

“Never Mind The Quality Feel The Width¹”

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Fig. 1: Legendary “Manny Cohen” & “Joe Kelly”

Once Upon A Time

The setting of a Tailor’s workshop which was developed into a late 1960’s television comedy series could so easily have contained the two intriguing Tailor’s Squares which are the basis for this article. Certainly in the 1960s many tailors were still displaying their Tailor & Cutter Academy Diploma, perhaps signed by WDF Vincent as Chairman of Examiners, often as a centrepiece for their window display. However, it’s doubtful if either of the two tailors above were amongst that exalted number!

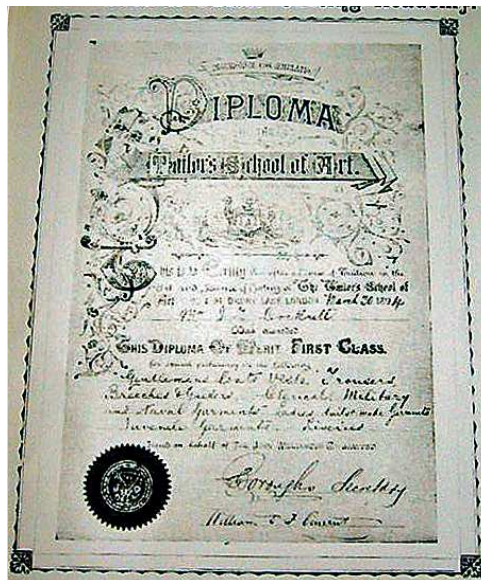


Fig. 2: The Tailor & Cutter Cutting Academy Diploma

¹ First broadcast in 1967, “Never Mind The Quality Feel The Width” became a British TV sitcom classic that was to run for 39 episodes. It featured two tailors from wildly different religious backgrounds working in their shop in the East End of London. Manny Cohen, played by John Bluthal was Jewish, and Patrick Kelly, played by Joe Lynch, was Irish.

Bespoke versus Ready-to-Wear

In these days of mass produced, ready-to-wear, easy care, one-size-fits-all clothing, it is perhaps difficult to imagine that about a hundred years ago in Britain the clothing industry was very different indeed. As seen from two early catalogues [1] [2], this proud profession also spawned its own particular calculating aids.

