

Show me Britain dressing for 1992 and I will show you a child that doesn't want to grow up. And a Victorian nanny that won't let it. While fashion in the rest of Europe has been shaken up by the great challenges and adventures of modernism, Britain clings to the skirts of a cosy pre-industrial heritage. Open the nation's closets and you will find a wardrobe of hand-me-downs, cricket stripes, pinstripes, schoolgirl pinafores, schoolboy blazers, tails, toppers and tweeds.

We live in a culture of mothballs, a culture that wraps itself eagerly in the imagery of yesterday. In spite of a whole generation that have learnt to dress in modern (imported) sportswear, it is still widely believed in Britain, that 'traditional' and 'old fashioned' is the only proper way to appear. For we have always dressed like that and that is how it *should* be.

This is not true. Nostalgia is a crisis of confidence, a fear of the future, not some sweet quirk of individuality. Britain is not nostalgic by nature but by circumstance. Victorian Britain did not look back wistfully to the good old Georgian days when they knew how to make a house properly and chaps could wear coloured breeches with impunity. 60s' Britain did not people its television with men in immaculately pressed white linen, nor its advertisements with ragamuffins in fairisle jumpers.

80s' Britain, however, behaves as if the past were the only decent place to live. Those who aspire within its society do not covet the shiny goods of modernism but the tarnished treasures of the past, or at least those that mimic the past. Rooms are filled with the stuff of the great country house: the big upholstered sofa, the grandfather clock, the real fire, chintz. Catwalks are thick with imitations of old snobberies, from hunting jackets to smoking jackets.

It is not the loss of 'our' currency or 'our' apples that makes Britain drag its feet so unwillingly to market, but the threat of losing this manufactured past. Modernism, the



Fallow fields of fashion: Nostalgia is a fear of the future

Top Hat Traditions

Rooting around in the dressing-up box of late-80s' British fashion, the thoroughly modern Charlotte Du Can can find nothing to wear for the great European fancy-dress parade of the future

culture of the rest of Europe and of the future, is a frightening, bold concept for the British to grasp. Modernism is something ugly like the South Bank. Something difficult and pretentious like a James Joyce novel. It is something vulgar worn by Joan Collins in *Dynasty*. It is Jonathan Ross showing off in an Armani suit. Modernism is not behaving according to the rules. It threatens to make our lives unpleasant and cheap. We are afraid that if we go 'European' and 'mod-

ern' we might lose all our colourful tradition and merge into a monochrome mass.

But what is this precise heritage and tradition? Some old tailoring and mumsy old knitwear: some old punks posing in Kings Road for Japanese and American cameras. What purpose does any of this serve, except to preserve Britain as a theme park for the benefit of the tourist industry? What talent can possibly flourish here where the philistine and the parochial are constantly

rated above the cultural and the universal?

This roseate version of the past perpetuates a system that should have gone out of style a long time ago. It's a system that says there are lords being bountiful in the castle and peasants working merrily in the fields. For so they sit, the nouveaux top hats gleefully guarding their untaxed hoards, and there they sit, the second-hand cloth caps pretending that Aneurin Bevan is going to come back after all and save the day.

These are stagnant and obstructive images. It is time we let down the drawbridge and liberated these besieged islands. If the things we care for so much disappear, then they were not worth the keeping. If we lose our tailors and shoemakers, it is because we need new clothes not old ones.

European modernism is neither stagnant nor obstructive. It assumes that life is not fixed but open to possibility and change, that a suit can be made in many different ways and not just that decreed by tradition. It assumes that anyone can get to eat in the best restaurants and understand ideas and not just those who had the benefit of the 'right' education. It assumes that anyone can inherit the earth and not just those who dress and behave like 18th-century landowners.

European modernism does not embalm the imagery of the past but uses it to feed the present. If designers in Europe re-invent the frockcoat they do it for its cut, its swaggering qualities, its form and not its symbolism. In Britain the frockcoat is chosen to celebrate a colourful tradition, to continue the charade.

But who wants to live in a land of make-believe? Who wants to be shut in a nursery all day long, even with the best dressing-up in the world? No, nanny is wrong. You will not catch your death if you go out without your hat. You will be bold and free. You will be living in a culture that is vital and progressive and walks abroad in a spirit of bare-headed egalitarianism, rather than hiding beneath the ghost of your grandfather's hat. •