

Shop talk **Charles Boyd-Bowman,** Managing Director of Alexander Boyd



Tell us about your shop

'We have been in this shop for five and a half years. We are bespoke shirtmakers and we offer bespoke tailoring in the shop, so if you come in we can measure you up and make the shirt to order.'

'We make 80 per cent of what we sell ourselves, and everything we do is made in England. We have two factories – one in Kent and one in Suffolk – where we make shirts for ourselves and for others.'

Who shops here?

'Quite a wide variety of people. We get the hedge-fund managers down from the West End, the men from the City, and the more fashionable crowd who shop near

Brick Lane and Spitalfields. We've also launched a website, and that's bringing more people to the shop.'

Is it harder to run an independent shop than it used to be?

'No, because what we offer is unique, and what we offer in the time we can offer it is unique too.'

'We are very fortunate because we actually make the product ourselves – we don't have to go anywhere else or rely on anyone else to do so, which enables us to be flexible. For example, a man came in at three o'clock one day in desperate need of a bespoke shirt for that evening, and we had two made for him by 5pm. It was an unusual situation, but it goes to show what you can do!'

What are your favourite shops in London?

'Well, near here is the Albion café (2-4 Boundary Street, E2 7DD, 7729 1051, www.albioncaff.co.uk), where we go for food and bits and bobs; we actually made the uniforms for the staff there, so it's a reciprocal relationship.'

'There is also a great new cheese shop in Spitalfields Market (see p46), and I have picked up quite a few things from the nearby [vintage] furniture store Elemental (67 Brushfield Street, E1 6AA, 7247 7588, www.elemental.uk.com).

'I don't have to go anywhere else for clothes because everything I need is here.'

What is the most enjoyable aspect of owning a shop?

'Well, we're a family business in the way we are run and in the way we treat our customers; we like to think of them as our family too and to treat them as such.'

Any plans for the future?

'We are looking to bring other products into the shop – outerwear and knitwear will be next – but we will always look to our core values when expanding and make very key choices about what we bring in.'

► For more on **Alexander Boyd**, see p97.

A suit to behold

London has long been the centre of the universe when it comes to bespoke suits and expert tailoring.

Mayfair's **Savile Row** is famous the world over, having been synonymous with bespoke tailoring since the 1800s. However, what the term 'bespoke' actually means has been the subject of controversy in recent years, with many of the street's old-school tailors arguing that newcomers have been using the term to offer tailoring services that were not actually bespoke, but simply 'made-to-measure'.

Determined to preserve their centuries-old technique, the high houses of Mayfair tailoring formed the **Savile Row Bespoke Association** (www.savilerowbespoke.com) in 2004, drawing up a list of standards by which to distinguish themselves as the real deal. Their 'pure bespoke' standards included: measuring the customer's body by at least 21 individual points; creating and keeping an original paper pattern for each customer; advising and consulting on all aspects of the suit's fit and fabric; and, perhaps most importantly, performing virtually all needlework by hand.

Four years later, though, the Advertising Standards Authority created considerable wiggle room for UK tailors by allowing businesses to label themselves 'bespoke' even if they measured, framed and cut by hand, but sewed by machine.

In the end, going 'pure bespoke' is a question of intimacy with your clothing. Initial outgoings for made-to-measure will always be cheaper. However, if you're after a suit that will exactly fit your proportions and physique, which will last for decades, be easily adjustable with age (if you gain weight, for instance), and which will be a real expression of your tastes and personality, then you might choose to enlist the services of an expert bespoke tailor, such as those mentioned below, who train for years before they're let loose on the luxurious fabrics of your choosing. The level of craftsmanship employed is unbeatable.

The following Savile Row shops are all members of the Savile Row Bespoke Association.

Henry Poole & Co (15 Savile Row, W1S 3PJ, 7734 5985, www.henrypoole.com) was established in 1806, and founded Savile Row. Since then, it has served royalty and historical notables, from Napoleon III and Emperor Haile Selassie to 'Buffalo' Bill Cody, Winston

Churchill, and the livery of Queen Elizabeth II. History buffs can examine King George II's household livery on display in the store. All suits here are 'pure bespoke', with two-piece suits from £2,646 and three-pieces from £2,828 (prices exclude VAT).

