

Buyer's View: Northern Suede



Building on history

The city of Manchester is known for many things—including a reasonably well known football team, a thriving university, and the Halle orchestra.

Flemish linen weavers settled in the area in the 14th century, establishing the textiles tradition that left the small town able to exploit the arrival of cotton from the American colonies. With its canal transportation, accessible supplies of coal and water, Manchester became the burgeoning hub of the new textile industry and, in effect, of the Industrial Revolution.

At the turn of the 20th century, Manchester's precocious economic growth slowed, stalled by the 1890s depression and competition from the textiles of the USA and Europe. Rather than modernise Manchester's industry, mill owners focused on the seemingly boundless markets of the British Empire, ultimately leading to the industry's final decay in the mid-20th century. Capping off a decidedly average century, in 1996 the IRA blew up the city's commercial centre in the worst ever explosion on the British mainland.

Bouncing back from the 1996 bombing, the city seized the opportunity to revamp the town centre with new public spaces and some imaginative modern architecture that actually works. The city's industrial heritage has translated into prime real estate and there are now more than

7,000 new apartments with another 8,000 planned. The building spree turned to sporting venues when Manchester hosted the very successful 2002 Commonwealth games.

One of the results of the early rapid development of the city was the influx of immigrant workers to serve the growing textile factories and this led at the end of the nineteenth century to the largest Jewish community outside London. They were mainly occupied in the tailoring trade but an important branch of this was the manufacturing of waterproof clothing. This led to Manchester becoming one of the world's main centres for rainwear and outdoor garments.

The tailoring involved specialised techniques and fabrics peculiar to these garments. Amongst these was the skill of preparing the waterproof seams known as "schmeering". In this process the operator or "schmeerer" laid a dead straight line of rubber adhesive down the edge of the seam using a finger and an accurate eye so that there was no visible adhesive when the seam was folded and rolled.



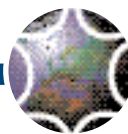
Seam Roller

Adapting textile tailoring to leather

This kind of tailoring is similar to that employed in leather garments and can still be found today in the Cheetham Hill district of Manchester which was the traditional home to much of early Manchester tailoring. Cheetham Hill is now also home to Northern Suede, a successful leather clothing business, which maintains the link with the traditional tailoring traditions of Manchester.

The company was founded in 1982 by the present managing director, Sydney Arron, who already had a background in the Manchester clothing trade as a buyer of leather garments. Northern Suede sources leather and suede garments for supply to many well-known retailers and mail order outlets including major UK groups Debenhams, Allders and Fenwicks. All the garments are made to customer specification and design in specially selected clothing factories, mainly situated in the Far East. The company has also begun to diversify into licence agreements and produces ranges of clothing for the Ben Sherman and Peter Werth brands, and recently entered into a licensing agreement with the Playboy brand to produce a range of leatherwear.

The women's range, to be produced by Northern Suede for the United Kingdom and European market, will consist of jackets,



skirts, bustiers and leather jeans with a "sassy and fun look", according to Playboy. Targeted at women aged between 16 and 30, the range will focus on pastel shades of suede and leather.

"Playboy is one of the world's most iconic brands and is the must-have item for girls across Europe," Arron says. "Our leatherwear will target girls who like to go out, look good and have a fun time."

The choice of leather by Northern Suede is very much influenced by visits to the main catwalk shows, demands from customers and the company's own designer who visits the main fashion centres such as Paris and Milan, plus the leather fairs in the Asia Pacific region. These visits are the prime reason for their recent use of pigskin splits from China for a very successful range of coats and jackets.

The company has formed very close links with a number of preferred suppliers who already had good relationships with Sydney Arron through previous employment.

They work closely within agreed quality assurance parameters and are well acquainted with what is acceptable and what will be rejected. Prototype garments, once agreed, are established as sealed standards. Speed is of the essence in the world of fashion; initial ideas are exchanged with the makers via e-mail followed by the first samples within a week. The usual lead-time from first idea to bulk supply is around 12 weeks with order sizes ranging from 250 up to 10,000 garments.

The requirements of the leather selected are fastness and performance plus a natural appearance, softness, drape and tactile properties. Customers also expect leather garments to have the 'correct' leather smell, which is hard to define, but is that particular cocktail of chemicals which is known by everyone but is almost impossible to reproduce deliberately.

A further prime requirement of garment leather is also difficult to define: the necessity to meet the latest fashion trends. This is where the years of experience and trend-spotting ability in a company such as Northern Suede becomes



invaluable as it is able to make that important connection between exactly what material to use to achieve the particular fashion look required.

The large trading groups are now the most important buyers in the fashion world and they are not afraid of using their purchasing power to demand the very highest quality at the very lowest price. Brands have a difference in approach, maintaining desirability for their designer items by means of price and availability. The leading brands say where and how their goods are sold, displayed, priced and marketed. They set the standards and the manufacturers and retailers must conform.

Northern Suede sees its future in brands and this is the reason it has gone for the Playboy licence as a means of expansion into the European market where the brand will be in Collette in Paris and Harrods in London.

The types of clothing planned will follow the lifestyle changes now taking place in the young fashion market; jackets are worn less, hot bars and clubs mean that tops and bustiers are more the fashion look.

With its experience of producing fashionable leatherwear, Northern Suede appears set to move with the trends and continue the long tradition of tailoring in Central Manchester.

