

Jonathan (left) and William Church in the Cheaney flagship store.

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The complicated intertwining of the stories of Northampton footwear brands Cheaney and Church's began in the late nineteenth century. Now two Church cousins own and run Cheaney. By the early part of 2016 they had grown the workforce by 80%, doubled turnover and won a prestigious export award.

Cheaney twists and turns produce success

English footwear-brand Joseph Cheaney has been awarded the Queen's Award for Enterprise, a business award conferred on UK companies with a high level of performance in international trade. It is the third time in Cheaney's history that it has won this accolade.

Joseph Cheaney has been making traditional English shoes in Northamptonshire since 1886. Eighty years later, the Cheaney company was acquired by another famous Northampton men's footwear firm, Church's. In 1999, luxury group Prada acquired Church's, with Cheaney transferring too, to become part of Prada's new English subsidiary. Four years later, Prada decided to sell a 55% of Church's to a private equity group, but bought that stake back in 2006. Statements at the time talked of Prada's commitment to continuing Church's "rigorous dedication to craftsmanship and the label's quintessential English identity", but footwear industry observers will recall that there was plenty of confusion at the time, exacerbated by the start of the global economic downturn a couple of years later.

Shortly after that, in 2009, two representatives of the fifth generation of the Church family to be involved in the business, cousins Jonathan and William Church, came up with a plan for a return to simpler times. Buying Church's back from Prada would have been difficult. The two cousins have never spoken in public of a desire to do that, and Prada has continued to hold Church's up as a brand it is proud of as a successful component of the Italian luxury group. In any case, they might have found it difficult to talk their bank managers into a purchase of Church's; the 2006 deal to reacquire the 55% stake Prada had sold, valued Church's at almost seventeen times the amount it had paid the family seven years before - £108 million.

Instead, they decided to focus on Cheaney and convinced Prada to allow them to carry out a management buy-out of the Cheaney brand. They now own and run Joseph Cheaney & Sons.

While always highly regarded among shoe aficionados, at the time of the buy-out Cheaney was best known in the trade as a contract manufacturer. The Church cousins have long believed they can build the Cheaney brand up and give it a new lease

The Tweed boot: a tribute to tradition and craftsmanship.





of life. William Church says: "It had all the right ingredients, a strong heritage, its own UK factory and a skilled local workforce. Being independent gave us the opportunity to raise the profile of Cheaney, as a brand in its own right, both in the UK and internationally."

The company justly describes itself as having "a rich manufacturing heritage". It has been handcrafting its shoes, cutting out the leather, stitching and final polishing in the same factory in Desborough, 30 kilometres north of Northampton, since 1886. It takes eight weeks and up to 200 different hand operations to make a pair of the brand's Goodyear-welted shoes.

Since the buyout in 2009, Cheaney's turnover has more than doubled (from £4m to £9.6m), while exports have tripled and now account for nearly one-third of the company's turnover. Around 80% of export sales come from Europe and Asia, with Italy being Cheaney's biggest market in Europe, and Japan its largest export market overall.

"The Japanese have a huge respect for well made tailored goods, and for the 'Made in England brand,'" Jonathan Church says. "The market has been challenging, but we have managed to grow our share and we still see great potential in the Japanese market."

In addition, Cheaney has a growing presence in Germany, Belgium, France, the US, Canada, Scandinavia and the Middle East. The company has also taken part in trade missions with the UK department of trade and industry. Exercises of this kind have taken place recently to South Korea, Russia, Malaysia and Taiwan, with local embassies carrying out market research and arranging relevant customer contacts and appointments.

Cheaney's workforce has grown from 90 (when the Churches bought the company) to over 160 skilled craftsmen and women now, some of whom are fifth-generation employees themselves. The company says it places importance on training and passing on these skills to the next generation by employing apprentices "to continue the craft in Northamptonshire".

CHEANEY TIMELINE

- **1886** – Joseph Cheaney starts his own shoemaking business in Desborough, Northamptonshire.
- **1896** – The company moves to a new factory, which is where production still takes place today.
- **1930** – Joseph H Cheaney, the founder's grandson, joined the company and stayed in the business until his retirement in 1981. It was he who pioneered expanding the business into export markets.
- **1966** – The company achieved export accolade the Queen's Award for the first time.
- **1966** – Cheaney was acquired by Church's.
- **1971** – Cheaney wins the Queen's Award for a second time.
- **1999** – Church's (and Cheaney with it) was acquired by Prada.
- **2002** – The first flagship Cheaney store opened in London.
- **2003** – Prada sells a 55% stake in Church's to a private equity group.
- **2006** – Prada buys the 55% stake back.
- **2009** – Cousins William and Jonathan Church effect a management buy-out of Cheaney.
- **2016** – Cheaney wins the Queen's Award for the third time, 130 years after it was founded.