



A mother and child from Nottingham meet music star Myleene Klass for a fitting of Start-rite shoes. ALL PHOTO CREDITS: START-RITE

New parents, old values

More than seven million people living in the UK in 2010 were born in other parts of the world, almost 12% of the total population. Cultural, culinary and linguistic diversity are enriching, but there is a spin-off for the footwear industry in having so many people from other countries living in the UK. So says Eve Davies, brand director of specialist children's footwear brand Start-rite.

Norfolk-based Start-rite has an important place in the history of the shoe industry in the UK. It was founded in 1792 by a cordwainer in Norwich called James Smith. To offer local people a more affordable alternative to the typical, bespoke shoe of the time, he began to work to common sizes so as to be able to offer cheaper shoes off the peg.

Innovation must have run in the family because, according to Start-rite, Mr Smith's grandson, Charles Winter, became the first footwear manufacturer to use the newly developed sewing-machine to make shoes. In turn, it was Mr Winter's grandson, James Southall, who brought to market the brand name Start-rite and the understanding that footwear manufacturers need to bear in mind a different series of requirements for children's shoes compared to adult shoes. In 1928, the company commissioned a study into children's feet to confirm its belief

Children's footwear brand Start-rite has been a by-word for quality shoes that fit young feet well for decades. It is now working harder than ever to get its message across to new generations of parents.

that children should be catered for differently.

By the 1950s, it had stopped making adult shoes altogether to concentrate exclusively on using the knowledge it had built up of children's feet and the reputation it had earned as a supplier of quality children's shoes to expand the Start-rite brand further. It worked hard on its lasts to make shoes that fitted young feet correctly and to offer a range of width fittings that it felt had been lacking in the market until then. Children, parents and grandparents living throughout the UK in the second half of the twentieth century came to associate the name Start-rite with serious children's shoes that fitted correctly and lasted a long time, far from the cheapest but good value for money.

A message worth repeating

In 2012, the brand still finds itself pushing the message that children's feet require correct measurement so that their shoes will fit properly, according to Eve Davies. "It's a message that's always worth emphasising," she says, "but it's quite a British thing. People who have come to live here from other countries may not have grown up with the same understanding. We have had generations that grew up having their feet carefully measured and their shoes carefully fitted, but it seems to me there is a new generation now that doesn't know as much about this, that their children's shoes need to be fitted, with growing room, and that even if the materials cause no pain or marks the shoes can still damage young feet, in which the bones are like blancmange."

Star quality

Something that the company's founders may never have dreamed of but that Eve Davies has put in place to help Start-rite present its philosophy to today's parents (from all backgrounds) is to enlist celebrity support for the brand. Interestingly, though, she says that in this case, the celebrity was already a passionate devotee of the brand before the partnership began. The person in question is pianist, singer and broadcaster Myleene Klass. Ms Klass became famous in the early 2000s as a member of the music group called Hear'Say, which had several years' television, recording and touring success. She later had a solo singing and piano career and now presents music programmes on national radio.

The company has worked on a small range of shoes with her for the autumn-winter 2012-2013 season, an arrangement that both parties want to continue for the seasons ahead. The special collection they are collaborating on for spring-summer 2013 will be bigger.

Red patent and leopard-print linings

Ms Davies describes the inaugural joint collection as "just a little taster"; it consists principally of re-works the music star suggested to a couple of classics in the main collection, including red patent finishes and leopard-print linings in shoes as the Carmen and Madam Butterfly models, which have had a good reception. The spring-summer 2013 ideas, which are already touring the UK to give advance viewings to retailers, combine to give a boutique range within the collection, shoes with more of a designer feel and, the company believes, more fashion appeal.

"Myleene is from Norfolk and her mother is a nurse and knows about foot health, so Myleene has known about Start-rite all her life," Ms Davies explains. "Her own children were

wearing our shoes before we even talked about this project, so it's not the case that we have agreed to work with her just to have a celebrity name. She will grab headlines for us, but what people will hear from her is the same as they hear from us, that our shoes are about good foot health as well as fashion. It is a new venture for us; we have been quiet in the marketplace and if you are too quiet people sometimes think you have disappeared. So, yes, we are trying to move with the times, but this is not a volume-chaser for us, but just a way of positioning ourselves as more fashionable. And no matter what, we will always come down on the side of building shoes properly."

High standards everywhere

Start-rite's sourcing these days is spread across various footwear manufacturing locations in Asia (including India, China and Indonesia), but it is still commissioning "a reasonable amount" from outsource manufacturers in Europe, principally in Spain and Portugal. Eve Davies describes them as good sources for the brand's more fashionable models and insists that they are becoming more competitive, price-wise, all the time, owing to the increases in labour costs in Asia and in transportation costs from those locations to the UK. "We insist on high standards everywhere," she says, "so we never place mega-volume orders for manufacturers just to churn out. We spend ages on our lasting process and on maintaining the shapes we want, and all this while, for the past 10 or even 20 years, the retailers who sell our shoes, like everyone else, have been trying to reduce stock."

With a background in apparel retail, Eve Davies knows a lot about order volumes reducing and about the companies big and small who have learned (often the hard way) how much cash can be tied up in inventory. In the clothing industry, she insists, even the best in the business is unlikely to achieve a greater than 65% accuracy rate for forecasting precisely which items will wow the shopping public when they hit the shelves. And with footwear she says it's even more complicated because retailers have to stock more sizes and width options per style.

Everyone knows that staying true to your principles and, at the same time, giving consumers what they want is a tough task. Start-rite's commitment to its heritage is a help here, rather than a hindrance. The National Health Service in the UK is publishing 900,000 copies of a new Mother and Child guidebook for new parents. In the section on the foot health of growing children, it mentions the importance of choosing shoes that fit from the outset and it singles Start-rite out as a recommended brand. This, along with the active involvement of Myleene Klass, gives it a great chance of making as big an impression on a new generation of parents as it did 50 and more years ago. 



A small collection put together for autumn-winter 2012 includes a small number of re-works of classic Start-rite shoes, including the Carmen and the Madam Butterfly.