

## CHECK OUT THE NEW CHAP

For his latest adventure in craftsmanship, Nick Foulkes takes up an invitation to try Huntsman's new cutter for size.

by **nick foulkes** photography **andy barnham**

What do we mean when we describe something as legendary? Like 'iconic', 'legendary' is a term that has been traduced by ubiquity. However, stop and think what the stuff of legend is: epic quests, mythical beings, arcane rituals, romance, lore handed down through the generations... you can imagine Homer and Virgil running through just such a checklist each morning as, with their skinny lattes at their side, they sat down with the Sony Vaio or MacBook Air to knock out another instalment of the *Odyssey* or *Aeneid*... Circe turns men into pigs (check), Laocoön is killed by supernatural snakes (check).

These days, we tend to work on a smaller canvas than of old but, in its own way, Huntsman of Savile Row is a legend: it even has its own pantheon of deities, Colin Hammick and Brian Hall.

I knew about Huntsman long before I pushed open the doors of No. 11 Savile Row and fell under the spell of the boldest of boldly checked tweeds.

As a teenager, I used to visit the jumble sales of West Sussex. I would ride forth from my boarding school and load up on vintage suits; it is how I got my eye in and learned to tell a handsewn buttonhole from a machined one, to appreciate a properly mitred cuff, and so on. Very occasionally, I would come across a suit that inside the right inbreast pocket carried the label of H. Huntsman & Sons. There was something that set these garments apart — or maybe that is a piece of retrospective rationalisation.

Anyway, what drew me to Huntsman was its sepulchral feel. Bear in mind that I am talking about the pre-PR days of the 1980s, when I started writing about Savile Row and its tailors. Back in those days, there was a drowsy dignity about Savile Row that put me in mind of the House of Lords on a warm Friday afternoon circa 1905. The reason I started to celebrate this almost-forgotten sartorial backwater was that, while Savile Row was revered in the US and Japan, it was more or less ignored in its home market... back then, people were much more excited by Signor Armani's essays in loose-fitting taupe. Now, of course, the Row is a brisk

and bustling retail thoroughfare garnished, at one end, with the half-naked, hard-bodied models of Abercrombie & Fitch and, at the other, with the shops of Messrs Boateng and James.

But back in the 1980s, what struck me about Huntsman was its heroic indifference to fashion. At about that time, double-breasted coats or single-breasted with three- and four-button fronts were all the go, and yet Huntsman persisted with its one-button front, its high armhole and its suppressed waist (again, shape was something that had been abandoned by fashion, which favoured the baggy look that found its apotheosis in David Byrne's suit from *Stop Making Sense*).

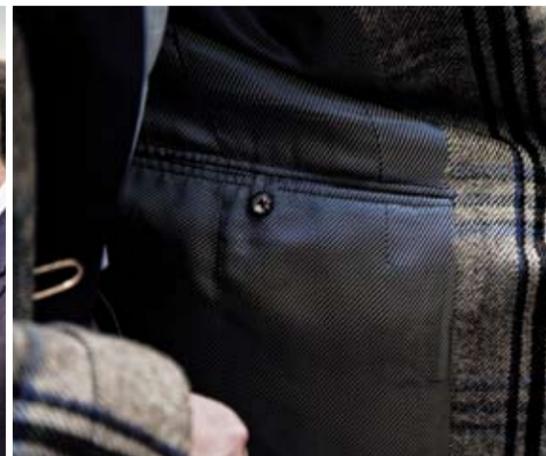
Huntsman spoke to me of an age as golden as the apples of the Hesperides; an age of swashbuckling financiers like Lords Hanson and White; of the Clermont Club in its heyday; the London of *The Mayfair Set*; when the Establishment still ran Britain (or thought they did); and the future of the world was decided over a glass of kümmel in a nimbus of cigar smoke, with a nod and a handshake by men wearing suits tailored by Huntsman of Savile Row.

