



The cap Oxford has remained unchanged for two hundred years.

ALL CREDITS EXCEPT LATCHET SHOE: NORTHAMPTON FOOTWEAR MUSEUM

Fads, trends and classics

Footwear fashion is not always easy to define. For instance, it can be extremely short lived and so best described as being merely a fad. Fashion trends, on the other hand, have a much longer lifespan and can continue over a long period of time. Classics are timeless and remain the same regardless of whatever else may change. As far as footwear is concerned, the best examples of this are the plain ladies court shoe or pump, and the men's cap Oxford. Both are simple, elegant and functional, and cannot be improved upon.

Specifically, men's footwear has

always been divided into two distinct groups: boots and shoes. For instance, if we go back to the early 18th century, wearing boots suggested ownership of a horse, a degree of affluence and of being a 'gentleman'. In the early 1700s, they were solidly made using thick bovine leather and with high heels that enabled the rider to push their feet forward in the stirrups for a more secure seat in the saddle. As well as being highly functional, they also increasingly acquired an element of fashion that developed into a trend that has lasted up until the present day. This was the so-called 'Bucket' top, copied from boots worn by the cavalry.



Bucket boot (1720) showing a strong 'cavalry' influence.



Standard 'top boot' (1930) remains basically the same as it was in the late 1700s.

These bucket tops soon began to be folded down until, by the end of the century, boots had become far more refined. They had low heels as riders' stance in the saddle had changed and had assumed the simple proportions that are still used in riding boots today. They were also made to fit very tightly to offer protection to the leg and ankle in case of a fall. A well made boot on a slim leg could look extremely elegant indeed. A fashionable element was added with contrasting tops which could vary in colour depending on what was currently in vogue.



Latchet or buckle shoes were universally worn throughout the 1700s.

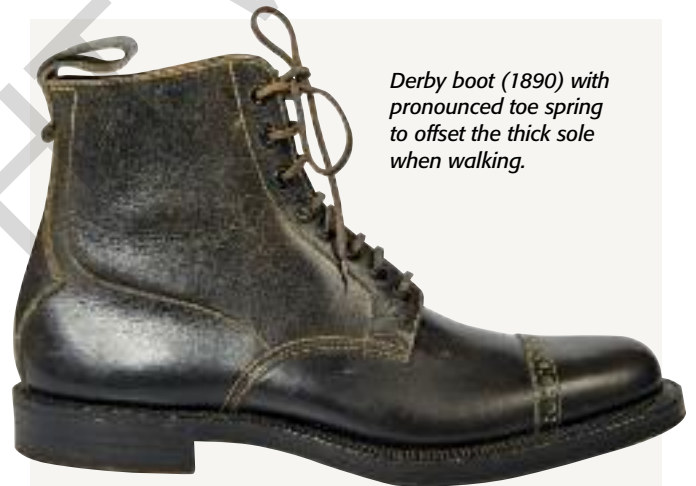
CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK/
KONSTANTIN AKSENOV

The vast majority of men in the 1700s, however, wore low shoes of the latchet type, secured over the instep by a large buckle. They were simple to produce, easy to put on or take off and were made at all quality levels. As such, they could be said to have been a universal trend as they were worn throughout the century by men of all stations in life. The buckles were purchased separately from the shoes and, while plain steel was the norm, silver, engraved or even jewelled versions were often used to denote status and wealth.



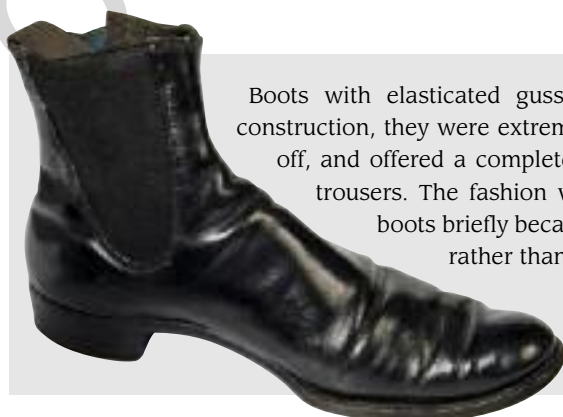
Dress Wellington (1820) was designed to be purely decorative.

