

FINE & DANDY

An 18th-century celebrity, Beau Brummell set Georgian society alight with his wit, charm and sartorial elegance. As the BBC brings his story to the screen, *H&A* goes on location to glimpse the glamour recreated

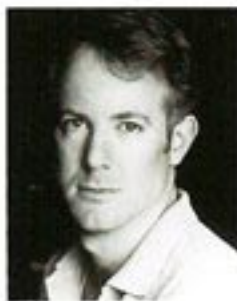
FEATURE NATASHA GOODFELLOW PHOTOGRAPHS WILLIAM SHAW

It's a rainy Sunday in March and *H&A* is on location at Wilton House near Salisbury, where a vignette of Regency life is being recreated. For now, this is Carlton House, opulent London home of the Prince Regent, and the year is 1795. Crew members huddle in a porch, sheltering from the drizzle and draining the last of the morning's coffee. A hush descends as a dashing figure strides in and bounds up the Gothic staircase, polished boots glinting and dark coat tails streaming out behind him.

This can be only one man, Beau Brummell – known variously as a dandy, a famous wit, the best-dressed man in England, Sartorial Adviser to the Prince Regent and, latterly, the man who invented the modern Savile Row suit. He is played by James Purefoy, and everything about him – from his sardonically raised eyebrow, perfectly pointed sideburns and self-confident, even arrogant, smile as he turns on his heel and twirls his cane for the benefit of his audience – says that this is a role he particularly relishes.

'I can't wait to see the Prince Regent,' whispers production manager Cherry Brewer. She doesn't have to wait very long – in an altogether less elegant entrance, Hugh Bonneville – looking for all the world as if he's emerged the worse off after a fight with a Christmas tree – comes in and stomps up

the stairs. 'Oh lord, he's gone glam rock!' someone chuckles. The two actors greet each other, allowing the onlookers to appreciate the contrast between them. While James's Brummell is a picture of elegance, in tight-fitting trousers, waistcoat and a perfectly



Beau Brummell is based on Ian Kelly's biography

tied snow white cravat, Hugh's Prince Regent, with bouffant bag wig, powdered and rouged face, fringed knee breeches and ribboned cape, cuts a much more comic figure. In late 18th-century London, anyone who was anyone – including the Prince Regent himself – rejected the period craze for lace and frou-frou and plumped instead for Brummell's style, following his dictum that, 'to be elegant is to be unnoticed'.

Grace and favour

The son of Lord North's private secretary, Eton-educated George Bryan Brummell – or 'Beau' as he became known – befriended the Prince Regent, 'Prinny' to his pals, at an early age. He was asked to be Prinny's *chevalier d'honneur* (best man) at his wedding at just 17. That such a young man should be consorting with royalty caused quite a sensation. His inimitable fashion sense, cocky charm – only he dared to be rude to the Prince – and huge wealth (in today's money he inherited around £1.5 million on his father's death) meant that he was almost instantly adopted as the ▷

NEW DRAMA

aristocracy's arbiter of style, and the country's first true celebrity.

Prestigious society men, the Prince among them, came to watch him dress in the morning, a performance that could take up to five hours. They learned how to tie their neckties just so and how intensive grooming and washing with warm water (unheard of at the time) were of the utmost importance. Tailors extended him credit in the hope he would wear their clothes. If Brummell declared a penchant for a certain brand of snuff or a particular dance, its popularity was assured.

BBC Four's drama entitled *Beau Brummell*, is based on Ian Kelly's biography and deals with Beau's meteoric rise to fame and his equally spectacular fall. He spent over 20 years indulging his passions – clothes; gossip; shopping at the glittering establishments on Bond Street and Jermyn Street; going to the theatre; gambling, and consorting with the leading courtesans of the day at various balls and parties. But in 1816, crippled by debt and out of favour with the Prince, Brummell was forced to flee to France. He died there of syphilis in 1840, suffering delusions that he was still at the centre of London's social whirl.

'Past Beau Brummell dramas have dealt with his fall into penury and lunacy,' remarks

'Brummell's life describes a dramatic arc, imitating the brief but glorious sparkle of Georgian England'

Ian Kelly, 'but this production is much more to do with the dawn of celebrity – the interface of fame and fashion that he represented. It also tackles Beau's fitful relationship with the Prince, his ambiguous friendship with Lord Byron [Matthew Rhys], and the love triangle between Beau, Byron and the courtesan Julia Johnston [Zoe Telford]. It's the dark underbelly of Jane Austen.'

