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Boots, material culture and Georgian masculinities

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ABSTRACT
Writings on footwear tend to emphasize a fundamental division between those made for men and women: men’s are plain, sturdy and functional, whereas women’s are decorative, flimsy and impractical. Of all male footwear, boots are typically the plainest, sturdiest and most functional of all. In the eighteenth century they were emphatically outdoor wear, and scholars have noted their rustic and unrefined image. This article re-evaluates the elite male boot of the long eighteenth century in Britain, emphasizing its complex symbolic associations and its significance for the gendered lives of men. Boots were associated with equestrianism, social status and the military, and therefore were key markers of gender, class and national identities. Furthermore, the article considers boots as material objects, and what this tells us about their use and the impact that they had upon the bodies of their wearers. Based on research in three key shoe archives, this study uses boots to think about Georgian notions of masculinity, the body and the self.

The finest bootmaker in Regency London was George Hoby of St James’s Street. He made footwear for royalty and, famously, the Duke of Wellington, for whom he invented the eponymous boot. One chronicler of the time noted that, ‘he was so great a man in his own estimation that he was apt to take rather an insolent tone with his customers’. On one occasion, Sir John Shelley went to see Hoby to complain that his top boots had split in several places. ‘How did that happen?’ enquired Hoby. ‘Why, in walking to my stable’, he replied. ‘Walking to your stable!’ sneered the bootmaker. ‘I made the boots for riding, not walking.’

The remark that men’s boots were not made for walking is striking to modern readers. Writings about footwear tend to emphasize a fundamental division between those made for men and women: men’s are plain, sturdy and functional, whereas women’s are decorative, flimsy and impractical. This befits the social roles

KEYWORDS
Boots; shoes; masculinity; body; Britain

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that the modern world prescribed for men and women: as Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil note, shoes are instantly recognisable as being male or female, ‘not because of functional dissimilarities or anatomical diversities between the sexes, but because shoes are one way by which we construct gender identity’.2 Shoes are more than just functional objects and have become powerful cultural signs,3 but paradoxically one of the key signs of the ‘masculine’ shoe is its very functionality. Shoes therefore have the potential to tell us a great deal about masculinities, but whereas there has been some valuable work on other periods,4 there is still much to be said about the eighteenth century.5 This article therefore examines the elite male boot of the long eighteenth century in order to shed light on Georgian notions of masculinity, the body and the self.

Of all male footwear, boots are typically the plainest, sturdiest and most functional of all. They are often substantial in construction, offering support to the foot and lower leg, and protecting them against the elements and foreign objects. Boots are the footwear of soldiers, construction workers, hikers or horse riders, which enable them to complete the practical task at hand.6 Fundamentally, they are outdoor wear. In the polite world of the eighteenth century, indoor shoes for patrician men could be brocaded silk mules or delicate leather pumps with elaborate buckles, shoes that would not be suitable for traversing any great distance or on ground that was uneven, wet or muddy. For elite men, boots were to be worn outside and were specifically prohibited in spaces like court or parliament. The MP Charles Tottenham was fined for wearing top-boots in the House of Commons, and commentators from abroad noted that an English gentleman will only wear boots in town if he is carrying a whip, to show that he has been riding. The Bath Assembly Rooms had a rule that ‘no gentleman in boots or half-boots be admitted’ on ball nights.7 Riello therefore argues that boots were rustic rather than urbane, the opposite of refined gentility.8

In the military world too, boots were for action rather than ceremony. The 1803 standing orders for the Garrison of Gibraltar prescribed that officers on duty should wear ‘black topped wax leather polished boots’: ‘When officers go to balls, then, and then only, they will be permitted to appear in Shoes and Stockings’.9 Northampton Museum has a military dress shoe from 1828 owned by a Lieutenant

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3F. Bondi and G. Mariacher, If the Shoe Fits, trans. Jane Chisolm (Venice, 1979), 164.
5The key work is G. Riello, A Foot in the Past. Consumers, producers and footwear in the long eighteenth century (Oxford, 2007), which is concerned with both men and women’s shoes. See also E. Semmelhack, Standing Tall: The curious history of men in heels (Toronto, 2016), 36–45.
6M. Demello, Feet and Footwear. A cultural encyclopedia (Santa Barbara, 2009), 44–46.
7Southampton’s Assembly Rooms were more forgiving, adding ‘military gentlemen excepted’: John Feltham, A Guide to the Watering and Sea-Bathing Places (London, 1806), 33, 295.
8Riello, op. cit., 70.
Norbury. Its fine stitching, supple uppers and thin flexible sole would make it ideal for dancing – Georgian formal dances often involved bouncing on the tip-toe, which would be impossible in a rigid boot – but it would not have held up to wear in the field. This article will consider both the civilian and military worlds, since this was a period when there was considerable overlap between the two. Military and civilian styles informed one another: uniforms often followed civilian fashions, and military styles such as the hessian and the wellington achieved vogue in times of war. Furthermore, distinctions of rank in dress echoed those of social class. Whereas shoes for the men would be provided in bulk, officers were expected to buy their own uniforms and would acquire bespoke riding boots from a bootmaker in much the same way that a gentleman would in civilian life. A pair of military riding boots in the National Army Museum, for example, bears Hoby’s label, and displays stitching and workmanship that is notably fine. It is often difficult to tell military and civilian boots apart in museum collections, unless they come with a clear provenance, so it is practical to consider them alongside one another.