The early 1800s also saw purpose made dress boots increasingly worn. They were much lighter and featured fancy upper cuts with contrasting leathers plus higher heels to make the wearer appear taller and more elegant. They were also made with a looser fit to make them easier to walk in. The example shown here features the 'Wellington' style upper named after the famous Duke where the leg is split into two sections and seamed down the sides. This method is still used to produce American cowboy boots.



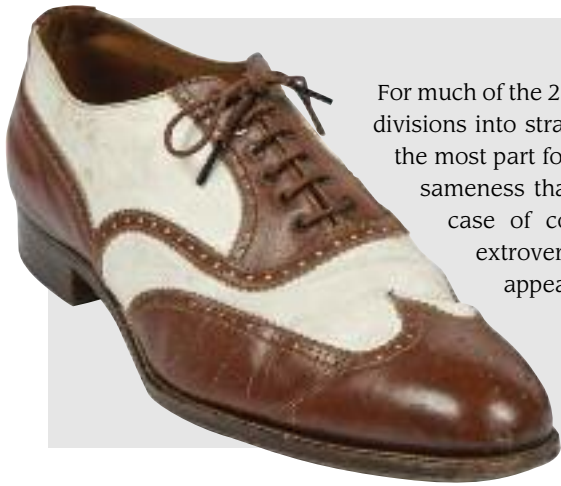
Derby boot (1890) with pronounced toe spring to offset the thick sole when walking.

In the 1800s, mechanisation of the shoemaking process lowered the cost and improved the overall quality of footwear in general. Lace-up boots became more popular than low shoes and by 1900 were almost universal. Using the Goodyear welted construction, they also assumed a look we are familiar with today with either a closed front 'Oxford' cut or an open front 'Derby' cut.



Boots with elasticated gussets became fashionable in the later 1800s. Generally of lighter construction, they were extremely comfortable to wear. They were also quicker to put on and take off, and offered a completely smooth appearance which looked good under a well-cut pair of trousers. The fashion waned after 1900 to be resurrected during the 1960s when 'Beatle' boots briefly became a hot fashion item. Both instances could be best described as fads rather than trends.

Elasticated boots became briefly popular in the late 1800s due to their ease of use.



For much of the 20th century, men's shoes were either of the Oxford or Derby type with subdivisions into straight or wing cap designs, semi- or full-brogues, etc. In fact, patterns for the most part followed standardised proportional measurements that imparted an overall sameness that could only be alleviated by the use of contrasting materials as in the case of co-respondent shoes. These briefly became fashionable for the more extrovert wearer in the 1930s but were not practical for the average man as their appearance was difficult to maintain.

Co-respondent shoes became very fashionable in the 1920s and 1930s.

What can be seen so far is that the styling of men's shoes up until the mid-1900s followed definite long term trends with an occasional fad that had little impact on the overall market. One reason for this was economic necessity as the vast majority of men could only afford footwear that met basic needs. Another one was that up until the second half of the 20th century, materials and constructions were severely limited.

The introduction of materials such as vulcanised and resin rubbers, PVC, PU and other synthetic soling materials, together with cement sole attaching and injection moulding, opened up whole new possibilities. From around 1960, 'fashion' became an important market segment for younger men due to increased disposable income and social freedom. Very narrow toes, platform soles and clogs soles were extreme examples. In every case, however, they were essentially fads as none of them lasted very long.

'Winklepicker' (1965) with cemented resin rubber sole and bump toed shoe with PU unit sole (1976) show the extremes to which styling could go.



By the end of the 1970s something totally different appeared in the form of the 'Trainer'. Initially worn by footballers for training purposes, it coincided with a growth in casual clothing for men, and young men in particular. The 1980s saw the rise of sports influenced footwear in general led by major brands such as Nike. This type of footwear now accounts for a huge proportion of everyday footwear for women and children as well as men. It is both comfortable and practical, and its popularity continues to grow. In this instance, a fad has grown into a global trend and for many people is now regarded as a 'classic'.

Nike 'waffle' trainer (1978) was a portent a trend becoming a global phenomenon.