

The English shoemaker's best-selling styles are based on lasts that are 80 years old.

Tricker's celebrates lasting value



England's only surviving hand-made shoemaker recently celebrated the 80th anniversary of two of its lasts, which are still being used to make its best-selling styles.

The first, 4444 – “all the fours” – is used to make the company's Wilson country brogues, while last 4497 is the basis for its Stow range of boots.

The 188-year-old company describes the Stow as the “cornerstone” of the brand and is based on a design that former head of the company Walter James Barltrop drew in 1840 when he was just seven years old! Mr Barltrop later married into the Tricker family and generations of his descendants have been at the helm ever since.

For such a traditional and close-held family business, bringing in an outsider to manage the day-to-day running two years ago was a bold move. Chairman Nick Barltrop spent months on the search process and eventually hired Martin Mason, formerly CEO of fashion brands Nicole Farhi and Lulu Guinness, as managing director. He in turn hired David Jeffery, brother of shoe brand co-owner Mark Jeffery of Jeffery-West, to look after sales and to help “bring Trickers into the 21st century” in terms of a new website, social media and “all the peripherals that go with it”, explains Mr Jeffery.

Although UK shoe manufacturing in general has been in decline for many decades, the men's businesses around Northampton have witnessed something of a revival over the past few years. Brands including Church's, Cheaney and

Crocket & Jones have reported increased sales – up to a third more a year in some cases – as new strategies propel them to undersold markets. Tricker's relaunched its website in 2015 to make it a fully functional ecommerce site and garnered celebrity endorsements including British actor Tom Hughes and, more recently, style blogger Jonathan Daniel Pryce, known as GarconJon.

“We have been very fortunate over the years that customers in our three main markets (the UK, Italy and Japan) have always been big fans but we know through our web sales that there are customers in other parts of the world who want to buy Tricker's,” explains Mr Jeffery. “Brands now have to have a multi-tier level of communication, whether that's our website, or our flagship store in Jermyn Street, London, that's been there since 1936; whether it's Instagram or Twitter, or through brand ambassadors.”

Landed gentry

When the company was founded in 1829, its speciality was heavy country boots for the landed gentry and for farmers, who needed hardwearing weatherproof shoes. Over the last 30 years or so the focus has shifted to fashion sales, as the demand for well-made leather shoes for the office, or to wear more casually, grew. “We do still sell to farms and that fraternity, because our shoes are so sturdy and well made,” says Mr Jeffery, “and we offer a full resole and repair service.”

To mark the launch of the seasonal collection Tricker's have worked with GarçonJon, London's leading men's street style photographer Jonathan Daniel Pryce.

ALL CREDITS: TRICKER



For almost 200 years, Tricker's has been hand crafting shoes from its Northampton factory.

We get shoes coming back after 40 years to be resoled and reheelled. I think anyone that buys into Tricker's product understands that they are buying into something that they are going to have for a long period of time."

The shoes are still made in the Northampton factory which the business moved into in 1904, with just over 1,000 pairs produced per week by a team of around 90. Each is the result of 260 individual processes.

The company also offers a bespoke service, which includes a last made for each customer. The intricate nature of the work requires a vast amount of skill as the shoemakers even make the cord used to stitch the leather together. These shoes can take between six and nine months to complete.

"The only way to learn these skills is to work with people who've been in the business for a long time," explains Mr Jeffery. Mr Mason has made a conscious effort to set up apprenticeships in various parts of the business, as young people are seen as key to the company's longevity. "Convincing them to come into the industry is one of the biggest challenges for many of the Northamptonshire shoe brands," says Mr Jeffery, as many footwear students are more interested in the design side or see shoemaking as less glamorous. "However, the ones that do come in are very good and very keen to learn. It gets under your skin."

Adele Williamson, the company's first female apprentice, was recently recognised as a Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust scholar in the art of shoemaking. "This is great, not only for her own skills and training but also because it strengthens our bond with the royal family."

Royal connection

Tricker's is one of only a handful of British shoemakers to hold the Royal Warrant, which means it supplies to the royal household and has to comply with strict environmental, social and ethical standards, which are audited every few years. "Prince Charles likes to see that we are getting apprentices into the business," says Mr Jeffery. "The warrant is very valuable for

any company, it gives you that extra credibility. We are very proud to have it and it's something that we will strive to keep."

Asian customers are particularly keen on it, he adds, and they make up a large percentage of sales. Around 40% is sold in the UK and Europe, with a third reaching Japan, and the rest of the world accounting for the remainder. "We've been too reliant on the three main markets," he admits, "and we need to now look at areas where we can grow – America, South Korea and China."

At the heart of the company's success is excelling in a niche, which Jeffery suggests is country shoes and boots. The leathers are sourced from France, Italy and Germany, with a small amount from Horween in the US, and suedes from Charles F Stead in England. The company recently hired a leather buyer from rival brand John Lobb to manage the relationships with the tanneries and agents. Like all companies that use leather as a raw material, its rapid price increase in 2014 weighed on margins, as has the falling pound against the euro (the Brexit vote in June 2016 sent sterling down to its lowest level since 1985).

"It's the way of the world, you have to absorb it as much as possible," says Mr Jeffery. "After labour, the second biggest cost is raw material and most of our raw materials come from Europe, which puts a bit of pressure on the business. We are quite fortunate that we invoice in euros to our European buyers, so as long as we're invoicing more than we're buying, it all balances out."

Feet on the ground

From a design perspective, Tricker's launched its first seasonal collection last October, and for spring/summer 2017, its first lightweight summer shoe and boots. The unlined, single-welted collection comprises a lace-up boot, loafer, oxford and monk shoe with flexible leather soles, available in new brown, coffee or navy.

As well as diversifying the product offering, expanding the footprint is on the agenda, with the business currently in discussions to open shop-in-shops in Tokyo, with an eye on opening standalone stores in major cities around the globe in the future.

"Our customers are very fastidious about heritage and provenance, and I think that's becoming a global thing, not just with the Japanese," says Mr Jeffery. "If you're spending a lot of money, whether on a watch or on footwear, customers don't just want to buy into a product, they want to buy into a brand that's making it with the same traditions that they did many years ago."

Last year, UK shoe companies produced around 5.7 million pairs of shoes worth £360 million, similar figures to 2015. However, between 2010 and 2015, the industry increased its output by more than 30%, according to the British Footwear Association, driven mainly by the Northamptonshire-based brands.

The area's association with history and quality is one reason Tricker's would never outsource any production, even if the order book grows, insists Mr Jeffery. "We have always been proud to make everything in the factory in Northampton; being true to the roots of the company is what makes us credible and gives us provenance. We have to stay true to the family values of making quality footwear from the most durable leathers, and that's what we want to continue doing." 