In this article, I want to nuance this stereotype of the plain and functional male boot. I will do this by exploring the complex symbolic associations of the boot from the early eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, and the significance that they had for the gendered lives of men. To a certain extent, it is a story of evolving styles, and indeed historical writing on shoes has traditionally taken this approach, focusing on developments in shoe design and production in a broadly chronological way. Although shoes are rarely taken seriously by historians outside of the specific field of shoe history, the study of footwear can benefit from insights from a range of fields. Indeed, shoes can be an important point of intersection for histories as diverse as those of consumerism, gender, medicine, war and material culture.

Of all these approaches, material culture will be the primary one pursued here. At a basic level, this involves using objects as primary sources, rather than just conventional historical sources such as texts and images. As Katherine Ott notes, ‘objects are the thing that words are about. The words convey the meaning but do not embody it.’ Handling objects therefore provides a direct sensory experience, ‘not a mediated or facilitated one.’ There is a danger of anachronism in this encounter, given that the reactions of the handler will be those of the twenty-first 

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11 On the tip-toe in formal dances see: The Art of Preserving the Feet; or, practical instructions for the prevention and cure of corns, bunions, callosities, &c. (London, 1818), 191.
13 A regimental bootmaker would make them according to an approved pattern: H. Strachan, British Military Uniforms 1768–1796. The dress of the British Army from official sources (London, 1975), 70.
century rather than the eighteenth. It is also a very subjective one, however seductive the appearance of giving the historian access to a prior, concrete truth. This study will therefore also use textual sources about footwear from the time in order to learn about the significance that footwear had for its owners and wearers, and to place the artefacts in their social and cultural context. Nevertheless, the ethos will be to begin with objects, rather than to use them in an illustrative way: boots themselves are the key source for this study, and drive its conclusions about their historical significance.

The historiography of material culture posits that objects perform cultural work rather than just instrumental functions. Much of the field is currently concerned with their emotional implications, and shoes were personal effects to which people were peculiarly attached. Lieutenant Colonel Kelly of the First Foot Guards died ‘in endeavouring to save his favourite boots’ from a burning building, and memoirs from the Napoleonic Wars attest to the value that common soldiers placed on their footwear when on long marches. Beyond their practical value, the shoe has a unique significance for its wearer, since it gradually moulds to the shape of the foot. Ulinka Rublack notes that museums should therefore ‘intervene minimally when undertaking conservation work’, since signs of wear tell us a great deal about their owner and their use. Usually manufactured from leather, boots are metaphorically an extension of the wearer’s skin: as with other articles like leather breeches and hair wigs, they raise the troubling question of where the boundaries of the body begin and end. Manufactured from skin, leather has the same properties of toughness, flexibility and water resistance: indeed, before the availability of rubber and plastics, any material article that required these characteristics would typically be manufactured from it.

Artefacts that were worn could also have a direct physical impact on the wearer. Coming into direct contact with the body, the texture and fit of garments provide distinctive sensory experiences, and can even affect the body itself. Tailored clothing can shape the frame, as well as altering its outward visual appearance, and can thence bestow self-confidence or social status upon the wearer. Shoes can be a source of comfort or pain, of warmth or exposure, of dryness or damp, and can support or distort the motions of the body. Factors such as suppleness,
shape or heel height can affect the posture or the walk. In handling the objects, therefore, this study has sought to establish the physical effect that the footwear would have had upon the wearer, as well as evaluating more visual aspects such as style and quality of manufacture. Of course, the ideal way to assess the impact of boots upon the body would be to wear them, but the fragility of 300-year-old leather means that this is not an option. Footwear from this period has to be handled with great care, wearing gloves so as to protect the leather from oil, salt and moisture on the hands.

In order to conduct such a study, surviving examples are needed; and the small number of these goes some way to explain why men’s footwear from the eighteenth century is such a compact field. In museum collections, shoes from the eighteenth century are much less numerous than for later periods, and the vast majority of these are women’s.24 Shoes were more likely to be kept if they were decorative or interesting, and men’s shoes were typically plainer than women’s. This also means that collections are skewed in class terms, since there are very few surviving non-elite shoes.25 Working people wore their shoes until they wore out, and once they were beyond repair they were discarded. Shoes were only preserved in exceptional circumstances, such as when they were concealed behind walls or underneath floorboards to bring good fortune.26 This means that, despite the millions of common soldiers’ boots that were produced during the Napoleonic Wars, virtually none have survived. The boots studied here are therefore largely high-quality items belonging to patricians and commissioned officers, although some may have been worn by plebeians in equestrian occupations such as coachmen or cavalrymen, who may not have owned them directly. Their relationship with their expensive boots was one of ‘involuntary consumption’, John Styles’s characterization of how groups such as servants engaged with the consumer culture of the eighteenth century.27 Again, this reminds us that, in order to understand an object, it needs to be placed fully in context rather than merely experienced first-hand.

