

High-end men's shoe brand J.M. Weston takes great pride in its 120-year-old traditions. When one of the tanneries that supplies it with premium leather got into severe financial difficulty, the footwear firm stepped in to take over. It wants to keep at least some supply on home soil, in France.

Luxury shoe brand takes more control of its traditions

A court in Le Puy-en-Velay in central France has decided which of two rival bids will take over the running of local leather company Les Tanneries du Puy. The company went into administration in April 2010, but the courts allowed the management team time to find new owners, with leather production continuing at the site, highly regarded by many high-end footwear manufacturers and brands, throughout the upheaval.

There were two realistic proposals on the table. One came from Jean-Michel Soquet, an entrepreneur who recently sold a spa and beauty treatment resort in the hills near Le Puy. The other was from Denis Lemerrier representing a holding company called Groupe EPI, which owns luxury footwear brand J.M. Weston, a long-standing and important customer of Les Tanneries du Puy. At a hearing on July 8, the commercial court in Le Puy decided that the second of these two bidders should take up the reins of the tannery. Intriguing though it was that an entrepreneur such as Mr Soquet should seek his next fortune in the ancient art of making leather, it seems to make much more sense for the fate of the tannery in the beautiful town in the Auvergne region now to be in the hands of a company that knows, loves, lives and breathes leather, and has done for generations.

Les Tanneries du Puy is located in the attractive, historic town of Le Puy-en-Velay in Auvergne, France.

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK

Behind the footwear brand

J.M. Weston makes and sells mostly high-end men's shoes for business and leisure wear. One of its most recent collections, Claridge, includes a wing-tip Oxford brogue in black calfskin, a Derby in brown aniline calfskin, a loafer and a boot, both in black calfskin, and an Oxford in burgundy aniline calfskin. The company describes these shoes as "a subtle link between tradition and audacity". The audacity comes from the work the company is doing with footwear designers such as Michel Perry, a name in his own right in the world of women's shoes in France for more than 20 years, but who works with J.M Weston on men's collections, and with Paris-based music and fashion label Maison Kitsuné, with which it also worked on a recent summer collection, East Hampton. Tradition comes from the company's long history and its continuing commitment to the values of its founder.

J.M. Weston, an unusual name for a French company, was launched in Limoges in 1891 by a local manufacturer, Edouard Blanchard. At the turn of the new century, he sent his son Eugène to the US to study Goodyear stitching techniques and ways to work width variation into models, marking the path the company would go down in the decades ahead. Today, between three and seven different width options are available for each half-size. The town that young Blanchard fetched up in was Weston, Massachusetts, which



As well as luxury men's shoes, J.M. Weston supplies boots to the Republican Guard of the French Gendarmerie. Each officer has the right to a new pair of Weston boots every two years.

CREDIT: MARIE-LAN NGUYEN/WIKIPEDIA



“ Historical note... linking history... ”

The two ancient French towns where J.M. Weston and Les Tanneries du Puy have their headquarters are 380 kilometres apart by road, but a curious historical detail links them. They are two of only four cities in France to have given their names to historic routes on the pilgrim's road to Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain, historic because they were established by the twelfth century. The

route from Le Puy is called Via Podiensis in Latin, while the one beginning in Limoges has the name Via Lemovicensis. Along with the other two historic French paths, from Tours and Toulouse, they meet in the Pyrenees, from where the road continues for another 900 kilometres to Santiago. Down through the ages, countless tonnes of shoe leather have been consumed on these roads.

explains the name of the footwear brand.

On his return to France, he continued working at the facility in Limoges until a chance meeting at a horse-race with a Paris dandy named Viard led to a move to the capital and the first J.M. Weston shop there in the Boulevard des Courcelles in 1922, followed ten years later by the opening of the brand's flagship store on the Champs-Élysées. The company now has own-brand stores in fashionable areas across central Paris, as well as in London, Shanghai, Brussels, Tokyo, New York, Moscow, Beverley Hills, Hong Kong and a long list of other cities in Europe, the Middle East and North America.

Production values

The traditional Blanchard values also live on in the way J.M. Weston shoes are made. To this day, workers in the company's factory in Limoges use the techniques Eugène Blanchard brought back from the US and each shoe is handled between 150 and 190 times during its construction. A designer's drawing defines the last construction, skilfully carved in the traditional way from wood. Several hundred types of leather are available for the craftspeople to choose from, including crocodile and other exotic materials, although calfskin and bovine leather from les Tanneries du Puy and a number of other high-quality French tanneries are the favourites. Cutting, stitching and punching in the brogue design's holes are all activities that are carried out or controlled by hand; other interesting touches include an initial W being formed by nails hammered into the sole, and markings that show the width as well as the size.

Marching orders

For more than 40 years, J.M. Weston has been the supplier of boots to the Republican Guard of the French Gendarmerie, the unit responsible for guards of honour (for which the correct footwear is *de rigueur*). Each officer has the right to a new pair of Weston boots every two years.



J.M. Weston now has its own stores in fashionable locations across the world, including Hong Kong (pictured here).

CREDIT: HBOALAMC/WIKIPEDIA

Care and attention shine through in all the company's finished products, which is why the brand's fame has spread to all parts of the world. Controlling the quality of the materials it uses in its shoes is part of this, which is why Groupe EPI wanted to make sure the leather Les Tanneries du Puy produces continues to be available.

On leaving the court after the July decision that gave Groupe EPI the right to take over the tannery, Denis Lemerrier said: "The [70] workers at the company [Les Tanneries du Puy] can turn a new page now, one that points towards the future. Our interest dates back to 2006 when, with Hermès, we decided to help the Les Tanneries du Puy. We [J.M. Weston] have already spent more than 30 years maintaining the exceptional *savoir-faire* of a separate small veg-tan tannery near Limoges. The expertise of that small tannery has allowed it to win recognition as a part of our living heritage. I have the same ambition for Les Tanneries du Puy, and what we have to do now is for everyone to join forces and get to work." 🌐