IV

BUTTONS AS CHRONICLES

EPISODES IN THE LATER HISTORY OF THE COAT AND CUFFS

We have gained some insight into the development of garments as a whole, and no doubt it is now obvious that the little details of construction will prove by no means the least attractive part of our subject. It has become customary to refer to a button as typifying something of specially small account, though very often much may depend in practice upon one of these despised articles.

We have already shown that the mere position of a few buttons that are still useful, may raise most curious points, and in the present chapter we shall proceed to investigate some episodes in the later history of the coat which have left their mark upon it, to a great extent in the shape of useless buttons. This topic will be dealt with in some detail, so that it may serve as a guide to those of our readers who may be induced to undertake the fascinating study of survivals in dress. Afterwards, the general survey of modern clothes will be continued, and here and there lines of research will be indicated, while some
problems will be left for our readers to solve. In the second part of the book, it is intended to deal with a certain number of costumes which have been handed down to us as they are.

At the present time there are usually to be seen two buttons on the back of civilians' coats, except in the case of lounge suits and dinner jackets, and there may be four or more on the great coats of policemen (see Figure 12) and on the tunics of some soldiers. The first question which we will endeavour to answer is, Why are they there? The two upper buttons in the case of uniforms are now used to support a belt, and at first sight it looks as if they were originally intended for this purpose. Their adoption in other cases might then be put down as a survival from a time when civilians carried swords. Unfortunately for this theory, it can be shown that the sword-belt was not necessarily worn outside the coat (see Figures 18 and 19).

We must therefore look round for further evidence,
and we find that those coats which bear the pair of buttons, have a slit up the middle which gives rise to the skirts or tails. This arrangement carries us back to the time when there were no railways and few conveyances; when men commonly travelled on horseback and their whole attire was adapted to this end,

![Diagram of buttons closing slit on back of ulster.](image)

**Fig. 13.—The buttons that close the slit up the back of an ulster.**

so that they were ready for the saddle at a moment's notice. The division in the coat which we are considering, allowed one tail to fall conveniently on each side of the horse after its rider had mounted it.

In long overcoats of to-day we find only a short slit, left for convenience in walking (see Figure 13); but it has a special interest for us, as in connection with it there are two or three buttons and buttonholes, usually hidden, which allow of the opening being closed up.
Here, then, we have buttons on the back of the coat still serving a useful purpose, and it is not at all difficult to trace the series of fastenings back to a much longer one, which in the seventeenth century was quite obvious. (See Figure 14.)

Each button and buttonhole was placed in the middle of similar pieces of lace or embroidery, so that the sides of the coat were made to look symmetrical. The object in view was the keeping of the skirts of the coat together when the wearer was not on horseback. At the present day the buttons have
been duplicated and are on both sides of the coat, and they are still sewn to ornamental pieces in the uniform of the Grenadier Guards. The presence of the lower buttons on uniforms and coats is therefore explained. It might be assumed that the topmost button had also been doubled and raised above the slit, and that in this way we have obtained the two ornaments on the back of our coats.

Before accepting such a solution of the problem, however, it may be well to see if the buttons may not have had another origin; and on looking for some clue we find that two folds take their rise from the point where the buttons are situated. These may be expected to throw some light upon the question.
The folds are now permanent, but on a voluminous coat, such as still used by horse soldiers, they can be produced temporarily (see Figure 15) by setting the two buttons further apart and running a tab from one to the other. Sir George Darwin has attempted to carry the history of these two buttons still further back. He has expressed the opinion that each is one of a pair that originally kept in place a small tab at the side of the coat, and so helped to produce a waist when required. (See Figures 17 and 18.)

In some drawings of coats (see Figure 18) the side tabs and their corresponding buttons are shown in addition to those on the back of the coat.

There is, however, evidence to show that the buttons were originally on the sides of the coat, for they are so wide apart as to be to all intents and purposes in that position, on the uniform overcoats of the London Electric Tramway drivers. (See Figure 16.)

They may well represent the topmost buttons of the lateral series, still found on the overcoat of the members of the Corps of Commissionaires. In this case there are three buttons on each side, of which the middle one is used for fastening the side-pocket.

It is worth while to consider side-pockets, which in their turn are remnants of lateral openings which were made in coats at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the following centuries. The sword-handle conveniently protruded through the left-hand
FIG. 16.—The buttons and tab on a tramway driver's coat.

FIG. 17.—An eighteenth-century coat with side buttons and tab.

FIG. 18.—Side tabs and buttons at the back (after Racinet).
slit, which, like its fellow, ran from the waist to the lower margin of the coat or stopped half-way. (See Figures 18 and 19.) In the latter case, the arrangement very much resembles the vertical pocket which has become common again of recent years. (See Figure 20.)

Occasionally a tab, such as that to which reference has been made, kept the parts of the coat together; but often there were buttons and buttonholes, at least at the upper end of the openings. These survive in several cases, such as in the overcoat of the commissionaire, while the pocket is sometimes represented by a mere flap (see Figure 21) ornamented with buttons as on the livery of certain footmen.
To sum up the matter, the topmost pair of buttons has come from the fastenings of the side slit and the lower ones from those of the back slit. Buttons on the skirt behind have in the meantime had a very intimate connection with the evolution of the "swallow-tail" coat (see Figure 24). They were used to fasten the corners of the ordinary riding-coat together, so that the linings should not be injured by the sweat of the horses. (See Figure 22.)

