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Class act

Lots of companies—lots of people, in fact—like to think they are indispensable; it's part of human nature.

London-based manufacturer John Lobb appears happy to offer something that, by definition, is not indispensable, shoes for the luxury end of the market. William Lobb, one of the fifth generation of Lobbs to work in the firm that started out in 1849, defines luxury as something desirable, something we invest in for comfort or enjoyment, but that is not indispensable.

Then he thinks for a moment and says that, for some of his select list of clients—actors, singers, TV stars and royalty are on it, along with people at the top of the business ladder on both sides of the Atlantic (it's company policy not to discuss present-day customers, but Laurence Olivier and Frank Sinatra are examples of names from the recent past)—shoes from Lobb are essential.

William Lobb is part of the fifth generation of his family to work in the handmade luxury footwear business.

In most footwear markets around the world, a £200 price-tag would mean high end. At John Lobb, £200 will buy you no more than the tree to preserve the shape of a shoe. You have to add a further £2,000 (about $4,000) before you can walk away



Exterior of the Lobb shop in St. James's, London.



The distinguished history of the company still appear to discerning customers today.

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The company will make shoes in any style the customer wants, but draws the line at athletic shoes.

with any shoes, and that's before tax. And if it's exotic leather you want, the price is even higher, with the most expensive shoes in the range, made from crocodile, costing £6,000—again, before tax.

"Sometimes people wonder how shoes can cost so much," William Lobb says, "but they seem happy enough to pay £2,500 for a Savile Row suit, so why is it more difficult to comprehend with shoes? A similar amount of work goes in, and it's more important to look after your feet."

Historical view

He believes the firm's long and distinguished history is one of the reasons people buy. The founder, the original John Lobb, was born in Cornwall in 1829, and, like almost everyone at that time, started his working life in the fields. When he broke his leg in an accident, however, his agricultural career came to an abrupt halt and, forced with the need to find another way of making a living, he became an apprentice to a local shoemaker. He learned quickly and soon felt confident enough in his craftsmanship to go to London and strike out on his own.

When he arrived, however, he found intense competition. The 1841 census recorded that London had 28,574 boot and shoemakers already, making footwear production the third most common occupation in the city in John Lobb's day.

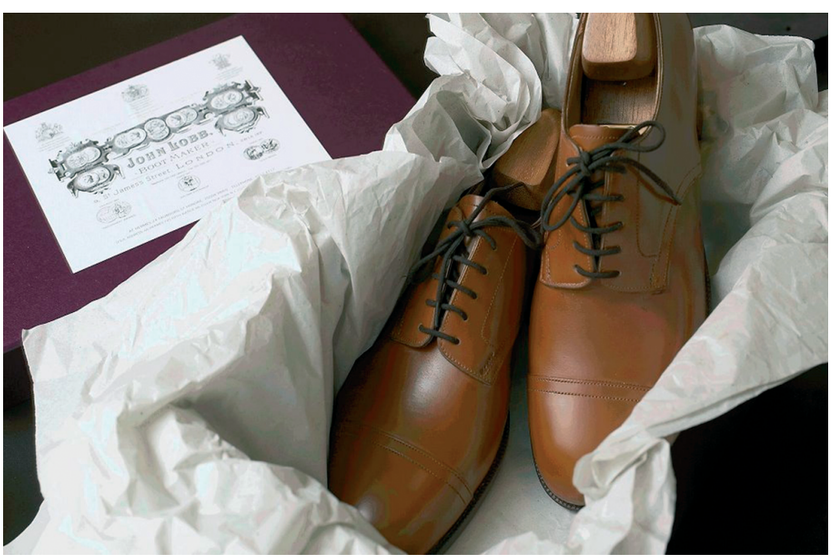
Perhaps for this reason, he decided to leave for Australia in 1850, seduced into thinking that the Gold Rush occurring there might offer an easier way for him to make his fortune. "He didn't find any gold," his descendant says, "but he did make shoes for those who were luckier and he was paid in gold."

Before long, he had earned enough of the precious metal to set up his own shop on George Street in Sydney, and it was from here that he built up his business and his reputation.

As early as 1851, he began to renew his ties with the old country, entering a competition that formed part of the Great Exhibition in London that year and winning a prize. In 1862, he gave a pair of riding boots to the heir to the throne, the Prince of Wales and, the following year, won a royal warrant as an approved supplier of footwear. Armed with this, and with the business experience he had gained from his time in Australia, William Lobb sold his shop in Sydney and moved back to London permanently, setting up in new premises in Regent Street with the royal warrant on prominent display.



Even trees for your shoes will set you back £200.



The price for a pair of handmade shoes starts at £2,230, plus tax.

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Only the finest leather will do.



To learn to make lasts in the traditional way requires a three-year apprenticeship.

The company now has two royal warrants, which it still has on prominent display, although the shop is now in St James's Street, further along Piccadilly in the direction, appropriately enough, of Buckingham Palace.

Fit for purpose

When customers call in for the first time, the fitter takes careful measurements of the whole foot, with those for the heel and the instep among the most important, William Lobb explains.

"We've always stuck to traditional measuring methods, through thick and thin," he says. "We can go to the customer to do this, rather than expect them to come to the shop every time. The US, for example, is a very important market for us and we have no shop there. We go to hotels and meet our customers there."

With the measurements secure, the next step is to make an individual last for each customer, a skilled craft in its own right, and one that requires a three-year apprenticeship. Only after that will the pattern-cutter start work on creating a pair of shoes in the style the customer wants. Mr Lobb continues: "We'll make any style a customer asks for, women or men. Only a handmade shoemaker is able to offer that service. We really will make anything—except trainers."

Leather selection

It goes without saying that the company insists on using only the finest leathers for the shoes it makes, and this goes for sole leather as well as uppers. Mr Lobb explains that the sole leather of choice is veg-tanned in Italy, using oak-bark as the tanning agent. "I think it's the best you can get," he adds. "It takes nine months to make the leather, so it's like having a baby, although possibly a bit easier."

He says people are always visiting, and always welcome to visit the John Lobb shop in St James's Street to look around. They are unlikely to find another way to get a glimpse of what goes on there because the company feels it has no need to advertise. Word of mouth is all the endorsement it needs, to win new customers and win repeat business from them.