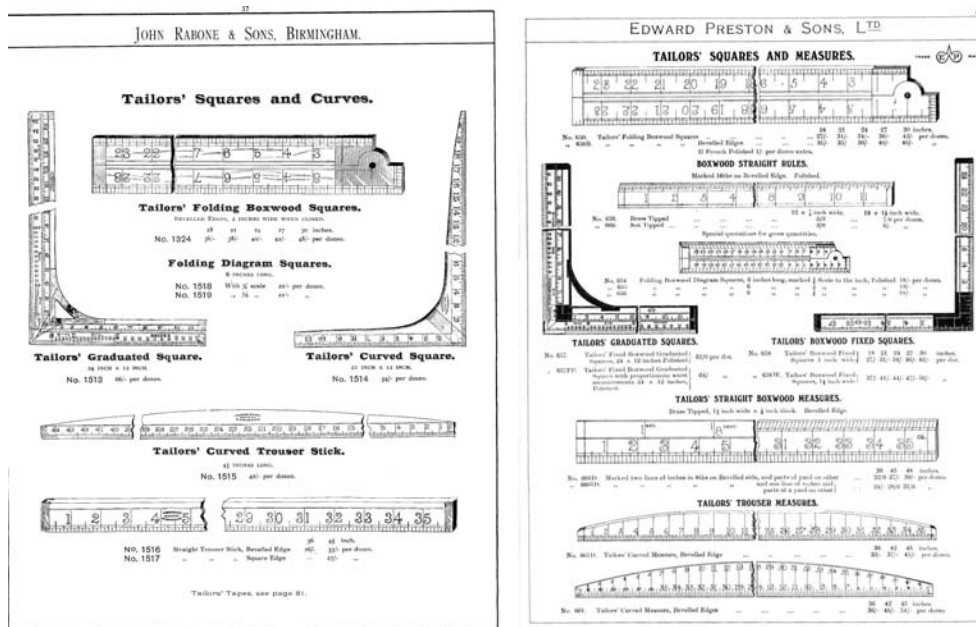


Fig. 3: Listed examples in the 1892 Rabone and 1909 Preston catalogues

In the Victorian and Edwardian eras, the Tailoring profession was at its zenith; there was a vast selection of styles of men’s suits for all occasions, and in certain quarters, to be seen in the wrong style of suit or other garment, could be seen as a social or professional catastrophe. We only have to read novels of the period, like Galsworthy’s “*Forsyte Saga*”, to get a hint of this, when a young man paying a house call in a soft hat was enough to give an elderly maiden aunt a fit of the vapours.

Curiously, like the two unlikely tailors in the British TV sitcom, a small item in the “*Skid Stick*” [3] brought together two owners of Tailors’ Squares and readers beware, they ended up co-authoring this story!

Gerrard Street, London

For a tailoring story it is remarkable that this account is centred on Gerrard Street rather than the world-famous ‘Mecca’ of tailoring; Savile Row. The two boxwood Tailors’ Squares featured (see figures 12 and 13) were both supplied by the John Williamson Company Ltd., of 42 Gerrard Street, London. Williamson is listed in the Trade Directories of the time as a ‘publisher’, as indeed he was. His company published the “Tailor and Cutter” magazine, first at 93 and 94 Drury Lane, and later, from 1902, at the Gerrard Street address. Both addresses were also the home of the “Tailor and Cutter” Academy, which provided courses for the training of young tailors, and not surprisingly, supplied the necessary equipment.

The magazine enjoyed a long life; it was still listed at Gerrard Street in a 1959 directory, but by then it had also acquired a great telegraphic address: “*Tailcutta Lesquare London*”!!

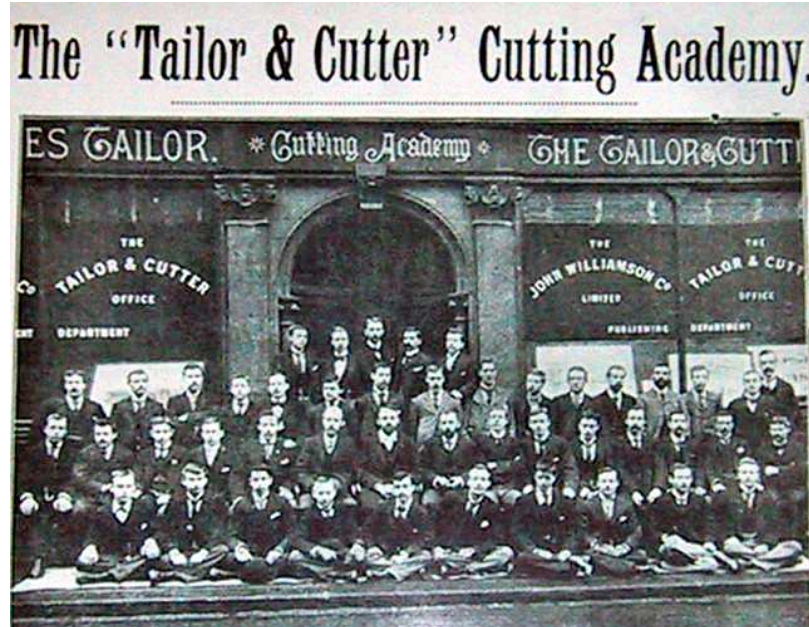


Fig. 4: John Williamson Co. Ltd. Cutting Academy [4]

Naturally, the tailors who set up these academies and training establishments all had their own ideas and apparently foolproof “systems” which were designed to make tailoring an easier task. One such individual was William Vincent, whose tailoring square proudly bears his name - and was the catalyst for this article!

