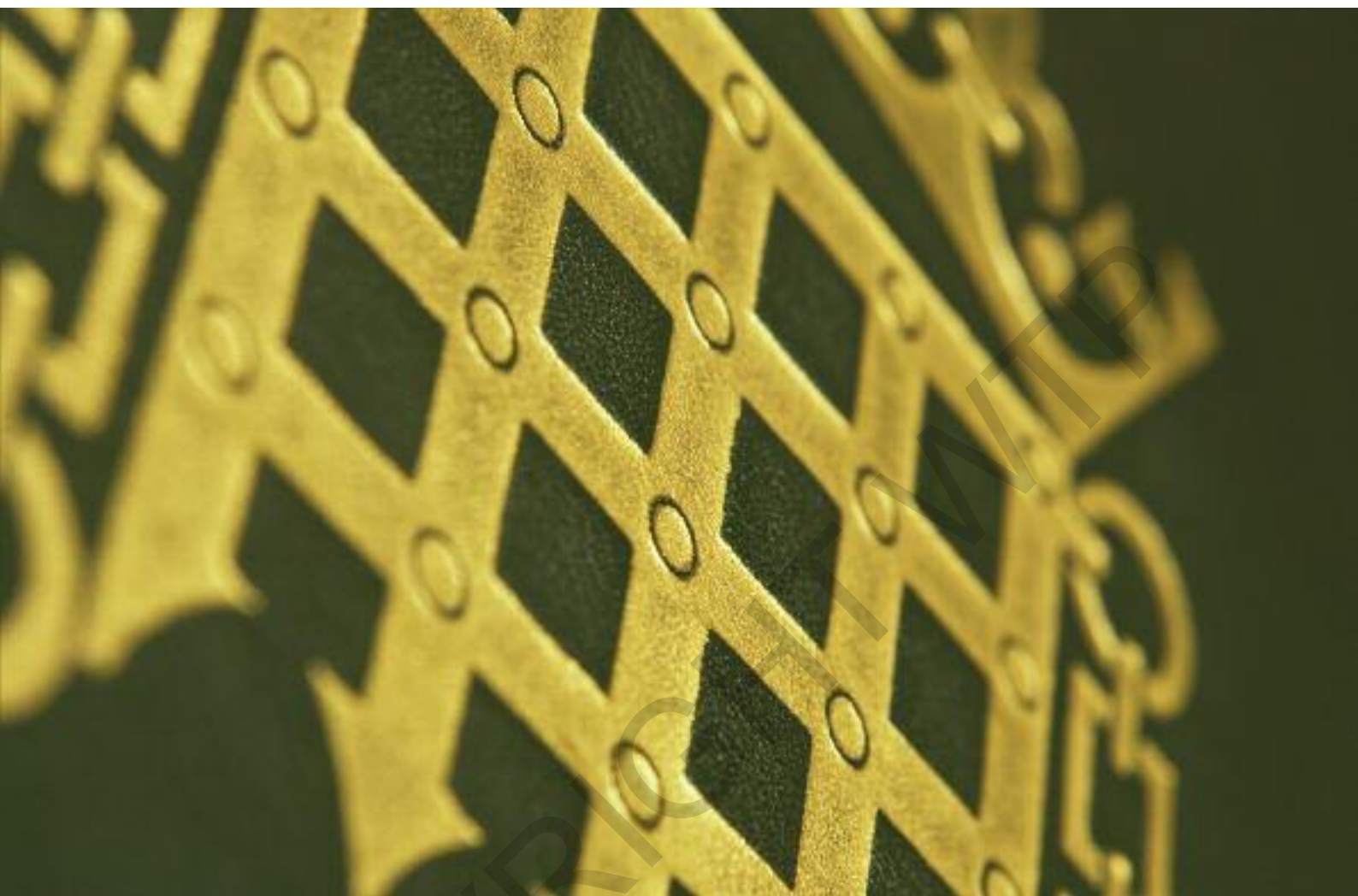




The iconic green leather from Andrew Muirhead & Son that upholsters some of the seating in the UK's Houses of Parliament.

