



JENNY SEAGROVE

People helping horses, horses helping people

ARTISAN GIN • TRING EN FETE • WHEELS ON FIRE • LOST GARDENS • MILITARY CUTS
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FASHION

The queen of coats

'It's theatre, isn't it?' Dazzled and inspired by military uniforms, tailor Pip Howeson follows each coat that she makes, from the shearing of the sheep in northern Scotland to perfecting shoulder measurements in her Chelsea studio

Pony Pip's hunter, lives in Gloucestershire, in the Berkeley country, scene of her misspent youth: 'The riding cut is functional, you can move in it. Using it as an inspiration means that people are comfortable wearing my pieces'



Photograph Chris Arnes



Pip Howeson with Widget, her terrier: 'As a country we have a classic look, quite blue chip'

'Margaret Thatcher would have been an amazing person to dress,' muses tailor Pip Howeson. 'Her look was harsh – she could have got away with a softer neckline. Audrey Hepburn would have been fun, and Catherine Deneuve, who is so beautiful.' Pip pauses as she considers this delicious roll call of fantasy clients. Jackie Kennedy... apparently, when she was married to Onassis she had a huge clothing allowance and bought lots of the same clothes, then sold them. He obviously kept her short of cash.'

Young Pip, the daughter of a naval commander, grew up on the Cornish coast, living in a white house on a cliff, riding in the inspirational countryside, messing about in boats. She admits to being both dazzled and inspired by her father's naval coat. 'He had a stunning boat cape. I have it now. It's not that fitted but it's beautiful and so romantic, with brass, lion-head clasps. And the white tropical uniform – it's theatre, isn't it?' At 14 years old, Pip decided that she wanted to make coats. Not coats *per se*, but coats for people.

Having a plan for her future career didn't stop Pip sneaking out of university in Cirencester to hunt with the Berkeley. She admits to spending too much time with horse and hound to gain much benefit from her education. Yet, the joys of a rousing gallop aside, it wasn't time wasted: hunting kit is another of the 'uniforms' that inspire. Time well spent, then.

She studied, instead, with Savile Row

Photograph Steve Innes



Stephen Fry, perfectly at ease in his Brompton jacket

'Stephen Fry... has a slight geography-teacher appeal'

tailors, small couture houses, even high-street brands. They opened their doors to her because she had the *chutzpah* to knock and ask. 'Tailoring is a craft and everyone is keen to show you their craft and the particular way they cut,' she explains. 'Apart from a few, everyone was friendly. I was fortunate to get a job with [the fashion designer] Selma Blow, known for her tailoring using bright fabrics.'

On a business course at the School for Creative Start Ups in London, Pip was given the opportunity to pitch for prospective investment at a dinner, leading to shared investment from Doug Richard (ex-*Dragons' Den*) and Chris Ingram, art collector, philanthropist and successful businessman. 'Chris has been great, a real mentor,' she says. 'He sees tailoring as an art.'

Integral to Pip's bespoke pieces are the fabrics she chooses and her wholehearted support of the British textile industry, most especially small mills specialising in hand-woven tweeds. She regularly travels the country visiting artisanal British mills, meeting weavers.

'They opened their doors to her because she had the chutzpah to knock and ask'

Harris Tweed, hand-woven on treadle looms in weavers' homes on the wild islands of the remote Outer Hebrides, is a particular passion. 'I love working with Harris Tweed. It's magic,' she enthuses. 'I love the people, I love phoning up and booking fabric from them – though it never arrives on time, there's either a thunderstorm or the ferry's not working.'

'They've been through a terrible time but have now found their feet again. If you hold up a piece of Harris Tweed you can pick out the traditional colours of the moors; a bit of lichen here, a bit of red moss there. I love that.'

While Pip's fantasy list of people from the past who whet her creative appetite is an exercise in whimsy, her actual clients bring into sharp focus the difference between simply making coats, and making coats for people. Stephen Fry, for instance, could hardly look more at home and at ease than he does in his Pip Howeson Brompton Jacket.

'He has a slight geography-teacher appeal,' says Pip affectionately, 'so we did beautiful velvet elbow patches for that jacket: they weren't needed but it was fun and he loved that. Three of the buttons on his cuff are covered in the same fabric as his jacket, and one is covered in the velvet of the patch; there's velvet behind his collar as well.'

She has spotted Stephen wearing the

'... he wanted to feel that he could wrap it around his wife on a dark moor in a storm'



Sculptor Nic Fiddian-Green, hands in his pockets like a naughty schoolboy. 'When I make a piece, it's a long process,' says Pip. 'There are at least three fittings. I get to know everybody quite well'



The Josephine, developed from a client's dream of her perfect coat

Jacket on television, mainly on the oft-repeated *Gadget Man*. 'He can be quite irritating, because he loses weight,' she says, half cross, yet laughing, 'though there's always an inch and a half in the seams so, either way, everything can be re-fitted.'

Equestrian sculptor Nic Fiddian-Green also looks entirely at one with his full-length coat, wearing it with the air of an insouciant high-plains drifter. 'It was quite difficult to get him to pin down in words what he wanted,' she recalls. 'In the end, I asked how he wanted to feel in his coat and then it all came out. He wanted to feel that he could wrap it around his wife on a dark moor in a storm, and be able to sleep in it under a tree. In the back of the coat there's a nod to his equine-ness, with lots of buttons right up to the shoulder blades, so if he did want to gallop off on a horse, he could.'

She laughs, though, at the way in which he wears his beloved, all-purpose comfort coat. 'I'm really keen on the shoulders sitting absolutely on the shoulders,' she states. 'He wears his coat off his shoulders, like a naughty schoolboy, with his hands in his pockets. He keeps sticking equipment in his pockets - I made the pockets to hold equipment but I didn't weigh the equipment.'

Each of Pip's pieces comes with a lifetime guarantee. 'Nobody's called me up on it yet,' she affirms.

Pip describes her clients as, 'doers and thinkers, lovers of the arts, cultured, and haters of carbon copies'. They include a rower with one bicep an inch and a half larger than the other ('how could he buy off the shelf?'), business magnates and a clutch of European artists, even a member of our royal family (Pip won't divulge the name).

She confesses that seeing her designs being worn can be emotional. Rather proud of the elegant bespoke ceremonial uniform she made for Judith Shallow, High Sheriff of Suffolk, Pip admits to a lump in her throat, perhaps even a tear, while watching the swearing-in ceremony.

'Whoever you are, I've made you a piece and you feel confident in it, ready to face the world. You know it's going to be in your wardrobe forever and that makes me happy. That sounds evangelical, but if you change shape, I can change the shape; if you want to change the lining, I can change the lining. The fabric is such good quality and the make is such good quality, that you can hand the piece on to your children. It's a real investment.'

'As a country we have a classic look, quite blue chip, and it hasn't deviated much. It's fun to play with things but there has to be a reason. I'm not one for fads. I like timeless fashion.'

'If you have one of my pieces,' she adds, 'it will be equally cool in 40 years' time.'

www.piphoweson.com



Pip wearing the Margot coat, standing next to the Francesca: her inspiration for the Margot was drawn from Russian embroidery, Fabergé eggs and a 1918 cavalry officer's coat that she found in St Petersburg