

CONTRIBUTORIA

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ARTICLE INSECTS, US & THE FUTURE

Politeness and nodding on the Chap Trail '14



By
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Getting up in the morning isn't easy. Waking up is simplicity itself, especially for someone like me who spends most of the night only half asleep, in the grips of a nightmare, getting up to go to the toilet, or one of the many other things my body prioritises over the ho-hum business of sleep. What I'm saying is - it's early, too early for proper brain function. It's especially too early to be struggling into a pair of tuxedo trousers, a fresh white shirt, and a tailcoat.

I walk to the coach station through a heat haze that is already starting to come off the pavement, and my tail coat starts to feel more and more like a mistake. I've decided to go to the event as a Crowleyan dandy drunk, all black tailcoat tuxedo with a bow tie raffishly left undone and heavy silver jewellery. This isn't too far from my usual look to be honest. I'm drawing diagonal looks from passers by who must assume I'm an emo Frank Sinatra impersonator on the way back

from an all nighter.

I'm off to the Chap Olympiad: a open air tea party for people involved in Chappism. Chappism or to give it its more politically charged name 'Anarcho Dandyism' looks towards the past, notably the forties and fifties, for its fashion and models of behaviour. They seek a more civilised, polite, society at the centre of which is the eccentric and individual 'Chap': an Englishman.

"The Chap believes that a society without courteous behaviour and proper headwear is a society on the brink of moral and sartorial collapse. It seeks to reinstate such outmoded but indispensable gestures as hat doffing, giving up one's seat to a lady and regularly using a trouser press." says its website.

This started in 1999 with The Chap, a small press magazine that soon found a following after appearing in Loaded. That's probably where I found it. I admit I have a few copies of the magazine and always found it funny, if a little one note. And it soon stopped me: looking into the past and holding it as an ideal is problematic. The past is quite racist, and the fifties was not only hugely repressive for women, but also for the youth of the time. The Chap holds eccentricism and individuality in very high regard but has a very restrictive dress code. The fifties was so repressive that one of the first notable sub-cultures, the teddy boys, looked back to the Edwardian era modes of dress to escape.

The Chap seemed obsessed with the middle and upper classes, almost scrubbing

the working class out of historical context altogether except for the odd reference to an 'oik' or a 'yob'. These words are levelled at anyone wearing jeans or trainers or not hitting the chap standard of dress. It's interesting to note that around 1999 was also when the word 'chav' began to hit the public consciousness: first as an insult, then as a badge of pride from people that embraced the word and made it their own.

The fifties were the last time that England wouldn't be hugely influenced by American culture. The sixties brought hippies, mods and rockers, and a wave of Americana that now has morphed into a huge monoculture. When the Chap movement protests it tends to be at the symbols of that American-born monoculture: the Gap, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Starbucks. I wanted to find out is Chappism elitist? Can it be seen to be racist? Anti-American? Can you really mine the past for gems without some of the muck getting on your clothes?

I arrive late, in an area of London with tall Georgian architecture. Bedford Square was once the home the likes of Lord Eldon and Henry Cavendish and now housed the Sothebys Institute of Art and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The verdant garden in the middle is obscured by foliage and bound by railings. The shadow of the buildings and tall trees offers some protection. I join the end of the line.

The guys in front of me are both wearing straw boaters, the shirts are well cut and the jackets bear a military crest. Both are drinking cans of gin and tonic, the

same cans that pepper the railings all down the line. Dave and Danny, one is a school bursar and the other is - vaguely - a consultant, they met in the navy and use that to explain their affiliation to chap.

“I would have thought that the air force is more Chap than the navy”

“They would like to believe that, but its patently not true,” Dave smiles at Danny and they share a look.

“Are you both Chaps?” I ask, Dave tells me he is definitely not a Chap. Some of his friends had sent a picture of him to the magazine’s ‘Chap or not’ section and they had deemed him not a chap. I turn to Danny. He says:

“Well, there is something to be said for saying that if you have to tell people you are a Chap, then you’re probably not. I nod” my head.

