-war revival of Edwardian styles began as the artificial creation of exclusive fashion houses, aimed specifically at the few people rich enough to be able to ignore rationing restrictions. Nostalgia for the era was clearly in the air. Indeed, as early as January 1946, little more than three months after the war's end, a group of left-leaning but well-heeled painters called the Artists' International Association threw a lavish Edwardian Ball at the Royal Watercolour Society's Galleries in Conduit Street, Mayfair, with specially commissioned portraits on the walls and

décor by Bernard Sarron, later a distinguished art director in the film industry.[24]

At this point, clothing coupons were strictly controlled, so for most people such upmarket fancy dress occasions – or indeed any kind of fashion extravagance – was out of the question; in the event of a wedding, ordinary families would pool their ration books to enable the bride to obtain sufficient material for a dress. Across the Channel in France, sales of cloth were not restricted, so when designs from the Paris catwalk shows of 1947 imitated the lavish women's gowns of 1910 no such difficulties arose. UK newspapers were soon informing their female readers that Edwardian hairstyles, dresses and jackets were back in fashion.

'An Echo of Edwardian Elegance', gushed one headline.[25] 'Is it the muff-like draping, or the giant chenille spot on her veil?' Doubtless these were the sort of questions obsessing millions of young women as they struggled to bring up their families in the bombed-out wreckage of the big cities, in a year when the new Labour government's President of the Board of Trade warned parliament of 'an extreme shortage of clothing'.[26] For many this was true, but Sir Stafford Cripps presumably did not deliver this speech wearing a fig leaf to a group of MPs dressed in rags. Cripps was the main politician associated with post-war austerity measures, yet according to his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, he had enjoyed the huge income in 1939 of £30,000 per annum.[27]

Edwardian Ease and Elegance

Despite the constraints of many of their readers, the press determinedly encouraged the tendency towards all things Edwardian. For instance, in March 1946 the *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette* gave notice of the latest womenswear trends

in an instalment of its regular bulletin from the capital, 'Our London Letter':

> In the first display of modern fashions since 1939 shown in a London West End store this week Edwardian styles stood out. There were suits cut to a point behind, blouses and skirts for evening wear, coats with all the fullness at the back and, most Edwardian of all, an ivory voile housecoat known in its day as a negligee.[28]

The message was repeated throughout that year in newspapers across the country, with headlines such as 'Edwardian Again',[29] while one journalist noted that 'waists are small, but basques are full, being pleated, trimmed with braid in the Edwardian manner'.[30]

British fashion, from centuries-old habit, looked across the Channel to the French capital for inspiration. A May 1946 photo feature in *The Sketch* stated that 'night and day signs of the revival of Edwardian ease and elegance are strikingly evident in the Paris collections,'[31] citing Pierre Balmain as a prime example. Their article was entitled 'Re-Enter the Gibson Girl', a reference to the idealised images of women drawn by American illustrator Charles Dana Gibson between 1890 and 1914. For some reason, however, when Christian Dior launched his first collection in February 1947, it was hailed by *Harper's Bazaar* magazine as the 'New Look' – an odd choice of label, given how heavily it was in debt to the shapes and styles of forty years before.

Indeed, in John Paul's 1952 espionage novel *Murder by Appointment* – set in the recently liberated Europe of 1946 – an agent visiting Paris offers the following description when his female partner returns from a shopping trip with a new outfit more redolent of the era of hansom cabs than jet fighters:

> She wears a turquoise-blue satin cocktail frock with a big bustle and a tight-fitting bodice. The tight sleeves reach just under the elbow. Her blonde hair is thrown back loosely over the exquisitely embroidered lace collar . . .
>
> 'How do you like Balmain's latest creation?' she asks.[32]

In April 1946, the illustrated magazine *Britannia and Eve* highlighted this trend. A series of pictures accurately captioned 'Fashion History Repeats Itself'[33] showed tailored women's suits with narrow waists and velvet collars, and then in a February article they called for a rejection of wartime designs:

> Madame, You're Missing Something – You have the excitement of your hard-won freedom, your emancipation – for what it's worth – the honour of your blitz record and the fun of the battle blouses that went with it. Your grandmother had none of these things, but she had glamour, the gracious, delicious allurement of her clothes.[34]

