

# BY THE WAY



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## What the Well-Dressed Man is Wearing

Wodehouse wrote continuously from 1902 to 1975, during which time men's dress underwent some fundamental changes. As a result, today's readers may have an incomplete understanding of exactly what is meant by some of the terms which he used. In this issue of *By The Way* we have sought to explain some of the subtleties which time has blurred.

Most of the information in this issue is taken, with the author's approval, from Norman Murphy's *A Wodehouse Handbook*.

### Collars

In Wodehouse's school days, the junior boys wore starched turn-down Eton collars (ie broad, stiff, white collars worn outside the jacket) but the senior boys and masters wore 'stickups'. To understand the nature of a 'stick-up', cut a strip of cardboard the same length as your neck size and four inches high and tie it round your throat and wear it throughout the day! It was impossible to turn your head without turning the top half of your body. It was the prospect of wearing such a collar plus top hat that so upset Lord Emsworth in *Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend*.

At some time in the 1890s, somebody decided to ease things by turning down the corners of the two front edges to give you a 'wing collar', still to be seen today, sometimes worn with a dinner jacket.

To a schoolboy of the period, the graduation at 15 or 16 from the Eton collar to a stick-up was a great step, a mark of passage similar to a girl putting her hair up.

By 1900 collars had shrunk to three inches in height, and by 1912 to two or less, but a well-starched collar would still inhibit any sudden movement of the head. That is why so many artists and authors in early Wodehouse stories showed their unconventionality by wearing comfortable turn-down soft collars.

The turn-down collar was starting to be seen at Ascot by 1928.

### Dinner Jacket (or 'Black Tie'); in the USA 'Tuxedo'

A short, black jacket which was originally worn only on 'informal' occasions with a white shirt, black bow tie and black trousers with a satin stripe down the

seams, it has evolved into the most familiar dress for men at formal gatherings. It is believed to have been introduced by Edward VII when Prince of Wales.

A New York socialite saw the innovation at a 'men only' evening in London, and introduced it to America at an Autumn Ball held at his Tuxedo Park country club in October 1886, from where it obtained its transatlantic name.

Variations involving alternative coloured material (such as midnight blue) for the jacket and trousers, gold jackets, patterned waistcoats, coloured shirts and bow-ties are modern developments.

### Evening Dress (or 'White Tie')

Evening dress consists of an elegant evening tail coat, the long tails to the coat giving immense dignity, a waistcoat, starched white shirt and bow tie, together with spongebag trousers. Black waistcoats were worn except to dances, when white waistcoats were worn, as were gloves. The white tie is of starched piqué cotton, and soon becomes a rag unless it is satisfactorily tied at the first or second attempt. After that, it must be discarded, a consequence which explains why Bertie Wooster had two shelves full of white ties in *The Aunt and The Sluggard*.

### Eton Jacket

A short, black, broadcloth jacket with an open front and broad lapels, pointed at the back and cut square at the hips, worn by younger boys at Eton College.

### Frock coat

A long, elegant double-breasted garment, the hallmark of Victorian respectability. In the USA it was called a 'Prince Albert' to commemorate the Prince of Wales, who wore it when he visited

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America in 1860. It was invariably worn with a top hat. Psmith wore this in *Psmith in the City* as Wodehouse wore it himself when he went to pay morning calls. It went out of fashion after 1918.

### **Lounge Suit**

A simple set of garments which came in during the nineteenth century. As a matter of convenience and comfort, the tails of men's jackets, designed for riding on horseback, grew shorter and shorter until nothing remained but a central vent (which later designers adapted to create variations with either a double vent, or no vent at all). Matching waistcoats were worn for most of the twentieth century, but declined rapidly in popularity in the last quarter.

The lounge suit began life in the country, with the jacket buttoned high at the neck for protection against the wind and rain. As the collar became permanently turned down, the superfluous top button hole became the place where you stuck your carnation.

### **Morning Dress**

This came in as formal day wear as the frock coat faded after 1918. It comprised, as it still does, a tail coat (grey for social occasions, black for formal occasions and funerals), waistcoat (black, fawn or grey) and spongebag trousers. The colour of the top hat worn usually matched the coat.

By 1928, young men at Ascot were wearing green, red, or even striped and spotted waistcoats with their morning dress.

### **Norfolk Jacket**

A strong, thick tweed jacket with patch pockets and a half-belt, for use in the country. It was worn with matching tweed breeches or plus-fours. Esmond Haddock chose this style in *The Mating Season*.

### **Oxford Bags**

Trousers which became wider and wider towards the feet so they flapped madly as one walked.

### **Plus-Fours**

A distinctive style of loose-fitting knickerbockers or breeches. They originated as a form of dress appropriate to the golf course, as the extra material gathered in below the knee permitted a golfer to swing his club without pulling the breeches above the knee. In 1924 they became fashionable for country and leisure wear. Worn with the patch-pocketed tweed Norfolk jacket, they remained the custom for shooting or fishing until 1939.

### **Spats**

Short gaiters worn over the instep, reaching only a little way above the ankle and held in position by a strap which went under the shoe. They went out of fashion in the late 1920s.

### **Shirts**

In 1934 soft-fronted evening dress shirts began to be worn with a dinner jacket (Monty Bodkin wore one in *The Luck of the Bodkins*). Jeeves had returned Bertie Wooster's order for half a dozen in *Clustering Around Young Bingo* as early as 1925, and they did not become the norm until the outbreak of war in 1939 made the starching of stiff shirts well-nigh impossible.

The Depression of the 1930s meant that significantly fewer Americans were crossing the Atlantic to visit Europe. To maintain a flow of income from their ships, major companies started running short cruises round Europe aimed primarily at the middle classes, with the result was that clothing hitherto only worn by the wealthy at Mediterranean resorts – coloured sports shirts and green and blue sports trousers – found its way to the UK.

### **Spongebag Trousers**

Striped, checked or herringbone-pattern trousers to be worn with morning or black jacket.

### **Stiff-fronted Shirts and the use of Studs**

The rigidly starched, stiff white collar worn with a suit until the 1930s was accompanied in evening dress or dinner jacket with an equally rigidly starched shirt-front.

To wear this type of shirt and collar it was necessary to use collar studs. A short stud fixed the collar to the neck of the shirt at the back, while the longer front stud had to go through four layers of material, holding both sides of the shirt together and then going through the two ends of the collar.

In addition, since the rigid starched shirt-front could not be buttoned, shirt studs were used, a fiddly process which entailed unscrewing the decorative head off the stud, reaching up and underneath the starched shirt you had put on, forcing the stud shank through the starched narrow slits and screwing the decorative stud-head back onto the shank. The stud heads were easily dropped or lost, so Lord Emsworth's habit of using brass-headed paper fasteners was commonly resorted to by resourceful diners.