

INTRODUCTION

These visits made us feel very fortunate. Not only are some of these facilities disappearing, but we were also granted access to areas of these iconic companies that are usually out of bounds to a casual visitor or customer. Whether getting in round the back at Lock & Co, or sitting in Derek's vintage-strewn office at Lewis Leathers, this was a deep dive into the people and personality of Britain's heritage brands.

Horst, as a photographer, prized this access, in particular the archive pieces or old catalogues carefully sealed away in plastic folders. For me, it was the voices that brought each company alive. The stories of workers who had been in the same role for 40 years, quietly telling you of the pride they felt in quality and consistency. The gentle laugh of Brooks worker Eric Murray when he told us how famous he was in New York. In the text accompanying each chapter I have endeavoured to capture in these stories – old and new, personal and social – the elements that have shaped and continue to shape each brand. Initially, we thought the selection of the brands would be difficult. The age of the companies (over 100 years old) seemed like the biggest constraint. But then, when we began to focus on companies producing iconic clothing and accessories, the choices became straightforward. Mackintosh raincoats are iconic; Barbours are iconic; equally John Lobb, Anderson & Sheppard and (if you know your motorcycle lore) Lewis Leathers. We chose only one maker for every type of clothing, and of course it had to be British.

It's been quite a journey, literally and figuratively. We hope you enjoy learning about these amazing companies as much as we have.

Simon Crompton



INTRODUCTION

Some of the welcoming, and historic, shopfronts that we journeyed behind during the making of 'Best of British'.



LOCK & CO
6 St James's Street,
London, SW1A 1EF,
England

Established 1676
Makers of hats

Lock & Co, the oldest hat maker in the world, was founded in 1676 by Robert Davis. His son Charles continued the business and took James Lock (1731-1800) on as an apprentice in 1747. James later married Charles Davis's only child, Mary. When Davis died in 1759, James Lock inherited the company from his former master, and the Lock family, James's descendant, still own and run the company today. The main shop has been in its current location since 1765.

Horatio Nelson first walked into Lock & Co hatters in November 1800. He had just returned from the Mediterranean, and came into the St James's Street store to order a cocked hat and cockade. The two-cornered style – the same as he would later be shown wearing on Nelson's Column – was all the rage at the time. Nelson, a horribly vain man, had an oft-stated fear of dying badly dressed.

On 6th January 1801, just a couple of months later, Nelson was back. He bought another cocked hat, which would be worn at the upcoming Battle of Copenhagen, the bloody encounter that led to Nelson's promotion to viscount. A few years then passed until his next visit, on 5th August 1805. But this time he commissioned something special in addition to the normal cocked hat and cockade: an eye-shade.

Nelson had been blinded several years earlier, and finally wanted a permanent covering attached to his hats. So Lock & Co designed a flap that would sit on top of his blind eye, covering it from view (shades of vanity again). "We have the original design of that eye-shade in the records," says Hannah Rigby of Lock & Co. "It was a semicircular piece of felt that would have been sewn to the underside of the brim."

At the end of August 1805, Nelson returned for his last cocked hat. This one was worn into the Battle of Trafalgar, where Nelson was shot and later died. Today, it rests as a memento on top of a wax effigy in Westminster Abbey.

Happily, however, Lock's connection with the Nelson family continues. A direct descendant of his, known only to staff as Mr Nelson, is still a loyal customer. A bit of a character, he rides around London on a tricycle with several Union Jacks flying from it, despite being well into his 80s. Mr Nelson prefers square-crowned hard hats – known as a Homburg most places but the 'Cambridge' at Lock & Co – which were also Winston Churchill's headwear of choice.

There are so many stories at Lock & Co that it is sometimes hard to know where to begin – or perhaps more importantly, where to end. They are so treasured that the company recently began a two-year renovation of the archives. All of the ledgers apart from the most famous (Nelson, Churchill and Charlie Chaplin) have been taken to the London Metropolitan Archives, restored and catalogued.

Lock is also building a new heritage room at the back of the shop, which will contain that first order from Napoleon, his eye-flap design, and several signed 'head shapes' created using its well-known 'conformateur'.

This traditional method of head-measuring uses a wooden frame with movable pins all the way around it. By adjusting the pins to fit the head, a perfect outline is created that can be translated onto a wooden block – in order to stretch the hat. "It's particularly important on hard hats, like top hats and bowlers," explains Hannah. "If they don't fit perfectly to the head they can be very painful."

