

FOSTER & SON

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Mr R. Edgecliffe-Johnson

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Foster &

First, you buy the crocodile eggs. This involves someone going through a tunnel that was made by a hippo crashing through the mangroves. He hopes he doesn't meet the hippo coming the other way. When he reaches the riverbank, he starts looking for the crocodile eggs — and hopes the mother isn't around. Then he makes off with the eggs, which have to be kept upright, otherwise the baby crocodiles will die ..."

We are sitting over a glass of wine in Fortnum & Mason, and Richard Edgecliffe-Johnson is explaining the first stage in the lengthy process of making a pair of exotic leather shoes — for which the crocodiles will, soon enough, be required to give their lives. Dressed in the impeccable uniform of the English gentleman, Edgecliffe-Johnson is an improbable Shéhérazade. But I am spellbound by his colourful narrative, the object of which can be admired, across Jermyn Street, in the shop of which he is proprietor. Though 'shop' would seem — forgive the pun — a somewhat pedestrian term for Foster & Son. Established in 1840, this is the oldest bespoke shoemaker in London.

The first thing you notice as you step through the hallowed portals, is the potent whiff of oak-tanned leather — as distinct from Continental leathers, tanned in chestnut or spruce bark. The next, is the sober air of the gentleman's club — traditional in its livery of dark green and gold — with glass-fronted French mahogany cabinets and shelves that display Brogues, Oxfords, Derbys, loafers, boots, glossy dress shoes, sturdy country shoes, velvet slippers — everything that the well-heeled squire might require. Since 1965, the company has also offered a range of ready-to-wear shoes, specially designed by and made for them in Northampton. To the untrained eye, these would look like the ne plus ultra and, from £365 a pair, cost about one-tenth of their custom-made equivalents. Edgecliffe-Johnson must have encountered the unspoken question a hundred times. Why bespoke? He brandishes a machine-made Brogue, at random, and holds it up to a similar, hand-made model, stamped on the sole with the company's signature red fox-and-boot logo. "I probably shouldn't say this", he says, "But look at the difference — in the detail of the toe, in the curve of the waist ... A machine just couldn't get in there to create that shape. And look at the difference in the size and intricacy of the perforations ...". At this point, I learn more about the Brogue than I thought was possible to know: "They were originally shoes worn by gillies messing around in the bogs, so the water could drain out of the holes. The aristocracy saw this footwear when they went shooting, and took a shine to it, adapting the style for their own use." The style, which requires a second layer of skin on the uppers, for the decorative elements, made extravagant use of leather. "So during the last War, when leather was needed for military artefacts, Brogue making was banned. That gave rise to the 'Austerity Brogue', which just created the illusion of that extra layer ..."



& Son

The word 'cordwainer' was coined in the 12th century, and derives from Córdoba, a city which at that time was associated with quality leather products. After 34 years as a successful City banker, Edgecliffe-Johnson is a relative newcomer to the cordwainer's art, and displays an infectious enthusiasm for every aspect of his second career. That he embarked on it at all is largely due to a game of chance. "While at Citibank, in the 1970s, I met and got on very well with Jimmy Goldsmith," he says. "And I noticed that the way he did business was very similar to the way he played backgammon. He would make a calculated decision based on the doubling cube mentality [cutting his losses at a given point, rather than pledging a higher stake in the hope the game might turn]. That got me interested in backgammon." So much so, that Edgecliffe-Johnson set up a backgammon club at the RAC (of which, as a classic car enthusiast, he is a member) and, on retiring from the City, became Chairman of its Committee. "That's how I met Sarah Adlam. She was a formidable backgammon player — and she and her husband, Nicholas, happened to own a shoe company called Foster & Son ...". After Nicholas died, Edgecliffe-Johnson was asked if he would help run the business. He joined the company in 2006 and, four years later became the sole proprietor and Chairman of Foster & Son, along with the even older firm of Henry Maxwell, royal spur- and boot-makers, established in 1750.

Today, Foster's incorporates Maxwell's, and they share a workshop. History oozes from every pore of the company's leather, which is treated in a 2000-year-old tannery in Devon to create the soft, flexible and durable English bridle leather of choice. Leather-bound ledgers, written in neat copperplate script, log transactions that are also a reflection of Britain's imperial past. The Imperial Yeomanry, Egyptian Army, Bengal Lancers and assorted aristocratic regiments are listed among Maxwell's clients; as is Edward, Prince of Wales who, on 23 June 1898, purchased 12 pairs of spurs at 13 shillings a pair. Hanging in the office, a 1907 black-and-white photograph records the occasion when Maxwell's was called to Windsor Castle to make shoes and boots for 24 assorted royal personages. There they all are, alongside Edward — now King Edward VII — posing for the camera: Kaiser Wilhelm II, Alfonso XIII, the Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich ... "It was taken before World War I, when they were all still friends" says Edgecliffe-Johnson.