Dege & Skinner (10 Savile Row, W1S 3PF, 7287 2941, www.dege-skinner.co.uk), a few doors down, has built a formidable reputation as a bespoke tailor and highland dressmaker, but also commands great respect for its military uniforms and shirt-making services. With three royal warrants to its name, it's a sure bet for top-notch service, and, according to owner William Skinner, it makes 'the best uniforms in London.' Prices for a Dege & Skinner bespoke suit start at £3,000, with shirts from £195 (prices include VAT); master shirt-maker Robert Whitaker cuts with a skill that's hard to match, even on Savile Row. Equally impressive are Dege & Skinner's selection of dressing gowns.



John Lobb



African Waistcoat Company

Gieves & Hawkes (1 Savile Row, W1S 3JR, 7434 2001, www.gievesandhawkes.com) isn't just about fine tailoring; it's also a history lesson for anyone interested in the development of men's clothes. Despite having held royal warrants without interruption for 200 years (the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh and Prince Charles are all customers), the company continues to innovate.

It offers three services: the beautiful ready-to-wear collection starts at £595, while its made-to-measure service starts a little higher, at £895; handmade bespoke is the premier service – it's a long procedure (we're talking months), but you'll eventually take home a luxury handmade garment made to your exact measurements and requirements.

While the majority of the finest suit-makers are still on Savile Row, there is one London tailor who offers Mayfair sophistication on a Soho budget: **Chris Kerr** (52 Berwick Street, W1F 8SL, 7437 3727, www.chriskerr.com) – who learnt the trade from his father, legendary 1960s tailor Eddie Kerr.

Located in the heart of Soho, the purple façade of his shop is a stylish stand-out amid a row of curry houses, hair salons and bustling sidewalk cafés. Inside, the vibe is more artist's studio than shop, and everyone from Johnny

Depp to James Bond (in his Daniel Craig incarnation) has stepped inside; Nick Cave is a regular (ten suits in the last ten months, apparently). But despite the star-studded clientele, Eddie tells us that the shop's mission remains simple: to make pure bespoke suits for the man on the street. '£1,200 is expensive enough,' he says. It's thus the ideal place to commission your first bespoke suit.

However, if you're still baulking at this price, and aren't yet ready to invest in a bespoke suit, then quality ready-to-wear and tailored suits are available at Dutch-owned **SuitSupply** (9 Vigo Street, W1S 3HH, 7851 2961, www.suitsupply.com), which opened in 2010, around the corner from Savile Row. You won't get the personal attention of a truly bespoke tailor, but the company's tailoring session is still comprehensive – customers are measured by a 35-point system, and then details are sent to Italy, where a tailor creates your suit in 100% Italian fabric, posting it back to the UK in six to eight weeks. Alterations can then be made in store, if necessary. And with prices starting at just £349, it's a fraction of the price of a Savile Row number.

Whether you go for fully bespoke, off-the-peg, or somewhere in between, you'll need a decent shirt and a pair of shoes to complete the look. As well as offering expert tailoring (master cutter Clive Phythian trained at Gieves & Hawkes), **Alexander Boyd** (54 Artillery Lane, E1 7LS, 7377 8755, www.alexanderboyd.co.uk; see also *p95 Shop talk*), over in Spitalfields, can measure you up and make you a beautiful handmade tailored shirt to order (prices start at £175). Even the shop's off-the-peg shirts are made in the finest cotton in a factory in Kent, as are its ties, handmade from silk woven in Suffolk. For bespoke shoes, meanwhile, head to **John Lobb** (see *p126*), where, for a price (around £2,000), you'll get a handmade pair that will last a lifetime. And for a snazzy contrast to a classic English look, head to Camden Passage (see *p106 Streetwise*) to check out the colourful garments made by the **African Waistcoat Company** (33 Islington Green, N1 8DU, 7704 9698, www.africanwaistcoatcompany.com). Here, old Etonian Calum Robertson marries African and Savile Row traditions and craftsmanship, producing dazzling waistcoats made from West African cottons and silks.