This bulletin was first published as "The button-down collar shirt" in *The Vacuum* (no. 27, 2005), a monthly Belfast free-sheet. It was written for the paper's "Obscure Object of Desire" column, hence its confessional tone. Although fashion has moved on since, this text is republished exactly as it was then. In the meantime, it's getting harder and harder to find the soft, untreated formal shirt described.

Thanks to Richard West of *The Vacuum* for originally commissioning the piece, and for permission to reprint.

Cover image: that original Brooks Brothers collar

In my case, the search for the right clothing has not really been a matter of fashion, but more a quest for the real thing: the long-lasting epitome. Once you've found this kind of garment, you just re-order, hoping that the suppliers continue to supply and are not lost in closures and incorporations. In this perspective I can see the point of the Savile Row suit or the English gentleman's fishing outfit, though in fact neither model draws me. The look I wanted, emerging into clothes consciousness as a sixteen-year old, was Ivy League, but as worn by my jazz heroes rather than by the inhabitants of Princeton, New Jersey. Key images of that time included Miles Davis on the cover of *Milestones*, and Art Pepper looking unreasonably fit and muscle-bound on the front of *Gettin' Together!* (Listen to that band's fast tempo recitation of "Softly as in a Morning Sunrise" if you want to know pleasure.) As well as the music of the LPs, what hooked me was the button-down collars worn by the cover icons.

Was it just these associations with jazz? There's something to add about the quality of the button-down shirt as a reassuringly complete enclosing form. Historians suggest that they derive from the 19th-century polo shirt, whose collar was buttoned down to prevent it flapping. Another way to avoid the flapping collar is to do without one altogether. But for me the collarless shirt has all the wrong associations of artiness and attempted agelessness.

At that time in the UK, the mid-1960s, button-downs had also been taken up by some of the rock musicians — you can see them worn briefly by the Stones, the Beatles, the Who, the Kinks, and the rest — and for a longer time they were one of the items of Mod fashion (Italian suits, parkas, scooters, and all that). I suppose some British musicians bought their shirts on American tours, but there was a local manufacturer: Ben Sherman. My first authentic button-down was a white long-sleeved Ben Sherman, made of a quite thin cotton and polyester mix. Later I acquired two short-sleeved Ben Sherman button-downs, made from yet thinner and coarser fabric with patterns that could have been "tartan" but for their aggressive and almost fluorescent colors. The tough thin materials hardly seemed to wear or fray. A few years ago, still in good condition, I took them to a charity shop. By then I felt the Mod look was just too ancient.

Behind Ben Sherman is a nice story told by Mod historian Terry Rawlings. Born in Brighton in 1925, real name Arthur Benjamin Sugarman, he emigrated to the USA. In California, from his third wife's swimwear-manufacturing father he learned about the garment trade. Then in 1962, after his mother had become ill, he returned to Brighton. The company issued its first button-down shirts in 1963, achieving rapid success. Ben sold his business in 1973. It exists still, but in a dissipated form, each season issuing all kinds of fashion gear. It must be some years since they made button-downs.

I was always rather unhappy with the British button-downs. The Ben Shermans seemed the best of them, but they were quite mean in their specifications. The fit seemed always tight, the tails of the shirts had no length. The collars were without that generous, loose soft roll that one sees in American shirts. Some of the other British button-downs were just parodies, with collars that might have buttons at the tips but which were reinforced and semi-stiff: "fused" with an extra inlaid strip, rather than simply made from two sheets of cloth.

Finally, in 1991, waking up to the fact that I had passed the age of forty without setting foot in the land that had supplied so much of my mental life, I devised a trip to the USA. Within hours of landing in New York I was in the main Brooks Brothers store at 346 Madison Avenue, looking in wonder at shelves full of these shirts, in many fabrics and sizes — there were different shirt lengths for any one collar size — at several levels of formality. Here finally were well-made, generously specified button-downs. The cutting and stitching was beautifully refined. The buttons were well-formed and white or pearl: to use dark buttons on a dark cloth is usually a bad move. These shirts were expensive, but over years of frequent wear, washing and ironing — and continuous pleasure generated by the look and feel of these garments — anyone would agree that the outlay was worthwhile.

These are pure cotton shirts. If the cloth is patterned, it is a distinguished, subtle pattern. The stripes range from the thin and delicate, to eye-dazzling. The checks can be straightforward normative grids, to "plaid" (the US term), which can be strong but is without the brashness of my old Ben Shermans. Through the 1990s and into the millennium I went back to

Brooks Brothers stores in the USA, and bought more of these shirts. At the time of my first North American trip and for some years after, the business was owned by Marks & Spencers, and perhaps that explains why one could sometimes find decent button-downs in the UK's then favorite high street shop. Though these were mostly undistinguished "Oxfords," made from plain or sometimes striped thick cotton, and without the interest and elegance of the shirts made for Brooks Brothers.

My favorite button-down, and thus the supreme object of desire, is one of the shirts that I acquired on my first visit to the shop in Madison Avenue. It is the most unobtrusive of these shirts: white with a thin blue stripe at intervals of about one millimeter. Now, fourteen years old and after much wear, this shirt is getting a bit worn at the cuffs. I used to wear it on all occasions, with a suit and the occasional tie, or with chinos and other casual stuff. But now, with the realization of quite how much this object means, I have become more careful with it, and wear it only if I feel especially in need of reassurance. I promise myself that, if I go back to New York, I will buy ten or fifteen of these shirts. No doubt the details will have changed a little, but the basic model must still be current. Yet, however close they come, the new shirts will never quite match the excitement of the shirt of 1991 that finally resolved the yearnings of 1965.

*