**Boots and the body**

Focusing on boots rather than footwear in general requires some justification. In the period in question, boots and shoes were more distinct than they are today. They had different functions and would be worn in different situations. In terms of manufacture, bootmaking and shoemaking were separate trades, requiring different skills.28 Whereas there was a large readymade trade in shoes, bootmaking

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24 For this study I have accessed three major collections: The Bata Shoe Museum (Toronto), National Army Museum (London) and Northampton Museum (which holds the UK’s national collection of shoes). I consulted forty-five examples of male footwear from the period c.1700–1840, of which twenty-five were boots.

25 Karen Harvey has noted similar patterns of survival for men’s breeches: see Men of Parts; op. cit., 804. On the wider issues of selection and survival, see Grassby, op. cit., 597–8.

26 For example the ‘Weedon boot’ of the 1840s, discovered at Weedon Barracks in Northamptonshire: see Matthews David, ‘War and wellingtons’, op. cit., 120.


28 Riello, op. cit., 40.
was more likely to be bespoke. As well as being made-to-measure, bespoke goods were of superior quality, and were typically paid for on credit rather than up-front.\(^{29}\) They also involved a different relationship between producer and consumer. Elite consumers of footwear were very knowledgeable about their production, knew good craftsmen by name and cultivated relationships with them.\(^{30}\) An anecdote published in *The Spirit of English Wit* (1813) gives us a flavour of this:

‘Friend, these are handsome boots, Sherry; who made them?’ – S. ‘Hoby.’ – F. ‘How did you prevail on him?’ – S. ‘Guess.’ – ‘I suppose you talked him over in the old way.’ – S. ‘No, that won’t do now.’ – F. ‘Then when they came home you ordered half a dozen more?’ S. – ‘No.’ – F. ‘Perhaps you gave a check on Hammersley, which you knew would not be honoured.’ – S. ‘No, no, no; in short, you might guess till to-morrow before you hit it. I paid for them.’\(^{31}\)

It is also worth clarifying where the line was drawn between boots and shoes. Ankle boots, such as those worn by the British infantryman from the Peninsular War onwards, would be ‘shoes’ in military parlance, whereas a ‘boot’ would typically rise to the calf or the knee. Boots therefore used much more leather than shoes, and were typically heavier in construction, so cost considerably more. In 1673 the Duke of Hamilton paid £2 14 shillings for shoes, and £12 for boots.\(^{32}\) Even boots for servants could be expensive: the Newdigates of Arbury Hall (who spent a quarter of their clothing budget on livery) spent up to £3 a pair on boots for the stable hands.\(^{33}\) This was well beyond what servants could have afforded to buy in civilian life, and people often wore shoes with cloth gaiters as a cheaper alternative. Common soldiers did too, and were expected to black them to give them the appearance of boot leather, unlike their officers who wore the real thing.

Boots were therefore a significant purchase, and we have to consider what this tells us about the nature of elite male consumerism. Whereas much of the historical work on the so-called ‘consumer revolution’ has focused on female consumerism, recent work has highlighted the shopping behaviour of men. Claire Walsh has suggested that men’s consumerism was more impulsive and pleasurable than women’s, and Margot Finn notes that men ‘lavished time, money and signification’ on clothes and personal possessions in particular.\(^{34}\) Men’s consumption of boots can arguably be put in the same category as leather horse tack, which Amanda Vickery suggests was an ‘utterly masculine, dark brown territory of goods’.\(^{35}\) Shoe shopping is one area of consumerism where men will studiedly ‘manhandle’ a potential purchase: footwear is ‘very much the sum of its parts, a physical object

\(^{29}\)ibid., 54.
\(^{30}\)Rublack, *op. cit.*, 52, 59, 84.
\(^{31}\)G. Cruikshank, *The Spirit of English Wit, or Post-Chaise Companion* (1813).
\(^{32}\)Swann, *op. cit.*, 22.
\(^{33}\)I am grateful to Mark Rothery for this information.
whose look, weight, texture and smell bespeak the skill of its maker and point to its intrinsic value.\textsuperscript{36} The same sensory considerations come into play when handling an object in a museum.

Boots are also symbolically distinctive. Boots have a longstanding association with the military and with violence. The verb ‘to boot’ means to kick; to ‘get the boot’ or be ‘booted out’ is to be ejected by force; ‘booty’ refers to the spoils of war; ‘booted up’ means ready for action. Johnson’s dictionary gives additional contemporary definitions: ‘profit; gain; advantage’, whereas to be ‘bootless’ is to be ‘useless; unavailing… without success’.\textsuperscript{37} Valerie Steele therefore suggests that ‘boots convey an image of potent masculinity’.\textsuperscript{38} Sexual and martial potency go hand in hand. According to oral tradition, the Duchess of Marlborough once declared that, ‘the Duke returned from the wars today and did pleasure me in his top-boots’.\textsuperscript{39}

