

A number of UK footwear companies have come together with the British Footwear Association (BFA) to launch a new nationally-accredited apprenticeship standard that it is hoped will help train the next generation of shoemakers.

The needs of the many

According to figures from the British Footwear Association, more than half of the six million pairs of shoes produced in the UK each year are exported.

The chief executive of this body, John Saunders, says international interest in footwear made in the UK has "possibly never been higher", especially for premium hand-made shoes. The country also has a number of manufacturers of comfort footwear, orthopaedic products and performance training shoes.

There is no doubt the UK footwear industry has declined considerably over the past 30 to 40 years, in part due to shoe groups turning to Asia for cheaper manufacturing. Nevertheless, in Northamptonshire, the UK's traditional footwear heartland, there are still several thriving high-end men's shoe brands. At the same time, one can also find pockets of manufacturing further north in the country.

A new national apprenticeship standard, developed by many of the companies still making shoes in the UK and the BFA, aims to provide the skilled workers required for the UK footwear industry to survive. The groups involved include Loake, New Balance, Church's, Cheaney, Hotter, Tricker's, Crockett & Jones and Dr. Martens.

Industry-wide necessity

"It is economically imperative that these skills are protected and developed," Mr Saunders says. "Additionally, there are firms wishing to expand production, so this collective effort on training will ensure that all manufacturing businesses are able to offer the kind of nationally-approved and formal training we haven't seen for some time in the UK."

One company with its sights set on expansion is comfort footwear specialist Hotter, based in the North West of England. Robert Perkins, its chief operating officer, tells *World Footwear* the company has ambitions to expand its international reach. To do this it will need more staff and so a recognised scheme to train new workers is very beneficial.

The apprenticeship standard aims to give participants a basic understanding of how shoes are made.

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The UK still has a number of thriving high-end men's shoe companies.

CREDIT: CHEANEY



Mr Perkins, a non-executive director of the BFA, played an important role in the initial development of this scheme, which has been two years in the making. "For the industry to sustain and to grow, we will need a new generation of shoemaking people," he insists, adding that there has been a "constant reduction" in staff numbers in the UK footwear sector since the 1970s.

The joint managing director of high-end footwear maker Cheaney, William Church, says his brand is "obliged" to train its workers on a continual basis in order to "sustain skills in our business". This takes place at its factory in Desborough, Northamptonshire, although not to any formal standard as such a standard did not exist. Cheaney remains "completely committed" to manufacturing in the UK, Mr Church insists, and so it requires a steady supply of skilled workers. This is where the new apprenticeship standard comes in.

For his part, Martin Mason, manager director of Tricker's, another Northamptonshire-based brand, says the company has an "immediate requirement" for several apprentices and "fully expects" to be able to offer a full-time position at the end of the course. He adds that Tricker's already invests heavily in training to allow it to keep up with its sales plans.

Collaboration is key

The BFA's role in creating this standard was to facilitate the work of the companies involved, according to Jayne West, the organisation's training and development manager. She explains that in the UK it is now the responsibility of employers to design apprenticeships, rather than that of the education sector itself.

She believes the collaboration between these different groups has been and will continue to be crucial in ensuring the standard is appropriate and effective. This sentiment is echoed by Robert Perkins, who says no individual brand has the means to develop such an apprenticeship alone. "I felt strongly that we needed to work together," he explains; the specialist skills required for shoemaking mean one unified standard is the best way forward.

All the companies had their say when it came to designing the content of the apprenticeship standard. Ms West says it was "fascinating" to hear their respective needs and demands when discussions first began. All had to take steps back from their starting positions in order for the result to work for everybody, she adds, but all are happy with the eventual outcome.

Mr Church says it was important for Cheaney to be involved to ensure the final outcome met the company's needs. He is quick to point out, however, that it is intended to be suitable for all. The intention is for the scheme to be flexible enough to suit everyone from specialist shoemakers to large multi-national groups, and from premium bespoke footwear brands to industrial-scale shoe manufacturers. He describes creating a standard appropriate for all kinds of footwear manufacturers as "both the biggest challenge and the main objective" of the process.

Core skills

The apprenticeship will offer high-quality entry-level training for anyone interested in a career in the footwear industry. Ms West tells *World Footwear* they do not need any sort of background in shoemaking or in manufacturing to enrol. The scheme aims to give apprentices a basic understanding of how to make shoes. Once they have this they will be able to take on more specialist skills, like 3D-printing techniques, bespoke craftsmanship or working with performance materials, further down the line. Mr Perkins describes the standard as "broad" and says its creators were "keen to embrace the whole industry".

Training will last from 12 to 15 months and will include skills such as cutting materials (mostly leather), skiving, forming the footwear, lasting, closing, attaching the sole and finishing the footwear. Apprentices will spend 80% of their time "on the job" at the company that employs them, with the equivalent of one day per week in the classroom. From the start of the course the apprentice will be a full-time employee at their company and will be paid in line with national apprenticeship guidelines. At



The specialist skills required to become a shoemaker mean a unified training standard is long overdue.
CREDIT: TRICKERS

the end of the course, they will have to demonstrate they are "production ready", Ms West says.

