



Buyer's View: J & M Davidson

From the Wild West to the West End

The Notting Hill district of London has undergone a remarkable transformation from a slightly run-down area of bed-sits for recently arrived immigrants in the 1960s, then becoming a vibrant cosmopolitan community with its annual carnival, to today's highly fashionable district with a high proportion of celebrity-status residents and shoppers.

Bordered to the south by Kensington and the east by Bayswater it has become home to numerous galleries, designers and discreet fashion outlets patronised by many of the more discerning A-list celebrities.

With a design studio and gallery in Golborne Road to the north and a shop in Ledbury Road in the heart of Notting Hill, the company J & M Davidson is well placed to quietly get on with satisfying the style demands of its well connected customer base. Its belts, bags, clothing and stylish knits are often to be seen in glossy magazines, fashion shoots and catwalks but the founders, John and Monique Davidson, are less likely to be as well recognised as their products.

World Leather was recently given a fascinating insight into their company J & M Davidson, which has been in existence since 1984. The story started in the late 1970s when the couple were living in Paris and Monique was asked to design some belts for a family friend who owned a clothing company.

The Davidsons had been travelling widely in South America and, during one visit, Monique spotted the styles of belts sported by the gauchos of Argentina. This gave the couple the idea of turning similarly styled plaited dog leads into waist belts and a co-operation was started with a dog lead manufacturer. Work continued for the next few years during which the range of belts was developed and the client base was expanded.

In 1984 the couple returned to Britain and decided to start their own company, specialising in belts made in the Argentinian style of gaucho leatherwork with horse bridle plaiting. The dog lead influences were also incorporated in very



long belts which went around the waist two or three times. These ethnic styles were an instant success and the company was soon selling thousands of belts each year. The unusual and exclusive belts for men and women were the springboards from which other ranges were launched.

John Davidson describes their ranges as incorporating English tradition with a French twist, using bridle leather with saddlery influences, such as stitching, braiding and studding. They have now grown to include a wide range of hand crafted leather handbags, luggage and small leather goods, ladies knitwear and daywear collections, as well as their own denim range.

The collection has perfectly cut tailoring, separates and knitwear all made in luxurious fabrics. Each design features the J & M Davidson's signature attention to detail and finish, hand stitching, plaiting and vivid linings. It is a collection that truly crosses the boundaries of seasonal fashion. Each season's new fabric and leathers, and the small subtle changes in detail made, contribute to the constant evolution of the collection and its wide audience appeal.

The bridle leather used was originally sourced in the UK from Liverpool and then Walsall, still home to many saddle makers (see *World Leather* Vol. 14 No 7), but it is now obtained from tanneries in Italy. For its belts the company uses vegetable tanned and chrome leather in the range 3.5mm to 1.2mm. The bridle leathers are usually full grain aniline and hand stuffing is still the preferred finishing method in the signature shade of deep havana. The saddlery influences are carried through in the use of solid brass and silver accessories, such as buckles, many of which are made by them.

The traditions of handcrafted leather are easily recognised in the company's products, from the tooling of the leather, the selection of linings and the immaculate hand stitched seams. The slight differences in the suppleness and stretch of leather and the fact that many pieces are hand cut



means that each article becomes unique and subtly different from all the others in the series. The emphasis on handcrafting their bags and belts is strongly influenced by the couple's regular road trips across America, Monique being very much taken by the rich hued rugs and jewellery of the

Navajo Indian styles of New Mexico and John by the intricate cross stitching of Wild West and Gaucho saddlery.

Styles must develop constantly and they both make regular visits to Paris Fashion Week, which sets many colour and styling trends. Lineapelle Bologna is

used to select colours, finishes and leather styles for their next collections, but John Davidson complains that the timing of the show in May is far too late, giving very little time to prepare and make up samples, especially for the very demanding Japanese market.

By the early 1990s the company had generated enough sales of its ranges of handbags and belts to warrant the opening of its shop in Notting Hill. At that time the Notting Hill area of London was not the trendy district it has since become but it immediately appealed to John and Monique who recognised the urban village feel that they knew well from their time in

Paris. The shop stocks the entire collection ranging from ready to wear, bags, and small leather goods, jewellery, furniture, luggage and the home wear line. The Ledbury Road premises were augmented in 2002 by the gallery in Golborne Road. Here, besides offices and design studios, the space



is used to exhibit new and up and coming artists alongside vintage furniture and objects d'art which are all for sale. A visit to the gallery gives a good insight into the world of J & M Davidson, the constantly changing works of art sitting at ease alongside the vintage furniture and objects d'art, a mixture of old and new, modern and classic.

