



The British luxury carmaker has seen substantial growth in the number of customers requesting customised interiors over the past few years, and now almost all vehicles encompass some kind of bespoke element.

Personalisation drives Rolls-Royce's profits

Matching a car's interior to the colour of an Irish Setter dog might seem a little unorthodox. Perhaps more so, the suggestion that the leathers should be the shade of a particular lipstick. But artisans in Rolls-Royce's leathershop in Goodwood, West Sussex in the south-east of the UK, say nothing is too much trouble. They quote company motto "if it does not exist, design it", uttered by co-founder Henry Royce, as a philosophy behind their Bespoke department, which has also made wooden marquetry from an owner's tree

and matched paint to a green eyeshadow.

Last year was a record year for the luxury carmaker, both in terms of volume and value of vehicles sold. Most importantly for the tanning industry, it was also a record year in terms of the amount of customers choosing bespoke interiors – individual requests have doubled in two years, meaning both more leather used, and more specialised colours and finishes on the leather.

"Our bespoke personalisation service is the jewel in the crown of the Rolls-Royce success story," says its chief executive,

Torsten Müller-Ötvös. "Placing our customers at the heart of the design process in this way is central to the brand promise."

Nearly every Phantom and almost three in four Ghosts sold around the world are now commissioned with "bespoke personalisation". Nearly every Phantom and Ghost in Europe in the first quarter of this year was specified with bespoke design, and the figures for customers in the Middle East were 100% for the Phantom and 99% for the Ghost. In North America, 95% of Phantom models have



BEAST to Beauty



been built with a personalised element. This compares with only half of customers requesting bespoke elements in the Phantom in 2005, and a similar percentage for the Ghost only two years ago.

Extended production

This growth in demand has led to a significant expansion of the production facilities. The company has recently completed a 2,500 square metre extension of its assembly hall and added 600 square metres to its surface finish centre. This has meant the number of jobs available for

highly skilled designers, engineers and craftspeople has doubled and, to fill the gaps, the company has extended its apprenticeship scheme.

For Andrew Monachan, manager of the leather workshop, this means finding enthusiastic young people who will grow with the company. "Training does take time, and varies between the cutting, sewing, covering and seat build processes," he tells *World Leather*.

The leathershop is the largest technology in Rolls-Royce in terms of manufacturing associates, and

The extended production line in Goodwood.

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apprentices spend four years training in-house as well as gaining nationally recognised qualifications at local colleges. "As we continue to expand we look to recruit people with the relevant basic skills and then train them accordingly, in addition to training apprentices who we can target to areas where we have skills shortages," adds Mr Monachan.

The proximity of the workshops to the

Nearly 75% of Ghosts are commissioned with "bespoke personalisation".



design team helps to turn “dreams into reality” and gives “incredible scope to fulfil every possible request”, according to Bespoke design manager Gavin Hartley. “One of the joys of working in a place like this is the access and close relationship we as designers have with our craftspeople,” he says.

Ideas are developed with engineers and artisans, every detail discussed and plotted; the marquetry and embroidery are hand-drawn before the manufacturing process begins. “It’s about capturing the essence of what you’re trying to achieve,” adds Mr Hartley. Customers seeking to complement their lifestyles can commission hand-crafted picnic sets, cigar humidors and champagne coolers; the colour of the leather and thread, embroidery and embossing are also tailored to clients’ demands. “There are no wrong answers, it’s about pooling and finessing the best ideas into a compelling concept.”

German tannery

For each interior, the leather team use between nine and 13 high-grade bull hides from a German tannery. “While sourcing the very best quality hides is becoming more difficult on the world market, we work exclusively with a small father-and-son finishing tannery for whom our business is a large part of their output,” says Mr Monachan. “Being matched in terms of our capacities means that we can remain fast and flexible, reacting quickly to customer demands. We are also able to quickly develop new colours and manufacture batches of hides for a single, bespoke motor-car.”

The leather is drum dyed to ensure colour permeates right through; it is then naturally dried to bring out the grain and deliver a “contemporary feel”. The process also means the leather remains supple, preventing cracking or squeaking and ensuring durability and longevity. Each leather component is precision cut by laser, then hand-stitched using traditional upholstery techniques before seats and interior panels are signed by the craftsman involved in their creation.

