



A novel
factory

SUE CADE takes a step back in time at the last remaining oak bark tannery in the country

Production sites these days are mostly shiny, sterile places with mechanised processes.

By contrast, the J&FJ Baker tannery in Colyton is like something from a Dickens novel – dark, mildly malodorous and oozing with character.

I'm shown around by Andrew Parr, the fifth generation Parr in the business. Andrew tells me the tannery business goes way back before his family bought it in 1862; it's been in same location for longer than anyone can remember, most likely since the Romans were in occupation.

He explains: "When my great, great grandfather, who was a baker in Exeter, married into a tanning family, he and his wife decided this was the perfect spot for their business." Back then it was not just a tannery, but a mill, too. The site abuts the River Coly, with the mill pond conveniently on site for the water needed for the tanning process.

This is the last oak bark tannery in the country, though years ago when there was an abundance of oak trees in England it was the most common method of tanning leather. "It's the same story in other countries," Andrew explains. "In the South of France and Italy, chestnut was traditionally used for tanning, and nearer the Equator, mimosa."

The process uses oak bark that has been stripped in spring. Oak stripping was once a thriving local industry, but the bark is now imported from other parts of the country. Similarly, lime used in the factory once came from Lyme Regis, but Andrew says it is now obtained from Derbyshire.



ABOVE: Andrew Parr is the fifth generation of his family in the business

LEFT: The intensive tanning process has developed over centuries to create exceptional leather

Hides are sourced locally from beef cattle in Devon such as Hereford, Charolais, Belgian Blues and Limousins, collected daily and quickly cooled and salted by hide merchants before arriving at the tannery for the start of the liming process. This is when hides are dehaired by immersion in lime pits.

As I climb the steps to take a close look at the pits Andrew half-jokingly warns me not to fall in. I suddenly feel like I'm in an episode of *Midsomer Murders*; the deep pits would be a perfect hiding place for a body!

Over in the tan yard, another murky shed that Andrew says is exactly as it has been for centuries, are more pits – 72 of them containing varying strengths of oak bark tan liquor. The hides are moved weekly for three months from weak tan to stronger mixtures before remaining in the last pit for nine months. It's an intensive process developed over centuries to

create exceptional leather.

The quality of the leather depends on the quality of the original hide. The finest hides are kept for harness leathers, whilst those with scratches and tears are used for shoe leather, as any defects can be cut around. The tannery's leather is an integral, traditional part of the British shoe making industry, sent to Savile Row and Jermyn Street for handmade shoes (think Colin Firth in the film *Kingsman*), or to Northampton, the shoe-making centre of the country. Andrew believes the bench-made shoes from Northampton are "the best in the world".

He points out leather being prepared for harnesses, and I remember from my childhood experiences in the equestrian world how English leather was always hyped as far superior to Indian leather for quality and durability. Harness leather

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undergoes additional procedures: another shave and hand dressing with oils and grease - including a dip in mutton tallow. While there's not a lot of glamour in tanning hides, the end result reeks of class.

I wonder aloud what the most expensive leather produced here is, and Andrew shows me a piece of Russian Calf, a copy the tannery makes of a renowned Russian leather last produced during the Russian Revolution. "It's used for luxury leather goods; we supply bag and wallet makers, and shoemakers Crockett & Jones."

That prompts me to ask whether any celebrities endorse J&FJ Baker leather, somewhat idiotically imagining Johnny Depp's distinctive *Pirates* tricorne (it strikes me that Jack Sparrow would feel at home in the murkiness of the tannery). Andrew won't be drawn but is happy to mention supplying shoemakers with a Royal Warrant, meaning Prince Charles and the Duke of Edinburgh may well step out in top quality Devon leather. ♦

FIVE LEATHER FACTS YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW

Most expensive jacket: Michael Jackson's legendary red leather Thriller jacket, auctioned for \$1.8 million in 2011.

Most iconic whip: the bullwhips brandished by Indiana Jones ranged from six to 16 feet in length, and featured a 12-plait natural tan kangaroo hide overlay.

Most often seen in films: the Barcelona chair, featuring 148 separate pieces of leather, has been seen on screen in *Tron: Legacy*, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, *American Psycho*, *Casino Royale* and *Justice League*.

Most ancient piece: a 5,500-year-old one-piece leather hide shoe was found in 2008 in excellent condition in the Areni-1 cave located in the Vayots Dzor province of Armenia.

Most bizarre use: leather was thought to be a sophisticated wallpaper in 17th century Florence and Venice.