



The Buyer's View



Buyer's View: Swaine Adeney Brigg

An introduction to sporting elegance





There are some companies which have evolved to fill a particular niche or supply a particular product in the ever-changing and evolving consumer sector. *World Leather* was recently privileged to visit one such company at its premises in Cambridgeshire, UK. At first sight one of the company's specialities would seem to have an inexhaustible demand, given the reputation of a typical English summer, in that it has long been one of the leading makers of umbrellas. The company in question, Swaine Adeney Brigg, has developed over many years from umbrella and whipmaking to carve itself a niche in the luxury leather goods market.

Some time before 1750, a Captain John Ross left the Army of George II and founded a business making carriage driving whips at Piccadilly, close to the Royal Palace which was then St James (only moving to Buckingham Palace in 1836).

Such was the excellence of his craftsmanship that the business was

granted the Royal Warrant of Appointment as Whipmaker to His Majesty King George III. It has been honoured to hold Royal Warrants granted by successive monarchs since that time.

Captain Ross retired in 1798 and the business was bought by James Swaine, a virtuoso craftsman who, at the age of nineteen, had been foreman to Charles Griffiths an old-established whipmaker in Holborn. The firm flourished and in 1816 James Swaine's son was brought into the company. Ten years later his son-in-law, James Adeney, was made a partner in the business which became known as Swaine & Adeney.

In 1836, Thomas Brigg the umbrella maker was established in St James Street, London. It was appointed Royal Umbrella Maker to Queen Victoria and in the 1890s it opened its Paris branch with a magnificent showroom on two floors at 33, Avenue de L'Opera.

Swaine Adeney merged with Thomas Brigg in 1943; Brigg having lost its Paris branch because of the hostilities and both companies had suffered from having their young craftsmen called into the armed services. The merger enabled them both to survive a difficult time and the business was consolidated at Swaine Adeney's Piccadilly address.

Looking forward

Time alone does not confer greatness and today, as always, the company continues to look forward and evolve in an ever-changing world. It still makes umbrellas, canes, whips and associated equestrian leather goods, but nowadays the craftsmen are more likely to be seen hand making luggage. It also produces a seasonal range of clothing which reflects its English heritage, but with a distinctly contemporary look and feel.

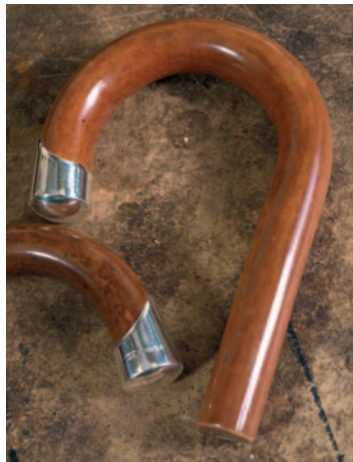
What has not changed is that it remains a manufacturing business, at the heart of which is a modern factory with easy access to the motorway network in Bar Bridge near Cambridge. Neither has it compromised on the quality of the materials used in its products, English bridle hide—a natural leather dressed with tallow and oils, gold and silver, pure silk,



fine wool and horse hair are still used. Horn collected from the lower slopes of the Himalayas, not to mention the plethora of exotic woods and cane all carefully selected by a team of buyers whilst continuing to honour a commitment to conservation and sustainable forestry.

Managing director Ian Eastwood explained the sourcing of the bridle leather used in the company's range of luxury travel goods. Swaine Adeney Brigg makes great play on its Englishness and uses a small west of England tanner for its traditionally vegetable tanned and dressed bridle shoulders. The company uses 1.6-1.8 and 2.8-3.0 mm selections for the panels and straps. The leather is oil and tallow dressed, spray dyed and traditionally finished. The demands on the leathers used are extremely severe and the tannages have to be able to produce a product which is very tight but with a high degree of flexibility. They must be capable of being soft enough to be used in holdall styles and tight enough for attaché cases.

Eastwood comments that it has become more difficult to source the best kinds of leather since the company started its expansion in the 1980s. At that time it mainly used its expertise in the saddlery trade to source its leather and was using





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*Hand Stitching using Knee clamp*

about 50% bridle leather and some full grain hair cell printed leathers.

What Swaine Adeny Brigg had, and still has, is a strong niche in bridle leather and its expertise in this area meant that almost everything it did in this area was successful. This did, however, mean that the company was never really strongly established in the ever-growing women's market. This has been addressed by its involvement with an investment group which will enable the company to build on its already established retail strengths. It sees the future as very much in retailing with outlets in London and New York.