WDF Vincent

William Diskett Foot Vincent was born on the 18 June 1860, in Yeovil, Somerset, the eldest child of John Vincent, a glove cutter of Middle Street, Yeovil, and Elizabeth Diskett Vincent neé Foot. On the 28th December 1879, he married Florence Summerhayes, the daughter of William and Alice Summerhayes. The 1881 Census shows them living, with their young daughter Elizabeth, at 22, St. Ebbe Street, Oxford, where he is carrying on the business of a clothier and woollen draper. He must have been doing quite well, as he employed two young apprentices, one of whom was his brother-in-law, Albert Summerhayes. He moved the business to Maidenhead, and whilst there, entered and won an essay competition about Tailoring. This encouraged him to change direction in his profession, move to London and enter employment at the *"Tailor and Cutter"* Magazine. It seems that in his early days at the magazine, his terms of employment meant that the articles on tailoring methods and systems which he wrote about were never attributed to him.



Fig. 5: WDF Vincent

However, by 1891, he had become something of a national authority on tailoring, and in the census of that year described himself, rather grandly, as a "Professor of Scientific Tailoring." By 1901, he was editing the *"Tailor and Cutter"* magazine - a publication that was seen as “the bible” for the trade [5].

He appears to have been a prolific author on the subject of tailoring and cutting: The following are some of the books he wrote, all of which were published by the John Williamson Company:

- “The Pocket Edition of the Cutter’s Practical Guide to the Cutting of all Kinds of Ladies Bodices, Jackets and Skirts”
- “The Pocket Edition of the Cutters Practical Guide to the Cutting of all kinds of Garments”
- “Tailoring of the Belle Époque: Vincent’s Systems of Cutting of All Kinds of Tailor Made Garments”
- “The Art of Measuring for All Kinds of Tailor Made Garments”
- “The Cutters’ Practical Guide to Economy in Cutting All Kinds of Tailor Made Garments Worn by Ladies and Gentlemen”
- “Clothes Cleaning and Renovation” [with T.W.Allen]
- “The Tailor and Cutter Academy Systems of Cutting all kinds of Tailor Made Garments”



William Vincent became a highly regarded authority on tailoring, sought after for lectures such as the one he gave to the City of London Master and Foreman Tailors Society on October 19th 1923 – “Recollections and Reflections on Some Exhibitions of Garments”.

Fig. 6: William and Florence now retired to Eynsham, near Oxford in 1921

William Vincent died on the 15th June 1926, at the sadly early age of 66.

“Rock of Eye” and Patterns

Historically the true *tailor* was the *cutter* as in the trade, the tailor is simply the person who sews or makes up what the 'cutter' has first shaped. The cutters’ “rock of eye” skill was highly revered. So much so, that even after completing their training, it would take many more years as an undercutter or striker before anyone was endowed with the coveted accolade of ‘cutter’ [6].

“Rock of eye” is the tailors’ ability, born out of experience rather than any scientific cutting system, to size up a customer by just looking at him or her. Some Savile Row tailors and other centres of bespoke tailoring still have “head cutters” that follow the “rock of eye” ethic and prefer to draw their patterns free-hand.

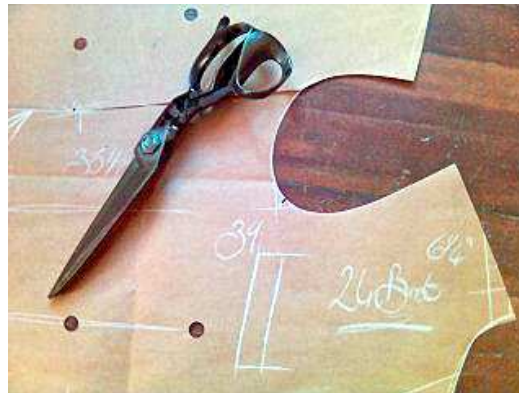


Fig. 7: Free-hand drawn pattern by Tom Mahon

Drafting a unique pattern that conforms to the size and posture of the customer is by far the most difficult part of the bespoke tailoring process. Men and women are different (*vive la différence*) but even over the centuries, despite the population as a whole becoming taller and more well-rounded, the basic anatomical proportions (e.g. for a given chest measurement) remain very much the same.