The BFA has recruited training providers in the areas of the UK where companies are looking to recruit. In Northamptonshire, home to a number of the brands involved, the training partner will be further-education institute Northampton College. Local manufacturers are helping the college to develop a working shoe room where apprentices will be able to get off-site machine and equipment experience. This has included donating equipment, materials and transport support to get this facility off the ground. It will serve as the starting point for a 'technical academy', to be further expanded in the future. The other colleges that will be involved in the training are West Lancashire College in the North West of England, which will mostly serve Hotter, and Capel Manor College in London.

Open to all

There is no age restriction for those signing up to the programme. Apprenticeships are typically associated with younger people, specifically those just leaving full-time education, but it is also open to those looking to retrain and launch a second career. The main incentive for this group is that the nationally-accredited programme represents a formal pathway into the industry. It is also a paid apprenticeship, so there is more than just new skills on offer.

Stephen Bent, production manager at Dr Martens, says: "This is a great industry that offers more career options than people realise. We wanted to create a scheme which, no matter which firm you had your apprenticeship with, the skills, knowledge and understanding you gain will be of relevance to any employer so a qualified apprentice will be a very employable person."

William Church says the scheme is "particularly appropriate" for younger people as it offers the chance to follow a structured training plan that leads to a formal qualification. On top of the obvious skills they will acquire, he also mentions the sense of achievement it will give them.



Ms West reveals some companies have expressed an interest in sending existing staff on the course as a "refresher" exercise. Cheaney is one of these and Mr Church says a number of its employees have been "very receptive" to this idea. In addition, it plans to put three new recruits through the programme. As mentioned, they will formally join the company at the start of the course, before taking up permanent roles once they have successfully completed it.

The companies involved in the programme are "training to keep", according to Ms West, who adds that this



Robert Perkins, chief operating officer of Hotter, says this is a long-term project.
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apprenticeship is much more than just a 12-month trial period during which the apprentice decides if footwear manufacturing is the right path for them to take. The employers are looking to recruit and train personnel who will work for their business for years to come.

Long-term vision

The new apprenticeship standard is not the "perfect solution" to the problem of the skills gap in the UK footwear industry, Ms West admits, but she feels it can make a significant difference. She anticipates there will be some problems and hitches when it is first rolled out but says the content can be reviewed after three years. At that point, the companies will come together again to redesign or tweak it. There will also be opportunities for new footwear groups to get involved. During the first three years, Ms West expects there to be "ongoing informal dialogue" between the BFA and its partners about how the programme is going.

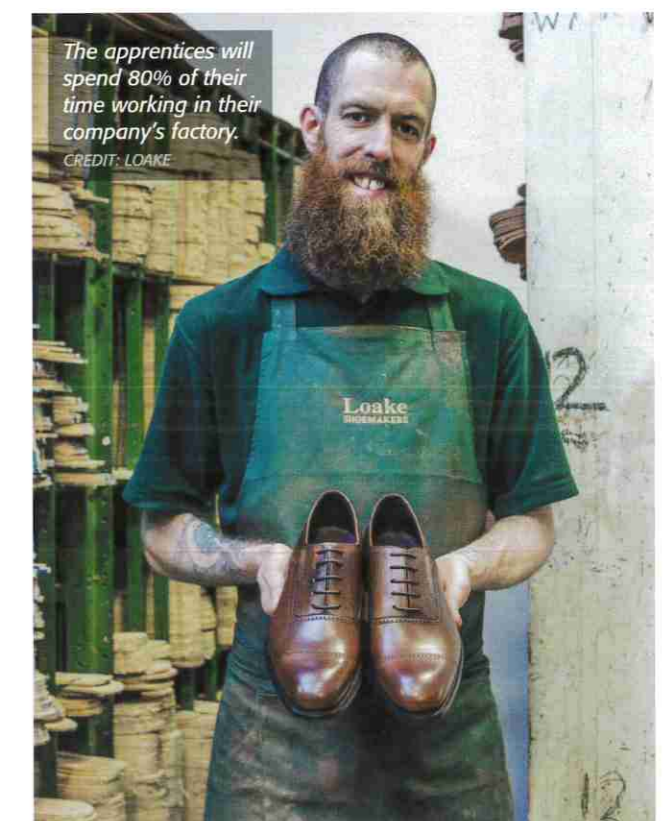
For his part, Robert Perkins concedes that the new standard will not bear instant fruit. He sees it as a 10-year programme, but says the important thing is that the "economic framework" will be in place for it to be a success. There is also a "social dimension" to the project, he tells *World Footwear*, as a number of UK shoe factories are in areas where there are "more challenges". He believes it offers an individual the chance to receive formal training in a profession, allowing them to access employment opportunities that can improve their quality of life as well as that of their family.

Mr Church says the apprentices taking part in this scheme will learn a lot more than they would do if they were being trained completely in-house by just one company, which will make them "better rounded individuals". For Cheaney, the scope of the apprenticeship will allow it to evaluate the skillset of each individual and decide where they might fit into its business.

Northampton College and West Lancashire College hope to have enough apprentices signed up to launch the scheme in September or October, while Capel Manor College continues to

gauge demand from local shoemaking companies before deciding whether to move forward with its implementation.

For Ms West, success for the new apprenticeship standard would be for graduate apprentices to still be working in the footwear industry 10 years down the line, hopefully progressing through the ranks at their respective companies and continuing to develop their shoemaking skills. Its ultimate goal is to provide a consistent, long-term supply of skilled workers so that the UK footwear industry can survive and grow. 



The apprentices will spend 80% of their time working in their company's factory.
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