

Nick Foulkes

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STRIKE A CORD

One of the more memorable days in my working life took place about 21 years ago, when I went to the Bois de Boulogne home of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor to spend the day going through HRH's wardrobe. I have never yet experienced a fit of Stendhal Syndrome, when, overwhelmed by too much beauty, one collapses. However, I almost had to reach for the smelling salts after looking through the wardrobe of the best-dressed man of the last century.

I suppose that this is how Howard Carter felt on opening the tomb of Tutankhamun. It was a store of unimagined riches and an experience that was to influence my life in countless subtle ways. But perhaps, after all these years, the single most important effect on my life has been that I see corduroy in a completely different light. One of the very best things in Edward VIII's wardrobe was a bottle-green corduroy dinner jacket that had been made for him by Scholte in 1949 (pictured). It was shawl-collared with silk facings and was fastened using the buttons of the Beaufort Hunt. I immediately had Terry Haste run one up for me in navy blue (substituting the hunt buttons for silk-covered ones) and of late I have taken to wearing it again. It is a garment that reminds me how HRH the Duke of Windsor taught me to appreciate the versatility of corduroy.

Until my moment of dinner-jacket epiphany, I had tended to view corduroy as a trouser fabric and had had various jaunty colours made up. I suppose the bright pair of cords is our equivalent of the Palm Beach or country club trouser, embroidered with small motifs testifying to the sporting or leisured life (tennis racquets, yachts, martini glasses etc) in what Tom Wolfe described as go-to-hell colours. This was confirmed to me a few years ago when Ralph Lauren combined both traditions with some utterly brilliant heavy corduroys in brown and green embroidered with duck and pheasant.

Over the years various corduroy suits and jackets (I still have difficulty referring to a jacket as a coat, but I suppose that I must learn to do so one day) have appeared in my wardrobe and have wrought subtle improvements upon my life. For instance, I find that my appreciation of mid-20th-century Scandinavian

design is greatly improved if I am wearing a two-piece, three-button, midnight-blue fine corduroy suit with a rollneck sweater. I have also discovered that broad tobacco-coloured corduroy fashioned into a three-piece suit is just the thing to wear to get the most out of visiting the architectural jewels of Tuscany and Umbria. The rustic colour scheme ensures that one melts into the landscape, while the fabric implies a certain intellectual quality that I find can be enhanced by the addition of a well thumbed copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (in the Dorothy L Sayers translation, of course) peeking almost absent-mindedly from a patch pocket.

WARM FRONT

In fact, the more I look into corduroy the more I become convinced that it is the near-perfect fabric and need not be restricted solely to autumn and winter. I started experimenting with lightweight, bone-coloured corduroy to wear as a sports jacket in spring with spongebag trousers, but it was not until I met the Neapolitan master Mariano Rubinacci that I was inculcated into the delights of summer corduroy. This particular act of horizon-broadening marked another important step on my corduroy road and, like all great ideas, is really rather simple. The trick is to use to shirt-weight corduroy. Simple as that. Made with as little as possible in the way of padding, the results are garments of shirt-like comfort, and the line between shirt and sports jacket can be further blurred by the use of safari-shirt-like pocket details and extravagant button-through pocket flaps.

I even have a particularly splendid lime corduroy suit in this weight that I can only imagine I had made so that I can look at it throughout the winter to remind myself that even on grey days the promise of summer and sunshine is still there. My chief dilemma, of course, is deciding whether I should have someone embroider small motifs *à l'américaine* over it, and it is a question that I will be pondering for some time as, alas, the Duke of Windsor is no longer around to seek advice from and nor is his wardrobe to be consulted: it was dispersed in a Sotheby's sale in September 1997. *f*