CREDIT: ANDREW MUIRHEAD

Buyer's View

The Palace of Westminster and Andrew Muirhead & Son

As if there weren't enough political headaches to go round, debate raged at the start of 2017 in UK parliamentary circles over proposed restoration work at the Palace of Westminster, the building that houses the two chambers of the UK parliament. The project could cost up to £4 billion and take eight years to complete and some parliamentarians remain to be convinced that it would represent value for money in an age of austerity. Nevertheless, the stonework is fragile in places, the electrics and the wiring are ageing and there is a potential problem with

Customer relationships grow strong when there are genuine benefits for both the tanner and the organisation using the finished leather. Andrew Muirhead's work with the UNESCO-heritage building that houses the UK's parliament is a case in point.



asbestos fibres. This is a building that has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1987 and looking after it is a matter of obligation, not a matter of choice. No one is worried about the leather used to upholster the seating inside, though. The leather, green in the House of Commons, the lower house, and red in the House of Lords, the upper house, is in safe hands. It's mostly supplied by Andrew Muirhead & Son. For the House of Commons, in particular, photographs of the green leather-clad benches are among the most iconic images that exist of any political environment. Everyone can picture the tower of Big Ben on the outside, and almost as readily everyone can picture the leather-covered benches on the inside.

A place to sit

Most of the 650 members of the House of Commons don't have a place to sit of their own in the parliament chamber. In fact the chamber does not have room for 650 people to sit in it and during busy debates and important votes, some of the politicians have to squeeze onto the benches beside their colleagues or stand. All of this means considerable wear and tear on the upholstery with different benches needing to be repaired at different times.

"It requires us to be part of a continuous discussion," explains Andrew Young, the leather manufacturer's UK sales manager. "What we make for this customer is fairly bespoke and it's of great importance to understand how the building works." Supplying leather, to the chambers, to offices and meeting rooms and other parts of the Palace of Westminster, is to share in the wider conservation effort that the site requires. The building in place today dates mostly from the mid-nineteenth century (to replace an older structure that was badly damaged by fire in the 1830s) and contains more than 1,000 different rooms, although the oldest part of the estate, Westminster Hall, was completed in the year 1099 and is still in use. It's not uncommon for conservationists to present Andrew Muirhead with a sample of old leather and ask for it to be replicated. In contrast, a more modern part of the estate is Portcullis House, which opened in 2001 to provide extra office space for members of parliament. Part of the design of the main atrium is a set of marble benches that frame some decorative fig trees. To add an element of comfort to these beautiful benches, Andrew Muirhead has worked

High profile. The Palace of Westminster in London is a sight that everyone knows.

CREDIT: ALVESGASPAR/WIKIPEDIA

to develop leather to cover cushions for them.

"It's a challenge," Mr Young explains. "The Palace of Westminster has had its own in-house furniture restorers who would sometimes apply their own lacquers to leather without recording anywhere exactly what they had done. It leaves us with the task of producing leather that shows a similar level of mellowing to that of a much older piece and making it fit in." He thinks there will never be an occasion to replace all of the leather on the benches or in the main committee rooms at once and that Muirhead will have to continue to fulfil smaller orders, getting as close to the original material as it can, making leather that will "blend in". There have also been times when such a match is required for a piece of leather that is too firmly attached to a piece of furniture to offer a sample, requiring the use of a handheld spectrophotometry machine by the in-house restoration department and, on one occasion, a valuable footstool being sent all the way to Glasgow to the team at Andrew Muirhead to generate a match.

Competitive tenders inviting bids from all over the European Union are common so this is work that Andrew Muirhead has to carry out competitively as well as expertly. The most cost-effective way would be to supply the material from stock but, with such a wide variety of colour tones and other finishes to match, this is simply not possible. Canterbury-based tanner Connolly was a regular supplier of leather to the Houses of Parliament before it ceased production in 2002. Solvent-based finishes that made the leather shine up attractively in Connolly's day are not an option for the current supplier of choice and another challenge it has faced has been to find new ways of producing a similarly glossy finish. "We're prepared to do that, of course," Mr Young continues, "and I think it's our ability to respond to this and to all the requests we receive from the Palace of Westminster that sets us apart. It's the most visible example of our wider work for government and a prestigious and high-profile customer for us to have and we want to continue to be a responsive and reliable supplier." 🌐