



Leather notebook and passport holder
from the Ettinger For Bentley range.

CREDIT: BENTLEY MOTORS LIMITED



Although it has seen its raw material costs rise almost 50% in the past three years, British leathersgoods brand Ettinger is experiencing substantial growth and believes the key to its success is embracing its heritage.

By royal appointment

The sundrenched grounds of Buckingham Palace were a fitting venue for a celebration of companies deemed the best in their field. More than 60,000 visitors coped with the heatwave in London rays over four days in mid-July to celebrate the Royal Warrant holders – those companies which have supplied goods or services for at least five years to the households of the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh or the Prince of Wales.

Among them was leathersgoods maker Ettinger, a family-run business which has held its Warrant for almost 20 years. “The Warrant is seal of approval – customers

can trust that the products are going to be well made – if the Prince of Wales buys it, it’s got to be good quality,” explains Ettinger’s CEO, Robert Ettinger.

He attended the festival with his wife and team, who said they made interesting contacts “from retailers to companies and even some ambassadors” and demonstrated their wares and craftsmanship to attendees. Ettinger launched a capsule collection to commemorate the occasion, with 15% of sales going to the Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust – a charity that offers grants to aspiring craftsmen and women.



Ettinger CEO, Robert Ettinger. CREDIT: ETTINGER

The company was established in 1934 by Robert's father, Gerry Ettinger, who – having worked as a film producer in Italy and Germany where he worked with Marlene Dietrich – used his contacts to sell a range of luxury gifts across the continent. After a pause in the 1940s during the war, he returned to London and bought a small leathersgoods company, and as international trade began to increase, so did the business. He remained an active part of the company until he retired at 91.

In 1990, Robert took the reins and introduced some contemporary designs, expanding the business into South Africa, Australia, the US and Asia. Its first stand-alone store was launched in 2010 in the Ginza district of Tokyo. "The Japanese love warrants – they like 'handmade' and Made in England, as well as the British look and design. Things designed and made in England do look different to fine, thin Italian wallets – they've got a British look – a little more chunky and a little bit heavier."

One staple wallet in the collection is made from heavy horse bridle leather and has been manufactured in the same style since the 1930s. "It's still our biggest seller in Japan and everywhere," adds Mr Ettinger.

The company has worked in collaboration with Bentley Motors, another royal warrant holder, for a number of years, launching collections including mobile phone cases, key fobs and leather trays for Bentley's customers or enthusiasts. It has also produced ranges for Balvenie Single Malt Whisky, Monocle, Stüssy and Emirates Tours, as well as high-end department stores such as Harrods and Fortnum & Mason, and has held the licence to produce gifts sold at the Wimbledon Tennis Championship since 1992.

Raw material worries

To maintain the synonymy with luxury, the company relies on sourcing high quality leather. "The quality is critical – it would be like making a car out of thin metal compared to solid, high-quality steel," says Mr Ettinger. "We work with tanneries in England where we can, and in Europe, and buy only the finest skins."

Ettinger representatives often travel to



Components are carefully glued, stitched and finished by workers who undergo years of training.

CREDIT: ETTINGER



Intricate detailing is the company's signature; card cases are constructed from 11 leather elements.

CREDIT: ETTINGER

tanneries in the UK, France, Spain and Germany to select the skins prior to tanning. "We are very diligent in what we buy, the quality and the finish. What we have found in the last two or three years is we're having to buy even better quality leather to keep the standards we're expecting."

