

The famous Clarks desert boot. Galahad Clark says he is still "proud and passionate" about what Clarks does.

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Seventh-generation shoemaker is a barefoot believer

If you have roots near the town of Street, Somerset, in the south-west of England and bear the (admittedly common) name Clark, the chances are you will soon be asked if you have an association with the famous footwear brand. Clarks was founded there by two brothers, Cyrus and James Clark, in 1825; their specialism was making slippers from the sheepskins that were easy to source in that part of the world.

James Clark's great-grandson, Nathan, went on to develop one of the brand's most iconic ever products, the desert boot, which he brought to the industry's attention in 1949. Nathan Clark was serving in the Second World War when he noticed soldiers wearing rough suede boots with crepe soles. They had come from local tradesmen in Cairo's Old Bazaar, specially commissioned by men from South Africa, whose veldtschoen (boots sewn from soft, flexible hides, with a

Galahad Clark's family has been involved in footwear production since 1825, which lends a certain weight to his belief that all shoe designs should mimic the bare human foot.

reliable grip for walking on sand or rocks) had worn out. "I thought a version of these boots would make a good all-round shoe," he said in an interview later in his life, so he created one for Clarks. At first the company was less than keen, thinking that suede shoes for men would not sell, but Mr Clark took samples of the boot to the 1949 Chicago Shoe Fair, where they proved popular.

Family ties

Seven generations on from Cyrus and James, Galahad Clark is making his own impression on the footwear world, having previously co-founded heels fashion brand United Nude and now concentrating on minimalist brand Vivo Barefoot. If, in doing so, he is holding onto family traditions, he is only just clinging onto the family firm by his toe-nails. "When they were still manufacturing in England, the whole town was pretty much a Clarks town," the Vivo Barefoot founder says of Street, which he still visits frequently. "The family desperately tried to keep the factories in the UK going, right up until the late 1980s and early 1990s. It tried every manufacturing trick in the book to do so. In the end, the company did get into a bit of trouble and was nearly sold."

The business now has its shoes made by outsource manufacturing partners, mostly in Asia and the Americas, but still runs its own design and distribution business from Street. It has around 200 shareholders, not all of whom are called Clark, but who do all have a link to the original family.

Private affair

When a hostile bid to buy Clarks was tabled in the early 1990s, Galahad Clark was still at school. "I was watching from afar really," he recalls, "but I'll never forget that moment. The company was still completely owned by the family and it went to a vote. My father (Lance Clark) was fighting to keep the company private. He was part of the last generation of family management. Other parts of the family were opposed. We are all friends now. But I remember the day of the vote and it was very, very anxious. People were being helicoptered in to sell shares from one camp to the other and it was 50.5% to 49.5% in favour of the decision not to sell."

It was as part of this process that the family agreed to bring in outside management, and, with Vivo Barefoot to concentrate on, Galahad Clark does not seem to feel he missed out too much. "Luckily Clarks has remained in family hands," he says. "I've never really done anything of any consequence in Clarks, but it's been great to sit on the sidelines at least and see that happen."

Educated owner

He pays tribute to having been brought up in the shoe business and has clear memories of his father "baking shoes in the oven in the family kitchen". Lance Clark told him straight that he was under no obligation to go into the footwear business, but said he hoped his son would end up as the owner of a footwear business and that it would be for the best for him to be "an educated owner". This meant spending "a lot of child labour years" on shoe production lines in various places.

But he got away, for a time. Galahad Clark ended up going to university in the US, specifically at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It was the late 1990s and he became interested in rap music. It transpired that the members of his favourite rap group, the Wu-Tang Clan, were devotees of a famous Clarks product, the Wallabee moccasin. Presented with a chance to hang out with his favourite musicians, he says now that he "allowed myself to be sucked back into the footwear business". While still at university, he developed a product he called Wu-Shoes. He enjoyed the project, even though it was what he describes as a dismal failure, and "just got the bug", he explains.



Galahad Clark says that while there are lots of designs for shoes, there is really only one for the human foot.

CREDIT: UNITED NUDE

Pure experience

He co-founded United Nude with Dutch architect Rem D Koolhaas soon after returning to Europe and later, in 2009, formally set up Vivo Barefoot. He says he cannot really take any credit for this brand, which claims to offer the "original and most pure barefoot experience available", with its shoes that have zero-drop, anatomic width, total flexibility and ultra-thin, puncture-resistant soles. A lifelong friend, Tim Brennan, had long been interested in what we now call barefoot shoes, having grown tired of sports injuries, especially from playing tennis, and attributing his physical problems to the sports shoes he had been wearing. "He told me that we needed to make shoes that would allow us to be as close to barefoot as possible," Mr Clark recalls. "I instinctively loved the idea and we started developing shoes together. There are many different philosophies on shoe design, but there is only one on foot design. These shoes allow the foot to do its natural thing."

He points out that it took until 2011 for him to learn fully about biodynamics and some of the technical aspects of making barefoot shoes, but says that now that he can consider himself "educated" on the subject, he has become more convinced than ever that all shoes should be designed this way. Even Clarks shoes.

"I hope that we might work together one day," he says of the global footwear corporation that bears his family's name. "I've made the offer once or twice but we haven't got there yet." He sees the irony and the difficulty in the proposal. Vivo Barefoot goes round the world telling people they should wear as little 'shoe' as possible, while Clarks sold around £1.5 billion worth of the products in 2014. He describes the corporation as a "big ship" and says he understands that it's not fair to ask it to "turn on a halfpenny". But he insists the world is moving in the direction of barefoot and that science to back up the claims its devotees make is starting to come through. He still feels "proud and passionate about Clarks", but believes strongly in what he is doing now. 🧠