

Savile Row meets Hong Kong

Dan Syngé visits Sam's, a tailor where a bespoke suit costs from £300

This year marks the 10-year anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong to Beijing. Yet this modern commercial hub on the edge of mainland China somehow retains the feel of a British colonial outpost. Tourist favourites such as the Star Ferry, the Peak Tram and the Noon Day Gun are indelibly linked to the British legacy. But the colonial connection is nowhere more evident than in Sam's, a cramped tailor's shop in the Burlington Arcade off Nathan Road, Kowloon.

Sam's has offered quality bespoke tailoring to Hong Kong's military and civilian population for the past 50 years - a landmark celebrated this year with a Hong Kong Post stamp.

Step inside and you are not only witnessing a bona fide Hong Kong institution at work but coming face to face with 1960s Hong Kong - a time when off-duty British servicemen played cricket in the harbour or disembarked destroyers to explore Kowloon's exotic backstreets. "We had a barracks around the corner, so we sold our suits to the British officers," recalls the immaculate, softly spoken, Bombay-born Manu Melwani who, at 60, remains the public face of the business.

All around him are rolls of shirt cotton, leather-bound swatches and suits ready for collection. On the walls are regimental crests and dozens of framed publicity shots of Melwani standing next to clients ranging from Prince Charles and Bill Clinton to

David Bowie and Michael Jackson. The shop is abuzz with activity. Melwani's son, Roshan, ushers a big-waisted American into a fitting room while a blazered old brigadier pops in to pick up an order for his nephew.

When the shop opened in 1957, Melwani was an 11-year-old schoolboy who, when not helping his father in the shop, would catch up on his homework in the sweltering back office.

"Our British customers used to tell me that if I wanted to learn the trade properly, I must go to Savile Row. So I did." Aged 18, Melwani travelled to London

and served an apprenticeship on the Row, sleeping in the workshop overnight because he couldn't afford to pay for digs. "I didn't see much of London but I learnt all about mess kits, plus furs and hunting jackets, as well as how to measure people correctly and how to cut suits."

Sam's offers tailor-made suits, shirts and formal wear at just a fraction of the price of Piccadilly or Madison Avenue. It's a wonder that some delegation from Savile Row hasn't yet come down to Kowloon and confiscated all their chalk, pins and tape measures.

A made-to-measure two-piece suit at Sam's will set you back £300, compared with £1,500 or more at Paul Smith or £2,500 at Gieves &

Hawkes, Savile Row. For this, you get a fast professional service (a suit can be picked up the day after a fitting) and a garment that bears all the hallmarks of bespoke: perfect fit and choice of fabric, buttons, lapels, pocket-style and vents.

The shop's British military heritage is one of the key selling points, and Sam's suit labels still bear the slogan "Her Majesty's Forces Service". Post-handover, however, Melwani's clients are an increasingly international mix of bankers, lawyers, stockbrokers and tourists. "I've known some of my clients for over 50 years, and almost all of them have come through word of mouth," says Melwani. "I listen to my customers and keep prices reasonable."

Indian tailors like the Melwanis, as well as their Chinese counterparts who fled largely from Shanghai following the 1949 communist revolution, have been a popular feature of Hong Kong's street life. But with changing fash-

ions, soaring rents and competition from ready-made, times are getting harder.

Still, "things have got better since 1997", says Melwani hopefully, before predicting at least another 50 years of Sam's. "Britain has been our number one market but the Chinese also like their clothes tailor-made."

www.samstailor.com



British connection: filled with swatches, rolls of cloth and photographs of celebrity clients, Sam's in Hong Kong has provided suits to the military and civilians for more than 50 years

