

*Crockett & Jones dress boot from the early 1900s.*

CREDIT: NORTHAMPTON MUSEUMS AND ART GALLERY

# A STEP BACK IN TIME

In the March/April issue of *World Footwear*, an article on Prize Boots looked at the high degree of skill possessed by English hand shoemakers in the first half of the 19th century. The second half of that century witnessed the invention of machines that turned a handcraft industry into a highly mechanised one which employed large numbers of people in towns spread across the country. Amongst these, Northampton in particular gained a reputation as the producer of the very best men's boots and shoes that has lasted to this day.

What were the factories like that led this expansion of the footwear industry from the late 1800s up to World War I? Very few of the original companies survive and, of those, hardly any have a complete photographic record of the time. One exception is Crockett & Jones, established in Northampton in 1879, still owned by the same family and still making shoes to the same high quality as when the company first started.

## BACKGROUND

In the Middle Ages, Northampton's location at the junction of the principal routes from north to south and east to west made it the ideal place to receive hides from butchers spread over a wide area. It was also surrounded by oak forests from which timber was taken for housing and ship building. Oak bark was the best available tanning agent at the time, so the town became the most important centre for tanning leather in the country. And, with leather readily available, shoemakers soon followed.

As has already been remarked, up until the middle of the 19th century, shoemaking remained essentially a craft industry. The invention of the lockstitch sewing machine in 1846 followed by that of the Goodyear machine welting

process in 1871 changed everything as it now became possible to mass produce uniform footwear in purpose built factories.

## STARTING UP

The problem for a would-be shoe manufacturer in the late 1800s was the same as for any potential entrepreneur today: raising the capital to get started. Charles Jones and his brother-in-law James Crockett were fortunate that in 1879 they each received £100 from a charitable trust founded 'to encourage young men of good character in the towns of Northampton and Coventry to set up in business on their own'.

In common with almost all their competitors they were able to start in a small way as much of the shoemaking process was still carried out by handworkers at home, with only the cutting of components and final finishing taking place in the factory, before the completed shoes were sold to retailers. As the century neared its end, so an ever increasing variety of machines became available necessitating large factories employing substantial numbers of people.

These photographic images show the five story extension made to the original Crockett & Jones factory in 1911 and





**Clicking:** Shoe factories at the end of the 19th century were built in the middle of towns. Land was at a premium so they were built several stories high. Clicking departments were traditionally on the top floor where the light was best, with closing on the next floor down, followed by lasting, welting, and making as more machines became involved and the weight on each floor level increased.



**Closing:** Sewing machines were driven by leather belts off a central shaft under the bench which was itself driven by either overhead shafting as in this instance or by an electric motor underneath. Note the absence of any guards on drive belts; health and safety was not a major consideration 100 years ago despite the long flowing dresses all women wore at the time.



**Lasting:** After pulling-over, lasting for welted shoes would be performed on a hand operated flatbed machine using wiper plates and, for flat lasted constructions, a pincer machine which pulled and twisted the upper to form pleats as in hand lasting. The photo shows a row of the latter. They were hard work and operators soon gained upper body strength and a real 'shoemakers grip'.



**Welting:** The welt sewers working on the right were key employees as the seam between welt and insole rib is the foundation of a welted shoe. While both they and the inseam trimmers further down the room are positioned to receive good light, the operators performing ancillary tasks had to make do with less. Work in progress was carried on wooden racks which were moved from floor to floor by a simple hand operated lift.



**Making:** Key operations such as rough rounding and outsole stitching (left) were located down each side against the windows with the centre of the room containing operations such as sole attaching, channel closing (front right), sole levelling and heel attaching. It was invariably crowded with racks waiting at each of a large number of separate operations. This in turn meant far more lasts were used than today but, at the same time, that shoes stayed on the last longer and this helped them to retain their shape.



**Finishing:** This either formed a special section of the making department or was located on the ground floor so that racks of finished shoes could be wheeled straight into the shoe room and packing department. The finishers trimmed, scoured, waxed and edge set the soles and heels using a variety of machines all running at different speeds. Main line shafting only ran at a constant speed so the size of the shaft pulley for each machine had to be matched to the one on the later such that it ran at the correct speed.



**Shoe Room:** In most modern factories, this would now be called the finishing department as completed shoes were cleaned, polished and inspected for quality. Most of this would have been carried out by hand much as it is today. Women in shoe factories were only employed as closers, in the shoe room and in the offices. Regardless of the department involved, supervisors were always men.



**Packing:** This view has been specially 'staged' to demonstrate the extent of the company's export trade, with Milan, Brussels, Buenos Ayres and Melbourne all visible on packing cases. The company was in fact awarded the Diploma of Honour at the 1911 International Manufacturing Exhibition in Turin. Note the staff all wearing caps.



**Roughstuff:** As upper leather went in at the top of the building, soling leather went in at the bottom. Most factories cut and processed all bottom stock components themselves. As many of the machines were extremely heavy, the department was often located in a semi-basement area. The 'Revolution' cutting presses shown had a constantly turning flywheel which was tripped by a foot treadle to bring the beam down on to the forged steel cutting die which the operator held with both hands. While fast, they were also dangerous and operators often lost one or more fingers.



**Handsewn:** The very best welted shoes might have had both the welt and sole seams sewn by hand as the flatter insole rib produced a more flexible shoe than the machine welted version. Hand sewers needed no machines, just somewhere to sit and a tray to hold their tools as they held the lasted shoe down to their legs with a simple strap tensioned by one of their feet in the same manner as the old hand shoemakers (centre foreground). They could therefore be fitted in wherever there was a convenient area which, as can be seen here, was not necessarily the best that the factory had to offer.

CREDIT: ALL FACTORY IMAGES CROCKETT & JONES

were taken shortly after production began. It shows an open and airy factory due to its then revolutionary steel framed construction. As the first such structure in the town, it now carries a preservation order even though it is still very much in use. Although the working conditions shown were better than many factories at that time, the images nevertheless bring home to us the large number of people and different machines needed to produce a top quality shoe 100 years ago.

## THE COMPANY TODAY

The most remarkable thing is that not only has the company survived the decimation of the UK footwear industry that has seen Northampton's 100 plus shoe factories in 1960 fall to just a handful today but that the fifth

generation of the family is now involved. Furthermore, although production at 3,000 pairs per week bears no comparison with the 15,000 pairs per week achieved in 1920, it has nevertheless been steadily increasing over the past few years, a sound testament to the family's refusal to compromise their high standards.

While modern machinery is used wherever appropriate, the attention to traditional detail which is a mark of the company's products means that a significant number of old machines remain in use maintained by spares taken from a store of old ones acquired whenever there was a factory closure. Were the employees seen here in 1911 able to step forward 100 years, they would still recognise the factory and many of the procedures that are still employed to complete a pair of Crockett & Jones shoes. 