

The footwear industry covers many manufacturers and products. Right at the pinnacle is the hand or bespoke shoemaker who exists in many countries around the world. The very best handmade shoes are arguably still made in London by a unique family-owned company.

The best bootmaker in the world

John Lobb was born in 1829, the son of an English farmer. An accident when he was twelve left him crippled in one leg so that following his father on the land was out of the question. He was therefore apprenticed to a bootmaker and over the next five years developed into a highly skilled craftsman.

He was a forceful young man with ambitions far beyond being merely a local bootmaker. That meant going to London, which he did, limping two hundred miles on foot. He went straight to the best bootmaker of the day, Thomas's in St James's Street, and demanded a job. Thomas was not impressed and threw him out. Lobb is said to have departed with

the words "I'll build a firm that will knock you sideways".

At this time boot and shoe making was easily the largest handicraft and the third most popular occupation in London. The 1841 census records no less than 28,574 craftsmen, so competition for work was high. Lobb decided that if he could not work for Thomas he would work for himself. But that required capital, so in 1851 he joined the Australian Gold Rush.

He started by making boots for prospectors including one with a hollow heel in which gold nuggets could be concealed. It was a great success. He



John Lobb the firm's founder

was paid in gold and within two years had accumulated sufficient funds to set up business in George Street, Sydney, where the elite tradesmen were centred. Although he prospered, he never lost his dream of becoming the best bootmaker in London and therefore the world.

By some means he discovered the foot measurements of the British Prince of Wales, made the best pair of riding boots of which he was capable and sent them to England with a request to be appointed the Prince's bootmaker. The ➤



Inside the shop at 9 St James's Street

WORLD FOOTWEAR

latter was impressed and in 1863 John Lobb received that most valuable of assets for a British tradesman, the accolade of a Royal Warrant. Armed with this he sold his business and sailed back to London in 1866. The firm of Lobb was on its way as was his dream of becoming 'the best bootmaker in the world'.

The most beautiful shop in the world

The company has lost nothing of its heritage and currently holds three Royal Warrants as Bootmaker to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh and His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. Now under the guiding hand of John Hunter Lobb, the present-day shop with its splendid wood-panelled interior has been described by *Esquire* magazine as 'The most beautiful shop in the world'. It also produces the most beautifully made shoes you could possibly hope to see.

So what is the secret? Simply the finest materials obtainable, highly skilled craftsmen using completely traditional hand methods, the strictest attention to every possible detail and plenty of time. It can take four months from the initial measuring of a customer's feet to final completion. It is also very, very expensive, with a pair of men's low shoes costing in excess of \$3,000.

Crazy? Maybe. But, Lobb promises that you will possess a pair of shoes that fit and complement your feet in every way, are the most comfortable you will ever wear and are a joy to own. They will also wear and wear. There is even a club, started by an American admiral, to which you can belong once your shoes are fifty years old. And yes, it has quite a few

members. Looked at in this light it could be seen as a good investment even allowing for inevitable repairs. Lobb shoes are also classics in design terms, so they should never date.

There is also no shortage of customers. As well as royalty, Lobb has shod the feet of presidents, noblemen, prime ministers, famous soldiers and sportsmen, singers, actors and authors. It even copes with wealthy eccentrics such as the American gentleman who visited London once a year and, while there, would put his head round the door and say, "Make me as many boots as you can by the end of the month before I go back." What a customer to have and, in fact, a substantial majority of shoes are made for US customers.

What goes into a pair of Lobb shoes?

An old adage says that 'you cannot make a silk purse from a sow's ear' and so at Lobb only the very best materials are used. Likewise, only the most skilled people can achieve the high standards of workmanship required to produce a pair of its shoes.

Firstly, the last maker takes an outline drawing of the feet and takes the joint, instep and instep-to-heel measurements.

He then shapes the lasts by hand from rough-turned beech blocks, taking into account any peculiarities or foot conditions. Many Lobb customers have foot problems. The lasts will also have heel height and toe-spring appropriate to the weight and style of shoe. The last shown here is for a man's formal court pump and so has a low half-inch heel and a narrow cone to provide a tight topline clip.

Existing customers' lasts are stored in the basement of the shop where at present there are over 11,000 pairs all numbered and recorded. When an existing customer orders a new pair of shoes, their lasts are taken out, their feet checked and any necessary alterations made. All new lasts and alterations are made in the shop and in full view of customers.

The next stage involves the closer who cuts the patterns as well as stitching the upper together. The traditional paper forme system is used as it is quick and perfectly acceptable for hand lasting. The paper patterns are passed on to the clicker who cuts all the upper pieces with



A classic Lobb shoe



Man's last for a formal dress pump shoe



Stored lasts



Traditional tools are used to produce patterns



Pair of golosh slip-on uppers

careful consideration to the relative thickness and directional stretch required for each one.