Mr. Deane Butcher tells me that he can remember this buttoning back being done in the case of his uncle, when the latter rode to market or to church; but in this case it was the two uppermost buttons which were again brought into use. At dances the
coats were also subjected to similar treatment, and what at first was a temporary condition afterwards became a permanent one. It is obvious that the turned-back lining would often be of a different colour from the outside of the coat, and facings on old uniforms, and in that of the present dress of a lord-lieutenant (see Figure 23) are derived from the practice of fastening the corners of the coat together. In the “swallow-tail” the outer corners have been cut right away. (See Figure 24.)

The buttons, in the interesting cases which we have described, have been allowed to remain as part and parcel of our costume on account of their decorative

**Fig. 23.**—A coat with the skirts buttoned back and showing the lining.

**Fig. 24.**—A dress coat with skirts cut away.
character, and in a great measure the same is true of those on coat cuffs (see Figure 25). In many cases there are proper buttonholes, and it is possible to undo the sleeve buttons; but occasionally the arrangement has degenerated and the buttonholes are imitations or only the buttons remain.

To find an explanation of this feature we shall have to go back again to the seventeenth century, when so much was expended upon coats that it became advisable to turn back the cuffs out of harm's way. To hold them in position, series of buttons and buttonholes were devised, and just as the turning back of the skirts was at first temporary and afterwards came to be done once for all when the coat was made, so
the turned-back cuff grew into a permanent institution. In Figure 26 the buttons are one above the other as in modern dress, but in the next two Figures (27 and 28) they are horizontal.

A survival of this arrangement can still be seen in the coat sleeves of the higher clergy. In ordinary

![Fig. 27. — A coat sleeve (after Hogarth) with a horizontal row of buttons.](image)

![Fig. 28. — Sleeve of a coat of the seventeenth century, reputed to have been worn by Charles I.](image)

dress, the turned-back edge of the cuff may now only be represented by a band of braid or a row of stitches; but in soldiers’ uniforms, an ornamented cuff persists which represents in reality the lining of the sleeve. Again, the turned-back cuff is actually present in the clothes of costermongers, and has been revived on overcoats to a considerable extent during the last few years. (See Figure 29.)

As a rule, too, the vertical pocket already described
accompanies the turned-back cuff, as it did some centuries ago. (See Figure 20.)

It must not be forgotten that buttons have long been used on narrow sleeves. They are undone when the hand is to be pushed through the cuff, and afterwards fastened for the sake of warmth or to give a

![Fig. 29. — The turned-back cuff on an overcoat, modern.](image1)

![Fig. 30. — A sleeve with vertical buttons and a turned-back cuff as well (from a uniform, after Hogarth).](image2)

neat appearance. It is therefore possible that the ring of buttons is more properly a survival of the time when cuffs were turned back to preserve them, and that the vertical row is really of earlier origin. A uniform represented by Hogarth (Figure 30) shows both the row of buttons and the turned-back cuff, which seems to be quite independent of them.

In this instance we may have the degenerated
turned-back cuff and one revived, shown together. Such a case, we need scarcely point out, could hardly occur in the case of an animal structure, for if by a “throw back” or “reversion to type” we get a vestigial character once more fully reproduced, we cannot expect the original structure and the vestige to be shown at the same time.

The adoption of buttons more or less for ornament has long been practised. John Brandon, who died in the year 1364, is shown on his brass (in the church of St. Mary, King’s Lynn) with no less than forty buttons on the sleeves of his undervest, which has embroidered cuffs and is buttoned to the elbow (see Plate IV). We shall, however, have something more to say with regard to buttons from this and other points of view as we proceed.

An interesting case of superfluous buttons on the front of clothes is to be seen in the case of the short jackets of the postilions, belonging to His Majesty the King. There is a useful row down the middle which closes the garment, and two ornamental rows which start from each shoulder and curve downwards towards the middle row. These are probably vestiges of buttons that were once of use, and to seek an explanation it might be well to study some uniforms of the past. We shall find that in the eighteenth century it was customary to button back the revers of the uniform coat, as in the case of the French coast-guard officer of 1775. (See Figure 31.)
Reproduction of a brass to John Brandon and his two wives, in the Church of St. Mary, King's Lynn. Date 1364. On the male figure a continuous row of buttons runs from the wrist to the elbow of the under vest. The women wear the wimple and the gorget or throat cloth.

Plate IV.
Fashion afterwards decreed that the coats should be fastened again with hooks, but the two rows of buttons remained.

In the coat of the postilion there is no trace of the revers which showed the lining, and were consequently of a different colour from the rest of the coat. We find, however, in the peculiar uniform of the Lancers that there are the two side rows of buttons, to which is fastened a red front. This appears to represent the two revers combined. In the present year, 1907, a number of ladies’ dresses are to be seen in which the revers trimmed with a different material from the dress are buttoned back against the latter.

In some ceremonial dresses and uniforms there are
cross stripes on the breast (see Figure 61) which, it has been pointed out, represent series of buttonholes which have become hypertrophied, and are now exaggerated beyond recognition. The braid on the cuff of the London Scottish Volunteers seems also to represent buttonholes.

Such features as turned-back cuffs occur in women's clothes, and, as we have seen, the arrangement of buttons may be copied from masculine attire. In other cases buttons seem to appear which have, it would seem, no hereditary right to their position; but it may be well, before dismissing them, to see whether they have not a pedigree. We might cite the case of the buttons that are sewn on to the frocks a little below the knee. They are often at the head of a plait, and it would be worth while to look into their history.