“I’m not entirely sure what that means,” I admit. Danny shrugs.

They ask me about being alone, and I tell them I’m here as a journalist

“If you’re a journalist why don’t you go to the front of the queue?”

“Well I wouldn’t be able to strike up natural sounding conversations with people for the article,” this confuses them both for a second which I imagine is more to do with the gin than their mental acumen.

“Anyway I wanted to size up how well they’re searching people so I knew where

to put my hip flask.”

I needn't have worried, the security were only checking picnic hampers and bags, the confiscated wine and spirits were politely checked at the security table, anyway once my name was confirmed on the guest list I barrelled through security with a grin. Inside there were tables and chairs set up tents selling food and booze flanking two sides and people spread out on the lawn with all manner of high-end picnic equipment.

Going to get a drink, I find out the jugs of Pimms are 15 pounds so I snatch a glass from the bar and dump the contents of my hip flask into it, shielded by the rest of the bar queue. Suitably armed and braced I survey the crowd. Cricket whites with flat caps, pipes, oh so much tweed. It's not just '40s and '50s present but the whole of the past is. The palette that's drawn from to paint the odd throng: ringmaster next to navy pin-up, top hats and petticoats. Not one hasn't made the effort.

I look for any minorities and am pleasantly surprised to find a large representation. Later I do the maths and find the percentage roughly adds up to the proportional percentage for London in general. Although I do see a Raj outfit later on that seems in poor taste and a oriental gentleman dressed as Charlie Chan. All ages are represented too, although I'd say the crowd skews more the people in their thirties and forties.

Later, looking around, I would say with some degree of confidence that the

crowd were educated middle classes. Most of the clothes were expensive, branded, gear and some even carried the aquiline nose, ruddy cheeks, and vacant boggle eyes: the result of actual aristocratic inbreeding.

I move to the raised dais where the events are played out tripping over a supine gentleman in boating stripes and waxed moustache, nearly putting my foot through his antique working gramophone.

“Frightfully sorry old boy,” I say. My god what is happening to me?

“Think nothing of it,” he raises a champagne flute.

I arrive at the stage and the crowd thickens somewhat, they’re about to start the bicycle jousting. Two hat stands are set up with a cable between them. The jousters are expected to charge at the other on a bicycle, each using a broly to dismount the other. This is the theory, quickly it disassembles into farce, displays of falling tipsiness and good natured pantomime. The whole effect strangely highlighted by the anachronistic use of Barclays sponsored Boris bikes.

The smell of spilt Pimms is cut by the the pleasing aroma of pipe tobacco and I notice that I’ve finished my booze. I’m on a budget and cannot afford the seven pound drinks that everybody seems to be careless throwing down their necks. Although occasionally you can see one of the servers swing through the crowd muttering into the headsets with a confiscated bottle of something or other. So I dip out to find the nearest supermarket who rather wisely are doing an offer on

the cans of gin and tonic I saw earlier, the display is severely dented. The supermarket is only in the next street so I find a park bench out of site of the staff on the entrance and to finish the other three cans.

A girl with tumbling red hair interrupts me and climbs off her bike.

“Excuse me, is this a secret cinema thing?” she says in a broad southern Irish accent.

“Not at all,” I say and go on to explain what chapism is, or rather what I think chapism is and what anyone is doing here.

“I could get in there, the fence is only so high.”

“You totally could,” I said, at that point willing to be thrown out of the event just to give this girl a boost and see the madness inside.

“Nah I’d stick out like this,” she points to her perfectly normal clothes, “anyway, I went to a 20’s night at a club a few nights ago, it can’t be much different to that.”

“Plus the drinks are expensive that why I’m out here with these,” I point to the three empty cans and offer some of the last one which she refuses with a laugh and gestures to her bike.

