



Profile: Metropolitan Leather Company

From diaphragm leather to a prince's herd

The leather industry in the United Kingdom has largely disappeared over the past twenty years. A handful of major operators such as Scottish Leather Group and Pittards remain, but little else. There are, of course, smaller operations supplying niche markets with a specialised product. One of the smallest, however, is rather different and has survived by specialising in a wide range of products for an even wider range of customers. Its history goes back a long way.

The Metropolitan Leather Company was founded in Bermondsey in east London in 1919 to manufacture diaphragm leather for gas meters from African goatskin. Gas, a by-product of coal, was still widely used at this time both industrially and in the home for heat and light. The gas meter measured the amount of gas the customer used over a period of time so that they could be billed and the diaphragm was one of its essential components. The company therefore started life as something of a specialist.

By 1933 the company was both producing diaphragm leather and also cutting the diaphragms themselves for many gas meter manufacturers. At the same time, the production of lining and clothing leathers from E.I. Persian Crust was begun and the business expanded rapidly up to 1939 and the second world war. In 1940, the factory was badly bombed and the business subsequently moved to Great Harwood, Lancashire, in the north of the country.

Post-war reconstruction created an even greater demand for gas meters and so growth continued until a peak of 175,000 sq.ft of hair sheep per week was being tanned and processed, and thirty women employees were cutting diaphragms for shipment all over the world. In 1951, the old established company Broadhead & Conyers of Leeds was purchased to broaden the production base with kips and calf, with a particular emphasis on high fashion finishes for the shoe, leathersgoods and equestrian industries.

1955 saw all operations concentrated at Great Harwood. In 1985 the tanning side was closed and the remainder of the company was bought by the leather division manager Roy Winnard, who relocated to the current premises in Thrapston, in the middle of the country in 1990. He had worked for Metropolitan for 40 years and had full hands-on experience of every facet of the business, its techniques and its products. He recognised that the company had a unique combination of knowledge and experience in finishing leathers and this became central to the company's survival against the odds.

A multi-skilled company

It was an uncertain time, with the footwear industry disintegrating and

mechanical gas meters fast being replaced by electronic controls. As Winnard says, "With the decline of our traditional markets, life became hard so we have had to become more and more specialised in what we do, with the result that we are now one of the largest suppliers of quality leather in the country. We still make diaphragms from Nigerian sheep- or goatskin but on a relatively small scale and all for Poland."

Leather is bought in from all around the world as crust for final finishing. Much of the final output goes into leather goods of all types and so vegetable tanned bovine butts and shoulders predominate as these are the most suitable. They also provide an excellent base for the traditional finishes the company uses. Oak bark tanned bovine and chrome tanned goat are also used for orthopaedic and other specialist products.

Because of the great variety of end uses and the frequent small quantities per order, almost every stage is carried out by hand. Employees are multi-skilled out of necessity and this also provides flexibility. Great care is taken in the initial preparation of all leathers in order to create the best foundation for the ➤





final finish, where the recipes are based on traditional practices such as natural dye colourings and tallow and beeswax, with additional tweaks that are closely guarded secrets.

This use of traditional methods clearly works, as in the case of Japanese customers who see the whitish wax film left on the surface of the butts they buy as a sign that the leather is 'real English Bridle Leather'. Needless to say, this film polishes off to leave a deep and natural lustrous final finish. The actual operations are obviously fairly basic, so the quality of the leather bought in is paramount in terms of both tannage and grain. For instance, shoulders with light but clear growth marks are bought specifically for applications where the customer is looking for a totally 'natural' look, whereas most butts are selected for the tightest grain surface.

Diversity of products

The company was recently approached by a representative of Prince Charles from his Highgrove Estate that had a number of cattle hides from the Prince's herd which required tanning. Winnard arranged for the British School of Leather Technology in Northampton to process the hides from raw to vegetable tanned full grain crust. Metropolitan is now finishing the leather, after which it will be used for a range of fancy leather goods to be made by Daines and Hathaway, a traditional English manufacturer.

An increasing number of interior designers now consider leather to be a suitable material for floor and wall covering. Metropolitan has supplied a wide range of leathers in many colours and differing sizes for this purpose. It is currently carrying out development work for one of Europe's largest high quality flooring companies, which has set the highest possible standards. These include level substance, good abrasion resistance, the ability to withstand underfloor heating, stain resistance and a 'natural' appearance. After all of this has been achieved, the method of cutting to obtain accurate tiles has to be considered. Metropolitan has taken this a step further and is now working with a yacht builder to achieve a suitable leather plank for interior decking.

Another interesting outlet for Metropolitan Leather is film and TV studios. Recent films such as *Troy* have featured actors wearing articles fashioned from its leather and, in *Sharpe*, all the sheepskin numnahs for the horses that appear in the battle scenes. Historical re-enactment societies also require many different leathers for a range of items, such as costumes, belts and boots.

Despite the fact that most of the UK's leather goods manufacturers have gone out of business, Metropolitan manages to supply those that remain. Demand from Japanese consumers for English bridle leather in quality briefcases, wallets and bags continues and the company has developed colour ranges and

thicknesses to meet these demands. Subtle changes to the grease mix have also had to be made to suit the requirements of individual clients. Because all of this leather is hand finished, these changes can be made relatively easily and, at the same time, produce the white surface bloom so indicative of English bridle leather. On his travels, Winnard achieves great satisfaction in seeing a customer admiring and subsequently purchasing a leather briefcase made from his leather at prestigious duty free shops at London's Heathrow airport.

Due to the demise in the UK footwear trade, the demand for upper leather has greatly diminished. Metropolitan, however, holds stock lots of many redundant shoe upper leathers in lots of 500 to 9,000 sq.ft. and over one million in total. These are mostly sold for export but, occasionally, a small local customer will spend two hours looking through some 200,000 sq.ft. and then purchase just one small roll. Metropolitan is currently seeking agents abroad to sell these stock lots, which are regularly replaced. They are mostly of European hides and finished to high standards for the shoe trade.

Facts at a glance

Leathers used – shoulders, butts, sides, pig, goat, and sheep in vegetable tanned, semi and full chrome.

Product range – saddlery, briefcases, baggage, small leathergoods, military and police belts and holsters, orthopaedic appliances, gas meter diaphragms.

Order size – anything from one skin upwards.

Facts at a glance

The 'facts at a glance' box clearly shows the diversity of this company and just how flexible it is. The fact that it can cope with such a wide range of potential customers and end uses is its key strength. In addition, the company keeps to its delivery promises—if it says it can be done and by a specific date, it will be. In a modern age of computer forecasting that is invariably seems to get its timings wrong, it just goes to show that old-fashioned values and methods still have a place in the modern business world.

However, this approach would not work in a large organisation with layers of management. Here is a small company where the man at the top can maintain total day-to-day involvement. In the case of Roy Winnard, he is also a happy man and, like his seven employees, enjoys every working day. Between them they can supply almost anything in the leather line that you might care to think of, which also goes to show that it is possible to be a specialist in everything after all. 🌐