



No feet are more suited to spats than the dancing pair of the great Fred Astaire, pictured *Puttin' On The Ritz* in *Blue Skies*, 1946

Spats the way to do it

Once a signifier of hard work, then a marker of wealth and standing, spatterdashes—to give them their full name—could make or break an Englishman's outfit. Deborah Nicholls-Lee investigates the eventful history of the 'accessory *par excellence*'

F RONT and foremost in Robert Frederick Blum's painting *Two Idlers* (1888–89) is a black shoe sheathed in a glowing white spat. The elegant accoutrement belongs to the miniaturist William Baer, who reclines languidly on a wicker chair smoking a cigarette, with his wife, Laura, lounging beside him in a hammock. The message is clear: spats belong to the leisured classes.

Yet, spatterdashes, to use their full name, were originally all about hard work. Two hundred years before crisp white shoe coverings became gentlemanly symbols of style and status, khaki-coloured linen and canvas spats were tasked with shielding infantry soldiers' feet from rain, stones and mud; whereas versions in suede, leather or cloth were adopted by civilians—women as well

as men—as a defence against the filth of inner-city streets or untamed Nature when toiling the land.

The 18th-century paintings of George Morland depict haymakers, trappers and warreners donning knee-length, earth-coloured spats, possibly protecting their only pair of shoes. Their masters also adopted spats, fastening stirruted iterations of buckskin or cow leather over their fine stockings when riding or shooting—forerunners of the chaps and gaiters still worn today.

It was the improved sanitation of the Victorian streets that elevated spats from a primarily utilitarian garment to a marker of wealth and standing, epitomised by P. G. Wodehouse's series *Young Men in Spats*, detailing the exploits of the moneyed members of London's Drones Club. In Europe,

spats became 'the accessory *par excellence* of "boulevard fashion"; writes Farid Chenoune in *A History of Men's Fashion* (1993). 'Astute men realised how useful they could be during cold spells, or during long walks, and how they could change the look of a pair of shoes.'

In a deliberate move away from their origin in manual labour, the most impractical, pale-coloured varieties made the biggest statement. Fashioned in felt, linen or canvas and fastened with delicate buttons made of horn, pearl and brass, they sent out strong signals about the work-free lifestyle of their wearer.

Spats, notes writer J. G. Sinclair in his satirical *Portrait of Oxford*, published in 1931, are all about posturing. In Oxford, where, he says, class distinctions are 'as numerous as the legs on a centipede', 'spats are plenteous' and carefully selected. 'A mere



Spats life: elegant spatterdashes are associated with a leisurely upper-class existence in Robert Frederick Blum's *Two Idlers*, 1888–89

shade in the colour of your spats sets up a subtle social standard,' he states.

In Wodehouse's *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923), Bertie Wooster's eponymous valet knew this well. Wooster's impulse buy at Mayfair's Burlington Arcade of a version in school colours ('It would have taken a chappie of stronger fibre than I am to resist the pair of Old Etonian spats which had smiled up at me from inside the window') has Jeeves burning the offending items. 'A quiet grey is far more suitable, sir,' he opines.

For the few who wear spats today, no spats are still better than bad spats. 'Most spats today are awful,' laments piper-for-hire Glyn Morris of Scottish Bagpipers, who has been wearing white spats—now secured with the help of Velcro—for more than 30 years. 'They're typically not shaped properly around the calf and they're not made from proper canvas,' he remarks. 'Consequently, they look loose and floppy and not smart at all.' As for keeping them white, acrylic artist's paint and thinner, he reveals, conserves 'the grain of the canvas' and doesn't crack, although avoiding all those tiny black buttons is a 'nightmare'.

Shilling & Fitz in Perth is one of the few remaining outfitters meeting Mr Morris's



The King, then Prince of Wales, wears Edwardian garb for a Klondike Evening at Fort Edmonton in Canada, in 1883

exacting standards and dresses modern-day spat-wearers, such as the Royal Regiment of Scotland band, as well as individual pipers and drummers. 'One gentleman remarked that our tailor shop was like something from a Dickens novel,' reveals co-founder Lee Fitzpatrick. The stiff spats preferred by Mr Morris no longer depend on whale bone, but most are still bespoke, including the Black Watch style with its unusual square toe. 'The client is measured at the tailor shop wearing hose tops and Highland brogues,' explains Mr Fitzpatrick. 'The buttons and buttonholes are then plotted during the fitting.'

Back in the 1920s, spats were about showiness. 'Have you seen the well to do/Up and down Park Avenue...?' wrote Irving Berlin in *Puttin' on the Ritz*. 'High hats and narrow collars/White spats and lots of dollars.' Meanwhile, Agatha Christie was delighting readers with a new character, Hercule Poirot, whose spotless spats reflected his meticulous approach to crime-solving.

Whereas the Jazz Age kept spats centre stage in America well into the 1930s, the trend tailed off in Britain when George V was spotted spat-free at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 1926. The following day, spats →



The immaculately turned out Lt-Col Johnny Thompson—equerry to The King—sports spats for the Sovereign’s parade at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Surrey

were reportedly discovered beneath several bushes, cast off by a public keen to follow his lead, and were soon succeeded by the two-tone spectator shoe popularised by his heir.

‘I don’t know why they went out!’ groused Wodehouse in a 1975 interview for *The Paris Review*. ‘They were awfully comfortable.’ His own, he insists, were ‘always impeccable’ and worked wonders on his hand-me-down wardrobe. ‘The butler would open the door and take out my old topcoat and hat and sniff as if to say, “Hardly the sort of thing we are accustomed to.” Then he would look down at the spats and everything would be all right.’

Bad guise

There’s something about the vanity of wearing spats that casts doubt on the wearer’s virtue. Little wonder, then, that they’re commonly seen on comic-book baddies. Batman’s sartorial adversaries, the Penguin (*below*) and the Joker, are a case in point: their spats a final flourish that suggests something sinister; whereas the spats of Donald Duck’s miserly uncle, Scrooge McDuck, denote wealth and self-aggrandisement.

Spat’s association with criminality owes much to peacocking Prohibition-era mobsters such as Al Capone, whose three-piece suits and spats radiated soft power. The trope inspired Michael Jackson’s spat-wearing gangster in the *Smooth Criminal* video (1987) and the ruthless Spats Colombo in *Some Like it Hot* (1959). ‘You shave with spats on?’ Agent Mulligan asks Colombo in the film. ‘I sleep with my spats on,’ he replies.