Hollywood was quick to follow in the footsteps of royalty. Charlie Chaplin, Clark Gable, Cary Grant and twinkle-toed Fred Astaire among them. A style of side-lace shoe, which is still offered, was first made for Laurence Olivier, in 'Henry V'. All would have stood on the large pages of an open book, to have the shape of their foot traced, and have seven different measurements taken by the last-maker — who also made note of any special considerations: a hammer toe, a fallen arch, a bunion and any other misfortune of nature or nurture. In consultation with the shoe-maker, the client would then chose the style of shoe, height of heel and shape of toe, as well as the type, colour and finish of skin, and the all-important last would be hand-carved from beech-wood — a process requiring considerable skill. Nothing has changed.

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Foster's is one of a handful of remaining shops in Central London whose artisanal workshop is on the premises. We make our way upstairs, past wooden lasts that hang bunched from every inch of the wall-space, like contemporary sculpture. Each pair is discreetly numbered, in reference to its owner, and hung in sequence. Shoes and boots await collection or repair. I glimpse some notable names. Do clients require privacy for fittings? "We do have a room where we can take them, but most are pretty relaxed, and are happy to stay in the showroom," says Edgecliffe-Johnson. "But there was one occasion when a glamorous Russian lady arrived and demanded we close the shop at precisely 2.30pm, because 'He' would be arriving. 'He' arrived on the dot, accompanied by several burly bodyguards — a young man, who did not address a word to us directly, but only through this lady. He spent £1000 a minute, and left."

Most measurement and consultation sessions last around one hour. And upstairs I see the tools of the trade that turn the initial two-dimensional drawing into the three-dimensional shoe. It is a process which takes six to nine months of painstaking work, and includes at least one fitting before the outer sole and heel are attached. The ancient last-cutting machine — today the domain of Jon Spencer — sits in one corner of the surprisingly small workshop. And another surprise: of the five highly skilled shoe-makers employed here, four are young women — all trained in the craft and Foster aesthetic by master last-maker, Terry Moore. Now approaching 80, he is semi-retired, but still very much a part of the company's DNA.

After the last has been sculpted, the next stage is to cut the chosen leather — rolls of which, of different types and colours, are piled in another corner. Cutting is done from paper patterns, which are shaped on the last, with all the separate components stored in a box file, marked with the client's name. Lucy, a specialist pattern-cutter, is standing at a workbench, laboriously paring a piece of leather to the correct thickness, using a skiving knife. From moulding the leather on the last — the longer it is left there, the better, so that the leather can 'remember' the shape — to the buffing of a hunting boot with a deer bone, the modus operandi has remained untouched by technological progress. Yet, even in this most traditional of crafts, perhaps the most arcane procedure relates to the attachment of the upper to the inner sole and welt. "Flax twine is rolled on the thigh and coated with a

waxy, tar-like substance," explains Edgecliffe-Johnson. "It is then affixed to a pig's bristle, which is curved in order to go through holes made by a piercing awl." Holding a bristle in each hand, the shoe-maker pulls the double-ended thread through the holes and, as with a string of pearls, individually knots each stitch, the friction thereby produced melting the coating, which in turn seals the stitch. "The only use we make of a mechanical instrument is for the 'closing' stage," says Edgecliffe-Johnson "when the various components of the upper are secured together with tiny stitches made with a special sewing machine. Everything else is done by hand."

The upshot of such dedicated craftsmanship is quality, with a capital Q. Unstintingly high standards and 'refined masculinity' of style are the calling cards of Foster's: a restrained elegance as exemplified in their classic chiselled-toe shoe. Not that this quintessentially English ethos deters those in search of something more flamboyant. "One client wanted a pair of bright green crocodile loafers, with matching belt and wallet," recalls Edgecliffe-Johnson. "Another wanted burgundy and cream shoes to match the colours and upholstery of his Rolls-Royce. Both had big enough personalities to carry it off. Each pair of shoes is an act of collaboration with the client — but we won't make an ugly shoe. Someone once wanted an exaggeratedly long toe, for example. But it would inevitably have curled upwards with time. So we said no."

Since joining the company in 2006, Edgecliffe-Johnson has seen turnover triple, defying the recession and the prophets of doom. "Most of our customers come from America, Japan and the UK, but we have clients in 80 countries" he says. "And about 30–40% of orders for our bespoke work are from new customers." Each of these is prepared to pay upwards of £3000 a pair, and wait up to nine months for the delivery of his shoes. In our world of fast fixes, this indicates a healthy appreciation of the time required to make a truly handcrafted product, as well as continuing demand for an object of beauty.

"When I was a young banker in the City, I would wait in the car while my Chairman would pop in to Foster's for a fitting, on our way to visiting a client," Edgecliffe-Johnson reminisces, with a smile. "Little did I imagine that this shop would one day be mine."

Foster & Son, 83 Jermyn Street, London SW1