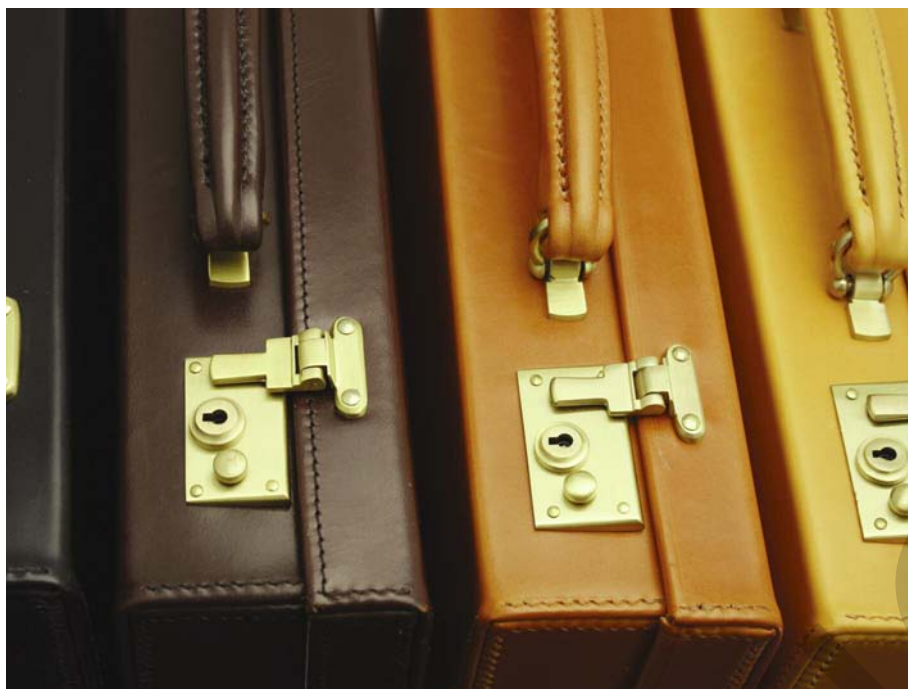
The reason for the struggle has been the rising cost of leather coupled with a strong demand in the market for high-quality skins. The company has seen its raw material prices increase by between 40% and 50% over the past two to three years.

"It has been tough," he admits. "The Far East and China are buying a lot of the wet blue skins for their own manufacturing and a lot of the big luxury brands are buying whole tanneries to ensure their supplies. So we have to go to the other

tanneries to buy the best from them and work very closely with them.

"Leather's already a very costly commodity and it's a big part of the product, which means our prices have gone up accordingly, they have to. Although a lot of the cost is our production, leather is a significant part and so that has pushed prices up from all leather manufacturers, be it the big international brands or us; we've all had to raise prices."

On the plus side, demand for high-quality leathersgoods is strong, seemingly unaffected by recessions in the West. Luxury goods groups Kering and LVMH, which own companies including Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Loewe and Bottega Veneta, are reporting ever-increasing sales and profits on the back of their leathersgoods



The vast range of leathergoods includes briefcases, photo frames, belts, hip flasks and jewellery cases.

CREDIT: ETTINGER

original 1890-built leather factory is great; it has long narrow buildings and lots of natural light to work by.”

Passing on the skills to the next generation of workers is critical to the continuation of not only the brand but also the leather manufacturing industry in the UK, which has declined substantially over recent decades, he adds. “We’re tending to take on people in their early to mid-20s and training up people in-house over maybe one, two or three years, and teaching them the skills. It’s critical to foster the right stills if you are to have continuity.”

To keep up with demand, the company is currently undergoing a period of significant expansion, having recently taken over the adjoining factory, which doubles its working space. “This will allow us over the next few years to grow the business, to take on more people, to train more people and to increase production.”

divisions. Even a slight decline in the rate of growth in China looks to be over, according to recent reports, which have said the rate is expected to rise again in the second half of the year because of the underlying appetite for luxury and continuing wealth creation.

All of which is good news for leathergoods brands, especially those that can tap overseas markets. The launch of Ettinger’s ecommerce site in 2008 made it easy for customers to purchase products all over the world. “I think when people give their credit card details online a lot of people are still wary – but Made in England and a royal warrant means they know they can trust us, and that seems to be helping enormously.”

In 1999, Ettinger acquired James Homer, one of the oldest leathergoods manufacturing companies in the Midlands. Homer is now at the heart of Ettinger’s manufacturing process. “We were manufacturing in London until about 14 or 15 years ago in St John’s Street near Smithfield Meat Market which was the old leather area. But it went from being an industrial area to one full of restaurants and bars, so we decided to buy a much bigger leather manufacturing business in Walsall,” explains Mr Ettinger. “The

Made from bridle hide in ‘London Tan’, some of the classic designs have been unchanged for decades.

CREDIT: ETTINGER

