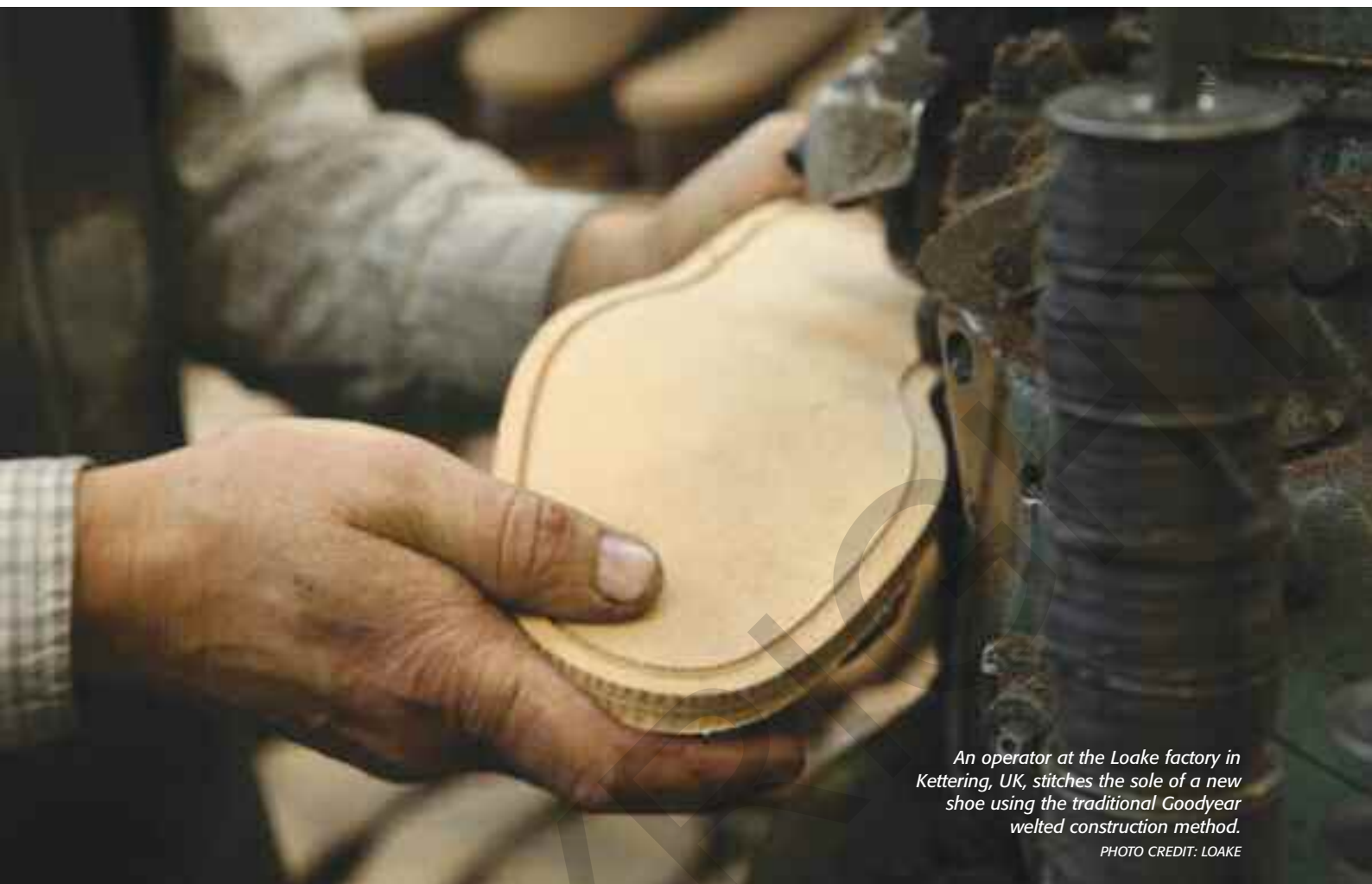




An operator at the Loake factory in Kettering, UK, stitches the sole of a new shoe using the traditional Goodyear welted construction method.