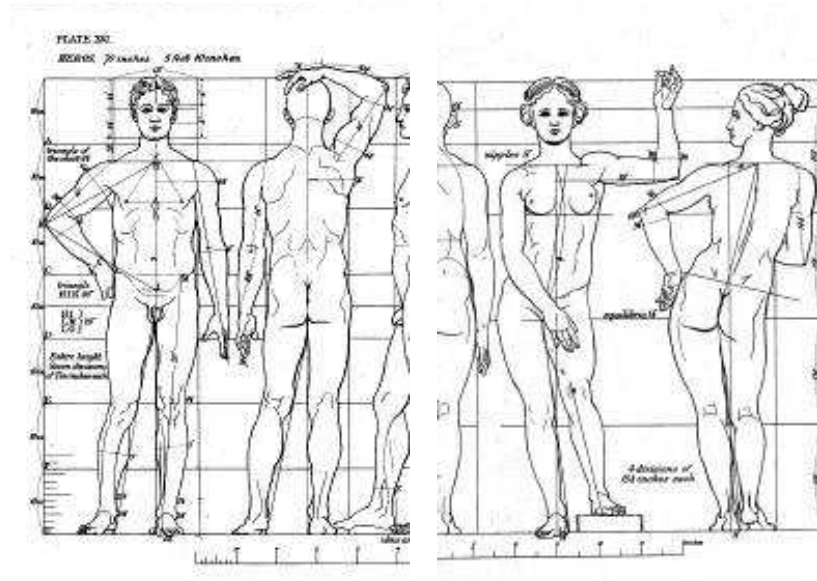


Fig. 8: Anatomical proportions

Tailors using “rock of eye” have an in-built mental calculator for these proportions. Indeed most skilled cutters would say that as the human body does not follow straight lines or have any right-angles, the “eye” is the only practical measure. However, it is also possible to take a series of measurements and use complex formulae to calculate the corresponding proportions.

“Block patterns” or generic templates (e.g. size 42 regular) were seen as an aid to getting the first fitting closer to the finished item and perhaps avoid some of the multiple fittings of the past. Also for the inexperienced, adapting a close-fitting generic pattern was easier than starting from scratch and ensured that key parts of the pattern were correctly proportioned.

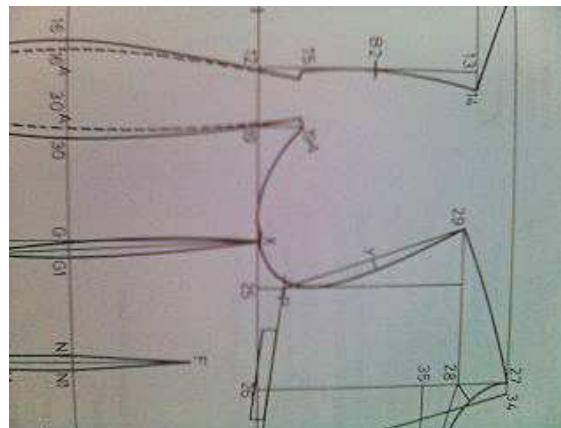


Fig. 9: Example of a template or block pattern

Tailors' Squares

Around the end of the 19th century several tailoring tools were developed to further increase efficiency and combat the increasing popularity of ready-to-wear garments in standard sizes [7]. One such tool was a Tailors' Square. This “L” shaped ruler not only helped with the measurement taking, but was also an aid in drawing patterns. Some even incorporated special scales to help get all the proportions right. This meant that for some tailors they were an alternative to the “rock of eye”.

However, despite a lot of research, it has proved impossible to find out exactly when Tailors' Squares first came into use or who might have invented them. They became popular in the early 20th century and various types are known to have existed [7].

