

Nigel Cabourn

Cricket. North of England. The Army Gym. Military Uniform. Paul Smith.

Words Andy Thomas Photographs Marcus Agerman Ross Styling Marcus Love

Cabourn Staff Nick Daley, Faye Green and Drew Holmes Location The Garden House, Gosforth

DETAILS MATTER TO Nigel Cabourn. Seams sealed by tape for serious wind and rain protection; Harris tweed and mohair lining; underarm ventilation with rubberised metal eyelets; horned buttons and military edition metal clasps; waxed, rolled drawstrings. For the English designer it's about functionality and how clothing responds to nature and the environment. This has been the foundation to his design since creating his own label in 1971, his final year at Newcastle College of Fashion.

He started amassing vintage clothing in the 1970s and his collections since have been based around his vast archive of over 3,000 pieces – everything from Bombay bloomer army shorts to striped cricket blazers, to Royal Air Force life vests. It's by militarywear's pragmatism, where every stitch and fabric choice is a matter of survival, that he's most inspired.

A confessed purist, Cabourn makes clothes with no compromise, while searching far and wide for inspiration. To design the perfect mountain parka he went to New Zealand, where Sir Edmund Hillary's jacket hung in a museum. Looking for the definitive weatherproof coat, he turned to the Ventile cottons developed during the second world war for RAF pilots. Seeking inspiration for a collection celebrating 100 years since Captain Robert Scott's 1912 South Pole expedition, he visited the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge. For his S/S 2013 cricket-inspired collection he meticulously studied Denis Compton's 1940s attire. The stories that become his collections are conceived in the Garden House in leafy Gosforth, a short drive from Newcastle. It's here, next to a cricket

green in a house surrounded by military and other vintage artefacts and a huge library of reference books, that Cabourn and his small team create his collections. One of the first British designers to secure a licence in Japan in the 1980s, he opened his first store in Tokyo, the Army Gym, in 2009. He has five stores in Japan, and we caught up ahead of the opening of his new London store.

What was the first piece of clothing that really meant something to you?

It was seeing Pete Townshend [of the Who] wear a Union Jack jacket; that was my first inspiration as a fashion person. It was 1967 and I'd just started at fashion college. I figured he must have taken the Union Jack from a flagpole and got a tailor, Tommy Nutter or someone of that ilk, to make a jacket. What a great idea. That gave me the idea to cut up my mother's velvet curtains she was throwing away and make them into loon pants.

What was the course like?

I was there from 1967-71 and I would say it was the best time of my life. It was a fantastic period, there was such an 'up' feeling. Everybody was on a high. Pop culture was my biggest inspiration to be a fashion designer. I did a proper four-year course. It was pure fashion design.

Who were your style icons at that time?

I loved the Small Faces because they were so cool; I really liked Steve Marriott. Also Peter Frampton, who was in the Herd at the time, and Eric Clapton and Cream. As a fashion student I was hitch-hiking around the country going to pop festivals so I used to see all these cool little groups.

What clothes shops would you go to in the north of England?

There were very few. There was a shop in Middlesbrough called John's City and Western, and that was the coolest shop in the North East. There was Marcus Price in Newcastle and also City Stylish. They had all the mod gear from London.

Did you make it down to London during this time?

