

The charity offering men a new look and a fresh start

London organisation Suited & Booted helps vulnerable men get back on their feet by giving them smart clothes



Freddie: 'I was caught in a circle that I couldn't break: prison, release, no hope of a job, then the inevitable reoffending.'

Photograph: Amber Rowlands

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Tucked away off busy Queen Victoria Street in London's Blackfriars, St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe is easy to miss. As the church's website puts it: "Like a well-bred lady fallen on hard times, the church waits with quiet dignity for someone to stop and pass the time of day." Designed by Christopher Wren, but burnt down in the Great Fire of London then badly damaged during the blitz, it is a beautifully austere building bordered on one side by the wonderfully named Wardrobe Terrace.

Outside, an unlikely sign beckons passers-by. It is not, surprisingly, an invitation to view the church's oak and limestone memorial to William Shakespeare, who worked close by for a time, but to visit the bustling HQ of an organisation called Suited & Booted. On a cold, drizzly January morning, I do just that and find myself sitting in a room full of rows of neatly pressed suits alongside a quiet young man who has just been measured up and is awaiting the arrival of his new clobber - a suit, shirt, tie and shoes, maybe even a pair of cufflinks and a pocket handkerchief. Around us, cheery volunteers are busy steaming, ironing and measuring. When one of them finally arrives with the quiet young man's clothes, encased in a designer suit holder, the recipient is momentarily lost for words. "Thank you," he says finally, looking at the floor. "It's really great that people like you exist."

Veteran American essayist and dandy Gay Talese once wrote: "Putting on a beautifully designed suit elevates my spirit, extols my sense of self and helps define me as a man to whom details matter." It is to this principle that Suited & Booted adheres, albeit in its own singular way. As founder Maria Lenn explains as she guides me through the church: "Suited & Booted is based on a simple, but potentially transformative idea. Put simply, it gives vulnerable men a realistic chance to start over by fitting them out with a smart suit, shirt, tie

and shoes so that they can attend job interviews looking the part.”

Maria is a quietly intense woman with a PhD in politics who has swapped academia for charity to assuage what she calls her “entrepreneurial spirit”. The suits come mainly from City firms collecting their employees’ unwanted clothes, while some are unclaimed stock from bespoke tailors and others are donations from clothing companies. They are not your



Imran Khan. Photograph: Amber Rowlands

regular charity shop stock: a quick perusal revealed a sharply cut, dark-blue two-piece by Cartier hanging alongside a grey wool Yves Saint Laurent number.



Carlisle McPherson. Photograph: Amber Rowlands

London-based photographer Amber Rowlands heard about Suited & Booted through a style-

conscious friend who regularly drops his old suits off at St Andrews by the Wardrobe. “I was looking for a project for my MA course and I’ve always had a fascination with the hidden parts of London. The project also chimed with my experience in a way, because, like many people, I know a few individuals who have fallen into trouble through alcohol or drugs and have found it hard to fit back into society.”



Name withheld. Photograph: Amber Rowlands

Rowlands’s portraits manage to capture the mixture of hope and vulnerability that attends a project such as Suited & Booted. There is a certain melancholy in many of the images, in which the smart young men stare away from her camera or, in one instance, turn away from it altogether. These are vulnerable people at a crossroads in their life, sometimes not for the first time. The following day, I speak to Freddie, one of her subjects and very much a Suited & Booted success story. Now in his 50s, he describes himself as “a reformed repeat offender” with “a colourful past”, the specifics of which he refuses to go into.

“Let’s just say I was at it for a good few years. Too long. I was born in the 1960s and grew up in Harlesden and Ladbroke Grove. It was different back then. Young black guys were marginalised and often criminalised. I was arrested for the first time under the Sus laws [which enabled the police to stop, search and arrest an individual they deemed suspicious] and it just went on from there.”

Until recently, Freddie describes himself as being “caught in a circle that I couldn’t break: prison, release, no hope of a job, then the inevitable reoffending. That’s how it went for a long time until I was referred to Maria and Suited & Booted.”

Freddie, who describes Maria as his “mentor”, is now managing director of his own company, The Reformed Foundation, which supports ex-offenders through training and

support in finding employment. “We have contracts though SeeTec [one of Britain’s biggest employment and training specialists] in Stratford, Lewisham and Walthamstow. I can pass on my knowledge,” he says, proudly, “and hopefully help people break the patterns of negative behaviour that lead to repeat offending.”



Russell Hurley. Photograph: Amber Rowlands

Around 2,000 vulnerable men passed through the fitting rooms of Suited & Booted last year, many of them ex-prisoners, but also recovering alcoholics, long-term unemployed, those grappling with mental health issues and ex-military men who have found it difficult to adapt to civilian life. “A new suit,” says Maria, “can, hopefully, equal a new start.”

Amber agrees: “Even though Suited & Booted is a secular project, there is something redemptive about the setting in St Andrews. For me, it was really about the idea of personal transformation that a new suit symbolises.”

I asked Freddie if he feels the same way. “I do,” he says, after giving it some thought. “I mean, I was a guy who had issues about wearing secondhand clothes or charity shop clothes. It was a pride thing, but Suited & Booted was not what I thought it would be. For a start, you can pick and choose what you want to wear. It’s about the clothes you like, not what they like. And it’s also about the decisions you can make about yourself if you feel confident. A good suit can give you that confidence. It can make you feel like a million dollars even if you’ve just come out of prison.”

Suited & Booted needs volunteers with specialist experience: stylists, alteration tailors etc. Info on volunteering and donating (shoes are particularly needed) at: suitedbootedcentre.org.uk

