

William Filby 1729—1810

**A tailor in Water Lane, Blackfriars,
and of 3 Pilgrim Street, Ludgate Hill, London.**

William Filby was made Free by redemption by order of the court on 6th September, 1763, and admitted to the Freedom of the Company of Merchant Taylors on 7th September, 1763. Many of our members are descendants of William, and his wife, Ann Bellfield. (For information; Tree T02, which is old Tree 103 renumbered.)

Below Oliver Goldsmith.....mentions the "famous bloom coat", shown in this picture, which was purchased from our ancestor, William Filby, tailor, of Water Lane, London, whose two sons, Miles and John, followed in his footsteps.



To your blue velvet suit, £21 10s. 9d. Also, about the same time, a suit of livery and a crimson collar for the serving man. Again we hold the Jessamy Bride responsible for this gorgeous splendour of wardrobe. The spring-velvet suit alluded to appears to have been a gallant adornment (somewhat in the style of the famous bloom-coloured coat) in which Goldsmith had figured in the preceding month of May—the season of blossoms—for, on the 21st of that month we find the following entry in **the chronicle of Mr William Filby, tailor**:

“A dress of George I is thus described by Horace Walpole: "A dark tie-wig, a plain coat, waistcoat and breeches of snuff-coloured cloth, with stockings of the same colour, and a blue ribbon over all:" and a summer visiting-dress of Walpole himself was: “A lavender suit, the waistcoat embroidered with a little silver, or of white silk, worked in the tambour, partridge-silk stockings, and gold buckles, ruffles and frill, generally lace.”

Goldsmith, always a showy dresser, had, according to **the books of Mr William Filby, tailor, at the sign of the Harrow, in Water-lane**, a suit described as of Tyriaii bloom, satin grain, and garter-blue silk breeches, price £87.2s.7d; a velvet suit, £21.10s.9d and, sometime later, a green, half-trimmed frock and breeches, lined with silk; a queen's-blue dress suit; a half-dress suit of ratteen, lined with satin, a pair of silk stocking-breeches, and another pair of a bloom colour.

So much for the tout ensemble! We may as well, perhaps, devote a few words to the separate details of these costumes, and more particularly the head-dress. The cocked, or three-cornered hat, was generally lined with silk, and the flaps looped up, sometimes with gold or silver lace, to a button on the crown; it was capable of considerable compression, from the very nature of its shape, and was generally crushed under the arm when its wearer entered a house.

The wigs were of the most fickle fashion, sometimes fringed with thick curls, sometimes fluttering in ringlets, and at times bristling with short, crisp curls — now putting forth a long

pendulous tail; then cur-tailed, with a mere sprout hanging down to the collar ; and finally, boasting only a large bow of black or brown silk at the back. The "campaign- wig" of 1702 was very full, curled, and eighteen inches in length to the front, with deep locks. Other varieties of wigs were known by the names of "the story" "tie bob," "the Busby," "the scratch," "the bag," "tie brown George," " the riding-wig," " the nightcap wig," "the periwig," "the tie," " the queue," "The tie" was the wig that we described as having a bow or tie affixed to the back of it, but which degenerated into a string of silk or plaited hair, called from its similarity to that appendage, a " pigtail." These wigs were somewhat expensive (and certainly superfluous) articles of dress, as may be imagined when we state that, such was the demand for good natural hair for their manufacture, that the price was 3/- per ounce.

Goldsmith, more bitter in his satires than Addison, deals a blow at this fashion, in his *Citizen of the World*. "To appear wise, nothing is more requisite here than for a man to borrow hair from the heads of all his neighbours, and clap it, like a bush, on his own. The distributors of law and physic stick on such quantities, that it is almost impossible, even in idea, to distinguish between the head and the hair."

The cane, to which we have alluded, was not what is now-a-days comprehended by the word — a mere walking- stick, but a stout staff or wand, reaching almost up to the eyes of the wielder, who was stared in the face by a grotesque and hideous head, which was usually the top— it would be wrong to use the word handle. It was, in fact, the same baton which we may sometimes see carried by footmen at the backs of carriages on state occasions.

