



Lotus veldtschoen boots circa 1920.

CREDIT: NORTHAMPTON MUSEUM & ART GALLERY

Guaranteed waterproof

his is a bold statement to make with regard to footwear. Not water resistant, which would allow for possible ingress of water under extreme circumstances, but proof against it under any conditions. Modern polyurethane-based membrane technologies from companies such as Gore-Tex or OutDry, do indeed guarantee dry and warm feet under the harshest conditions. Although they are now taken for granted, they are a comparatively recent development, so what went before them?

The earliest form of footwear that

could be said to be waterproof was imported into the US during the 1820s from Brazil. It used a crude process originally invented by indigenous people centuries earlier whereby a crude last (originally dried mud) was dipped into latex. This formed a skin which, once smoke dried, could be pulled off to create a simple 'overshoe' that could be worn over conventional footwear as a waterproof protection. Marketed under the name Fabricas they proved highly successful.

In mid- century, it was discovered that heating rubber with sulphur and a few other ingredients (vulcanisation)

changed its properties so that it no longer became sticky when warm or brittle when cold. The addition of fillers, using new milling and mixing technologies, created a wide range of vulcanised rubber products among which were Galoshes that worked in the same way as the Fabricas overshoes and, more importantly, the 'Wellington' boot which was a fully waterproof item of footwear in its own right.

It is difficult to say who actually invented it, but the North British Rubber Company appears to have been the first to use the name and for a number of years the company gradually expanded

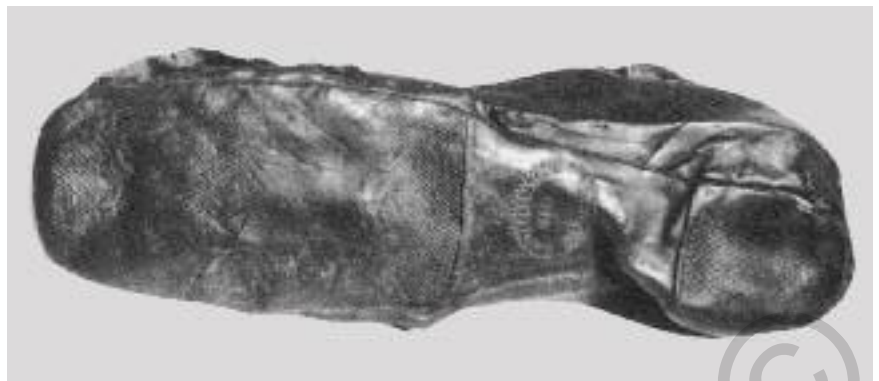
its market until the advent of World War I transformed its fortunes with a demand from the British War Office for a strong boot suitable for trench warfare where conditions were frequently waterlogged. Over 1.1 million pairs were produced by the time the war ended.

Although the boots were waterproof, they were also uncomfortable to wear for prolonged periods as, unlike modern moulded PU or membrane boots, they had poor insulation properties. Consequently, the wearer's feet were either hot or, bearing in mind conditions in trenches, extremely cold. While ordinary soldiers had to wear what they were issued with, whether comfortable or not, officers bought their own uniforms and boots. As they had to endure the same conditions, they searched for boots that were comfortable as well as waterproof, and were prepared to pay the price if they could find any.

VELDTSCHOEN

The answer already existed in the form of an ingenious combination of two traditional shoe constructions, veldtschoen and Goodyear welted. The veldtschoen or stitch down, is a simple construction where the upper is lasted out and down to a runner and sole, and then stitched through round the edge. Although its origins are uncertain, it was widely used by Dutch Voortrekkers during the Great Trek of 1836 when they migrated northwards from British rule in the Cape Colony of South Africa. These shoes were made from untanned game hide and could be easily produced using the simplest of tools. The British Army came across the name during the Boer War at the end of the 19th century and it was adopted by the British shoe industry for the stitch down construction.

According to Rebecca Shawcross, Senior Shoe Curator at the Northampton Museum and Art Gallery which has a large collection devoted to the development of footwear through the ages, there were several British patents taken out for a veldtschoen type construction, but not calling it by that name, in 1843, 1856 and 1860. Although a simple construction, it did have one valuable feature. As the upper was lasted out and down, water would run off the edge of the shoe. This made it more water resistant than constructions where the upper was lasted in as, for example,



Mid 19th century vulcanised rubber overshoe.

CREDIT: M MOSHER

welted. It did, however, lack the latter's structural strength and repairability. Bringing the two together, however, you combine the advantages of both.

CONSTRUCTION

The welted veldtschoen construction therefore involves lasting the lining in and the upper out. While involving more operations than making a conventional Goodyear welted shoe, it is in fact relatively straightforward. The upper material needs to be relatively thick (1.8-2.0mm) and as water resistant as possible. The material traditionally used was Martins 'Zug', a pebble grain embossed full grain leather that had been tanned with a high grease and oil content. This made it highly water resistant and malleable enough to assist

the double lasting process. The lining also needs to be relatively thick (1.2-1.4mm) and of good quality. As a further aid to resisting the ingress of water, the uppers of veldtschoen boots and shoes always feature a 'bellows' tongue.

