



IMAGE: CLARKS

Clarks goes back to its roots

Up until it closed the doors of its factory in Millom in the North West of England in 2006, footwear brand Clarks had been manufacturing shoes in the UK for more than 180 years. It was founded in Street, Somerset in 1825; although production was transferred to Asia in 2005, the village continued to be the location for the brand's headquarters as well as where it designed all of its shoes.

Clarks' announcement in July that it will reshore some of its production means Street will again assume at least a small portion of the important manufacturing role it once held. The company plans to manufacture its Desert Boot, a product first made in 1950, at this new manufacturing unit. They are currently made in Vietnam and India but Clarks says it will make up to 300,000 pairs a year in the UK once the facility is operational at the start of 2018.

This limited reshoring will create up to 80 "technical and managerial" jobs in Street, according to Clarks. The traditional shoemaking skills that have served as the brand's backbone will be complemented by what it calls "robot-assisted technology", which it will apply to specific shoe construction for the first time. It insists this "innovative, unique volume production method" will allow it to respond more quickly to the demands of consumers and of its global wholesale partners.

A little over a century since the birth of its creator, Nathan Clark, the iconic Clarks Desert Boot will soon be returning to British shores after the footwear group unveiled plans to bring some manufacturing back to the UK.

"The 21st century craftsmanship that we are introducing will lead to and encourage innovation in shoe design. It will be transformative to the process of how we design and develop shoes," Mike Shearwood, chief executive of Clarks, predicts.

He explains that "the changing global order" is forcing Clarks to reconsider the way in which it operates as a business. Reshoring of some production is just one aspect of this. He believes the company must innovate if it wishes to remain "at the forefront of shoemaking".

British boost

The news was welcomed by the British Footwear Association (BFA), which has supported shoe manufacturers in

the UK for more than 100 years. "It is important for a number of reasons," John Saunders, chief executive of the BFA, tells *World Footwear*. "Firstly, it is a vote of confidence in the future financial viability of footwear manufacturing in the UK. It also gives a major boost for investment in new technology which points the way to other possible future growth in capacity. Finally, it puts the focus on the UK footwear manufacturing sector at a time when the government is focused on reshoring and rebuilding the country's manufacturing skills."

He suspects Clarks has taken this decision in response to "global interest and demand for footwear and other consumer goods that are made as well as designed in the UK". It will give the company greater control over key areas of its supply chain, he adds.

When asked if this could herald a wider shift back towards shoe manufacturing in the UK, Mr Saunders revealed the BFA knows of other footwear companies that are exploring the viability of reshoring key elements of their manufacturing, such as upper closing.

He says the UK government can play its part in this by supporting investment via tax breaks and by encouraging more training in shoemaking skills. The BFA works closely with UK manufacturers through the government's 'Trailblazers' programme, which is helping to develop new apprenticeship standards in entry-level manufacturing and in more advanced shoemaking.

Clarks expects its new facility to be operational in early 2018 "subject to planning permission and other requirements". It is considering rolling out similar manufacturing units at other locations in the US, Europe and Asia; this would give it a network of regional supply hubs, allowing it to shorten its lead times and respond more quickly to changes in consumer demand. 



Clarks' headquarters in Street, Somerset.

THE DESERT BOOT



CREDIT: C & J CLARK ARCHIVE

The Desert Boot was the brainchild of Nathan Clark, great-grandson of Clarks founder James Clark. He has born in 1916 and throughout his life he played a leading role in developing the overseas business of his family's company.

While serving in Burma (now known as Myanmar) during the Second World War, Nathan Clark was fascinated by the rough suede boots with crepe soles that some of the soldiers wore when they were off duty. He learned that the soldiers had purchased them from a trader in the Old Bazaar in Cairo when they were serving in Egypt. The shoes had been specially made to cope with the desert conditions they encountered there.

He began cutting prototype patterns for his own version of the boots out of newspaper, sending these clippings, as well as some sketches, back to his brother at Clarks' headquarters in Street. The powers that be were far from impressed, however, proclaiming that the Desert Boot "will never sell".

Nathan Clark was undeterred. Upon his return to England he set about sourcing material for his design, which he based around a last that Clarks had used for a sandal. He chose to make the boot from suede from a nearby tannery, Charles F. Stead. The colour of the material resembled sand, in a nod to the Desert Boot's origins, and he added his own flourishes, such as orange stitching.

Despite his best efforts, Nathan Clark simply could not convince his superiors that the Desert Boot was a viable product, so he decided to try his luck on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. In 1949, he travelled to the Chicago Shoe Fair to present the shoe to a US audience, whose response was so positive that Clarks' decision makers were persuaded to start manufacturing the Desert Boot the following year.

It didn't gain any significant recognition in Europe until around 15 years later. The boots were especially popular among the French students who made headlines in May 1968 with their strikes and protests. In fact, its creator once recalled with great pride seeing television footage from Paris "where the students manning the barricades were all wearing Desert Boots".

Nathan Clark died in 2011, but his legacy is a shoe that remains a staple of the Clarks product range nearly 70 years after its creation.