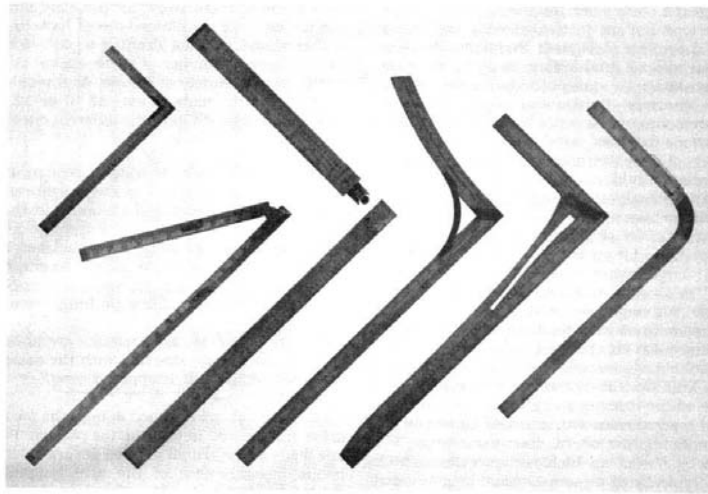


Fig. 10: Examples of various Tailors' Squares

Before Tailors Squares, “rock of eye” and experience were the cutters tools of the trade [5] [8]. But for the inexperienced, a Tailors' Square is a handy device for getting the basic proportions right and in the right place. Even today they are still seen as essential training aids and a practical tool for strikers still learning their trade.

Despite the many variations that undoubtedly existed, most Tailors' Squares fall into one of two main types:

- Curved Squares
- Graduated Squares

Curved Tailors' Squares

Presumably William Vincent had strong ideas about the tools required to carry out the tailoring business to its best advantage, for in 1902 he registered the design for the Tailors' Curved Square which bears his name.

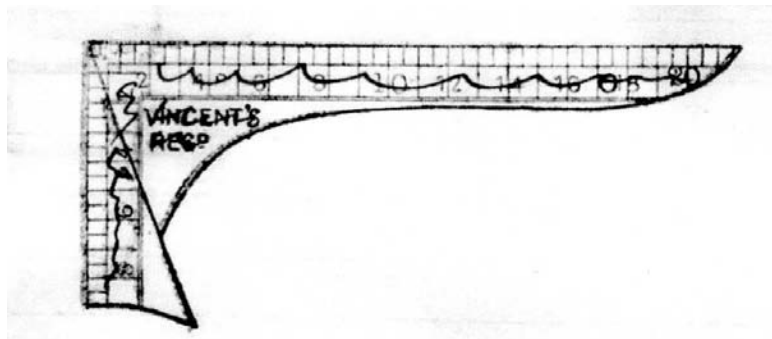


Fig. 11: The Vincent Square as shown in the UK Registered Design application

The design, Number 401016, was registered on 20th November 1902 but it is perhaps interesting to note that the other name which appears on the design application is that of George C. Boroughs. The address given for both men, who were described as “publishers”, was 51 High Street, London W.C. The

Diploma from the "Tailor and Cutter" shows that George C. Boroughs was, in fact, the Secretary of the Academy.



Fig. 12: 23 x 12 x 1/4 inch Curved "Vincent" Square in boxwood with a brass strap

Interestingly the shape of this John Williamson supplied square differs slightly from the registered design. The main inch scales are in divided into 1/8ths: Also unusually for a Curved Tailors' Square, this Vincent Square also has some graduated scales on the back for pattern transposition. The long arm has Graduated scales for 2/3rds, 6ths and 12ths. The short arm has graduated scales for 1/8ths, 1/4ths and 1/2ths.

Graduated Tailors' Squares

Graduated Squares have the same basic L-shaped design but are usually slightly larger. Typically, the longer arm of the "L" is 24 inches long. The other major difference is that the graduated version also has as standard, special graduated scales.

