

## Shorts suits: Would you wear this to work?

*As the men's 'shorts suit' is tipped to be a key look for the office this summer, Robert Colvile bares his knees and braves the insults.*

BY ROBERT COLVILE 29 MAY 2008

"Are you sure you've got the knees for this?" asked my colleague, delicately. To be honest, I wasn't sure - but when you're *casting aside* office etiquette in the name of fashion, *chutzpah* is a *heck of a lot* more important than knobbly joints.

My new approach to workwear began after I learnt this week that the business suit is *on its last legs*. Only 24 per cent of office workers are now required to wear one, compared with 37 per cent just four years ago.

If standards continue to slacken, the once-compulsory dress code could be dead within a decade, as brokers and estate agents swap tailored two-pieces for *chinos and brogues*. But an alternative interpretation of officewear is rapidly *gaining currency*: the shorts suit.

"Shorts are becoming a natural summer *staple* for those who dress well in the city," says the latest issue of GQ magazine - which hailed the *sawn-off* shorts suit as "a bold fashion statement that's totally tied to 2008".

Shoppers on the high street seem to agree: after a successful debut last year, Topman's jacket-and-shorts combinations are already *flying off the shelves*.

"I think it's a great look," says Charlie Porter, GQ's associate editor.

"Many men use suits as their default, no-thought wardrobe, so if you do anything to them then you're changing something

*sacred*. Combine that with shorts, which a lot of men find a problem anyway, and you're going to double the difficulty."

But the *cognoscenti* beg to differ.

"Formalwear is a very strong influence on the catwalks at the moment, and that's *working its way down to* the high street," explains Marcus Rigg, Topman's formalwear designer. "Guys are tidying themselves up and taking more pride in what they're wearing. In terms of shorts, there has been a lot more exposure in the media, so they're a lot more acceptable."

Not among my colleagues they're not. As I stroll around the Telegraph offices in a £135 shorts suit in light check from Topman, glorying in feeling of the air against my newly liberated calves, there is a predictable reaction: I may be a fashion trend-setter, I am told, but I am also a shoo-in as a *Just William*<sup>1</sup> tribute act.

I decide to escape their mockery and take to the streets, where I am grateful for British reserve: most of the passers-by barely glance at their surroundings, let alone a *bloke* sporting a shorts suit.

At least, that's what I tell myself, until a friend who has joined me on my *constitutional* points out that they're just waiting until my back is turned to start staring. As one man passes, I hear his steps falter, then a soft, startled "Bloody hell."

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<sup>1</sup> Richmal Crompton's character was not renowned for sartorial elegance.

I console myself with the thought that age is on my side: the shorts suit, after all, isn't for *squares*.

"It's Topman that's selling them, not Austin Reed<sup>2</sup>," points out Porter. "There are a lot of younger people who don't have our preconceptions about clothes."

Most of the men I talk to focus on the *thorny issue* of the socks - should they be knee-length, pulled up, or simply absent? Yet among the women, the problem is not the shorts suit or the socks but showing any leg at all.

"Men never really look good in shorts," says one colleague. "They're just a bit... unfortunate."

"I don't think shorts have ever worked on a man," offers another, "except perhaps Daniel Craig emerging from the sea in *Casino Royale*. And, to be honest, I wasn't exactly looking at his legs..."

When I put this to Porter, he urges me to pay no attention.

"I'm really confused by that," he says.

"If men said to women, 'No, you can't wear that because I find it unattractive', they would see it as really offensive. There's this strange imbalance."

So, should the sun come out, will I listen to Porter and reach for the shorts suit or bake on the crowded bus in the traditional heavy cloth? Probably the latter, I'm afraid. To paraphrase<sup>3</sup> the Bible - the spirit is willing, but the knees are weak.

<http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/article/TMG3364934/Shorts-suits-Would-you-wear-this-to-work.html>

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2 Austin Reed is a more traditional tailor.

3 This should be *parody*.