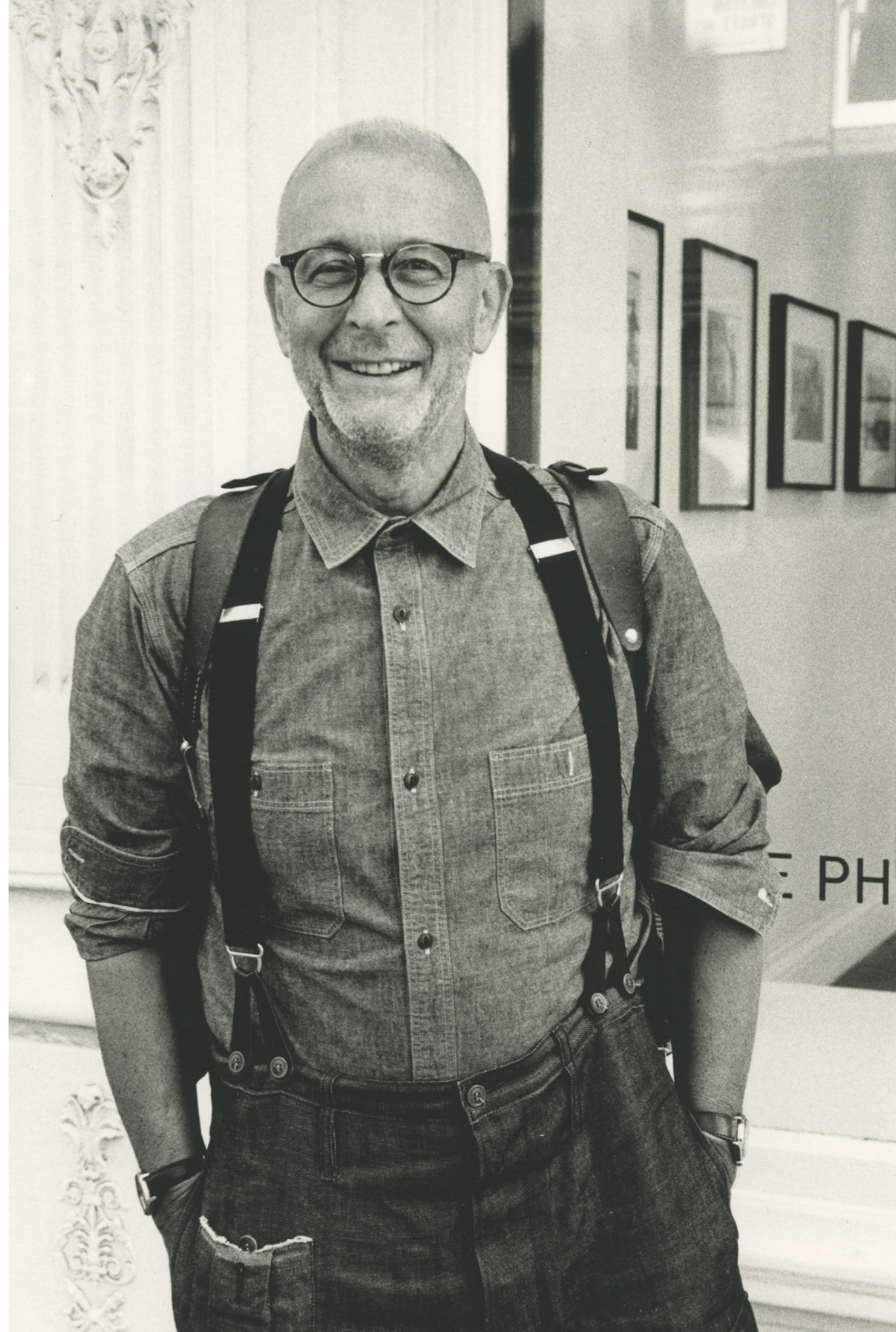
Only when I was 21, in 1971. I couldn't afford a ticket so I stowed away on the train. I got caught at the gates at King's Cross and they gave me a good ticking off and told me to clear off. I came down with a couple of girls from college and just had a great time. I went to Carnaby Street and Kings Road and just couldn't believe it. I was a country bumpkin, really.

When did you first start making clothes to sell?

I always wanted people to wear my clothes, even when I was a student in the late 1960s. So when Adam Faith came along with the Budgie jacket in 1971, I thought, I'm going to make Budgie jackets and loon pants, and I'm going to put army badges on them and make them look a bit funkier. I also did a long canvas jacket with suede tops and elbow patches. I started the whole business on that and I've been in business for over 40 years.