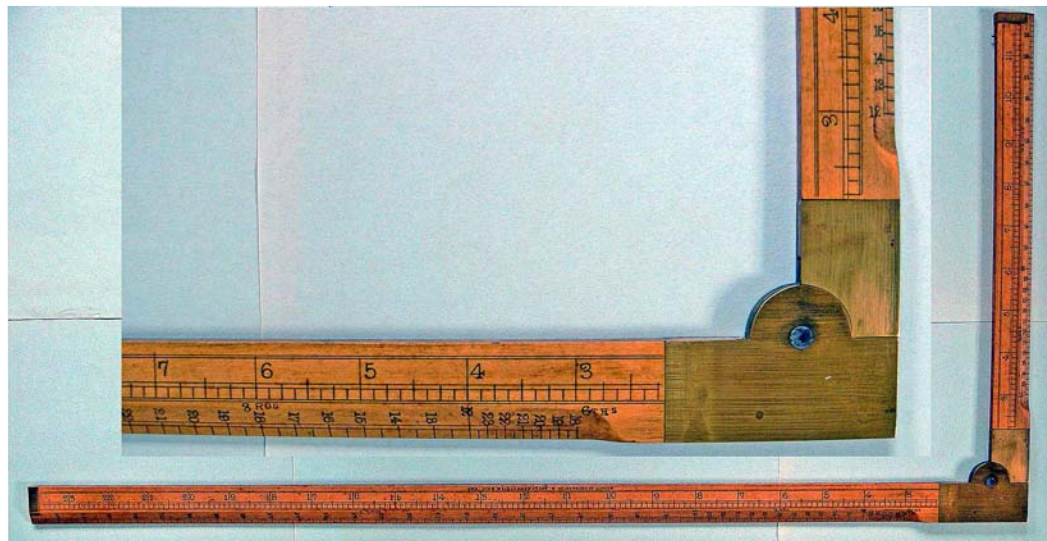


Fig. 13: 24 x 12 x 1/4 inch Graduated Square in boxwood with a brass hinge and brass bound ends

Most of the scales on this John Williamson supplied square are on the front. The back has, alongside the same basic inch (in 1/8ths) scale, just an additional centimetre (in 1/5ths) scale. The example shown has a folding brass hinge but others, like the Curved Square shown, had a fixed brace at the foot of the “L”. By having a riveted brass hinge and a single metal guide pin, this version was collapsible and much easier to carry around.

These “take-down” or “folding squares” were particularly popular in the late 19th century when tailors commonly made home visits or went to a client’s place of work to get the measurements for a new garment [6]. The example shown is a 2-foot 2-fold (or more accurately, a 1½-fold) model but 4-folds and even versions that came apart were also made.

Special graduated scales for transposing measurements directly onto a pattern feature on both the long and short arms of the square. Typically graduated scales of 12ths, 6ths, 3rds and 2/3 were added to the long arm and 16ths, 1/8ths, 1/4ths and 1/2ths to the short arm.

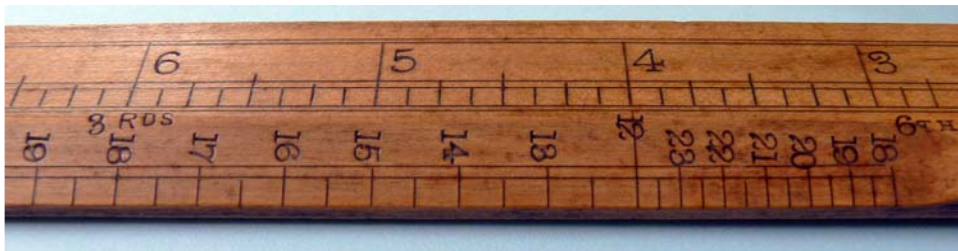


Fig. 14: Special graduated scales – long arm

On the square shown, the long arm has just three special scales:

- 4-inch 0-24 (tick marks start at 18) graduated scale in 6ths
- 4-inch 12-24 graduated scale in 3rds
- 16-inch 12-36 scale graduated in 12ths



Fig. 15: Special graduated scales – short arm

The shorter arm (measuring from the apex of the hinge) also has just three:

- 12-inch graduated scale in 1/8ths (part of the main inch scale as this was all in 1/8ths)
- 6-inch 0-24 (tick marks start at 12) graduated scale in 1/4ths
- 6-inch 12-24 graduated scale in 1/2ths.

How Tailors' Squares helped

To the untrained, the high degree of skill involved in drafting a pattern may not be obvious. Alongside accurate measuring and getting everything in proportion, when the two-dimensional pattern is placed on a length of cloth, it also has to reflect the three-dimensional nature of the final garment.



Fig. 16: A pattern transposed onto a length of cloth

Tailors' Squares can help in drawing up patterns for all manner of coats, waistcoats or jackets and trousers or skirts. For bespoke tailoring more than 20 measurements and figuration details are needed. For drafting a coat, a waistcoat or a jacket pattern, the anchor measurement is always $\frac{1}{2}$ the circumference of the chest plus 6 inches. For drafting a skirt or trouser pattern it is always $\frac{1}{2}$ the circumference of the hips [5] [8].

