



Profile: Joseph Clayton & Sons (Chesterfield) Ltd.



How to be agile in a heavy leather world

The present business climate is difficult enough for the majority of manufacturers with increasing competition, environmental pressures, burgeoning bureaucracy and ever-growing costs. These conditions are causing problems for almost all branches of manufacturing industry and none more so than the, "old fashioned" leather industries in developed countries.

Clayton of Chesterfield is one of the few remaining tanners in the UK, working throughout the process from the beamhouse to completion of the finished leather. One by one, or group by group, the UK leather industry has dwindled to a couple of major groups and a handful of individual specialist or wet blue producers. What then is the secret of the survival and the growing success of Joseph Clayton & Sons?

John Avery, the company's general manager, gave *World Leather* a fascinating insight into the plans for the future, which should ensure an agility, which will enable the company to continue and prosper.

Solid experience

The company has been in operation for some 160 years at its premises in Chesterfield and has, over time, concentrated on the production of heavy leathers in a wide variety of tannages. It produces vegetable, chrome, sulphur, oil and aluminium leather, in many combinations and also, on demand, can make iron and zirconium leather.

Avery details the strengths of the company as an unrivalled fund of solid experience based on multi-skilled staff, an extremely large and varied customer base and a concentration on highly specified

niche products.

The company does not produce and will not become involved in the supply of commodity leathers as this is regarded as a recipe for failure. As Avery says, "What is the future in trying to compete with tanneries which can produce more in a day than Claytons can in a month?"

The company's niche market approach is evident in its links with designers and specifiers who are often able to obtain their own bespoke tannages, thus strengthening the all important supplier-customer relationship. Around 60% of its product is export business.

Avery is keen to stress the relatively young age of the management team, and its dynamism, plus wide experience, is key to the plans for expansion, the solid base of experience and versatility forming the foundation for the future of the ►



HOW TO BE AGILE IN A HEAVY LEATHER WORLD



Floor tiles and friction discs



20mm chrome leather

company. Avery himself has heavy leather, finishing, wet blue, technical management and tannery design experience from his varied career in the industry.

The company produces many products, which are perhaps best described as pure performance with little emphasis on aesthetics, however, aesthetics mean more than just looking good. Many Clayton leathers find uses in technical and engineering fields. The clean hard edges of the friction discs it produces, for example, seem to be crying out for steel edges to sharpen.

There is something quite pleasing in the touch of a piece of 8mm sulphur-vegetable and oil-tanned triple combination leather which will be used to control a fierce Armed Forces pursuit dog. At the more decorative end of the scale, leather flooring tiles have a deep patina which mellow with time and use.

Behind the scenes

Many of the leathers that the company produces are destined to do jobs that are out of sight, as is the case with oil seals and gaskets whereas others are objects in their

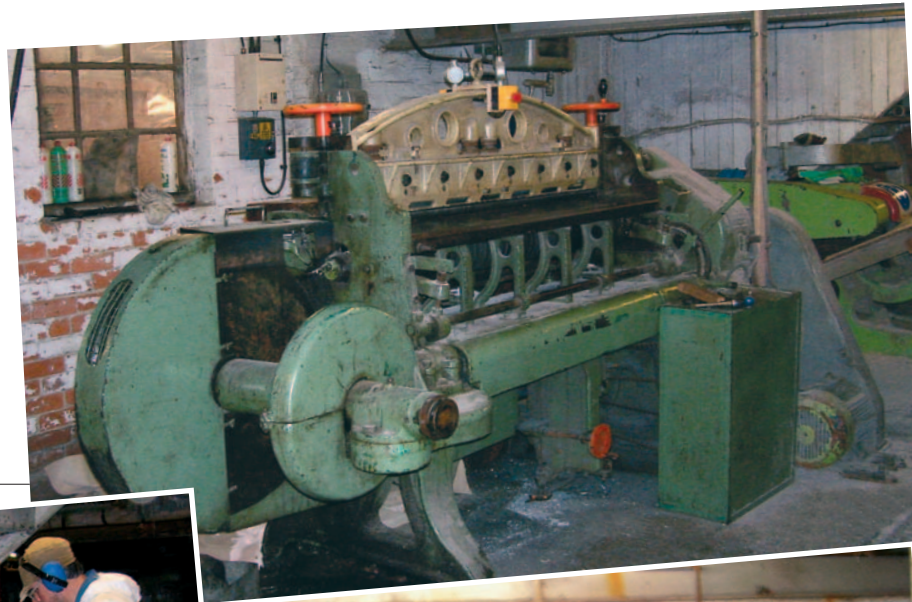
own right as with saddlery, harnesses and cricket balls. These are true niche products and are the key to the prosperity of the company.

