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A handsome shoe gains character as it ages, like antique furniture or a good wine. For that you need quality that lasts,” explains Euan Denholm, head of brand and business development at high-end shoemaker Edward Green. Since 1890, the company has been making handcrafted, Goodyear-welted gentlemen's shoes in a factory in Northampton, 110-kilometres northwest of London.

While Goodyear welted construction was developed in late 19th-century America, it has become synonymous with high-quality English-made shoes. “It means the shoe is made by sewing the sole to a band of leather called a welt, which is in turn sewn to the upper. It’s durable, can be easily remade time and again, and is very comfortable with a midsole of cork resin that shapes to your foot,” explains Denholm. “The Italian shoe tradition is

## *Well-heeled*

High-end shoemaking in Northamptonshire has a long and proud heritage that continues today, writes **Lara Brunt**

different – shoes are typically made by sewing the upper directly to the sole.”

With a ready supply of skins and oak forests containing bark perfect for tanning, the county of Northamptonshire has been the heart of British shoemaking since the 15th century. Over the centuries, large Victorian factories replaced small individual cobblers' workshops. During the war years, the factories were kept busy producing boots for the armed forces, and by the 1960s the region had 100,000 people producing 200 million pairs of shoes a year.

Like many British manufacturing industries, shoemaking started to decline in the 1970s, as production began to move overseas. Despite this, some heritage brands have survived, thanks in part to the ever-growing number of discerning international customers. While a shadow of its former self, today Northamptonshire is still home to the largest concentration of high-end shoemakers in the

world, including venerable names such as Edward Green, Crockett & Jones, Joseph Cheaney and Sons, Hermès-owned John Lobb, and Prada-owned Church's.

Although production processes have evolved since the early days, the manufacture of ready-to-wear Goodyear-welted footwear remains incredibly labour intensive. From the cutting out of the leather through to final polishing of the finished product, the eight-week process involves highly skilled craftsmen carrying out more than 160 separate operations. A

churned out from a great conveyor belt far away," he says. "But with shoes it's more than that. Globally, Northampton really is a centre of excellence for shoemaking. Savvy buyers internationally appreciate that, and so for shoes, 'Made in England' really has a special meaning."

Having consolidated their positions at the top of both ready-to-wear and bespoke shoemaking, Northamptonshire's remaining factories are full and the industry is even seeing new players emerge. Founded in 2006 by Tony Gaziano and Dean

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***'Northamptonshire is still home to the largest concentration of high-end shoemakers in the world'***

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pair of bespoke shoes, completely handmade on the customer's own last (the wooden form on which the shoes are made), take around six months to produce, with a number of test fittings throughout.

"The key skills of reading leather before 'clicking' – cutting – it, or sewing with a pig's bristle needle are almost immutable. They are about eyes as much as hands, and meticulous attention to detail," says Denholm. Many craftsmen have followed in the footsteps of their fathers and grandfathers, passing skills down from one generation to the next. "They are fiercely loyal and proud," says William Church, joint managing director of Cheaney and Sons, founded in 1886.

The businessman has equally illustrious shoemaking heritage: his great-great grandfather was the founder of Church's, which was sold to Prada in 1999. A decade later, Church and his cousin Jonathan staged a management buy-out of Cheaney (owned by Church's since 1966) with a commitment to continuing the production of high quality shoes made entirely in Northamptonshire.

"It is difficult to compete on price when retaining all operations in the UK, but we very much compete on 'Made in England' without compromise – we do not import or semi import any part of our production," says Church. Customers opt for English-made shoes because they believe they are "buying the best that's available," he says.

Euan Denholm agrees. "Generally, there's an interest in things having a provenance and not only

Girling, Gaziano & Girling opened its first factory in Kettering, Northamptonshire in 2009. "We're the only shoe factory to start up in the last 100 years, as everything has just gone the other way," says Girling, a second-generation bespoke shoemaker. "We employ around 20 craftsmen and we're looking to double that over the next two years to increase our manufacturing capacity."

The young company also makes shoes for prestigious brands such as Ralph Lauren and Paul Stuart New York, and is due to open its first flagship boutique on Savile Row this month. "Tony is half-Italian so we like to think we create a classic English shoe with a contemporary twist," says Girling. "We still make a lot of classic, cap-toe Oxfords, but we've added a little bit of flair as well." Evolution is important for Edward Green too. "Colours and textures bring a new interpretation to classic styles. Presently, we are really enjoying mixing similar colours of suedes and calfskins or patterned country calf," says Denholm.

While sales are strong, the biggest challenge facing the industry is a lack of young apprentices to carry on the centuries-old tradition of English shoemaking. "There's actually no shoe college in Northamptonshire so it's very difficult to get craftsmen these days," says Girling. "We're doing in-house training, as are some of the other manufacturers, and we're trying as an industry to reintroduce a shoe college to Northamptonshire. It's needed to keep the industry alive."