The lifestyle element further manifests itself through the extensive range of "J & M Davidson Maison" collection. From luxurious bed linen to glassware, leather to wooden furniture, each piece has been especially selected for its high quality and design excellence.

J & M Davidson is considered today to

be unique for a British company in that it owns its own very specialist manufacturing units. The company's bags are made in a large leather goods factory in the north of England, which was originally recommended to it by the original dog lead manufacturer. It finds that one of the many benefits of having its own factory is in terms of design and development and also the wealth of technical knowledge available. The creative ideas come from London but the factory has the technical expertise to translate these ideas into products. It manufactures a very hand crafted, labour intensive product using a signature bridle leather trim, with each bag or piece of luggage having a very personal, artisan finished feel.

Along with the leather goods manufacturer, the company also owns a knitwear factory in Belgium where about 90% of the knitwear for the collection is produced. Specialist knitting machinery ensures a very varied, high quality product with a wide variety of goods being produced. The company's signature pieces



are quality merino wool for the winter and cotton merinos in spring/summer. J & M Davidson has over the years established close working relationships with leading specialist manufacturers in



Britain, particularly in Scotland where it produces hand framed Geelong and Shetland knits, single and double ply cashmere.

A discreet range of preferred suppliers deliver the leather used by the company but it is constantly on the look out for new products and ideas. The important features of a supplier are consistent quality and delivery plus the ability and willingness to innovate. After samples are taken and standards agreed, the company relies on the supplier to select each delivery, which is usually from 500-1,000 sq.ft. This can sometimes be a problem as there are still tanners who seem unwilling to supply the small quantities that many customers require. John Davidson claims that, with the exception of certain Italian tanneries, he finds very little, if any, active marketing of leather to final consumers. The challenge for a company like his is the competition from the large designer names, such as Prada and Gucci, and their response is to use their smaller size to be always ahead on exclusivity and innovation.

Quality is also very important, especially with the growing market in Japan. The company's bag factory is run to Japanese TQM quality standards with any faults identified and eliminated during the process and not at final sorting.

The most common faults encountered are connected with abrasion of leather, particularly at the corners of bags. It is generally expected that any article should not wear out in under a year but consumers can still return goods after 10 years. The use of saddlery techniques lends itself very well to the making of a strong, long lasting bag and the company finds that the people who buy its products come back for more as they know that the bags last far longer



than a single season. John says that he has, from time to time, spotted some of the company's original bags from the late 1980s, in the famous nearby Portobello Road street market.

The aesthetic demands of this particular sector on the leather industry were discussed, but the price of the character leather it requires is becoming a matter of concern for the company. Each particular brand identity requires a very studied approach to get the goods into the store at the entry price. The starting point is therefore a selling price which itself dictates the price which can be paid for particular leather. Soft leather goods are typical entry point items, with a £600 break point. This means to a large extent that price is the selection criterion used and is the main reason for the current interest in Argentinian leather.

The company is very active in collating and assessing customer reaction, this being one of its strengths. The retail shop regularly provides detailed sales reports which are supplemented by reports from the important Japanese market where the business has an annual turnover of £6 million. The Japanese are seen

as the kings of merchandising and it is essential to get the right goods at the right time for each season. There are over 25 shops and concessions ranging from the newest in the department store Takashimaya, Shinjuku, as well as Barneys Japan. In order to recreate the feel of the collection, particular care has been taken to ensure that the Japanese shops and concessions are all replicas of its flagship store in London.

The brand is established but is constantly evolving, favourites are carried through each season, new designs are introduced and old styles are given a fresh update with different leather and accessory details. One of the key challenges is to renew the style without losing the longevity of its designs.

The future holds many challenges for the company, its brand is recognised as strong and ready for growth and there is a need to expand, possibly with a partner. The US and Japanese markets are essential and still seen as capable of providing the growth required. The company plans to add to its already extensive product ranges, with shoes from an Italian manufacturer and a range of beauty care products which is in the development stage. Bags and belts are, however, still the key ingredient, and the importance of accessories has now reached the stage where clothing is often seen as an accessory to the accessory with people wanting to be more individual yet still sporting the latest designer styles. With its ranges of well made, highly desirable leather products, the company is well placed to cater for this growing demand. ●