Boots’ association with the military is underlined by their use in equestrianism, since the horseman was historically a warrior. He was also a gentleman, so riding boots connoted social status and authority. In the eighteenth century, mounted soldiers were of higher status, be they cavalrmen or field officers in infantry regiments. Officers rode and soldiers marched,\textsuperscript{40} just as gentlemen would not be obliged to walk any great distance in the civilian world. Horse riders require footwear that is stiff and supportive, protecting the lower leg from chafing in the saddle and when riding through scrub. In the dragoons’ official Clothing Warrant of 1768, boots were listed with the horse tack rather than with the uniforms: they were equipment rather than clothes as such.\textsuperscript{41} The extreme example of this is the huge and heavy postilion boot, which is reinforced in order to protect the rider at the front of a carriage train from crushing his leg between the horse and the wooden shaft.\textsuperscript{42} What was good for riding was therefore not good for walking, and required a fundamentally different construction, as Hoby’s opening remark suggested.

Horsemen require footwear with a heel, to sit in the stirrups (see Figure 1). Nowadays the high heel is primarily associated with femininity, as is the distinctive walk and body shape that it promotes. The sexologist William A. Rossi famously demonstrated that high heels increase the woman’s pelvic angle, accentuate the calves, buttocks and breasts, and increase the motion of the hips when walking.\textsuperscript{43} This exclusive association of heels with femininity, however, has not historically always been the case. Although shoe historians debate the origins of the high heel,\textsuperscript{44} in the early modern world it was a sign of class rather than gender, given

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36}Breward, ‘Fashioning masculinity’, op. cit., 220.
\item \textsuperscript{37}S. Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language, 2 vols (London, 1792), I, col. 800.
\item \textsuperscript{38}V. Steele, Shoes: A lexicon of style (London, 1998), 132.
\item \textsuperscript{39}E. Knowles (ed.), The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, 6th edn (Oxford, 2004), 512.
\item \textsuperscript{40}C. Lawson, A History of the Uniforms of the British Army, 5 vols (London, 1967), V, 36.
\item \textsuperscript{41}Strachan, op. cit., 41.
\item \textsuperscript{42}Bata Shoe Museum, 83.182A, Pair of postilion boots, n.d.
\item \textsuperscript{43}Bondi and Mariacher, op. cit., 166.
\item \textsuperscript{44}E. Semmelhack, ‘A delicate balance: women, power and high heels’, in Riello and McNeil, op. cit., 225.
\end{itemize}
its association with equestrianism and with the power of the aristocracy. Men at the court of Louis XIV wore the famous *talons rouge*, to symbolize that they could trample his opponents. The British upper-class male similarly wore red heels in the early eighteenth century, giving him a ‘polite’ deportment and accentuating his height advantage over his inferiors, above whom he literally towered. As such, it is necessary to qualify the statement that men’s boots are plain and functional. It is not useful to compare men’s boots with women’s in the eighteenth century, as women rarely wore them: they were not general wear but were worn for riding, whereupon women would wear versions of men’s. It is more revealing briefly to note the associations that women’s boots have had in later periods,

Figure 1. Men’s leather jackboot, c. 1720. Source: Northampton Museum and Art Gallery 1922–23.17P. Reproduced with permission.

47Demello, op. cit., 47.
since this arguably colours how the boots of the eighteenth century are viewed today. Women’s tall boots can be very sexualized, an association played on by dominatrices and drag artistes. Steele suggests that this symbolic power of female boots derives from these historic associations in the masculine world with the military, with violence and with high status. She further notes that the ‘rise’ of the boot emphasizes that legs are ‘the pathway to the genitals, as well as constituting an erogenous zone of their own.’48 This is arguably as true for men as it is for women, and the high-heeled boots of the eighteenth century should be seen in this light. We will also see how boot design relates to the nature of legwear in this respect, enhancing the male physique in a sexualized way.

This suggests that we need to rethink how we approach, not just boots, but men’s dress in general. Historians have conventionally argued that the period witnessed a ‘great masculine renunciation’, whereby men’s dress became plainer and more uniform. The psychologist J.C. Flügel coined the concept in the 1930s, and linked this phenomenon to the great upheavals of the French Revolution and its rejection of social distinctions.49 Subsequent writers have questioned this interpretation but it continues to be influential.50 David Kuchta, for example, locates this shift earlier, and in English elites rather than the French middle classes. He argues that the rise of the plain three piece suit was ‘an aristocratic response to the new ideas of manliness legitimated by the culture that emerged after the Glorious Revolution’, which was only later appropriated by middling men as they claimed membership of the political class. The renunciation of sartorial display was therefore a conscious form of ‘inconspicuous consumption’, rather than a lack of showiness as such.51 As other commentators have noted, the universal adoption of black in the nineteenth century did not equate to dullness or denial.52

This ongoing debate has big implications for understandings of sexual difference. Thomas King argues that ‘the “great masculine renunciation” made men and women by promoting an ideology of gendered complementariness’: a common sartorial regime ostensibly levelled distinctions between propertied men, consolidating their identity and power as a group.53 According to this argument, corporeal display came to be identified with femininity: women were increasingly identified with their bodies, and thence maternal roles in the domestic sphere, whereas men’s very disembodiedness equipped them for the rational public sphere. As Karen Harvey has noted of men’s breeches, though, clothing that served to

48Steele, op. cit., 126.
51Kuchta, op. cit., 163, 164.
53King, op. cit., 181, 179.
emphasize the man’s anatomy and his very sexual potency can hardly be said to have done this: rather, the bodiliness of men was the basis for a new form of ‘embodied citizenship’.\textsuperscript{54} Outward signs of male gender took on a renewed significance in a period when political citizenship was increasingly aligning with masculinity. Debates around the franchise in particular emphasized that only men could possess the required attributes of independence, rationality and public spirit.\textsuperscript{55} There is therefore much at stake in the question of whether men’s boots in the Georgian period were plain and functional, or quite the reverse.