The events have stopped and a Victorian strongman best described as both ‘dashing’ and ‘strapping’ is moistening seats and racing pulses by bending

metals. I'm standing next to a group of six or seven women dressed as land girls in green overalls and gas mask boxes. They're fun sorts, taking it in turns to swoon over the bare chested sideshow. They're here for Sue's 60th birthday, and thought it'd be nice to have a fancy dress picnic. Only one of them had heard of the Chap magazine and Sue was having a 'lovely' time.

In the background, a woman dressed as a navy pin-up poses for pictures. Her skin is stretched in unusual places by hard work and surgery and her too round breasts are too surreal to be sexy.

Next on stage the event that is perhaps my favourite of all day: not playing tennis. The contestants take it in turns to be abjectly not involved in a game of tennis. Like most of the events its more of an improvised camp fire skit with the public participating, which only works because everybody is inhabiting their chosen personas entirely supported by the excellent wry commentary. It's a cross between performative LARPing and parlour games.

One thing I wasn't expecting was the large smattering of alt people (I'm using 'alt' here as a stand-in term for the huge mess of sub-cultures that have collapsed in on themselves resulting in an amorphous blob that is as hard to pin down). Large many coloured tattoos peek out from spotted sun dresses, piercings are covered in bright stripes of red lipstick, and unusually coloured hair is shaped into perfect tightly rolled bangs and pompadours. I strike up a conversation with a tall long haired guy, gangly in a waistcoat and shirt.

Apparently he's having a good time he tells me, despite the moping face and obvious discomfort.

"It isn't really my thing, my girlfriend loves the vintage look so she wanted to come today."

He gestures over to his girlfriend who is as immaculately turned out as he is uncomfortable, her two friends next to her are sitting with their backs towards me both wearing sun dresses with large tattoos on the back of their necks.

On stage they have started an event called 'The Ambassadors Ball' which involves catapulting a Ferrero Rocher into a lady's waiting champagne flute. Unfortunately, nobody has actually worked out the mechanics of the catapult and the chocolates are being propelled rather randomly at the crowd.

A large gentleman near collapses onto the bench next to me: "Too bloody hot to be wearing black," he says, his clothes are a dark brown but I'm not going to split hairs. He introduces himself as a Roger but when he sees my notebook quickly changes that to Archibald Tunnal, and he calls himself a 'undercover chap' which I think is a reference to his lack of moustache. That's because soon enough he pulls out a picture and it's him with a huge waxed handlebar moustache. He doesn't want to call himself a proper chap because he "doesn't live the lifestyle".

"Have to go," he says darkly. Archibald tells me that this is his fifth year at the

event, the only noticeable difference is that it gets a bit bigger each time and they have got rid of his favourite event 'Shouting at Foreigners'. This he grimly puts down to "the bloody PC brigade" at which he checks his fob watch and goes off to meet someone or other.

Over on the stage they are flinging wet gloves at each other so I decide to do one last circuit before running to get my coach almost body checking a short but solid gentleman in full RAF gear. His trousers are sharply pressed, his boots polished and he is standing at ease with his back straight. I apologise.

"Are you Forces then?" I say, gesturing to the uniform.

"No," he says in a thick South African accent, "I'm just trying to do a good job."

He's a nice enough guy and a little intimidated by a lush asking him questions, so I make my excuses. Just before I go I ask

"Are you a chap?"

"Not really," he replies "I'm just here with them."

Some names have been changed to protect the fact that my handwriting becomes illegible after eight cans of gin and tonic.



About the writer

"My wings are like a shield of bourbon. Writer, drunk, lover, not always in that order."
Danny's work has appeared in *Vice*, *Fused* and *Area* magazines. He typically writes about culture, pop and otherwise, and his own experiences travelling through subcultures. He's worked behind the bar and on the doors of the roughest pubs in Birmingham, sold encyclopaedias in the Australian outback, and taught gang kids from the ghettos of New Jersey how to shoot a bow and arrow. He most recently worked as a teaching assistant in a pupil referral unit, but gave it up to explore India and spend more time writing.

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