Improvements are, however, necessary and no business can stand still or rest too long on its laurels. Avery has identified areas for improvement and has set out a programme, which will enable the company to build on its already considerable success.

Clayton of Chesterfield at present

operates three sites—the Chesterfield premises in Derbyshire, SVR leathers in Beverley, East Yorkshire, and Samuel Sharp (Curriers) in Cosgrove, Northamptonshire.

Each of these branches is integral to the business with specialised finishing at SVR, harnesses and saddlery at Samuel Sharp and specialist tanning at Chesterfield. However, it is not very convenient at all to operate a business across three such widely spread sites, especially as the leather is part processed at all three, involving much



Robust machinery





Pit pickled buffalo



Classic tan yard

transportation and the reduced opportunity for total control of the overall process.

The acquisition of a new building just across the road from the Chesterfield plant has given the company an opportunity to consolidate all of its operations on the one site. The new building will house the SVR finishing plant and will be equipped with hot and cold roller coating, automated spraying and printing presses. This will enable a much more versatile and controllable finishing operation and will allow the company to broaden its range into lighter leathers. It should be added, however, that in the case of Clayton a lighter leather is one where the substance is less than 3mm!

The company has seen the need to add

some beautiful leathers to its portfolio but these will always be niche products true to the core values of the company. Expansion will take place in other niche areas and certainly not in commodities. "We like to think that we complement the trade overall by taking on the business that is either too small in quantity or too complex in process to be attractive to other larger companies," says Avery.

The right location

The company also intends moving the operation of Samuel Sharp from Cosgrove to Chesterfield, thus moving all of its currying and saddlery operations onto one site. This is not intended as a slow process of evolution, and preparations are already well in hand to relocate the businesses.

These moves will address one of the perceived weaknesses of the present company, which is its inability to satisfactorily dispose of low substance lower grade products. As with any tannery this is the key to profitability and the proposed developments will enable value to be added and output to be increased. In other words, the company will increase its agility and become a leaner, one-site, operating unit.

The proposed improvements are not just limited to bringing off-site operations to Chesterfield—a major development project for the Chesterfield tannery is already in hand and is being financed, in part, by an interest free loan from the Carbon Trust. The project involves installing a modern water supply comprising of a gas heated hot water ring main, which will cut the present steam heating bill by 30%. This is being combined with a programmable water dosing system from Incotec to replace the current, very slow methods that have been in place for many years. This will help to improve process control and will increase flexibility in processing.

There are also plans to improve the machinery in use at Claytons, but this is being done with great care as the heavy leather being produced needs very robust machinery.

The main raw material processed is heavy UK domestic hides, pre-rounded to remove the bellies as these proved difficult to dispose of profitably. The company is also a major user of full substance South East Asian water buffalo hides of up to 25mm.

Finished leathers of up to 17mm are not uncommon and when Avery talks about pit tanned leather this is pure 100% tan with no fillers anywhere in use.

At Clayton of Chesterfield an oil tanned leather is usually 6mm, certainly no window chamois!

With its marriage of experience and technology, the company has become a tanner and leather manufacturer that is able to produce quality leathers to suit individual requirements. In today's modern world, it is tempting interior and fashion designers world-wide with its extensive range of products, and so opening the doorway to new design opportunities. Through its latest developments, Clayton of Chesterfield is ensuring that it remains a key niche supplier, and a company that is agile and lean enough to react to future demands and opportunities in a world of very heavy leather. 🌐