As well as having an effect on the appearance of the body, Georgians were aware that boots impacted upon the body itself. McNeil and Riello note that footwear in this period was assessed in terms of its healthiness and physical comfort, within the new scientific discourse of ‘hygiéne’.\textsuperscript{56} Some medical literature on the subject was anxious about the dangers of wearing stiff high boots:

\begin{quote}
Boots made too small, and of thick hard Leather, are so pernicious to Health, and so disagreeable in Walking, that I wonder any sensible Being should confine themselves in them, for the silly purpose of showing the exact Shape of the Legs.
\end{quote}

The author went on to explain that when the arteries are compressed, ‘a Wasting or atrophy of the Limb follows’.\textsuperscript{57} Coachmen were known to suffer from embolisms from wearing their knee-high boots, probably exacerbated by having to wear them for long periods in a seated position. Eighteenth-century medicine placed great store on the healthiness of free circulation, and the evils of tight footwear came in for particular criticism.

Late-Georgian followers of fashion often wore tight shoes in order to achieve the appearance of small feet. One commentator was horrified that ‘the young and the would-be youthful, should contract their shoes until the members upon which the body rests, and which ought freely to enjoy their own power of motion, have been, as it were, “cribb’d, cabin’d, and confined” in a close prison’.\textsuperscript{58} Podiatric writers bemoaned that such footwear was the cause of corns, lameness and bone damage, and was particularly damaging to children.\textsuperscript{59} Furthermore, the physician William Buchan argued that, in preventing people from walking, such footwear ‘may likewise be considered the remote cause of other diseases’.\textsuperscript{60} Officers were therefore urged to supervise the fitting of their men’s shoes, ‘else every Soldier will certainly indulge his own particular taste, in the fashion of his shoes, without considering any other advantage’.\textsuperscript{61}

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\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{54}Harvey, ‘Men of Parts’, op. cit., 821.
\item\textsuperscript{55}M. McCormack, \textit{The Independent Man. Citizenship and gender politics in Georgian England} (Manchester, 2005).
\item\textsuperscript{57}W. Vaughan, \textit{An Essay, Philosophical and Medical, Concerning Modern Clothing} (London, 1792), 44, 57.
\item\textsuperscript{58}Art of Preserving the Feet, 197.
\item\textsuperscript{59}Vaughan, op. cit., 46, 65.
\item\textsuperscript{60}W. Buchan, \textit{Buchan’s Domestic Medicine Modernized; or, a treatise on the prevention and cure of diseases by regimen and simple medicine} (London, 1809), 51.
\item\textsuperscript{61}B. Cuthbertson, \textit{System for the Compleat Interior Management and Oeconomy of a Battalion of Infantry} (Dublin, 1768), 98.
\end{itemize}

often subject to hostile commentary like this, being a threat to both medical and moral health.62 The comfort and healthiness of boots are therefore key factors to be considered when examining artefacts from the time. Fashionable boots from the early nineteenth century are notably narrow, with a high instep and pointed toes, and signs of stretching in the uppers suggest that they were too small for their wearer.63 Alison Matthews David notes that this contrasts with plebeian footwear, which was wide and flat-footed, and therefore designed to be walked in.64 For this reason, the surgeon Samuel Cooper noted that ‘genteel persons are more likely to be afflicted’ with corns and other complaints than the lower classes.65

The history of the boot in Georgian Britain is therefore a complex one. The boot was suffused with symbolism about gender and class, and came to be the focus of anxieties about political and military power, as well as about bodily and moral health. The meanings of the boot were not static, and there were significant changes in boot design over the course of the century, so it is also necessary to take a chronological perspective. A focus on historical change is particularly apt where the history of masculinity is concerned, since the Georgian period is often identified as an important transitional phase in British gender relations. Historians often identify the period after 1750 as being crucial here, be it in terms of the rise of ‘separate spheres’ for men and women,66 of binary notions of sexual difference,67 or even of modern notions of selfhood. Dror Wahrman, for example, argues that the decades around the American Revolution had a crucial role in closing down the fluid and generic personal identities of the early modern world. This was replaced by a sense that individuals were unique and were located within fixed modern categories of gender, race and class.68 As boots were loaded with meaning in all three respects, it is revealing to consider the significance of changes in boot design across this transformative period in social relations. The focus of this essay will therefore shift to individual types of boots, exploring how styles changed over the course of the century, and using surviving examples from the museum collections to think about the experience of wearing them.