The squares can clearly help with the measurement taking but their very shape can also be an aid. For example, by placing short arm of the square in the armpit it is possible to get accurate measurement of the arm heights and the thickness of the shoulders.

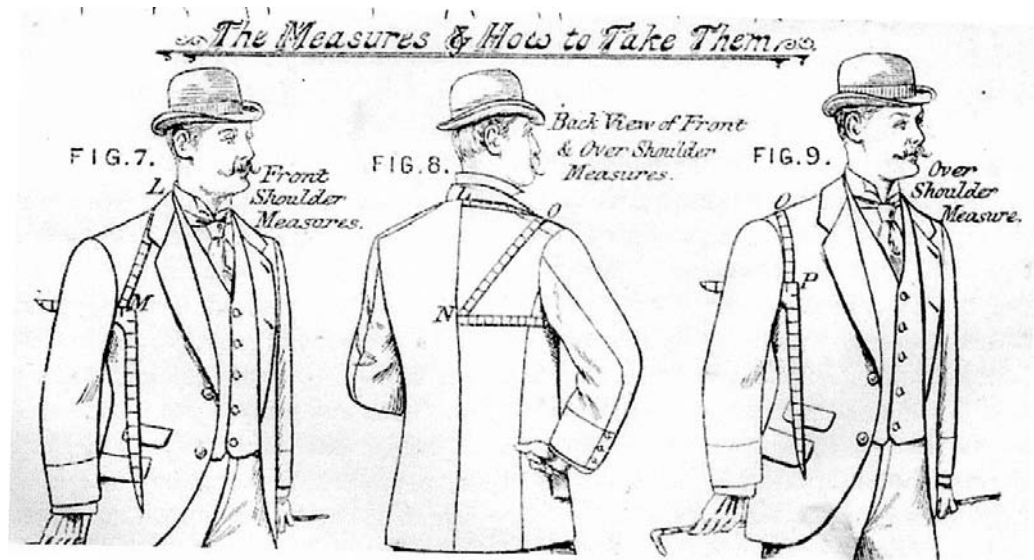


Fig. 17: Using a Tailors' Square as an aid to getting other measurements [9]

In particular the Curved Squares were used as a guide for drafting the curve of the forearm and hind-arm of sleeves, the shoulder seams, the scyes², the back and side seams, the darts/cuts, the front edges and the lapels. For trousers they helped with the seat, the side and the leg seams, etc.

² The scye is tailoring term for the armhole as seen from the "arms eye".

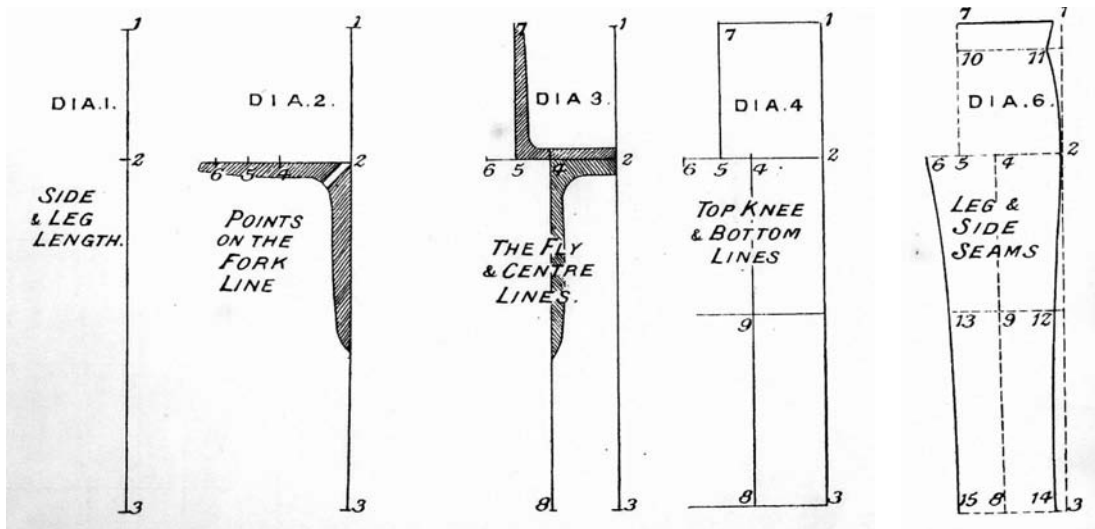


Fig. 18: Using a Tailors' Curve Square to draft a pattern [10]