Uncovering an era

To research his book, Ian spent hours looking through memoirs and letters and in the royal archives at Windsor. He also took a more hands-on approach, learning from historical costumiers how to tie his stock (cravat) and visiting many of Brummell's former haunts, including his home in London's Chesterfield Street, portrayed in the film by Elton House, a Landmark Trust property in Bath.

'It was very useful to see Brummell's house,'



MAKING IT ALL HAPPEN Production designer Alice Norris and David Edgar, the producer, take a break from the gruelling filming schedule

continues Ian. 'It is in a classic "dolls' house" design with two rooms per floor over four or five storeys, and a central staircase as well as a servants' staircase. At the bottom was the room where gentlemen waited to watch Brummell dress, and at the top was his dressing room. There's a story that Brummell's valet would walk past the waiting room with a tray piled high with crumpled cravats, claiming that, "These, Sirs, are the failures". However, having seen the layout of the house, I realised he would have had to make a deliberate detour to walk past the room. It was all part of the masquerade of showing what a great celebrity Brummell was.'

But as well as telling the story of a man, *Beau Brummell* is about an age and its culture. 'Brummell's life describes a dramatic arc,' says Ian. 'He came from nowhere, rose quickly to the top and then disappeared out of sight, imitating the brief but glorious sparkle of Georgian England. His life spans the birth of modern London, of shopping culture, fashion and celebrity. Brummell realised he could be most successful by doing nothing – it was all about surface and superficiality, the projection of an image.'

The aftermath of the French Revolution and the troubles in America created an uncertainty about how to behave, and Brummell – with his unflinching self-regard and his new style of urbane, urban masculinity – was more than happy to step into the breach. 'His rise to fame speaks of an age that was self-doubting – of people who wanted to know how to dress, what to think, and what to consider good taste,' says Ian. 'People sometimes talk of a man that all men want to be friends with and all women want to sleep with – Brummell was that man.'

THE BEAU BRUMMELL TOUR

Brummell's London centred on the area of St James's where grand, decorous façades gave way to backstreets and courtyards full of brothels and bathhouses. A statue of him stands in Jermyn Street and many of his former haunts still exist:

★ **White's Club**, 37-38 St James's Street, SW1 (020 7493 6671)

Created from White's Chocolate House, White's is the oldest club in London and was renowned for its bay window overlooking the street, where Beau and his coterie gathered to comment – often archly – on the attire of both passers-by and other club members. A gambling haven, the betting book was always open.

★ **James Lock & Co**, 6 St James's Street, SW1 (020 7930 8874)

One of the oldest family businesses in the world, Locks' shops kept Brummell – and his followers – in beaver felt top hats, prompting wits to quip that Brummell alone was responsible for the animal's decimation. Brummell was also instrumental in popularising its replacement, the silk top hat.

★ **Berry Bros**, 3 St James's Street, SW1 (020 7396 9600)

Brummell was often to be seen here, at Britain's oldest wine and spirit merchants, not least because customers could weigh themselves on their giant coffee scales – presumably something of that would appeal to a man as image-obsessed as Brummell. The scales and the ledgers recording Brummell's weight are still on show.

★ **Smith's Snuff Shop**, 74 Charing Cross Road, WC2 (020 7836 7422)

London's last remaining snuff shop, Smith's, still sells Brummell's preferred variety – Macouba – a medium strength ground tobacco perfumed with rose oil.

★ **Meyer & Mortimer**, 6-8 Sackville Street, W1 (020 7734 0656)

Jonathan Meyer, an Austrian immigrant, was one of Brummell's favourite tailors and it was with him that he pioneered the modern, tight-fitting trouser, which often had straps that went under the boot heel to keep the material taut. The company was bombed out of its original Conduit Street premises in the Second World War and Brummell's accounts were lost, though those of the Prince Regent survive.

Watch the drama

Beau Brummell is on BBC Four in mid-June. Check *Radio Times* for details.

Buy the book

Beau Brummell by Ian Kelly (£20, Hodder & Stoughton). H&A readers can buy it for just £18, inc p&p, by calling 0870 350 6093.



ALL IN THE DETAIL

Before Beau Brummell's influence, powdered wigs, gaudy jewellery, ostentatious dress and frivolous shoes (below) were the order of the day for men – fashions that were enjoyed to the full by Prinky, the Prince Regent (above, in full regalia). Brummell led the way in changing men's grooming habits and style, elegantly showing that less is more (left and right). Having taken on board the latest edicts of fashion, the newly dapper prince can be seen (above left), being attended to by hair and make-up designer Catherine Davis. All scenes here were shot at Wilton House, which has been visited by every British monarch since Charles II