Where were you selling your clothes?

In the North East, first. Then I met Paul Smith. I went to a show in Harrogate and had met Harold Tillman by chance. Paul worked for him at Lincroft's. Paul and I got on really well and he said, "God, I like this stuff you're making. What are >





you doing with it?" He thought he could sell it in his shop in Nottingham. But he also had connections in London and said he could sell it at the Village Gate and Take Six. He became my agent. One of the first people he introduced me to was Philip Start, the buyer for Village Gate – so there was the three of us all doing business together.

You've touched on it, but when did your love of vintage really begin?

It was a mix of things. Back at college, my first inspiration was music and pop culture. I loved that scene and those bands – but I also loved flower power, in particular all the kids wearing military stuff. People were mixing things up; that was the inspiration for my first three or four years. In the mid-1970s I was getting a bit into the wilderness, thinking, what the hell am I going to do next? How am I going to take the business forward? By chance, Paul came to me while I was

showing in Paris. He was just starting to wholesale. He brought this jacket and said, "Nige, have you seen this vintage jacket?" I said, "God, where did you get

'NO ONE KNEW ANYTHING ABOUT VINTAGE IN THOSE DAYS'

that?" He said, "There's a flea market here and you can buy all vintage American and English army stuff." I said, "You're joking."

Buying vintage was really that unusual? No one knew anything about vintage in those days. I didn't know and I don't

think Paul knew either, although he'd obviously had an inkling about vintage.

What was that jacket he showed you?

It was a British flight jacket with the button and tape on in army green. I loved it and he said, "Nige, you can have it." That was the start of vintage to me.

What did you do with that jacket?

I analysed it and it inspired me to do a whole collection. The following year I sold 30,000 pieces of outerwear and went from having a small business to a big business in a couple of years.

How similar were those first pieces to the vintage jacket?

They were very similar. The original was made of Ventile, but the problem was I didn't know what the hell Ventile was in 1979. It was only a couple of years later that I discovered it was an RAF fabric that had been invented in 1939. >





How much does your vintage archive inform your collections?

It's the inspiration, along with the books in the library. I buy 100 books a year; everywhere I travel, I'm looking for vintage books and anything else that inspires me. It might be a parachute, just anything really. It feels like I've been doing it all my life.

Looking at your clothing, what really stands out is the detail. When did you recognise the importance of that?

The late 1970s, when I started analysing vintage. You take a military piece and turn it inside out – it's just as good as the outside. Military wear does what it says and is functional and really works. It's authentic, and that's what my product is all about. It's also about longevity.

Your collections are based on stories. How do you come up with those stories and how do they inform the work?

The stories are there all the time. As soon as I see pieces I think of the stories that might be behind them. Then I think, for example, the 100th anniversary of Scott's expedition might be coming up, so I look at the pieces, marrying it all. And once I know we've got an event or anniversary on the way, I start really thinking. I'm concentrating everything at the moment on the first world war. For winter 2015, I'm continuing with it and the second world war, all based on the RAF.

What was the first collection that was based on a story or event like that?

It took me a long time after I started collecting vintage to figure it out. It took me until the Everest collection in 2003

['The Ascent of Cabourn', inspired by Sir Edmund Hillary's 1953 Everest ascent]. That was when I finally figured it out and thought, why am I not using the vintage with the stories, training myself that way? It's only really been about 12 years.

An iconic piece you developed from a story is the George Mallory jacket. How did that come about?

There were many reasons why I wanted to do something based on Mallory. But the main reason was going to the Royal Geographical Society about five years ago to find all the Mallory books I could. The scientists who worked at the RGS were there that day, they'd heard I had come down and said, "Listen, we know what you're doing, how would you like to see Mallory's clothes?" I thought they were joking. But they took me into this room

all dressed in white coats and long gloves and brought out all Mallory's clothes. I had them in my hands. That gave me such a lift to do that project. I'd been thinking about doing something on Mallory for years but that was the hook.