**The jackboot**

The jackboot derived from seventeenth-century styles. June Swann notes that the cavalier-style riding boot began to stiffen and straighten after the Restoration and became the ‘cavalry boot par excellence’.69 Riding boots were thereafter

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63For example: Northampton Museum 2000.27.50, Men’s single black leather boot, early 1800s.
64Matthews David, ‘War and Wellingtons’, *op. cit.*, 130.
65S. Cooper, *Practice of Surgery. Being an elementary work for students and a concise book of reference for practitioners* (Hanover, 1815), 145.
made of strong leather with a shiny black wax finish. Of all eighteenth-century footwear, the jackboot is probably the most symbolically redolent. These heavy, over-the-knee boots were a byword for oppression and militarism. When the opposition criticized the prime minister the Earl of Bute in the 1760s, they played on his surname to suggest his despotic nature, and he is instantly recognizable as a ‘boot’ in caricatures of the time.\(^70\) The jackboot retains this sense to this day, re-emphasized by its association with fascism in the twentieth century. Encountering eighteenth-century jackboots first hand, it is comprehensible why this should be the case. Their sheer bulk, thickness, hardness and inflexibility, coupled with their shiny black surface and aggressive appearance, makes them fearsome objects to behold. It is therefore important to consider the psychological as well as the physical impact of wearing such footwear: for soldiers, boots can contribute to their ‘belligerent attitude’ as well as providing an offensive weapon in their own right.\(^71\)

Jackboots got their name from the process of ‘jacking’, whereby hide was treated with wax and then tar or pitch to make it waterproof. Maintaining this high shine became something of an obsession. In the army, soldiers were required to carry shoe brushes and ‘black balls’ made from beeswax, ivory black and soap, and footwear was subject to a constant regime of maintenance and inspection.\(^72\) To a certain extent, this was about inculcating discipline and maintaining a uniform appearance, although there was also a practical utility in ensuring that the leather was waterproof, supple and long-lasting. In civilian society, the fetish for blacking was undoubtedly driven by the dictates of fashion, and a whole blacking industry grew up to meet the demand, using often poisonous ingredients.\(^73\) The unfortunate Lieutenant Colonel Kelly was renowned for his ‘brilliant’ boots, and after his demise, ‘all the dandies [including Beau Brummell] were anxious to secure the services of his valet, who possessed the mystery of the inimitable blacking’.\(^74\)

The jackboot was equestrian wear. Early eighteenth-century jackboots had wide tops (which cavaliers had formerly worn folded down) to protect the lower thigh while riding.\(^75\) Later examples dispensed with these and terminated at the knee, but these were emphatically boots for riding rather than walking. They were often fitted with spurs, and had high heels of stacked leather: the boot pictured in Figure 1 has heels of 65 mm. While ideal for the stirrups, and while it would have given the wearer an impressive bearing when standing still, they would have been unwieldy for walking. A colonel asked, ‘to what purpose is cavalry loaded with such monstrous heavy boots…? a lighter, yet full as strong, and much more

\(^{72}\)The 1795 Standing Orders for the 2nd Dragoon Guards provides ‘A Receipt [sic] for making black balls’: see Strachan, op. cit., 80.
\(^{73}\)Matthews David, Fashion Victims, op. cit., 116.
\(^{74}\)Gronow, op. cit., 104.
\(^{75}\)Bata Shoe Museum, P94.062, Black leather jack boot with domed toe, 1720.
serviceable boot might easily contrived. The dragoons (mounted soldiers who carried firearms, as distinct from the cavalry who use edged weapons) were originally issued with jackboots too but this ‘made skirmishing on foot almost impossible’. In the latter stages of the Napoleonic Wars they instead wore short boots, which gave them the flexibility to operate either on foot or in the saddle.

Further factors made jackboots unsuitable for walking. Jackboots were made from hide almost a centimetre thick, which offered excellent protection to the foot and leg but was very heavy and virtually rigid. Several of the jackboots that I handled had no flexibility whatsoever at the ankle, which would impede normal locomotion. This also made them difficult to get on and off. High boots were typically fitted with bootstraps to help pull them up, and a gentleman would require the assistance of a servant to pull them down. The expression ‘to boot and saddle’ therefore refers to a lengthy process, and the cavalry would be given orders to do this well in advance of an action. Finally, in common with virtually all shoes manufactured between 1600 and 1800, jackboots were straight lasted. Jackboots were symmetrical and had broad square toes, so could be worn on either foot. It was more comfortable to wear them consistently on the left or right, since the boot would mould to the foot, to the limited extent that thick hide would allow. This however weakened the stitching and wore out the sole unevenly, so soldiers were under orders to swap them around daily to make them last longer, relying on thick woollen socks to prevent rubbing. Patricians were not quite so cost-sensitive, and there is evidence of consistent wear on some high-end examples. In general, however, the jackboot did not fit around the body: rather, the body fitted around it. Jackboots were therefore oppressive to their wearers, as well as to those who beheld them.