Standing in the Fish Queue

Not everyone was enamoured of the latest trend. Here, for example, is a US ex-serviceman from New Jersey who wrote to *Life* magazine in 1947 protesting about their recent fashion pictorial, 'Gibson Girl Clothes':

> What a mess! What has become of the millions of Miss Americas who for centuries have tried to captivate the male? To think of the years I spent in the Pacific, dreaming of the day I'd return to a barracks bag tied in the middle. So long, brother! I'm going back to New Guinea where a fella can see what he's getting![35]

The extravagant use of cloth in these designs was expressly criticised by the British magazine *Picture Post* in a lengthy article entitled 'Paris Forgets This Is 1947':

> Straight from the indolent and wealthy years before the 1914 war come this year's much-discussed Paris fashions. They are launched upon a world which has not the material to copy them – and whose women have neither the money to buy, the leisure to enjoy, nor in some designs even the strength to support, these masses of elaborate material.[36]

As well as noting the difficulty of obtaining cloth in Britain, Marjorie Backett pointed out that the sheer impracticality of many designs showed that they were aimed at the idle rich rather than anyone who actually had to work: 'try lifting a bale of tweed – and imagine voluntarily adding to the fatigue of standing in the fish queue by having twenty yards of it hanging from one's waist'.[37]

There were other dissenting voices too, with one fashion commentator pointing out that 'the use of egret plumes in Edwardian days resulted in the almost total extinction of the egret in Lower Egypt';[38] by 1948, a columnist north of the border was optimistically claiming that Scottish women were rejecting the new styles:

> Already there are signs that the revolt is on. Not so long ago the women used to conform slavishly to the dictates of fashion, but this year the 'New Look' has been subjected to the scornful regard of the majority of women, who regard longer skirts, bustles and furbelows as the outmoded trappings of Edwardian times. This is an encouraging sign.[39]

Nevertheless, women's clothing in the late 1940s largely gave way to a sea of Edwardian-influenced fashions; for a while it appeared that almost every wedding reported in a regional or national newspaper featured the bride and bridesmaids decked out as if it was 1910, with hairstyles to match. At a society wedding in Knightsbridge in 1948, the bride wore 'a picture frock of white satin, following contemporary ideas of an Edwardian fashion,'[40] while at another less-expensive occasion in Nottingham the bridesmaids were dressed in a winning combination of 'cherry moss crêpe, in Edwardian style, with skunk muffs.'[41] Even the royal family came under the influence: when the future queen visited Paris in May 1948, it was reported that 'for dinner at the British Embassy last night Princess Elizabeth was wearing a new dress of lime green cut in Edwardian style, with a round neckline and folds at the shoulders.'[42]

Indeed, the Edwardian trend even persisted when the purpose of an occasion was to wear as few clothes as possible. One of the less risqué promotional shots given out by the capital's most famous burlesque club was captioned, 'vivacious "starlet", Pat Hamilton, wears this Edwardian ensemble in "Revudeville", the Windmill Theatre (London) show.'[43]

In these and many other ways, the stage was gradually being set. When the Ted and Teddy girl styles began appearing in the early part of the following decade, the only people who should have been surprised were those who had not been paying attention.

2

JUST LIKE EDDIE

All the Rage in London, Sir

After lobbying the female population of the UK to adopt the styles of their grandparents for several years, fashion designers, clothing manufacturers and the press then turned their attention to the other 50 per cent of the adult population. 'Sooner or later it had to come,' wrote one commentator in May 1948 with a hint of unease. 'Men had to get a "new look" too.'[1] However, exactly what form this would take was anybody's guess: 'If men were to follow the women thus far into the remoter days of fashion, soon they might be in bottle-green tights and breeches to match bustles and trailing hems.'

Such clothing was mercifully thin on the ground in late-1940s London. However, just as Alec Guinness was being dressed in a wide variety of Edwardian costumes for his multiple roles in the Ealing comedy masterpiece *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (released June 1949), designers were finally waking up to the sales potential of the pre-First World War look.

A tentative revival began in the south of England, but some up north – such as the writer Keith Colling – found the prospect grim:

> When I went to my tailor to order a new sports coat and slacks, it was with more than a little surprise that I gazed at