



The successful second Beast to Beauty conference took place in Northampton's Guildhall on July 17

CREDIT: WTP

Second conference builds on Beast to Beauty's success

The second annual Beast to Beauty conference, organised by *World Leather* and by specialist consultancy Leather Wise, took place in the impressive Guildhall of the UK's leather capital, Northampton, on July 17.

The conference, covering the whole of the leather supply chain, from raw materials to finished products, attracted around 100 delegates, including 20 fashion students with a special interest in leather from universities and colleges around the UK, whose places at the event were funded by The Leathersellers' Company, the Livery Company closely associated with the industry.

In an opening address, local dignitary Lady Jane Townsend said the conference was the opening event in an important weekend of celebrations for the centenary of leather industry education in the UK. Speaking in praise of leather, she said: "This most ancient and durable of natural materials, in this age of synthetics, is something that appeals to us all."

The first speaker, John Semmelhaak of Germany-based hide trading firm Friedrich Sturm, gave a detailed overview of the current situation in the leather pipeline. He made the point that the most successful people in the leather business tend to take what he called an "anticyclical

view" of what is happening in the raw materials supply chain. He said: "If prices fall, invest in the best raw material you can. Cheap and good quality raw material is the best insurance you can have."

After this, Jonathan Muirhead, chairman of the Scottish Leather Group, gave a tanner's perspective of what is happening in the market at the moment. His group of companies specialises in leather for the transportation sector and he said that, although automotive and aviation companies still specify leather because of its technical performance—its cleanability and comfort—and especially because of the value it adds to their



products, they are making life difficult for tanners. "Transportation is dominated by engineering," he said. "In engineering culture, components should be uniform in appearance and performance, and they make no exceptions for leather. They often classify the natural characteristics of leather as faults."

He said these client organisations were demanding greater consistency, higher performance, environmental soundness and lower prices and claimed there was a danger of tanners being pushed down the road of turning out unnatural, embossed leather, and of the product becoming "another commodity". Prices have already been driven down too much, he insisted, and no longer reflect the true value of leather.

In defence of chrome

Tony Covington, emeritus professor of leather science at the University of Northampton, closed the first session by presenting his vision of the future of leather and the leather industry. He caused a minor storm when he said that chrome-tanned leather could be less harmful to the environment than vegetable-tanned alternatives.

He said he felt that the arguments President Hu Jintao of China heard during a visit to a veg-tanned leather facility in Tuscany earlier in July could be "somewhat spurious".

He explained that the tanning process inactivates chromium, while the tanning agents used in the typical vegetable-tanning process will not break down in the environment and remain active. He commented: "It runs counter to intuitive thinking, but a move away from chrome doesn't make complete scientific or technological sense. Chrome is more environmentally useful and I think we are stuck with it for a few decades yet."

The focus of the second session was on construction challenges and featured four speakers: Matthew Nicholls of Leeds-based tanning company Yarwood Leather, Wolf Ciecieski, a consultant to the automotive industry in Germany, Guy West of Northampton-based high-end footwear brand Jeffrey West, and Rachel Pedley of retail group Dorothy Perkins.

Celebrity support

Footwear designer Guy West said that celebrity endorsements of his brand are the most powerful publicity tool it could hope for. He said he had seen comments in the *Financial Times* at the start of July from England cricketer Graeme Swann,



Cordwainers College student Gemma Johnson won a special cash prize at the event from Italian tanning group Conceria Prealpina. CREDIT: WTP

who said that, as a Northampton person, he had been brought up always to love leather shoes, that he still did love, and spend lavishly on, shoes, and that his favourite brand was Jeffrey West.

Mr West added that the brand also received excellent publicity from the support of another sports star, Formula One driver Jensen Button, who won six of the first seven Grand Prix for the 2009 season, and whose team, Brawn GP, is also based in Northamptonshire. The shoe designer said: "Those things mean more than anything. They are better than taking out ten advertisements in GQ."

He said Jeffrey West was a "tiny" business, with only four people working in it. Its only option, in the face of global competition, is to be design-led, he insisted. He felt there was little point in a UK-based company making Goodyear welted shoes, for example, because it's so difficult to compete with manufacturers in Asia. His brand has to come up with something different. "Yes, you get copied," he told the conference, "but there's nothing we can do except, each season, come up with the next design, and the next, and the next."

