The Surprising Histories of Everyday Clothes: Jeans to Heels

Name Date Class

Reading

1 Most of us dress without thinking about where our clothes came from. Yet many everyday items **originate** in surprising places, including army camps, battlefields, a royal court, and the site of a nuclear test. Some famous stories about clothing are simplified or uncertain, and this reading says so where the evidence is weak.

2 Before 1873, work pants often tore at the pockets. A tailor in Reno, Nevada, named Jacob Davis solved the problem by adding metal rivets to make **sturdy** work pants. Davis could not afford the fee for a **patent**, so he wrote to Levi Strauss, the San Francisco merchant who sold him his cloth. On May 20, 1873, the two men received the patent, and their company began to sell what it called waist overalls. According to Levi Strauss & Co., the name jeans did not become common until about 1960.

3 The T-shirt began as underwear. In 1913, the U.S. Navy began to **issue** white cotton undershirts with short sleeves and a round neck. For decades, the T-shirt was mostly worn under other clothes. During World War II, American servicemen in the Pacific started wearing theirs as outerwear because of the heat. The big change in image came in the 1950s. After Marlon Brando wore one in A Streetcar Named Desire (1951) and James Dean wore one in Rebel Without a Cause (1955), the T-shirt became a symbol of youthful **rebellion**.

4 The trench coat is named after the trenches of World War I, but it was not invented for that war. Rain coats for officers had existed since the 1800s, and both Burberry and Aquascutum claim to have created the trench coat. Nobody can say which company was first. What is clear is that the coat took its modern shape during the war, when designers added shoulder straps and metal rings on the belt. Officers paid for their own **waterproof** coats, which helped make them a sign of status.

5 Wristwatches followed a similar path. In the 1800s, watches worn on the wrist had been made mainly for women, while gentlemen carried pocket watches. Some soldiers strapped pocket watches to their wrists in the Boer War (1899 to 1902), but the real change came in World War I. In the trenches, pulling a watch out of a pocket was **impractical**, and officers needed exact timing to **coordinate** attacks. By the 1920s, wristwatches were being sold to ordinary men.

6 High heels were first a men's fashion in Europe. The Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto says that heeled footwear had been worn in Western Asia for hundreds of years before it reached Europe, and that it was linked to horseback riding, because a heel helped a rider keep his foot in the stirrup. Its exact origin is still unknown. Around 1600, Europeans were impressed by Persia's powerful cavalry. Men were quick to **adopt** heels, and they wore them as a sign of power and **prestige** for more than 130 years. In the 1700s, heels fell out of men's fashion, and they later became associated mainly with women.

7 The word cravat comes from the French word for Croatian. In the 1650s, French fashion copied the linen scarves worn by light cavalry, including many paid **mercenary** soldiers, who had fought in the Thirty Years' War (1618 to 1648). Louis XIV was fond of the cravat, and from Paris it spread across Europe. The modern necktie, however, appeared only in the 19th century.

8 On July 5, 1946, the French engineer Louis Réard decided to **unveil** a two-piece swimsuit at a pool in Paris. It was so small that professional models refused to wear it, so he hired Micheline Bernardini, a dancer at the Casino de Paris. He named the suit after Bikini Atoll, where the United States had tested a nuclear weapon four days earlier, because he hoped it would cause a similar **sensation**. Many people found it **scandalous**, and Spain and Italy banned it from public beaches. By the 1950s, however, it was common in Europe.

9 War appears again and again in these stories: the T-shirt, trench coat, wristwatch, necktie, and even the high heel all have military connections. Several items also changed who wore them, with heels moving from men to women and wristwatches from women to men. Clothes continue to **evolve** in this way. The stories also show how uncertain popular history can be. For the trench coat, the first inventor cannot be proved, and for the high heel, even the origin is unknown.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**originate**	_____	**A**	strong and well made
2	**sturdy**	_____	**B**	great excitement or public interest
3	**patent**	_____	**C**	shocking and seen as wrong
4	**issue**	_____	**D**	start to use a new style
5	**rebellion**	_____	**E**	organize actions to work together
6	**waterproof**	_____	**F**	change slowly over time
7	**impractical**	_____	**G**	a fight against authority or rules
8	**coordinate**	_____	**H**	the official right to make an invention
9	**adopt**	_____	**I**	not useful in real life
10	**prestige**	_____	**J**	a soldier paid to fight for any side
11	**mercenary**	_____	**K**	show something for the first time
12	**unveil**	_____	**L**	give out something officially
13	**sensation**	_____	**M**	not letting water through
14	**scandalous**	_____	**N**	begin in a particular place
15	**evolve**	_____	**O**	high respect and status

