

A superb example of 19th century bootmaking; highly decorated Western Boots are clearly nothing new.

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PRIZE BOOTS

Shoemaking has always been an important trade in western countries with footwear appearing high on the list of people's necessities. Until the advent of mass-produced boots and shoes in the late 19th century, even small villages in the British Isles would have had some form of shoemaker to produce and repair simple types of footwear for its inhabitants. Larger villages and small towns would boast a number of better shoemakers who, between them, were able to produce all the various types of footwear needed for everyday life.

Some of these worked on their own and some employed journeymen or apprentices, who from the age of thirteen or fourteen would learn the trade for seven years. At first, they would perform menial tasks such as preparing the wax that was applied to all the different threads used to stitch the shoe together. They gradually acquired more skills until they qualified as master shoemakers themselves. Some were naturally better than others and the method they used to demonstrate their superiority and attract better trade and higher prices was to produce what were referred to as 'prize' or 'exhibition' boots.

The samples a modern shoe manufacturer produces to win orders are intended to show the styling and level of quality available at the prices quoted. A prize boot was often made in a smaller size than normal and was specifically intended to demonstrate the shoemaker's level of skill and ingenuity in producing even the most difficult of subjects. It is hard to believe the levels of ability some of these old shoemakers possessed, particularly if one stops to consider that it was all done by hand. Not even the most advanced CAD/CAM manufacturing systems can begin to compete with some of them.

The first four images are of footwear shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Organised by Queen Victoria's husband, the Prince Consort, this was a showcase for British industry and agriculture. Although only shoes of the very highest standard were accepted, they were seen by thousands of people who hopefully would have been duly impressed. Some, who could afford the price this level of shoemaker would charge, might also have become customers.

These and all the subsequent examples were collected by



Edward Walker, a 'Designer of Ladies Boots' in London. They passed on to his son who donated them to the Boot Trade Benevolent Society in 1932. They were in turn acquired by the Northampton Museum in 2005 and form an important part of its footwear collection.

The Northampton Museum in England houses what is probably the largest selection of historic footwear anywhere in the world and contains some fine examples of this standard of shoemaking. The following images of boots and shoes in the collection show to what extraordinary lengths 19th century shoemakers would go to impress both potential customers and the public at large.

(Fig 1a & 1b) The vamp and counter of this first example are in black patent calf with a cut out design underlaid with what was originally mauve (now faded yellow) moire silk. The top edge of the vamp is finished with a rolling wave design and three pairs of ghillie straps with laces across the instep. The top piece of the low heel is sewn on with 40 stitches to the inch and then decorated with bone pegs. They were made by Hoby & Gullick in 1850.

(Fig 2) The contrasting black and light brown calf leather used on this dress Wellington emphasises the fine and



Fig 1a – Brogue lace shoe.



Fig 1b – Sole and heel detail.



Fig 2 – Men's Wellington boot.



Fig 3 – Two ladies brocade silk mules.

perfectly regular two row stitching. The rule gives a clear indication of just how small a stitch these old shoemakers could achieve. It must be remembered that this was all done by hand and, most probably, the light of a candle. (Also made by Hoby & Gullick a year later in 1851.)

(Fig 3) The first of these two ladies mules is in blue, gold and white on a very pointed toe, with a gilt fringe and a hand embroidered 'rose' design on the sock. It was made by the turn shoe method with a high silk covered heel, sewn 50 stitches to the inch (about 20 stitches per centimetre)! The other is in red and gold on a rounded toe, again with a gilt fringe and hand embroidered sock but, this time, hand welted. Both were made by John Hamilton, 1851.

(Fig 4) A white kid and red patent leather child's ankle boot on a narrow rounded toe. Fine detail punching and white stitching on the red patent left no room for error as any slip would be seen. The nineteen pairs of eyelets would also have been punched and clenched by hand. Still on its original last, this lovely little boot was almost certainly made purely as a demonstration piece; again by John Hamilton, 1851.

(Fig 5) While many of the top shoemakers were to be found in London, there was no lack of skills or imagination elsewhere in the country as this pair of ladies shoes amply demonstrates. The shoes were made with long pointed toes from greenish beige calf leather with pink leather covered Louis heels. The petal-shaped cut outs on the vamp are backed with white satin embroidered in chain stitch in pale blue, pink and green. The top edge and quarter seam are trimmed in ribbon with some further ruched ribbon around the throat and a multi-coloured rosette at centre. They were made by John Nelson Hefford of Derby sometime in the 1850s.

(Fig 6) Again by John Nelson Hefford, these exhibition ankle boots are in brown leather on a square toe. They have curved stacked heels and black leather toe caps extended up the vamp to form facings with 15 pairs of closely spaced eyelets and brown silk laces. They are lined in white cotton with purple leather top bands. The toe caps, sides of the facings, top edges and either side of the back seams are embroidered with leaf motifs. However long must it have taken to do all this?

(Fig 7) This black patent and cream satin side fastening prize boot is interesting for two things. First, it is a good example of a boot made on a 'straight' last. While pantographs had made left and right foot lasts available, many shoes were still made on straights at this time, so, when you bought a pair, you had to 'break' them in so that they eventually became a left and a right.

In the days before machine-turned lasts became widely available, the choice of last shape was also very restricted. To accommodate a wider foot, the shoemaker would simply add a pad of leather to the top of the last to increase the girth; crude but the only practical solution available.

The second is the finishing of the sole and heel. The maker was clearly as skilled with a paint brush as he was with needle and awl. Using blue, pink, green and white, etc., he has created patterns to emphasise the contrasting shapes



Fig 4 – Child's high lace boot.



Fig 5 – Exhibition court shoes.



Fig 6 – Ladies lace boots.



Fig 7 – Prize boot with hand painted sole and heel.

of the flat sided sole, ridged-arch waist and gracefully curving top piece. This is a most unusual example of complex bottom finishing and the work of John Clark of Northampton in 1838.

(Fig 8a & b) And, to finish this prize snapshot, a real 'tour de force' in red and gold gauged silk brocade and embroidered black silk. The galosh of this boot is glazed red morocco edge bound with dark blue galloon. The top band is ornamented with a gilt fringe, a tassel at the front and loops of gold braid, while the leg has been gauged (pulled in) at the ankle for further effect.

Not satisfied with this, the shoemaker has created a spectacular heel in the form of a pentagon, erected in two tiers, each composed of five mother-of-pearl columns: the upper row in Corinthian and the lower in Tuscan style. The whole is held together and attached to the heel seat by fine metal rods. The top piece of each pillar is covered with iridescent shell and two further pieces have been inlaid into the sole. This was in turn attached using an invisible or 'blind' welt and a stitched through waist which was then finely bevelled.

It was widely admired at the Great Exhibition and became known as the 'Pillar Boot'. It is a great pity that the maker remains unknown. His unique boot fortunately still survives in good condition as a reminder of just what these men could achieve with the simplest of tools. In a world of computerised mass production, we can but marvel at the imagination and individuality displayed by our forebears in the footwear industry. 🍷



Fig 8a – A spectacular exhibition boot.



Fig 8b – The sole and heel.