The top-boot

The top-boot derived from this equestrian style, but was a more wearable proposition. Top-boots started to appear from the 1730s and were fashionable from the 1770s, becoming part of the outdoor uniform of the patrician man. ‘John Bull’ is invariably portrayed wearing them in caricature, giving them the status of a national style. Top-boots had a shiny black surface and their distinctive ‘tops’ were created by folding them down so it revealed the contrasting colour of the untreated leather within (see Figure 2). In terms of the masculine ensemble, they were worn with breeches that reached to the knee, and a coat and waistcoat: coats shortened over the course of the century, leading to the appearance of a

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77 C. Oman, Wellington’s Army 1809–1814 (London, 1913), 297.
80 Cuthbertson, op. cit., 135.
81 National Army Museum 1959-11-59, Pair of boots, possibly heavy cavalry, 1750.
82 Swann, op. cit., 28.
long-legged, classical body shape.\textsuperscript{83} This created an expanse of leather, from the shiny black of the boots, via the buff of the boot-tops up to the waist, which drew the eye to the shape of the man’s leg and the location of the genitals. As Harvey has noted, this very sexualized image of the male body runs counter to the notion that there was a ‘renunciation’ of showy male dress in the eighteenth century. Rather than being disembodied, the dress of the Georgian man drew attention to his very bodiliness.\textsuperscript{84} By the turn of the century, boots were fitted to the calf and lasted to the left and right foot with a pointed toe, emphasizing the shape of the masculine body where they had formerly concealed it.

Top-boots were cut much more smartly and closely than the jackboot, and were fashioned from softer grain leather. Other concessions to comfort included their construction from a single piece of leather, minimizing the number of abrasive seams.\textsuperscript{85} Top-boots in museum collections (such as the one pictured in Figure 2) are notably more supple and flexible than jackboots, and the heels are much lower, although the soles remain fairly rigid. These could be worn for riding (and are worn by jockeys to this day) but they were also suitable for walking. They shod rural walkers when it became a fashionable pursuit in the Romantic period, and

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{Men’s black and beige leather top-boot, 1810–20. Source: Northampton Museum and Art Gallery 375. Reproduced with permission.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{83}A. Hollander, \textit{Seeing Through Clothes} (Berkeley, 1993), 225.
\textsuperscript{84}Harvey, ‘Men of Parts’, \textit{op. cit.}, 798.
\textsuperscript{85}Wilcox, \textit{op. cit.}, 119.
walking around town became a more attractive option when the ‘urban renaissance’ provided paved streets, promenades, squares and pleasure gardens. In the 1790s, boots became fashionable for general wear, as they often did in times of war, and Riello suggests that they also became ‘a sign of democracy and participation in public affairs’. If outdoor walking was becoming a respectable pursuit in the later eighteenth century, this was emphatically only for men. While men’s boots were becoming more suitable for rugged outdoor activities, women’s footwear was going in the other direction: their increasingly light and flimsy shoes becoming ‘expressive of a female environment increasingly considered to be a domestic and private space’. Footwear design therefore had a key role to play in this crucial period of realignment in gender relations.

The wellington boot

The story of the invention of the wellington is well known. It was developed from the hessian boot, which had become fashionable around the same time as the top-boot. This was a military style that came to Britain with Hessian auxiliaries during the War of American Independence. Like the top-boot, the hessian was cut close to the calf, but instead of having folded tops it rose at the front and its decorated top was finished with a tassel. It was worn outside of legwear and looked elegant with breeches. It was therefore a rather dandyish style, and was favoured by fashionable men such as the Duke of Wellington. As breeches came to be superseded by trousers and pantaloons in male fashion, the tassled and decorated hessian posed a problem as it could not be worn under them. Wellington also found that, when on campaign, boots worn outside of legwear became damp and difficult to remove, whereas boots worn under overalls stayed dry. He therefore ordered a modified version from Hoby, with a shorter smooth leg and a straight top, and took two pairs with him on the Waterloo campaign. As he wrote from Brussels in April 1815:

Mr Hoby

The last boots you sent me were still too small in the calf of the leg & about an inch and a half too short in the leg. Send me two pairs more altered as I have above described.

Your most faithfull Servt
Wellington

They eventually perfected the design, and the victor of Waterloo’s footwear became a sensation, becoming a ‘virtual national costume’. By the 1830s, boots were the
norm among respectable men. One commentator noted ‘we are emphatically a booted people’ and that, of all boots, ‘the Wellington is unquestionably the most gentlemanly thing of its kind’.94

The wellington’s great asset was its flexibility. Wellingtons could be worn for riding, formal occasions or general wear. Fitted legwear could be tucked in – as they often were in the military – or they could be worn smoothly beneath trousers or pantaloons, with the strap fitting under the low heel. Christopher Breward notes that the new combination of legwear and footwear was ‘a more practical, healthy and aesthetically suitable option for the energetic, bifurcated challenges of modern life’.95 The wellington therefore befitted late-Georgian masculinities in being elegant but sober and practical, being ideal footwear for the serious statesman, the industrious businessman or the man of action. Their combination with trousers underlined their patriotic and manly credentials: trousers had long been worn by common sailors and by the time they entered civilian fashions in the 1800s they were worn by soldiers too.96 If breeches carried the taint of the old aristocracy, trousers and boots were the uniform of the self-made man.97