The large muffs which were in vogue about the middle of the century, must, one would think, have given the gentlemen somewhat of an effeminate appearance, and were in ludicrous contrast to the warlike sword that was girt about their waists. In two of Hogarth's pictures we have examples from which to judge of the effect of these appendages of winter dress, namely, in *Taste in High Life*, and in the *Arrest for Debt* scene of the *Rake's Progress*. They appear to have been most in fashion about 1760-70, and only exceptional at other periods of the century. The sporting Earl of March writes thus in 1766, to George Selwyn, at Paris: "The muff you sent me by the Duke of Richmond I like prodigiously; vastly better than if it had been of tigre, or of any glaring colour — several are now making after it." And again: "Pray bring me two or three bottles of perfume to put amongst powder, and some patterns for velvets that are new and pretty." Might we not fancy it was a lady's letter, in-stead of a young nobleman's? — In after-years the infamous "Old Q." of Piccadilly.

Oliver Goldsmith and Medicine. By Raymond Crawford, M.D.Oxon, has the below detailing that mentions **Filby the tailor** again and for the last time essayed the practice of medicine. Reynolds urged on him that a regular calling gave a man a social status. Garth, Cowley, Akenside, Smollett, and others had successfully combined literature and medicine. **Prior, by the light of tailor Filby's ledger**, displays Goldsmith in purple silk small-clothes, a handsome scarlet roquelaure buttoned close under the chin, a full professional wig, a sword, and a gold-headed cane. **In the ensuing six months Filby was requisitioned for no fewer than three similar suits; the right effect was to be produced at any cost.** Next came a manservant, but still no practice; clearly Goldsmith's was a hopeless case.

Streets South Of Fleet Street, from the <http://www.oldandsold.com/articles33n/fleet-street-2.shtml> Noble has preserved some early references to Water Lane, and in his pages I find that it was 'presented,' in 1569, for its 'fall' of water upon the people's heads; and in 1574, complaint was made concerning "grete dunghills conteynge by estimacion above 40 loade caste up by the water of the Thames," on its west side. Indeed, the place was for long in a fearful state; and in 1610, we are told that "the waie beinge soe stopped with dung and dirte that the passengers can hardlie passe, and the pavement soe broken and ruyned that if speedilie redresse be not had neither horse can drawe his loade nor passengers goe that waie." All this occurred when the lane was much narrower than it is to-day, but little seems to have been done, notwithstanding the matter was brought before the Common Council, intermittently, between the years 1594 to 1596, until after the Great Fire, when the street was enlarged, and if not beautified at least cleaned. There was a Black Lion Tavern about half-way down the lane, and among its residents was Tompion, the famous watch-maker, who died at his shop, at the north corner, in 1713; **and Filby, the tailor (at the sign of the 'Harrow'), who supplied Oliver Goldsmith with some of those suits of which the poet was so inordinately proud.'**

The Citizen of the World is a capital collection of essays, possessed of an imperishable interest and significance. The greatest men of that age, and the best, loved Goldsmith like a brother. Very soon we see Dr Johnson marching down Fleet Street arm-in-arm with Percy to take supper with Dr Goldsmith. The lexicographer has on a new suit of clothes and a wig finely powdered, and looks uncommon through this unexpected scrupulosity of costume. Percy is impertinent enough to inquire the cause of this finery. "Why, sir," said Johnson, "I hear that Goldsmith, who is a very great sloven, justifies his disregard of cleanliness and decency by quoting my practice, and I am desirous this night to show him a better example."

This amusing incident marks the foundation of a great friendship. If ever Goldsmith had a friend, that friend was Johnson; if Johnson ever had a friend, that friend was Goldsmith. The story does not proclaim dear Noll a dandy this time. Doubtless his care or carelessness in garment kept pace, step by step, with varying moods. There is evidence enough to tell us how much he doted on finery and fashionable raiment **in those bills from his tailor, which to the very last remained unpaid. "Filby could afford the loss."**

From another article by a Mr Prior proving that Goldsmith died in William Filby's debt and concludes with copying an autograph note with which he has been favoured by Filby: **"My father, though a loser to that amount, attributed no blame to the doctor, who had been a good customer and would have paid him every farthing had he lived. Half the sum was for clothes supplied to a nephew."**

(Extracts have been edited)