



Jolly good sporting weather: Eton beagling group dressed to kill, 1910

Reliving a serge of emotion

The British are obsessed with school uniform, and remarkably willing to don it. How does this sexual camouflage affect us later? A new book sheds some light, Libby Purves reports

If you have ever wondered why Englishmen grow up with an exaggerated sense of hierarchy, you need look no further than the old Harrow School rulebook: "Second years wear all their coat buttons but one undone, and may turn their collars up. Third years may undo all their coat buttons, and may wear stiff turndown collars, silk scarves, and coloured socks. Fourth years may wear grey flannel waistcoats, silk ends to their tails, brown shoes and buttonholes. Fifts may wear fancy waistcoats and patent leather shoes."

Meanwhile, at Eton, boys aspired to enter Pop, so as to wear sealing-wax on their hats, and at lesser schools sacramental significance clung to an assortment of red piping, striped ties or brass buttons denoting seniority.

Comparatively few children have truly rebelled. Refreshing, but very rare, was the remark of young Compton Mackenzie at the age of 17: "If you think I'm going to hang on at school just for the pleasure of wearing a round cap with a white button on top, you'd better think again."

As for the women, the mystery of Janet Reger's British success is immediately solved by a look at the clothes list of any girls' boarding-school. Only 10 years ago it would include, in addition to a plethora of dresses, gymslips, cardigans and gym shoes, the item: "one dozen brown serge knickers, one dozen knicker linings". The idea was to wear the knicker "linings" (themselves solid cotton structures) then top them with voluminous serge-and-elastic

bloomers. When a girl has spent her formative years separated from the real world by a pleated knee-length wool-mix shroud, a belted mackintosh and two stoutly engineered pairs of pants, small wonder she breaks out into wispy satin or rude punk tatters at 18.

For these reflections I am indebted to a new book by Alexander Davidson, an intense 31-year-old who has become the historian of school uniform in Britain. He is ideally placed to study it. "I went to a minor London public school where we wore tweeds. I had a love-hate thing about the uniform: I was an academic child and didn't do many games, but I have a vivid image of children in coloured blazers and sporting clothes. I knew that I was missing the real social point of school by just studying."

Then he became a teacher in Kent. "The county was old-fashioned: I taught at Chatham Grammar School, which felt superior to the secondary modern, and inferior to the local public schools. The uniforms were part of the class structure. The grammar school children wore dreary black blazers and dark trousers and their parents were very proud of them, but they were attacked in the street by the secondary modern children, who had more casual clothes.

"At King's School, Rochester, they wore intricate uniforms, boaters, house colours and special green waistcoats for the debating society. I became fascinated by the way children's status was defined through clothes." Then he went

into the City, but there was no escape. "Everyone there is obsessed with school uniform. It's pathological. Talk to City men, and all they remember of their education is the details of the uniform."

Mr Davidson himself seems torn between his perception of the absurdities of uniform and a fatal attraction to its glamour: an infatuated sceptic. It makes his book engaging reading.

The early part of the story — the Tudor cassocks still worn by charity pupils at Christ's Hospital — presents few problems of motive or style. From the late Victorian era onwards, however, the historian faces many teasing questions before he even gets as far down as the collar. For instance, are top-hats phallic symbols, as Flugel, the costume psychologist, maintains. Or do they, as James Laver, the historian, suggests, symbolically represent the factory chimneys of the Industrial Revolution upon which all this prosperity was founded?

Why are uniform caps still so desperately important to schools, so detested by schoolchildren, yet so mysteriously re-adopted by stout, middle-aged men at Henley Regatta? Why should schoolgirls' hats turn down at the front and up at the back? Whence the enormous status of the straw hat?

To raise a wider question, why do parents insist on traditional dreary uniforms of institutional grey or Tory blue, with ties? One headmaster observed to me crossly that he would love to put all the children in cheerful unisex red tracksuits, but the parents insist on grey shorts, blazers and striped ties. Mr Davidson confirms this. "It is especially true of minor prep or public schools. The really grand ones like Gordons-toun or Hill House can strike out and have kilts or mustard-coloured knickerbockers, but it's the grammar school parents or the minor fee-paying ones who like the old constraints."

A study published at the beginning of the week showed that while uniform is back in fashion in state secondary schools, some in the independent sector are relaxing their rules. The headmaster of Harrow remarked that pupils were more concerned with good marks than dress.

Children often approve in principle of uniforms, but whenever they are asked to design their own, it is brighter and simpler, and far closer to the *Star Trek* boiler-suit than to the repressive Daniel Neal school of outfitting.

Perhaps, as some anthropologists think, school uniform is mainly a sexual camouflage, like the body-paint primitive tribes put on adolescents. Mr Davidson agrees: "It is a tool of sexual repression, or at least sexual containment. But every feeling a child goes through when growing up is reproduced in the way they wear a uniform — girls hitch their skirts up or undo buttons, boys let their shirts hang out deliberately."

He is mildly embarrassed by the decision to launch the book in the School Dinners restaurant in London, where waitresses in gymslips flex canes at male diners, but defends its relevance. "It is a place which capitalizes on young businessmen's fond and distorted memories of schooldays. That is real. They're obsessed."

And one can see why, if many of them have memories like this one from a prep-school boy. The headmaster was turning out the dormitory lights when he stopped at one bed. Its new little occupant had done up all his pyjama buttons, which was simply not the school custom. The head reached out and undid the top button. "Be sporting," he said reprovingly.

One Eton head said: "What we aim at producing is the type of man who has learnt not to consider his own interests as important as those of the institution he serves."

So it is heartening to hear Mr Davidson's classroom account of what children actually do to their school clothes: "Boys use ties for holding windows open, for makeshift arm slings and guitar straps, for cleaning spectacles and as catapults. In drama lessons, ties are wrapped around the head for the Rambo image.

"They wipe sweating faces on jerseys, put shirts on back to front to look like vicars . . . throw down blazers to serve as goal posts, pick off blazer buttons to play tiddleywinks and put them in the collection plate at church services." One can only say: good for them.

● *Blazers, Badges and Boaters* by Alexander Davidson is published by Scope (£12.95)