95Ibid.
97Semmelhack, Standing Tall, 45.
Wellington boots contrast with their predecessors in their close fit and their suppleness. Without elastic to achieve a close fit, they had to be made to measure, and surviving examples sometimes have cuts in the leg where owners were trying

**Figure 4.** ‘A Wellington Boot Or the Head of the Army’, by Paul Pry (William Heath). Cartoon, October 1827, © Victoria and Albert, London.
to achieve comfort, or to get them on and off.\footnote{Matthews David, ‘War and Wellingtons’, \textit{op.cit.}, 130.} These were expensive bespoke articles, and the fine leather and detailed stitching reveal their elite origins. As well as having supple uppers, their soles are relatively thin and flexible, suggesting that they could be danced in: one pair that I examined had soles that were only 4 millimetres thick, which flexed when handling.\footnote{Northampton Museum, 2000.27.33.1, \textit{Pair of men’s black and red leather dress Wellington boots}, 1800–25.} ‘Dress wellingtons’ are especially soft and fine. One example from around 1840 has the deceptive appearance of a laced dancing pump and a stockinged leg (see Figure 3): the boot visually becomes part of the body, rather than something that the body wears. Whereas plebeian footwear at the beginning of the Victorian period remained bulky and uncomfortable, the footwear of elite males moulded to their frames, embodying their natural authority in a masculine silhouette.

Indeed, in probably the most famous caricature of Wellington, the boot \textit{becomes} his body. William Heath’s ‘A Wellington Boot Or the Head of the Army’ (1827) depicts the Duke's head, sandwiched between enormous versions of the two garments with which he was synonymous, the bicorne hat and the wellington boot (see Figure 4). As well as signifying his class, the boot signalled Wellington's patriotic and masculine credentials by embodying his many martial achievements. Confident in his situation, he looks at the viewer and wears a satisfied smile. The title refers to his recent appointment as Commander in Chief (or ‘head’) of the Army, but he remains grounded in the realities of warfare. In the background, troops drill outside Horse Guards Parade, not far from Hoby’s shop.\footnote{Matthews David, ‘War and Wellingtons’, \textit{op.cit.}, 134.}

\section*{Conclusion}

Male boots were therefore far from simply being plain and functional items in the Georgian period. Although they clearly did have practical functions – notably to protect the leg and secure the stirrups while riding – these only served to underline their associations with social status, political authority and military power. In terms of masculinities, their use in outdoor activities contributed to an image that was unrefined to a certain extent, but it would not be correct to pigeonhole them on the ‘plain’ side of a male/female binary as shoe historians often do. Dandies appreciated the high shine of black leather, and the peacock stance fostered by high heels. They may have had to change into shoes in order to dance, but even this was no longer necessary with the arrival of the wellington, with its soft uppers and flexible sole. Far from witnessing a ‘renunciation’ in male dress after 1750, the boot becomes increasingly elegant and sophisticated, and more acceptable for fashionable general wear. Furthermore, instead of disembobyng the male, changes in styles meant that boots increasingly moulded to the frames of the elite men who could afford bespoke footwear from a fine bootmaker like
Hoby. One manufacturer from the 1840s urged that, ‘every one who wishes to be comfortably fitted, should have a pair of lasts made expressly for his own use’: this takes the bespoke relationship to its logical conclusion, constructing the boot around the actual body shape of the consumer, but was clearly only an option for those who could afford it.101 The shapely foot and leg permitted by expensive boots was therefore a visual sign of the class of men who possessed social and political authority in the early nineteenth century.

Boots are therefore significant in terms of notions of the individual and how that individual relates to society as a whole. As the eighteenth century moved towards fixed modern notions of gender, race and class, high-end boots became more closely personalized to the men who wore them. With the demise of straight lasts, broad squared toes and thick, wide legs, boots become less generic and more individualized: they shift from being equipment to clothing. An examination of the history of boots supports Wahrman’s argument that ‘the modern regime of selfhood’ arrived at the end of the eighteenth century, as individuals came to possess a unique identity. Yet whereas Wahrman argues that clothing comes to be regarded as a mask – something to be ‘seen through’ – elite footwear in the early nineteenth century serves to reveal the individual’s bodily uniqueness rather than to conceal it.102 Bulky non-elite footwear similarly marked out the wearer in terms of gender, race and (especially) class, but located them as part of a mass rather than as an individual.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, medical understandings of the body shifted from it being flexible and adaptable, to being fixed and suited to its environment.103 So whereas in the mid-century, one’s body would have to adapt to a rigid symmetrical boot that was not designed for it, by the end of the century the boot was expected to fit around the unique contours and motions of the individual’s body. These contours are still visible in surviving examples of boots from the time, given the unique way that leather stretches, scuffs and grains when it comes into contact with the walking foot. The materiality of footwear can therefore tell us things about its wearer that visual or textual representations never could.

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101Sparkes Hall, op. cit., 104.
102Wahrman, op. cit., 178.
103E. Charters, Disease, War and the Imperial State. The welfare of the British armed forces during the Seven Years War (Chicago, 2014), 171.