A need to improve volumes

Eastwood sees design as a potential weakness in the company's ranges with specialist products producing too little volume. This is being looked at in future ranges and we were shown some of the latest luggage designs and projects—which appear to have found favour with some well known celebrities who have keenly adopted the latest travel goods. The company is very keen, however, to stress its long history and traditional Englishness as this is a core value in the products it manufactures.

These traditional values were very apparent in a tour of the production facilities where we saw a great deal of the highly skilled hand work which goes into the manufacture of the various types of large and small leather goods, luggage and sports items. This starts right at the beginning of the process with the making of the steel or wooden frames for briefcases and toolboxes for bespoke motor vehicles such as Rolls Royce, Bentley and Aston

*Machine Stitching Briefcase corners*

Martin. After the leather is bonded to the fibreboard lining the seams are saddle stitched using the traditional two needles and waxed threads. This use of saddle stitching is an essential part of the process; it is done by hand in many of the articles such as folios, small items, and in the making up of each individual handle. An original handstitch marker is used to get the correct numbers of stitches per inch and the pieces are held in the traditional elegant wooden knee clamp leaving two hands free for the stitching process.

Even when stitching is carried out by machine in some of the less expensive ranges of products, the machine used is a unique 70-year-old model derived from a welting stitcher originally used in the shoe industry. This machine is lovingly maintained and its operator demonstrated the unique skill required to sew around the complex corners and edges of a structured briefcase. As Ian Eastwood comments, the company's manufacturing methods reflect

its bespoke saddlery heritage and have been unspoiled by progress.

The relatively long production process for traditional bridle leather means that there is little time flexibility in the supplier tannery which is usually working with up to three month lead times. This means that Swain Adeny Brigg will always need to carry safety stock which can be valued at around £500,000; it does not have the luxury of Just-in-Time deliveries. This further underlines the importance of a reliable supplier who will not only be aware of the quality standards required, but will also be used to the order patterns throughout the season. The supplier makes the main selection before the goods leave the tannery and the leather is further checked by the cutters as each piece is clicked out.

The company operates with forward orders which are called off at up to 10,000 sq.ft lots. One saving grace is the relatively small colour range at present in operation with the traditional colours of Chestnut, Havana, London Tan and Black being the most specified. Moves to the women's market could, of course, change this to a much wider fashion colour range.

The main features required of a chosen leather vary according to the end-use, it must be traditional bridle leather with a very high degree of tightness for framed document cases but there has been a noticeable trend recently towards more supple holdall styles which require a softer finish. If this trend continues there could well be a specification for a more drummed leather.

The supplier has proved to be more than capable of coping with special requests such as leather for bespoke luggage sets especially tailored for executive cars.

Eastwood told us that the company's





strong retail presence in a strong niche market leads to a very quick word of mouth reaction from customers, most of whom are repeat customers. The majority of negative feed back seems to be connected with fittings such as locks with relatively little adverse comment on the leather, but as the fittings belong to the article they must be without fault. This is especially important as exports continue to account for a major proportion of the total production.

Swaine Adeney Brigg's customers require consistent quality and also expect individual service and support. They ask for goods with a handcrafted English look, with the ability to give many years service or, put another way, overspecified. We were shown some excellent examples of goods in the repair department of the factory including a very well-travelled and obviously much loved leather suitcase which was in for refurbishment after more than 50 years of use.

The company uses this longevity of product to great effect in promoting the attributes, qualities and care of leather to



its customers. Care cards are used and individual customers are contacted with information. The store retail staff are encouraged to visit the manufacturing plant at regular intervals for courses on leather care and manufacturing methods so that they become better equipped to deal with customers' queries.

The company continues to develop and in 1996 Herbert Johnson, the long established hatters were acquired, its retail business being absorbed within Swaine Adeney Brigg's own store.

1998 saw the acquisition of the

Papworth travel goods business and consolidation of its manufacturing operation into Swaine Adeney Brigg's Great Chesterford factory.

In 1998 there was a move to the magnificent new store at 54 St James. Just around the corner from its original location the company now has the facilities to display its entire range on one floor—leather travel goods, umbrellas, equestrian accessories, gentlemen's and ladies hats, toiletries and gifts.

Ian Eastwood explained that the ultimate aim of the company is to establish itself as a world retail brand in the handcrafted traditions as exemplified by names such as Vuitton and Hermès.

As it moves past more than two hundred and fifty-five years of trading, Swaine Adeney has taken its place amongst the world's great international retailing names. It offers the discerning individual the Swaine Adeney sporting elegance: the integrity and pedigree of a style nurtured and developed over more than two and a half centuries. 🌐



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