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MADE BRITAIN

Britain has an unsurpassed reputation for traditional craftsmanship where quality counts over quantity. We look at British companies – from leather goods to cars, to jewellery and pens – which exemplify an approach in which no detail goes amiss.

WRITER Josh Sims

When

footwear designer Rachel Jones launched her new bag line, Buckitt, last year, she had one condition in mind: it had to be made in England. The labour costs, she was aware, would result in a more expensive product. But she was convinced that the bags would have a certain ineffable quality that wouldn't be achievable even if they were made in, say, Italy. "Although the hand skills are in danger of being lost now, there remains a distinct heritage in the UK for making dependable, unshowy, well-considered, hand-crafted goods," she says from her east London factory. "Of course, talk of 'craft' and 'heritage' has become fashionable – it's as much a factor in beers as in bags now. But behind that faddishness is an essential truth: that Brits are rather good at making fine things."

And not just beers and bags: while the UK's industrial manufacturing base may have gone under, or gone east, or is at least widely perceived as having done so – in fact, far from being dominated by service industries, the UK remains ranked seventh in the world for manufacturing output – not only do a number of historic, household names remain, but a plethora of small, sometimes one-man-band designer-makers are coming up to maintain a buoyant industry in the low-key production of everything from clothes to cars, jewellery to hats.

Suppliers and factories – perhaps as a result of the economic downturn – are more enthusiastic about working with small quantities and more challenging projects, which helps these new designer-makers get off the ground; and the internet has proven a crucial tool in funding, in reaching sufficient numbers of customers, and for customers to find the more esoteric products that suit their personality too. And with new ventures out to support such makers – the likes of London's annual Best of Britannia show, or the New Craftsmen collective, which has recently opened a Mayfair gallery – this is the new market of the global niche. And it's growing, if you know where to look.

"In fact, I was increasingly finding myself working with people who were very passionate about their product, finding that there were more and more of them, but also that not many people knew about them," says brand consultant Antony Wallis of why he launched the Best of Britannia show. "In part it's about protecting craftsmanship and underlining a sustainability message – that well-made things are built to last. But it's more simply about bringing these



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- 01 Buckitt bag
- 02 Buckitt bag in production: Hammer tab
- 03 Buckitt bag in production: Rivet press
- 04 Finishing touches – logo applied to inside pocket www.buckitt.myshopify.com



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- 05 Best of Britannia (BoB) shop
- 06 View of BoB exhibitions
- 07 Jack Sheppard display
- 08 G Plan Vintage display www.bestofbritannia.com



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- 09 A few of the hundreds of handmade pieces that make a watch
- 10 Series 2 watch
- 11 Inner of an Open Dial watch www.rsmithwatches.com



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Brits are rather good at making fine things.

Rachel Jones, Buckitt



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makers to the attention of people who should be buying their products. Many of them at the showcase are quirky in that British way. But it's not about waving the Union Jack, so much as perhaps pointing out that there are a lot of great British makers, old and new, and bringing them together."

Certainly the finer things from British makers can be very fine indeed: Roger Smith serves as one example of what might be called extreme craft. A protégé of the late master George Daniels, Smith might be regarded as one of the finest watchmakers in the world – he and his small team literally make every single component of his watches from scratch at his Isle of Man workshop. This means he creates perhaps just 10 watches a year – "companies tend to post annual increases in production as if that was some recognition that they're doing well," says Smith. "But I don't see it that way. I'm happy to say I'm one of the smallest watchmakers in the world." Smith has recently been commissioned to make a 'GB Watch', a one-off that will form part of a government initiative comprising a promotional world tour of British craft goods.

"The watch is perhaps an unusual way to demonstrate the British skills in making things – after all, watchmaking doesn't typically fit in with ideas of Britishness," Smith adds. "But I like to think the watch could bring recognition to a whole British watchmaking tradition that few people even know exists. Beyond that I think there is a resurgence of interest among people in knowing how the things they use in their lives are actually made and seeing that people still actually use their hands to make them – it's a counter to the frenetic world we live in." ▶



A protégé
of the late
master George
Daniels, Roger
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Globetrotter has tried to make its cases on modern machinery but repeatedly finds that it cannot measure up to the finesse feasible on its old Victorian workhorses.



01 Centenary Red suitcase collection
02 Suitcases in the making
www.globetrotter1897.com



Of course, not everything need be crafted quite to Smith's level, as a growing groundswell of demand for all things 'Made in Britain' perhaps suggests. Small wonder that, when back in 2005 there was EU talk of introducing a voluntary code to replace member states' own 'made in...' labels with a generic 'Made in Europe' one, manufacturers in the UK were among those up in neatly-sleeved arms (while those in Eastern Europe were, funnily enough, broadly all for it). The so-called 'patriotic purchase' has, in the UK as abroad, seen a shift towards an active preference for home-grown products – which in the UK tend to be at the higher end of the market. And it was perhaps for similar reasons, when in 2006 the Prada Group bought full control of one of the greatest names in English shoemaking, Church's Shoes, it did not do so purely for the name, figuring pattern-makers, clickers and closers in Italy would do the job just as well, more profitably and under closer supervision – authenticity and integrity were regarded as being a question of geography.