The upper is lasted as for a conventional welted boot or shoe with an all round welt except that the toe puff and counter are bonded to the lining only, allowing the upper to be then folded back out of the way. A slightly wider than normal welt is then sewn in all round, securing the lining, toe puff and counter to the insole rib (Figure 1). Adhesive is then applied to the flesh side of the upper and the top side of the welt, and the upper lasted down to the welt making sure it is well pressed into the feather. This is done

Welted veldtschoen construction

Figure 1

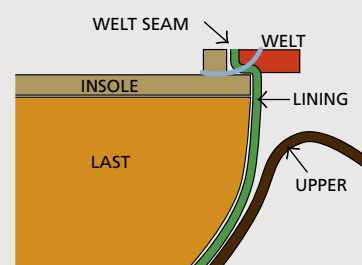


Figure 2

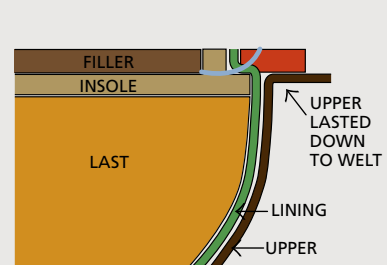


Figure 3

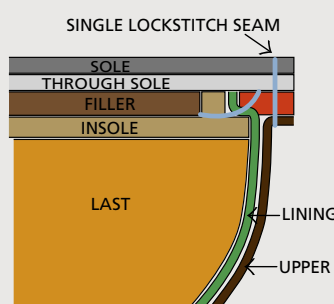
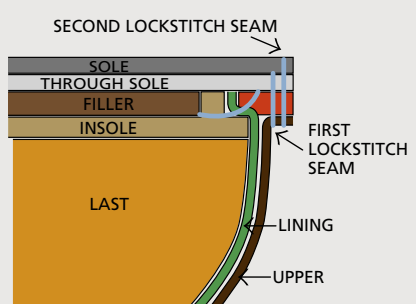


Figure 4



either by hand followed by welt beating or by the use of veldtschoen lasting machines if available. A wood shank and cork composite bottom filler are then added ready for the through sole and outsole to be attached (*Figure 2*).

The construction can now go in one of two directions: single stitch or double stitch. In the first, a through sole and an outsole are temporarily attached with rubber adhesive as on a normal welted shoe. The shoe is then rough rounded with a groove being cut into the top surface of the outsole to take the sole stitching. It is then lockstitched all round with the top thread tight to the feather and the bottom thread lying in the groove (*Figure 3*). It is then heeled and finished in the conventional manner. If the outsole is moulded rubber, as is often the case, there will be no groove cut so that the bottom thread lies on the surface of the sole. This is known as 'stitching aloft'.

The second method has only the through sole attached and stitched aloft without rough rounding. The outsole is then attached, the shoe rough rounded and stitched using a scotch edge attachment to space this second seam away from the first (*Figure 4*). The shoe is then heeled and finished as before. While more time consuming and expensive to produce, this method

makes multiple repairs much easier as the outsole can be stripped off and replaced without damaging the integrity of the basic construction. Welted veldtschoen boots and shoes made this way can have very long lives indeed.

BACKGROUND

The earliest mention of 'Veldtschoen Boots' appeared in 1890 in the sales catalogue of Manfield & Sons, a major footwear manufacturer in Northampton. The best known producer however was Bostock & Sons, renamed Lotus Ltd in 1919, the name by which the company is probably better known. Its range of veldtschoen boots and shoes appears to have been launched in 1912 and, by 1915, they were certainly being heavily promoted by advertising aimed at officers' families with the inference that their sons would withstand the trenches better in a pair of 'guaranteed waterproof' boots.

Veldtschoens remained popular long after 1919 for golfing, hiking and shooting, and a number of UK manufacturers produced them. Lotus remained very much the leading brand and continued to make them up until the 1980s when it finally went out of business. There is in fact a cult following for genuine original Lotus 'Officer's Boots' where high prices are

paid for old specimens which, despite being over 50 years ago, can still be repaired and given a new lease of life.

FACT OR FICTION

But are they truly waterproof? For many years, Cordings of Piccadilly, London, the famous traditional shop for hunting, shooting and fishing clothes and equipment, had in its window a pair of Lotus Veldtschoen Boots sitting in a bucket of water with a notice saying 'guaranteed waterproof'. Did any customer actually check they were still dry inside? It is very doubtful as this would be seen as questioning the shop's integrity and running the risk of being turned away as 'not the sort of customer they wanted'.

That was another age however and modern veldtschoens are certainly not marketed as being 'waterproof'. No sane manufacturer would dare do so; water resistant certainly. Modern technology has made such claims entirely possible for today's outdoor boots and shoes. In 1915, shoe manufacturers had only conventional materials with which to produce their boots and, where advanced technology did not exist, ingenuity certainly did. It certainly served the young officer well during his often all too brief young life. 🍷



Veldtschoens remained a popular country shoe with the styling remaining true to the original.

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