The most famous user of the conformateur was Queen Elizabeth II, who required it when she had her crown fitted ahead of her coronation in 1953. Lock & Co worked with Garrard's to adjust the crown, and then fitted the ermine around the outside themselves.

The new heritage room will have several signed shapes, as well as orders from the likes of Oscar Wilde, and the first ever commission of a bowler hat.



The wooden 'dolly' used by Lock & Co's house designer, Sylvia Fletcher. The head form is over 100 years old and was given to Sylvia when she was a 16-year-old apprentice to milliner Sybil Pendiebury.



The hat stretcher.
Steaming the hat, in
order to recover its
original shape.

LOCK & CO

Next page: The
conformateur, a French
mechanism invented in
the 1890s and still used
every day at Lock & Co.







John Smedley's manufacturing facility (01), near Matlock in central England, has a beautiful setting. On a hill, surrounded by woods, it sits across a stream that was initially used to power machinery, and later expanded to carry goods in and out.

Such an idyllic setting is rare for a modern factory. Access to transport is just as important today, but given that it is more likely to be by road or sea, location is more commonly close to cities or ports. And of course running water is no longer required as a power source.

Smedley's picturesque location is largely a product of its age. Lea Mills, as it is called, was founded in 1784 by Peter Nightingale and John Smedley (whose son, also John, gave the firm its name). It was one of the first cotton spinners of the Industrial Revolution, and is certainly the only such operation still running, giving it a claim to be the oldest factory in the world.

My favourite demonstration of its history is to be found inside Lea Mills, however. There is an inner courtyard – little more than a transit and storage area – where you can see clearly the different parts of the mill, their ages and styles. Foundation stones proclaim some of them: 1783, 1844, 1911. The others are evident only in the types of brickwork, or in the way they have been weathered. But the effect, taken together, is of seeing the history of a firm build up around you; of provenance laid stone by stone.

For a fashion firm, Smedley's product also reflects a good deal of its origins. Although the company started as a cotton spinner (as with many of the early founders of the Industrial Revolution in England), it quickly expanded into knitting and weaving as well.

01.



Lea Mills, the home of the brand, is situated in the heart of Derbyshire's Peak District, and the colours of the surrounding countryside are often reflected in Smedley's knitwear.

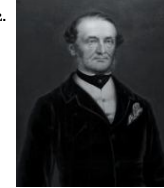
JOHN SMEDLEY
Lea Mills, Lea Bridge,
Matlock, Derbyshire,
DE4 5AG, England

Established 1784
7th generation
Makers of fine knitwear

John Smedley was established in 1784, initially making knitted stockings using local framework knitters. His son, John Smedley II, expanded into wool and luxury underwear and, as a result, may have become synonymous with the term 'Long Johns'. After John Smedley's death in 1874, the company passed to a cousin, John Thomas Marsden-Smedley, whose son John Bertram Marsden-Smedley continued the family tradition as chairman of the company for 20 years. Ian Maclean, one of his great-grandsons, is the current managing director.

When the younger John Smedley took over (02), he led the growth of finished products – largely socks and underwear. The Smedley archive, which recently underwent a thorough categorisation, contains examples of innovative thermal and athletic garments.

02.



John Smedley, 1803-1874

Significantly, the mill had expanded into wool before John took charge, and over the next few decades, fine woollen clothing became the bedrock of the business. Today, two thicknesses of merino wool – 30 and 24-gauge (the figure indicating the number of needles per inch) – make up the bulk of Smedley production, and the range of colours, fits and styles means that any man can find his knitwear requirements somewhere in the collection.

Over the years, Smedley has worked with many designers on collaborations (Comme des Garçons, at the time of writing) and produced silk blends, multi-coloured designs and sporting specials. But it is the consistency of the collection that has led to its being regarded as an iconic British company. Generations dress in Smedley: father might wear an easy-fit V-neck and son a slim-fit polo shirt (buttoned up to the neck), but they both appreciate the quality and reliability of the product.

Lea Mills is a confusing place to get around. Its step-by-step expansion means that the inside is akin to a rabbit warren, with lots of mismatched levels across its four floors (two of them underground). When we visited, every turning seemed to bring us back into a central, wooden-floored room, where a recent spillage had meant a corner was cordoned off. (Some wag had even drawn a chalk outline of a body in the middle of it.)

The company's story has equally been one of ups and downs, of expansion and contraction – recalling that history makes one even more grateful for the modern, thriving knitwear company we have today.

JOHN SMEDLEY