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

adopt	**coordinate**	**evolve**	**impractical**	**issue**	**originate**	**patent**	**prestige**	**rebellion**	**scandalous**
sensation	**sturdy**	**unveil**	**waterproof**						

1 Many popular sports _____ in England.

2 Buy a _____ bag if you carry heavy books.

3 The company holds a _____ on the new battery.

4 The school will _____ new ID cards next week.

5 The _____ against the king lasted three years.

6 Take a _____ jacket in case it rains.

7 High heels are _____ for hiking.

8 The manager will _____ the work of three teams.

9 The school decided to _____ a new uniform.

10 The university has a great deal of _____ .

11 The company will _____ its new phone next week.

12 The young singer became an overnight _____ .

13 The politician's behavior was described as _____ .

14 Mobile phones continue to _____ rapidly.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 According to Levi Strauss & Co., how did jeans begin, and when did the name jeans become common?

2 How did the T-shirt change from underwear to a symbol of youthful rebellion? Name two events or people from the reading.

3 Why does the reading say that the trench coat was 'not invented for that war'? What changed during the war?

4 Compare the paths of the trench coat and the wristwatch. What did they have in common?

5 Why does the reading say that the exact origin of the high heel is unknown, and what does the Bata Shoe Museum say about heels in Western Asia?

6 Explain how the meaning of high heels changed between the 1600s and later centuries.

7 How are the words cravat and necktie related, and how do they differ?

8 Describe how the bikini got its name, and explain why the reading says Louis Réard hoped for a similar sensation.

9 The final paragraph says that popular history can be uncertain. Which examples from the reading support this, and what patterns does the writer see across the stories?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"The trench coat was first made by Burberry."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that fashion history is mostly about war."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer end with two examples of uncertain origins, the trench coat and the high heel? What is the effect on the reader?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** Jacob Davis asked Levi Strauss to share a patent because he could not pay the fee.

2 **T / F** Levi Strauss & Co. says the name jeans was common by 1873.

3 **T / F** The U.S. Navy began to issue white cotton undershirts in 1913.

4 **T / F** Marlon Brando wore a T-shirt in Rebel Without a Cause.

5 **T / F** Both Burberry and Aquascutum claim to have created the trench coat.

6 **T / F** The trench coat was invented during World War I.

7 **T / F** Some soldiers strapped pocket watches to their wrists in the Boer War.

8 **T / F** In the 1800s, watches worn on the wrist were made mainly for men.

9 **T / F** The exact origin of the high heel is still unknown.

10 **T / F** Professional models agreed to wear the first bikini.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1. Which clothing history surprised you most, and why?
2. Many clothes in the reading have military connections. Why do you think military clothing so often becomes everyday fashion?
3. Jeans and T-shirts began as work clothes and underwear. What clothes today might become fashionable in the future?
4. High heels moved from men to women, and wristwatches moved from women to men. Can you think of other clothes whose meaning has changed?
5. Several stories in the reading are uncertain. Why do you think popular fashion stories spread even when they may not be true?
6. The bikini was once considered scandalous, and some countries banned it from public beaches. What clothing is considered shocking today? Will it still be shocking in fifty years?
7. Heels were once a sign of power and prestige for men. Do clothes still show status today? Give examples.
8. Which item in the reading do you wear most often? Did you know its history before?
9. Does the history of a piece of clothing matter to you when you buy it, or do comfort and price matter more?
10. Companies such as Levi Strauss & Co. and Burberry tell their own histories. How far should we trust a company's account of its own past?
11. Do you prefer practical clothes or fashionable clothes? Can clothes be both?
12. The reading says that a patent protected the design of jeans. Should companies be able to own ideas about clothing designs? Why or why not?
13. Are there any clothing items with interesting histories in your country? What stories do you know, and how could you check whether they are true?
14. How do you think clothes will change in the next twenty years?

Language Focus: Past Perfect for Earlier Events

The past perfect (had plus the past participle) shows that one past event happened before another past event or before a point in the past. The other event is usually in the past simple.

In the reading:

- "Rain coats for officers **had existed** since the 1800s…"
- "…watches worn on the wrist **had been made** mainly for women…"
- "…heeled footwear **had been worn** in Western Asia for hundreds of years before it reached Europe…"

Practice: Complete the sentence with the past perfect: *"By the time he wrote to Levi Strauss, Davis ____ (add) rivets to work pants."*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/history-of-everyday-clothes

Notes