Wolf Ciecieski spoke about the perennial challenges in the relationship between design teams and production teams, and about the specific issues that working with leather presents. "A designer is only as good as his knowledge of the material he's working with," he pointed out. "However, anyone who sits with designers in the automotive industry will tell you that it's very hard to get information over to them. This is tricky

because it's very important for a tanner to give as much information as possible on the background of the leather that is supposed to go into a car. And the more information the tanner receives about the car, the better his chances of achieving the right result."

Part of the furniture

For his part, Mr Nicholls focused on upholstery leather and traced the recent history of upholstery tanning in the UK. Little of the industry of 20 years ago survives, but he said the key to Yarwood's survival was quality. His company had put a great deal of effort into winning ISO 17025 accreditation for its laboratory testing facilities, he said, and had determined to "design our way out of trouble". This meant paying attention to understanding the mentality of consumers. He said he had doubts about the ability of any supplier to understand properly the demands of consumers in a different continent. "We need to look inside ourselves who we are, why we do what we do and why we're good at it."

Giving a retailer's point of view, Rachel Pedley explained that leather for the Dorothy Perkins Group was now worth £9 million a year, and growing, mostly in footwear. The group will sell 400,000 pairs of leather shoes in 2009, she said. At the moment, synthetic materials have a larger share than leather of the Dorothy Perkins footwear offering, and Ms Pedley said manufacturers of materials such as polyurethane are becoming better at making material that is softer and moulds better to the foot. But she also knows that



genuine leather shoes command a higher retail price, which is why she would like to use leather more extensively, educating customers about the benefits of leather as she goes along.

Prize moment

Conceria Prealpina, from Chiampo in northern Italy, decided to award a cash prize for what it deemed to be the best display of student design talent at the conference.

Many of the students who attended set up displays of their gloves, shoes, handbags and other leathers in a room beside the main conference hall. The senior management team from Prealpina decided that the best display was that of Gemma Johnson, an accessory designer who recently finished her course at Cordwainers College, part of the University of the Arts in London.

Ms Johnson's handbag designs, featuring a firm look, with sharp definition in the shape of a series of straight lines across the black leather, attracted a large amount of

attention from delegates at the conference.

Prealpina managing director, Giancarlo Baldisserotto, said her designs were very distinctive and stood out because they were different from the norm. "The standard was very high," he added, "and we're delighted to be able to offer encouragement to a young designer at the start of her career."

Immediately after lunch, the discussion turned to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and included a presentation from Steven Jeseph of not-for-profit organisation Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production. He explained the theory behind CSR. He pointed out that the business world has been slow to learn the lessons of past industrial accidents and poor treatment of workers. He said CSR in the twenty-first century was not about "writing a cheque to make yourself feel better" but about showing genuine leadership in matters concerning the labour force and the environment.

To explain how concern for the environment can turn itself into a business

idea, Adam Atkinson, founder of a new leathers brand called Cherchbi, spoke next. He explained how, over time, he became convinced that the best thing for him to do was to turn his back on a successful career in product development for the world's top sports brands, and return to his roots in England's Lake District to set up this new company that sources everything locally.

Next up, Neil Garrity of leathers brand Daines and Hathaway and Laura Haim of Pittards gave a presentation on the background to Pittards acquisition of Mr Garrity's company last year and their vision for the future. They also showed some of the leathers Pittards has produced recently for Daines and Hathaway to make its bags, office items and grooming products.

Accessories designer James Long delivered another designer-brand launch story, including a heart-wrenching account of how he managed, after a considerable struggle, to raise enough support to put together a catwalk collection for the London Fashion Week,





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Tuesday, Oct. 13
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Visual Display

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Tour of Beijing
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only for it to be stolen from his studio the night before the event. Another local boy, James Long's Northampton roots showed when he said: "I want to establish myself as a new British designer specialising in leathers, and I want to use premium leathers."

Terry Hanby, a consultant on brand development, gave the final address of the day, speaking on the subject of how to create a successful brand. "You have to look at your business from the users' point of view and define what makes you special to them," he said. "Then you have to make sure every aspect of your business reflects this."

After a networking reception at the Northampton Shoe Museum, delegates moved on to a gala dinner in the city's Park Inn. Steve Pateman, the footwear manufacturer who steered a traditional men's shoe brand into making thigh-length boots and high-heel shoes strong enough for men weighing 95 kilos (as featured in the film *Kinky Boots*), gave a colourful and entertaining keynote address.



Left to right: Jonathan Muirhead, John Semmelhaak and Professor Tony Covington were the speakers in the opening session of the conference which was chaired by Simon Yarwood, Publisher and CEO of World Leather. CREDIT: WTP



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