Upper leathers are mostly calf of the finest texture and sourced across Europe by an agent who reserves only perfect skins for the company. This of course means a high price must be paid but that is seen as secondary to quality. Similarly, waste when cutting upper sections is also secondary to quality and function for the particular style in question.

The upper sections then return to the closer who will skive them by hand and then stitch them together. The only mechanisation is a simple post sewing machine and all decorative stitching is done by hand using hemp thread and traditional pig's bristle made up by the closer. Stitch lengths are invariably fine and row spacing has to be exact. Toplines usually have an inserted 'slip-bead' instead of folding as this is stronger and more resistant to stretch.

At this level of shoemaking there is no room for any defect or mistake so nothing is ever rushed and, depending on work content, it may take a whole day to complete a pair of uppers.

Now it is the turn of the maker, a master of a wide range of skills who is responsible for lasting, sewing and finishing the shoe. Traditional English oak bark tanned leather is used for all the bottoming components, including toe-puffs and counters. This material is easy to work when damp and is extremely durable in wear. First, the insole is drafted over the bottom of the

last, allowed to dry, trimmed to shape and the sewing channels cut. Then the upper is mellowed and lasted tightly down to the wood with nails and the welt sewn in.

A leather shank and a tarred felt bottom filler are added and the sole sewn on using a channel cut at an angle around its edge which is then closed to conceal the seam. The sewing thread is again made from hemp with the weight varying according to the weight of the individual shoe—sole edges run from 1/8" to 1/2" (3-13 mm) in thickness, the former using very light welts and with the soles reduced around the edge. The heel is built up by gluing and tacking together successive layers, finishing with the top piece.

All the edges are trimmed, inked, waxed and ironed. The sole bottom is scraped smooth and colour washed—black for black shoes and natural for brown. The shoes are then left on

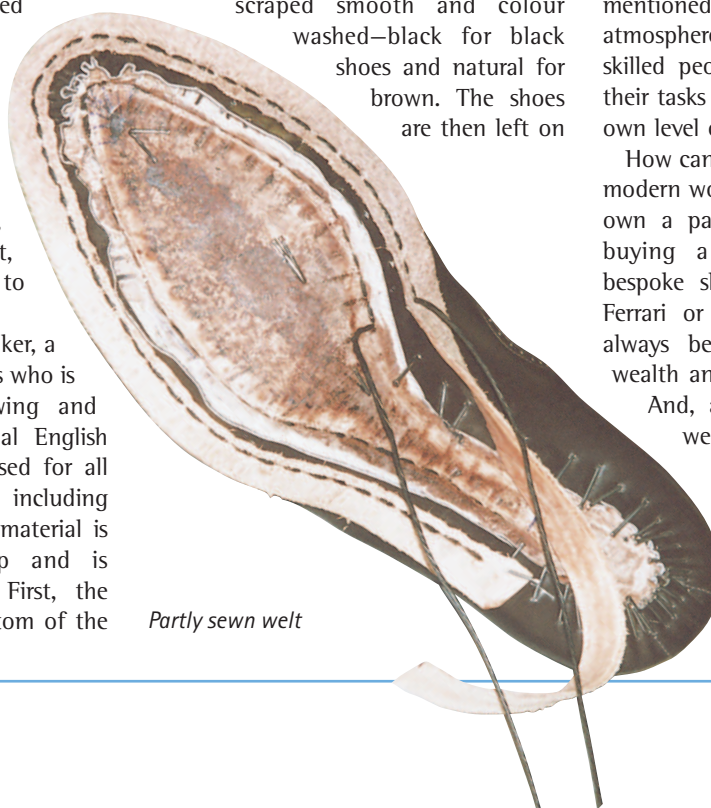
the last for at least a week before the polisher adds socks and laces and brings them up to the required lustre using creams and waxes. At the risk of repetition, all these many operations are completed entirely by hand.

A unique result

Only traditional skills, materials and methods are ever used and, in this, John Lobb is probably unique in today's footwear industry. The resulting shoes always fit perfectly. This is the direct result of precise last making and hand lasting that pulls the upper down the wood far tighter in every direction than any machine does. The obsessive attention to every detail is a further key factor and all this, coupled with the time and cost involved for a relatively small output, is what makes it so expensive. As mentioned, there is no rush. The whole atmosphere is one of calm, where highly skilled people are allowed to complete their tasks in their own time and to their own level of satisfaction.

How can such a business survive in the modern world? In a word: exclusivity. To own a pair of Lobb shoes is akin to buying a made-to-measure suit, a bespoke shotgun, a top of the range Ferrari or a luxury yacht. There have always been people who have great wealth and who appreciate fine things.

And, although the source of such wealth now changes with each generation, there always will be. The John Lobbs of this world continue to survive by offering such people something they can find nowhere else. 



Partly sewn welt