

# A brief history of Getting Dressed

*Grace Timothy takes a look at the 'disciples of dress' that have influenced the city:*

For me, fashion in Brighton has always been about the unique one-offs waiting to be found in the supremely eclectic Laines area of the city. It's the place where my mum was a hippy with a punk hairdo. Where she dressed me in a Katherine Hamnett style t-shirt that read 'Fuck Off Tory' at an event in the town where Enoch Powell fed me cheese-on-a-stick. Where my parents' friends sported a bevy of mohican hair cuts, pierced noses, shoulder pads and big glasses. It's where I later went to find things that would set me apart from my fellow teenage girls.

I think it's the compactness of the city that makes it a good forum for a variety of fashion expressions - there's lots of 'tribes' packed into 32 square miles. People often say that they feel utterly comfortable walking down the street here in whatever they fancy, things they may not 'get away with' elsewhere, which certainly explains some of the clobber you see on Brighton's streets. You only have to look at the impressive fashion careers of Brighton and Sussex University alumni to see that there's something in the water here.

Barbara Hulanicki was one such alumni whose fashion career was strongly influenced by the vibrant Brighton scene. Barbara attended art college in Brighton before settling in London and founding fashion phenomena 'Biba'; a shop where one could expect to bump into Twiggy and Cher, but was never so exclusive or expensive that you couldn't walk out with similar purchases. Brighton must have made a serious impact on Barbara herself, for in February 1966 she chose Queens Rd, Brighton as the sole Biba store outside of London.

But why Brighton and not some other similarly small coastal town? Back in the

nineteenth century, George IV put Brighton on the map after his first visit in 1783 when he chose the town as the location for his palatial residence, the Royal Pavilion. This wacky building shows George's pioneering approach to aesthetics, as he showed little regard for the surrounding landscape of the former fishing village and built a great Indian dome in the centre of the seaside town.

A renowned clothes fiend, at his coronation in 1821 his red velvet train was so long that it was carried by eight pages compared to the usual six, to whom George was overheard



1960s

*"You Can See George IV's Ideals Still Running Through The Veins Of These Various Fashion Movements: The Wildest Colours, Shapes And Materials Are King"*



Pride, 1990s

Photo: Nigel Swallow at North Laine Photography



## FASHION



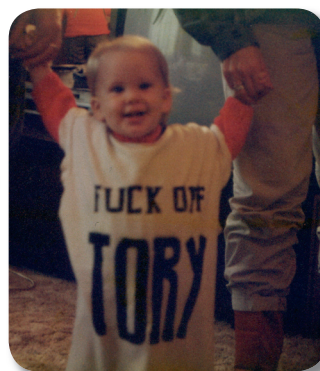
1960s

**“Shopping In Brighton Is F\*\*\*\*\*g Wicked!”** (PETE BENNETT, BIG BROTHER 7)



1980s

As anarchistic subcultures rose throughout the town in the 1970s and 1980s in reaction to the national economic boom and the resulting unbalanced distribution of wealth, they all found themselves accepted and indeed welcomed here, no matter how crazy they looked. Hippies were drawn to Brighton for its rich tapestry of political forums, such as the Women's Peace Camp of 1983, not to mention the proximity to a range of beautiful natural vistas, from the sea to the greenery of the South Downs. Punks were ushered into The Vault throughout the same period, creating an underground scene that is still very much in evidence today. The gay community flourished from the covert group dwelling in Kemptown in the 1930s, communicating their outlawed sexuality to one another through their white socks, to the establishment of Pride in Brighton and Hove in 1992, with a summer festival boasting an extravagant array of carnival costumes worn by gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual supporters each year.



1984

saying “Hold it wider”, in order to emphasize its sheer size. By 1791 he was in substantial debt due to his extravagance, with the equivalent of nearly £2,000,000 owed to his tailors alone. His wife, Caroline of Brunswick famously remarked that his knowledge of clothes and grooming were such that he would make ‘an excellent tailor, shoemaker or hairdresser, but nothing else’.

However George IV's patronage of Brighton made it a stylish location in terms of leisure and

design by power of association. But why is it that it's still considered such a fashionable place today?

Perhaps Brighton's status as a holiday destination has something to do with its fashion scene. From the arrival of the railway in 1841 Londoners have trooped down to the coastal town for its relaxing and supposedly medicinal sea air. Like most seaside towns, Brighton responded with some of the best leisure spots outside of London and during the nineteenth century the residential population grew from 7,000 to 120,000, suggesting many holidaymakers and day-trippers had ended up staying. In the 1960s, when the historical moment belonged to the young who were setting in motion their own cultural definitions, it was Brighton that saw the worst riots in 1964 between the Mods and Rockers. They both chose the town as the place to be seen on their May Bank Holiday that year.

You can see George IV's ideals still running through the veins of these various fashion movements: the wildest colours, shapes and materials are king. These fashion icons have ability to shock outsiders, but feel totally comfortable and at home amongst their fellow residents. It's long been about rebelling and expressing through dress. This is what George IV did, what the Mods did, what the Punks and Hippies did, and what the drag queens did. And this has to be what makes all of Britain's so-called ‘freaks’ fit seamlessly into the landscape and generate an extraordinary fashion scene.

In the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery's Fashion and Style collection, there is a whole section given over to the ‘Renegade’, with a vast array of items from Brighton's teddy boys, goths and travellers, which only goes to illustrate further how important these subcultures are to Brighton's history of fashion.

The only problem is that a fashion scene born out of the costumes of society's renegades may become stagnant without a major movement spawning the distinctively dressed disciples as we saw in the 1960s and 70s. There seems to be a need for a spirit of revolution, a social, political or economic upheaval to rally against and create a new group of fashion statements. Things haven't changed massively in the last five years. Perhaps it's time for the tide to turn. **NC**

With special thanks to Eleanor Thompson, curator of costume at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery.

### Fashion heavyweights to come out of Brighton:

*Barbara Hulanicki*, designer and founder of BIBA (Brighton College of Arts)

*Alexandra Shulman*, editor of British Vogue (Sussex University)

*Julien Macdonald*, designer (Brighton University)

*Tania Sarne*, designer and founder of Ghost (Sussex University)

*Mark Eley*, designer and co-founder of Eley Kishimoto (Brighton University)