But would anyone have really cared if a quintessentially British company had been relocated, providing the product quality remained unchanged? Katherine Green argues

yes, very much so, and this even with a company that, although based in the UK since the 1930s, is originally German – suitcase and latterly leather-goods manufacturer Globetrotter. She concedes that there is certainly an element of the good story to the fact that the company takes five days just to mould a suitcase's corner-piece, or that it has tried to make its cases on modern machinery but repeatedly finds that it cannot measure up to the finesse feasible on its old Victorian workhorses.

"But we make the way we do because we've found that the cases can't be rushed, that something is lost if we try to change too much," she says. "And if we moved it all wholesale abroad, and they weren't made in the UK anymore, I know people wouldn't be as interested in them. In part that's because, right or wrong, the UK has a certain association with the quality of craftsmanship. But it's just as much because people want to support the British economy and British makers, and to back British working conditions. There is a growing awareness of just how much British craft manufacturing has died out, but also people are much better educated about what they buy now too. They buy better and less frequently."



What makes British craft distinctive from that of other countries is precisely that it tends to be focused on the making of things that are useful, functional and so good value.

Nicholas Brooke, Sunspel

- 03 Sunspel workshop
- 04 Sunspel production line
www.sunspel.com
- 05 Vickers 'Sundown Town' special
edition bicycle
- 06 Building of a Vickers bicycle frame
www.vickersbicycles.co.uk



They are also, perhaps, opening their minds as to what actually constitutes craft – beyond the somewhat romanticised notion of wizened, gnarly-handed makers whiling away the wee small hours hunched over benches displaying a loving patina. "We're certainly not working from some stunning atelier. There's no glamour in it. In fact, it's mostly hot and dirty," says Ian Covey, founder of Vickers Bicycles, makers of bespoke bicycles, including, recently, a special edition for tailor Richard James. "What we do is really light industry, but it's no less about craft for all that. The product that results is just as special and all part of the growing desire for lovely, hand-made things."

"What's important to note is that British makers are not just about making the more obviously 'fine' things," agrees Nicholas Brooke, co-owner of Sunspel, one of the oldest and still among the best makers of men's underwear – clothing is certainly one area in which British makers have long excelled: knitwear manufacturer John Smedley, for example, can lay claim to running the oldest continually-operational factory in the world; Italy, the erstwhile home of fashion, was only unified as a state in 1871 – by then, Macintosh had already been keeping people dry for close to half a century.

"Luxury is often stereotyped as being about making something extremely expensive, from the rarest materials and in the most complex way," Brooke adds. "But what makes British craft distinctive from that of other countries is precisely that it tends to be focused on the making of things that are useful, functional and so good value. We're a practical nation, which is why other aspects of what we make – great design and engineering, for example – shouldn't be overshadowed by this fixed idea of craft." ▶





Morgan cars in production



01 Morgan Roadster
02 Morgan craftsmen
www.morgan-motor.co.uk

The UK is expected to make around two million cars next year, accounting for some 10 percent of British exports.

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That would certainly be the case with, for example, a car. The received wisdom may be that the car industry in the UK is long gone – and since there are only a few survivors from what was once a business with over 100 manufacturers, that is not far from the truth. And yet the UK is expected to make around two million cars next year, accounting for some 10 percent of British exports.

“Obviously the top-end UK car industry is going through something of a renaissance at the moment, which is something the government has cottoned on to in its new efforts to push ‘Made in England’,” explains Mark Ledington, sales and marketing director at British company Morgan, the world’s oldest privately-owned car manufacturer. “There may be an assumption that British craft is focused on small scale product, but actually it’s equally applicable to large, extremely complicated products. There is, of course, a style to the cars that is distinctly British, that comes from the history and heritage – but equally British is the ability to meld advanced technology to hand crafts. It’s something people appreciate you have to pay for – you can, after all, go to the high street for your suits, or you can go to Savile Row.” ▶



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But it's not just in hefty if streamlined chunks of metal and rubber that a characteristically British combination of craft and engineering comes to the fore. It can be in the little things too. It might just be in your pocket. Chris Holden and Tim Higgins of young design company Ajoto, for example, have spent the last two years in their New Cross studio working out how to drill a hole through a single block of brass in order to create a new, more minimalistic-styled but still upscale pen.

"The manufacturers said it couldn't be done, that it would be easier to drill two smaller lengths and then weld them together, and that the join would be invisible," says Holden. "But we told them that we'd know the join was there and that details like that mattered. What we want to do is take on a market dominated by these big, very classic companies that are more about quills and calligraphic writing with something that is about 21st-century craftsmen. It's about making products that are British in that way of being beautiful, unflashy things that appeal to the connoisseur, but which are modern with it."

And that, it seems, may be as carefully-crafted a summary of why one might want to spend more on our native produce as could be wished for. ■



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It's about making products that are British in that way of being beautiful, unflashy things that appeal to the connoisseur, but which are modern with it.

Chris Holden, Ajoto



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- 01 Aluminium waiting for the extrusion process
 - 02 Quality control of the Brass pens
 - 03 Inspection of a brass pen
 - 04 Silver Satin-Spun aluminium pen
 - 05 Brass pen parts
 - 06 Minimal Black Collection
- www.ajoto.com



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