The special scales found on all Graduated Squares were particularly helpful in transposing the measurements taken into sizes needed to draft the pattern. They helped locate the centre back of the nape, the neck point, the front and over shoulder measures in relation to the scye and the front of armholes, the position of the pockets and many other strategic dimensions including fixing the underside fork³, the pleat positions, the topside fork, the seat angle for trousers, etc [7]. Unfortunately the wise men who devised these peculiar looking 12ths, 6ths, 3rds, 2/3rds, 16ths, 8ths, 14ths and 1/2ths graduated scales are unknown; as is when they first came into use.

Having used a Tailors' Square to help construct a suitable pattern, the all-important cutting could begin. Finally, in bespoke tailoring, the sewing-up of the various pieces of cloth becomes part of a series of fittings.



Fig. 19: Three example stages of fittings for a jacket

Feel the Quality AND the Width

By having so many articles and books published William Vincent clearly had a major impact on the development of bespoke tailoring during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. That many of his reference works were highly revered and in their day, the *"Tailor and Cutter"* magazine and the academy diploma were seen respectively as the trade's "bible" and the highest accolade long after he had died, are a tribute to the extent of his contribution.

Therefore it is surprising that his role and legacy to bespoke tailoring is not better documented or well known. Luckily one outcome out of doing the research for this article is that the authors acted as a catalyst for William Vincent's great-grandson, Jeff Vincent, to start a webpage dedicated to his illustrious great-grandfather [11].

³ The *fork* is a tailoring term for the fly or crotch area.

Like the continued relevance of many of William Vincent's published ideas on tailoring and cutting, Tailor's Squares are still used today.

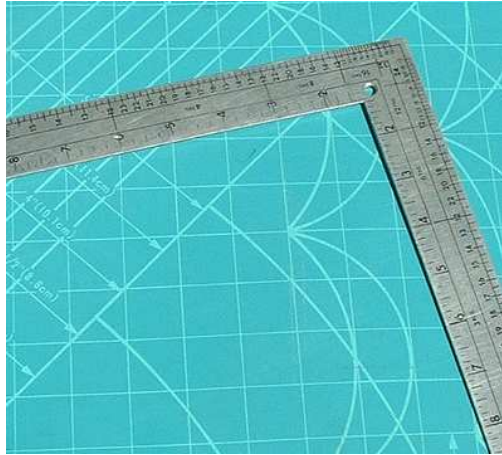


Fig. 20: Example of a modern metal Tailors' Square

However, fine boxwood-made Tailors' Squares now largely belong to a bygone age but true to the proud profession they served – they had both “quality and width”. Look out for them, especially ones carrying the Vincent accreditation, as these intriguing rules would grace and enhance any calculating instrument collection. Indeed, even for the die-hard slide rule ‘purists’, the special folding Tailors' Graduated Square with the special scales for pattern transposition make them a close cousin to the Coggleshall or carpenter's slide rule.

Finally in their day, the makers of Tailors' Squares would have appreciated the byline in an early 1948 edition of the ‘Wall Street Journal’: “*There'll be little change in men's pockets this year*” [12].

Acknowledgements

As denoted by being one of the Twelve Livery Companies of the City of London, the Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors, like the profession it represents, is steeped in tradition. As neither of the co-authors had any prior knowledge of the profession's traditions or working practices we needed help. So particular thanks go to (listed alphabetically):

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- **Michael Skinner:** 2004/2005 Master of the Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors (the first active cutter to hold the post in 350 years). Now retired owner, designer and head cutter of DEGE & SKINNER, a Savile Row firm founded in 1865, for lots of help with all the tailoring and cutting aspects,
- **Jeff Vincent:** the great-grandson of WDF Vincent, for the photographs of his great-grandfather and his great-grandparents, the Academy Diploma and all his help with information.

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