With the average cost of a Rolls-Royce reaching \$400,000, one might think the rising cost of leather would not impact the



The company’s apprenticeship programme, launched in 2006, has its next intake in September.



Members of the hand-stitching team come from saddlery, upholstery, fashion couture and sail-making backgrounds.

company too greatly, but Mr Monachan says it is important to use the material wisely. “Leather is only one (important) part of our cost structure. Our customers appreciate the quality of the natural materials and are willing to pay for that, but they also demand value for their money. It is important for us to ensure that we deliver a luxurious product, one that celebrates the character of natural grain hides, whilst also ensuring our yield from each hide is as high as possible.”

The team has also been experimenting with crocodile and ostrich skins, so they can be ready for any request. “Finding solutions to often complex challenges to clients’ exacting specifications is an exhilarating, rewarding experience,” adds Mr Hartley.

Global tastes

For customers in Thailand, a new bespoke showroom, based in Bangkok, has been opened to help with the creative process. Customers can browse samples of leather, wood and paint, as well as 44,000 colours, and designs are mocked up on screen to help visualise the finished product. Rolls-Royce’s biggest showroom in North America, based in Long Island, has a similar zone; the company knows the importance of regional distinctions when looking at colour and tastes.

“For China the colour red is important for two reasons,” explains Mr Monachan. “One is that it is a lucky, mystical colour. The second is that when Rolls-Royces were originally imported to China they came only with black exterior paint and



One customer asked for a pink leather matched to his girlfriend's favourite lipstick, as a surprise for her 40th birthday.



Many opt for their own, or a loved one's, initials stitched onto the headrests or carved into the wood.

red leather interior, and therefore that is what the customers grew to expect. That said, the new generation of Chinese customers are looking to mix colours and to specify custom embroidery. The American market, currently our largest market, is generally conservative in colour choices, whilst the Middle East has always specified highly individual colours and embroidery."

An owner based in New Zealand recently requested a 'one-of-a-kind' luggage compartment to be entirely lined in leather. "This sort of design challenge is what the craftsmen and women in Goodwood enjoy mastering for our customers," says Dan Balmer, Asia-Pacific general manager for sales and marketing.

Vegetable tanning

Rolls-Royce is keen to adapt to customers' changing demands, which is why it chose an "experimental" – or vegetable tanned – leather for the interiors of its "eco" electric Phantom. "Seton Corinova leather allows us to celebrate more of the curves, creases and other features that are part and parcel of the life of the animal," Mr Monaghan said at the time of its launch in 2011.

Most leather produced for automotive applications is chrome tanned, but Corinova is prepared with glutaraldehyde, while chestnut extract from Southern Europe and powder from crushed fruit of the tara bush in South America are used for drum-spun

colouring. The process only lends itself to earthy colours – a chestnut colour for seat covers and 'quebracho brown' [named after the tannin derived from the trees] for other areas such as the floor and trunk lining, both of which are made of durable saddle leather. The dyeing process gives a rich, uniform pigmentation while maintaining the natural feel and softness and the company says with further development it might be possible to use recycled Corinova in agriculture to aerate soil.

However, with more of the natural marks visible in the seats and armrests than in production Phantom interiors, the company admitted: "A change from the sumptuous finish applied to Phantom leather might imply a compromise to some owners, but others might welcome distinguishing features that stretch individualisation for Rolls-Royce Phantom models ever further."

Toasting 10 years

To mark a decade of production in Goodwood, a special collection of Ghost and Phantom models, designed by the Bespoke team, will be released this year. "This beautiful collection is a fitting way to celebrate an extraordinary decade," says Mr Müller-Ötvös.

The Home of Rolls-Royce Collection will feature a compass motif to reflect that last year, 3,575 hand-built cars were exported from Goodwood to all five continents – the highest annual sales in the 109-year history of the marque and the third consecutive record year. More than 450 pieces of leather will go into every Phantom, as well as 672 metres of thread, 112,500 stitches and 11 varieties of wood veneer. Sixty pairs of hands will take 400 hours to finish each vehicle.

"Bespoke is a major part of our business," concludes Mr Monaghan. "We are now starting to see increased demand for exotic hides and also increased demand for saddle leather, used instead of carpets and for custom accessories. We encourage our customers to be demanding and see how far we can stretch to make new, interesting interiors for them." ●