Of all the Savile Row signatures, Huntsman's is the boldest — and it is the creation of a genius called Colin Hammick. Hammick was an enigmatic figure and decidedly old-school. He joined Huntsman as a 14-year-old apprentice in 1942 and thereafter turned his life over to the pursuit of elegance. He remade himself taking elocution lessons so that he spoke as well as the aristocrats whose patterns he cut and whose suits he fitted. He changed his suits three or four times a day and, by the early 1970s, was better turned out than his customers, making the top of the best-dressed lists.

He created the daring, long, lean, single-button coat sometime during the 1950s, but as well as his enduring (and today much imitated) creation, he was capable of little touches of genius that go underappreciated even today — for instance, a slanted patch pocket so brilliant, so Huntsman. What I like about the Huntsman style is a controlled raffishness, the checks just a little bit too bold,



Although not one to welcome change where tailoring is concerned — he usually prefers a cutter who is familiar with his likes and dislikes — the sartorially fastidious Nick Foulkes felt at ease getting fitted for a 1968-style bold-check suit by Huntsman's new cutter, Dario Carnera (pictured below and right). The resulting suit, Foulkes says, was "impressive" for a first garment, as Carnera had taken note of his concerns (or sartorial checklist, if you will) and crafted an ensemble that both client and craftsman were satisfied with.



the coat just that touch longer than customary. If it were a car, it would be the Rolls-Royce Camargue — not to everyone's taste, but rare, painstakingly built, instantly recognisable and the most expensive of its kind. I love it.

I started visiting Huntsman when my friend and tailor Terry Haste took over and he made me some lovely things. However, when he and Huntsman parted company, relations cooled between us. Nevertheless, I kept on popping by and then one day, Peter Smith, who is about the closest thing Huntsman has to a walking compendium of anecdote and lore, a sort of Bard — a Taliesin of tailoring if you like — came over.

Peter approached me in that respectful way he has, cleared his throat and said he had a favour to ask. He had recently engaged a new cutter and he wondered whether he might presume to dare to speculate, hypothetically of course, if I might care to try him out, more as a favour to a friend. That is what I love about Peter, as well as being the repository of Huntsman lore and legend — he is more respectful than an embassy full of diplomats.

As Peter well knew, I was itching to get my hands on the new Huntsman check, woven to a pattern last seen in 1968. I had already tried to buy a coat length, a request that had been declined with such politeness that I came away feeling very pleased not to have acquired said length of cloth. Anyway, I was introduced to the new cutter, Dario Carnera. Dario has trained with the best: Anderson, Fallan, even a spot of Kilgour... I knew the name as his father is one of the proprietors of Cleverley.

I was left with the impression that my coat was being cut by a man who would actually lose sleep worrying if the twill lining we had selected did not come up in exactly the same half or quarter shade as the sample we had based our decision on.

It is always difficult meeting a new cutter. Given that I am distrustful of change, believing that even change for the better is a bad thing, it is slightly awkward; those who make me suits know instinctively by now what it is that I like and dislike, but with a neophyte, one has to run through this sort of thing all over again, explaining one's body image and so on, as of course a suit is made to fit the mind as much as the body.

Happily, I felt at ease with Dario, but also, and this is the interesting part, I felt confident enough to allow myself to be guided by him and I have to say that for a first garment, the result was impressive; I might have had a touch deeper underwrap, but there wasn't much else to complain about; he may not have been able to match the complicated check at the collar, but it mismatched symmetrically... if that is not too much of an oxymoron. Moreover, he had taken note of my paranoia about my VPL (which I don't think we need to translate) and given me a more generous skirt than perhaps he might have ordinarily allowed. However, he was quite set on the matter of the turnback cuffs.

On the final fitting, we both agreed that one of the cuffs needed re-aligning, fair enough, but what I had not expected was such a generous turnback. His answer was the logical one that it should be the same depth as my pocket flaps; I had never thought of it like that. But he was unable to disguise his disappointment when I asked for him to trim them back. And to be honest, I did not have the heart to disappoint him, so I called him up a couple of days later to give him the good news that the cuffs should stay as they were. After all, tailoring is about give and take between cutter and wearer, and you know what? I think he might have a point about those cuffs... I just hope that I did not cost him too many nights' sleep worrying about them. 📧