PHOTO CREDIT: LOAKE

Still work to do for León to tie up Loake link

Reports in the Mexican media at the end of last year suggested that the leather and footwear sector in León, in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, had persuaded high-end English footwear brand Loake to outsource some of its shoemaking to the skilled manufacturers in the city and the surrounding area. Outsource production of finished Loake shoes would begin in 2013, they said, adding that this would not be the last big international brand to take such a step. However, when *World Footwear* asked Loake about its plans, it said nothing was, as yet, confirmed regarding the production of its shoes in Mexico.

The promotions director for Cofoce, Guanajuato's external trade promotions agency, Jacob Torres Espino, has explained to us that comments attributed to him in the Mexican media mistakenly presented the Loake idea as more or less a done deal. "It's not," he says. "It's what we hope will happen in the future, but we know there is a long way to go and that we have a lot of work still to do."

Last year, newspapers based in the Mexican city of León said traditional English footwear brand Loake was set to outsource some of its production to shoe manufacturers there. Loake insisted it had made no such decision, yet.

He goes on to say that Loake developed its first contacts with Guanajuato around 18 months ago. Representatives of the company, which specialises in quality English Goodyear-welted footwear, visited footwear components and materials exhibition Anpic in León and began sourcing sole leather from a number of the city's 500 tanneries. Follow-up visits to the show and the city took place in 2012 leading to the optimistic reports in León newspapers that finished footwear manufacturers there were

FIVE GENERATIONS OF SHOE SOPHISTICATION

The Loake family has been making traditional English shoes in Kettering, near Northampton, since 1880. Four generations on, the company is still family run, with Andrew Loake, great-grandson and great-nephew of the founders, the current managing director and now a fifth generation is also involved. "As the current custodians of Loake, we are immensely proud of the commitment of our forefathers and the tradition they worked so hard to establish," he says. "For this reason our premium grade Goodyear welted shoes continue to be made in Kettering. Only the very highest quality materials are used. Each pair takes eight weeks to make and we still believe there is no finer way to make a gentleman's shoe."

However, it is also the case that for some years now, an entry-level range of Loake shoes has been available on the market alongside the main lines of Goodyear welted footwear. Some of these entry-level shoes are produced overseas, using a variety of construction methods. "This enables us to offer a complete wardrobe of shoes suitable for every occasion," Mr Loake explains.

He estimates that the company has made more than 50 million pairs of Goodyear welted shoes since his great-grandfather and two great-uncles started out. It now exports to more than 50 countries and as recently as 2011 opened its first own-brand store, in Princes Arcade on London's most famous centre of men's fashion, Jermyn Street. "Our aim is to uphold this tradition and continue making the most handsome, comfortable and durable shoes we can," the managing director concludes.



Loake's Churchill model in black calfskin. PHOTO CREDIT: LOAKE

on the point of securing contracts to make Loake shoes as outsource partners.

Mr Torres says he hopes this will happen and insists companies in the city and the surrounding area have the skills, expertise and high-quality materials to be able to carry out the work. Contacts have also been established with other international footwear brands for which he harbours similar ambitions. Companies he names as already having had discussions with Cofoce include Clarks, Burberry and Timberland. "Good Mexican footwear brands are already well established in Guanajuato," he says, "but we also believe we can convince these major international names that our offering is a good one."

A fundamental element of this offering is the access to high-quality leather in the location. Not only is the local tanning sector unusually strong in the number of tanneries operating there (some of which are admittedly small), but there is quality too. "This is at the heart of our approach to companies such as Loake, the Cofoce director continues. "We have been involved for some time with the Leather Working Group (LWG) and we now have 13 or 14 tanneries that have come through audits and received accreditation."

The LWG is a multi-stakeholder group that assesses the environmental performance of tanneries and awards gold, silver and bronze status to those achieving the best results. It has won the backing of important footwear brands; Deckers is one of a number that have committed to sourcing leather only from LWG-accredited tanneries by the end of 2013. 



The Anpic exhibition in León. Loake has visited the show and sourced some sole leather from tanneries in the area, but, despite local newspaper claims to the contrary, has not yet made a decision on outsourcing production of some of its finished shoes to this part of Mexico. PHOTO CREDIT: ANPIC