

## A Club for Lovers of Bespoke

A visit to the tailors Dege & Skinner on London's famous Savile Row is like a trip back to the Victorian era: the interior is in the late nineteenth-century style, there are numerous historic tools of the trade, and most importantly, they create suits for every occasion in the traditional manner.

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This tailor's has its own style – a jacket that goes in at the waist and then gently flares beneath. 'The pattern goes back to the mounted artillery uniforms that we have made for many years,' says the company's sales director, Graham Lawless. 'But we never insist on any particular pattern: the client always has the last word. This, I suppose, is the essence of Savile Row.'

In order to understand how a respectable tailor's became linked with the Army, we need to look back into its history – all 140 years of it. The firm was founded in 1865 by the German tailor Jacob Dege. His workshop was situated on Conduit Street and was known as Dege & Sons. The Victorian age saw the blossoming of the tailoring trade: an elegant gentleman needed not just a morning and evening suit, but also special clothing for bicycle rides, horse-riding, hunting, golf, motor sport and even smoking. What is more, several copies of each suit would be produced, since the dry-cleaning business did not exist in those long-gone days. Jacob Dege had talent and a strong work ethic, and at five guineas his suits soon achieved great popularity. At the same time on nearby Jermyn Street another tailoring house was flourishing – the Skinner family. In 1880 the heirs of both houses, Arthur Dege and William Skinner, became friends when they studied together at a special school connected with the tailoring trade in London. After they had left Merchant Taylor's School, Arthur and William decided not to join the family firms (apparently a typical story of disagreement with their fathers), and instead founded their own tailors, Dege & Skinner. Their firm, situated on Grafton Street, was successful between 1900 and 1910. However, the sudden death of his two younger brothers forced Arthur Dege to rejoin the family firm of Dege & Sons and support his father. A similar bitter blow awaited the Skinner family, when William died in 1912. Jacob Dege, the father of William's friend and ex-partner, then took on responsibility for the welfare of William's two small children. This good deed met its reward when William Skinner the younger, known to everyone as Tim, grew up and joined his guardian's business. From then on the firm became known as Dege & Skinner. It was Tim who took over management of the company when Jacob was forced to leave because of anti-German sentiment prevalent in the country during the First World War.

Tim stayed at the helm for many years, and was even able to flourish during the Second World War. At the beginning of the 1940s Dege & Skinner concentrated on producing officers' uniforms, and opened outlets in the military towns of Catterick and Aldershot.

Uniforms have remained at the heart of the firm's work in peacetime, too: they produce uniforms for Royal Dragoons and Lifeguards, and nowadays they make uniforms for thirty regiments of the British Army. Many of the requirements – the colour of the cloth, the size of the buttons and the distance between them, the design of the insignia – are worked out within the firm. And often soldiers become so used to the quality of the cloth and the service provided that they continue to order civilian outfits from the familiar address. I was shown a portrait of one of their clients, a famous general in the British Army. He wore Dege & Skinner suits for 78 years. On his last fitting he chose a rich high-quality material and said, 'I'll need the suit to last me for a long time.' Within a year the 97-year-old general was dead; his descendents, no doubt, will get long usage from the garment.

The successful long life of a company often depends on the variety of services offered. These tailors produce practically every kind of clothing, and all the necessary accoutrements and accessories of the male wardrobe. On the shelves lie ties, bowties, handkerchiefs, braces, socks, umbrellas, walking-sticks and hats, all strictly colour-coordinated. What is more, this is the only firm on Savile Row where they cut and sew shirts in their own workshops. In other tailors they usually only take measurements and cut – the shirts themselves are sewn in factories.

Dege & Skinner have two types of their own twill, the specially created house tweed. There are three principal company colours: ochre, red and light blue.

In the measuring room my eyes fell on a real shotgun. There is a reason for this: one of the company's specialities is hunting suits, and they need to be measured while the customer is carrying a gun, in order to ensure that there is enough room when taking aim and that the jacket looks good in every situation. In 1898 the firm even invented and patented a special cut for a jacket, called the Phitwell Back, a pleat at the back with an elastic tie. It doesn't hinder movement when shooting and at the same time allows the jacket to look elegant and close-fitting.

Another object in the measuring room is the boot jack, a device for taking off boots. During measurements for military trousers it is often necessary to take boots and shoes on and off; this special wooden contraption enables boots to be quickly removed without the help of a batman.

In 1977 Dege & Skinner were commissioned to design and produce ceremonial wear for the Sultan of Oman, and were subsequently awarded the 'Royal Warrant of Appointment'. The firm has also been outfitter to the Emir of Bahrain and his entourage for more than twenty years.

All in all Dege & Skinner is a success story. While the majority of family firms in London's West End since Victorian times have closed down because of lack of descendents, Dege & Skinner have begun to acquire former rivals. One of these acquisitions literally tripled the size of the firm overnight. In 1967 Dege & Skinner bought the old house of Rogers & Co, founded in 1774. This firm had, in its day, been the biggest suppliers of military uniforms: they were

contracted to provide uniforms during the Crimean War and were also one of Queen Victoria's lace suppliers.

In recent times the internet has brought a certain variety to the life of Dege & Skinner. Last year they went to Kiev to create suits for two businessmen, who had found the tailors on the net and invited them to Ukraine, all expenses paid. Dege & Skinner also offers consultative services: letters arrive in Savile Row by email from all over the world, with requests for an expert analysis of a suit in a photograph. Often these are portraits of military men, and their descendents wish to clarify some detail of their life or career. There are also examples of high praise from satisfied customers. One American customer, for example, by chance noticed the familiar label of Dege & Skinner on a colleague's suit. They greeted each other delightedly like long lost friends, spent ages discussing the joys of bespoke tailoring, and proceeded to write a letter to their tailor. Savile Row is proud of its clubbish atmosphere with good reason.

### **Captions:**

[first page]

*Today Dege & Skinner is run by Michael Skinner (centre), his son William (left) and Graham Lawless, Sales Director*

[second page]

*The firm's shop in Savile Row is maintained in the Victorian style*

*The uniform of the Queen's Bodyguard, specially created for a trip to Scotland*

*The parade costume of the Sultan of Brunei*

*Even at work Dege & Skinner's tailors are impeccably turned out*

[third page]

*Since the mid-sixties Dege & Skinner have sponsored the horse trials at Badminton and Burghley, providing the winner with a new suit*

*Dege & Skinner provide not only suits, but also accessories*

*An advertisement for a hunting suit with the Phitwell Back*

*Dege & Skinner are the only tailor's on Savile Row where shirts are created in-house from start to finish*

*Essential items in the Dege & Skinner measuring room: a shotgun and the boot jack, a device for quick removal of boots*