A lot of your pieces like, for example, the Cameraman jacket, fuse elements of different pieces of vintage.

I never design anything from scratch because it looks too 'fashion'. I take, for example, four vintage pieces from the first world war and mix them all together. That's what I'm about.

Would it be true to say that you focus very much on British vintage?

Yes, for the last 10 years or so I've been concentrating on the British. I'm into what the RAF wore or what the British Army wore. I'm not that interested in any other armies. I love the German stuff and I'll take a detail here or there. But really, I'm about the British. That's why about four years ago I did a collection based on my dad. He was out in Burma in the second world war. He died 35 years ago

and as a young man I had images in my mind of him wearing Bombay bloomers and khaki shirts in the garden. That stuck with me all my life. My mum told me she had my dad's handbook. I remembered seeing it around the house as a youngster

'I LOVE THE GERMAN STUFF, BUT REALLY, I'M ABOUT THE BRITISH'

but had never taken any notice of it. Then when my dad died my mum showed me and it was fantastic. It was about his life in Burma, with all his pictures. I based that collection on the clothes he wore.

How important is it to be a purist?

Being a purist is everything to me. I'm not interested in being another fashion person. I like things that are authentic. You get what you see with me. I love real things, so I love real fabric and all that British heritage. I love oilcloth and Harris tweed, Ventile, and Fair Isle sweaters. The only problem with the way I work is that you need a lot of money to buy the original pieces. So having my archive collection is everything. It's my library.

Where do you source your materials and where are the factories?

I have two collections. Mainline is made in Japan with all Japanese fabric, and Authentic is 90 per cent English fabrics, made in England. I have 15 factories around England all making clothes.

That must be hard to sustain?

It's hard work. A nightmare, actually. That's where the purist comes in. You have to be like that to make things in England because it's so expensive. But I'm product-driven so for me making a lot of money is well down the list. It's all >



about the best product: I've always been driven by that. But I think any designer that makes in England will be struggling. It's so difficult. To manufacture a product like mine in England using English fabric, making it on time, delivering it to the customer on time – it's a major job.

Would you consider making elsewhere?

No, not interested. I'll pack in if I ever have to do that.

Where are your factories?

Mostly in Lancashire and Scotland.

Do you see signs of a general move back to Made in England?

To be honest with you, no. We go around the factories and there are very few people making in England.

You are still based in the North East – tell me a bit about the Garden House.

The house is like a cricket pavilion at the bottom of the garden. It looks over the cricket ground. It's a beautiful property and I have 14 people in about a 1400sqm bungalow-come-cricket-pavilion. That's

where I run the business. We use it as a showroom, too. People like Karl-Heinz [Müller] from 14 oz. in Berlin will come and spend two days with me. So you do get people who love Cabourn coming up to Newcastle. I think being in the north worked. If you look at someone like Paul

'WE GO AROUND THE FACTORIES – AND VERY FEW PEOPLE ARE MAKING IN ENGLAND'

Smith, you'd say I missed out by staying north instead of going south. Very few people actually come to see you, so you have to work at everything.

You've done a few collaborations – how do you feel about them, generally?

I'll only do collaborations that work for us as a brand. I'm not interested in doing them for the sake of it. For example, I've enjoyed doing the Converse with Ventile, I'm doing a table-tennis collaboration with Fred Perry because I love table tennis and play every day. I did one with Red Wing that was good; I did one with Yuketen, and with Viberg.

Where are your best markets?

Japan and Korea. We do as much business there and in the far east as in the rest of the world.

You have five stores in Japan. How does it feel to be opening in London this year?

I'm really excited. It's going to be sort of based on the success of the Army Gym. It's going to be a bit Air Force-looking, less vintage and more contemporary, but still with all the roots. ■

*A Nigel Cabourn shop opens in September at 28 Henrietta St, London WC2
cabournlondonstore.com*