

Emma and Timothy Batten.

ALL IMAGES: ROBIN BANGERTER



Hidden dilemmas

Much of the advanced technology used by today's footwear industry has little in common with that of fifty years ago and even less with that of one hundred years back. In the current world of robotics and digital control, it is therefore both surprising and rather refreshing to find a footwear producer still using methods that have not essentially changed in over one hundred and fifty years.

Needless to say, the product involved is highly specialised and the output extremely small. It is also of the very highest quality as regards materials used, the primarily hand skills employed to produce it and the attention paid to

every detail of the finished article. It is in every sense a world away from the modern shoe factory, yet this business is now over 200 years old, has remained in the same family for all that time and intends to continue well into the future.

HORACE BATTEN (BOOTMAKER) LTD

William Batten began making boots entirely by hand in 1804. At that time even the uppers were hand-stitched and output was limited to just one pair per week because of the high work content involved. The Batten family has continued to make the very best quality riding boots ever since. Based in Northamptonshire, today's business was

established by Horace Batten in 1922. He was followed by his son Horace Lampard Batten, then his grandson Timothy, who currently runs the business with his daughter Emma, William's great, great, great, great granddaughter.

During all those years with the exception of the use of sewing machines to stitch the uppers and a few other basic items of machinery, very little has changed in the way that Batten boots are made. What has changed out of all recognition however is the rapidly changing world in which such a small business now operates and the dilemmas it faces as a consequence.

The traditional English riding boot



Figure 1 – The elegant look to a Horace Batten boot is created by the unique shape of the trees used in its manufacture.

combines strict functionality with an elegance of shape in a way that few other items of footwear ever achieve. Of key importance, the boot needs to be a good tight fit in order to support the ankle and leg in the event of a fall. The best way to achieve this is for the boots to be made to measure for each individual, as not only does this ensure a snug fit around the leg but also allows the crucial heel to throat measurement to be as tight as possible yet still allow ingress and egress of the foot. Even so, riding boots are by their very nature notoriously difficult to put on and take off. It is this element of shape that creates the first dilemma.

A SHAPE DILEMMA

Batten's small output does not need many lasts and so wooden ones often many years old are still used. Either a pair closest in size to the client's measurements is altered by adding small patches of leather called 'fittings' until the best possible fit is achieved or they can choose to have their 'own' pair made from scratch. Unlike conventional boots and shoes, riding boots also need 'trees' to give the final shape to their

legs. These are critical to the final appearance of the boots and Timothy Batten considers the special shape his grandfather developed during the 1930s is what gives a 'Horace Batten' boot its unique profile (Figure 1).

It can however create a dilemma with a client who has a more generously proportioned leg. Riding boots can of course be made for almost any size of leg, but there is no denying that a slim leg always looks best which is why women wear high heels that slim down their calves. The same therefore applies to boots and when part of a product's mystique is its elegant shape, how far is it safe to compromise that shape without damaging the product's image?

AN EXCLUSIVITY DILEMMA

The manufacture of most products generally involves an element of compromise for a variety of reasons, most often in regard to reducing costs. Batten makes only the very best quality boots. Its clientele is drawn primarily from the hunting fraternity, the military and equestrian sports such as polo and eventing. They are somewhat limited in

number and, as a pair of Batten boots can last for over thirty years (Figure 2), clients are also more likely to send a pair of boots for repair and refurbishment than order new ones.

They also appreciate real quality and derive discrete pleasure in owning a pair. Batten has responded to this by maintaining a low profile with no branding or other form of ostentation. The only way to recognise if someone is wearing a pair of Batten boots is by owning a pair yourself and knowing what to look for. Indeed, new clients are invariably the result of a friend's personal recommendation.

The problem facing a business like this is therefore whether to maintain this high but discrete reputation and wait for clients to come to you or compromise a little and become more marketing orientated in the hope this will attract a wider spread of clients and so increase revenue and output? There will always be people who will pay for the very best, especially if they perceive it as being truly exclusive. Dilute that exclusivity and there is a danger of putting at risk the very client base which forms the foundation of the business.



Figure 2 - A pair of ladies hunting boots made in 1982 that remain totally sound after thirty years of use.



Figure 3 – A bootmaker needs a range of skills that take time to learn and then hone to perfection.

A MATERIAL DILEMMA

The number of materials needed to produce a handmade riding boot is small, just upper leather, lining leather, bottoming leather, hemp for thread and assorted waxes, polishes and other general bits and pieces. Supply would therefore seem a simple exercise; it is not. The calf upper leather used is at the top end for weight and must be blemish free due to the large patterns involved. This means skins have to be specially selected and processed at the tannery. Although this makes the finished leather extremely expensive that, in itself, is not the problem.

The real difficulty is volume as although one pair of boots uses up one average skin the fact that Batten only produces a few pairs per week means that its usage is relatively tiny. Tanners require minimum quantities and the current supplier has recently announced a quadrupling of its minimum order which, while still very small by most industry standards, will nevertheless take Batten a year to consume. At the high prices involved, it will also tie up a degree of capital in proportion to turnover that would horrify any normal financial director.

The position could be eased if a lighter material was used. This though would require a much heavier calf lining to compensate and, in turn, create another supply problem. Even more important as far as Timothy Batten is concerned is that the finished boots would not be as sturdy as they are at present and also lose their shape more easily. So, despite the cost factor involved, he considers this would be a quality compromise that would not be wise.

AN EMPLOYEE DILEMMA

The small number of people involved in businesses such as Batten clearly poses a risk in cases of ill health. Most footwear producers can normally fill such gaps by transferring other employees. In Batten's case, the specialised skills involved render this next to impossible (Figure 3). Fortunately, there is a let out in that clients expect to have to wait weeks for their boots to be completed and a few extra days delay does not have the same impact that it would on a conventional supply chain.

More of a problem is that of finding people of the right skill level in the first place. While the pace of hand

shoemaking does allow a person to work on well after normal retirement age if they so wish, they will inevitably at some point have to stop and a replacement found. This creates possibly the biggest dilemma of all, whether to try to seek out someone who already has the skills needed or to start from scratch and train up a young person.

In the first instance, the pool of such people is extremely limited and it is also highly unlikely that the best would not already be in work or that their current employer would want to let them go. A Batten boot is made to the very highest standards, so only the best will do. The alternative of training up a young person would therefore seem sensible in terms of continuity.

The problem is finding suitable candidates in an age where young people have been led to expect well paid jobs from day one, rather than starting at the bottom and learning a skilled trade over time. While some may be happy to work with computer controlled shoe machinery, businesses such as Horace Batten that rely on traditional methods can appear less attractive.

A CLIENT DILEMMA

There is a further people dilemma; that of reaching a clear mutual understanding with the clients themselves as to the entire 'bespoke' process. Batten needs to know much more about a client than simply their measurements and the type of boot they want. For example, the type of horse they ride and how they ride it have a bearing on the final fit of the boots. In return, clients need to appreciate that producing their boots will take time and effort. For instance, they may not fit perfectly first time so adjustments must be made until they do.

Most clients either already appreciate this and are keen participants in the whole process of their boots' manufacture or soon become so. A good personal working relationship between supplier and customer is essential in producing a bespoke product. Clients who expect all the input to come from the other side not only make life more difficult for all concerned but are inevitably the hardest to satisfy. While there are always a few like this, the vast majority fortunately fall into the former category and so gain the most from their investment. 