

FACT:

Billingham bags use the same leather as Louis Vuitton



BILLINGHAM BAGS

In the first of our Cool Britannia series, KATHRINE ANKER heads to the Midlands to find out what goes into the making of the legendary Billingham camera bags

You can tell it's a family business by the way I'm received at the new Billingham factory. Harry Billingham, the company director and youngest son of the founder, Martin, apologises for the mess in the back office as he takes me past his father's old drawing board and a bulging stack of hand-drawn designs from the early seventies, and through to the floor of the new factory

building they have moved into six months ago.

It almost looks as if someone scraped the contents of the old Billingham factory into a van and dumped it in a corner of the much bigger new factory in Cradley Heath, in the Midlands. As in most family abodes, crates of the grown-up kids' belongings are stored away – in this case not in the attic, but on top of a sky-reaching shelf-unit next to

stacks of canvas and thick, brown cow hides. The hides are a point of pride for Billingham. "All of our hides come from Spain, from the tannery that provide hides for Louis Vuitton", says Harry. He tells me that Billingham's leather is even from the same selection of hides as the LV-branded fashion accessory – the best selection that the tannery makes. "Annoyingly, they get to pick first", he adds. The thick hides feel soft on the surface. Harry

runs his fingers across the top of a stack. "This is the head end of the cow, and these creases you can see here are from the back of the cow's neck that they've been lifting when grazing. Some manufacturers don't like this, but this is the character of the leather, this is the look that we use".

As we walk around the factory floor, Harry talks with passion and expertise about every step in the production. I learn about the ▶

properties of natural dye from tree bark and about the parts of the buckles that Martin Billingham designed and developed himself. I learn about the giant 'cookie cutter' that presses moulds into layers of canvas with 25 tonnes of pressure, and about the complicated process of making the canvas completely waterproof. This involves one layer of canvas from Austria, one from Korea, and the merging of the two with rubber, giving the bags the draped feel and heaviness that make them resistant to 19 meters of water pressure.

A typical engineer, Harry pays attention to every little detail that makes the bigger picture work. The seemingly repetitive tasks of the staff might appear insignificant on their own, but when you join everything together, you get an immensely complicated process involving perhaps 50 parts, the same amount of hands and a lot of different skills.

The sewing machines are a good example of this. Clattering from all around us, they are used to sew zips on canvas, foam dividers on the insides of bags, and leather patches on front flaps and corners. The machines are all different. Some of them look like museum pieces, others are so new and fancy that I am not allowed to film them. "That one can stitch through your fingers", says Harry and tells me how his parents used to bet on who of their sons would put their finger under the needle first. No one did, as it turned out.

Near the end of the production line, I spot the founder of Billingham, Harry's father, Martin. He is looking at one of the sewing machines and chatting to the lady who operates it, but scurries past me as soon as he sees my camera. Lens-shy like most photographers, I gather. We continue our tour and end up at the very last table, where trolleys full of green, unripe-looking Billingham bags are waiting for the final touch. The bags get sewn inside-out, with the green padding turned outwards, and have to be flicked around and moulded into place before they get the canvas and leather surface that we all know. "It takes a lot of practise to get it right", the lady at the work table tells



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me. She uses a metal pole with a worn-down, once-round tip to push in the corners. It's the same pole that was used when she started working at Billingham, 20 years ago.

Having seen every type of sewing machine from antique to sci-fi on the factory floor, I ask Harry a not very thought-through question: Was the original bag handmade?

Harry sighs. "Handmade is a misunderstood term. It's about taking a traditional way of working and maintaining the effect of that, but still

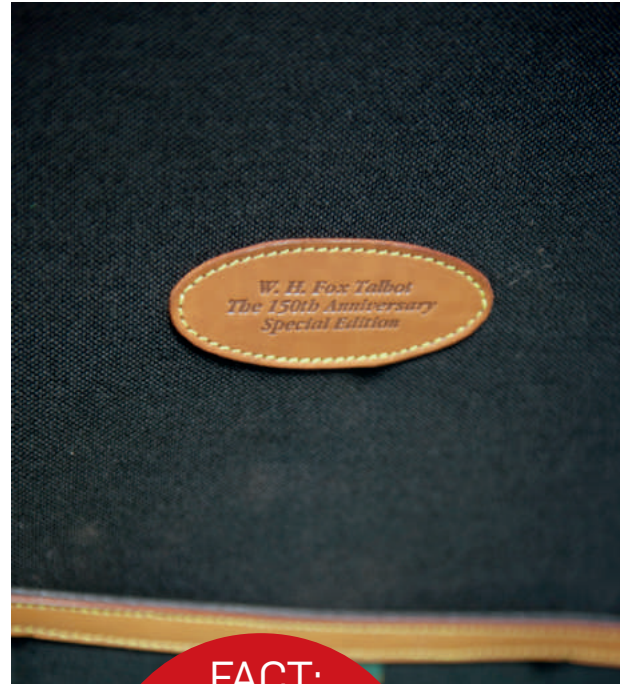


doing it in a production environment and modernising the production you have", he says. "You don't classify it as hand-made because it isn't hand-stitched, but it IS individually made. People expect someone to sit with a needle and stitch everything together and there's just no way we can do that. But we can maintain the old values and reasons for doing things the way we do them."

Looking at the people operating the sewing machines, I see what Harry means. It takes a lot of skill to sew the

leather straps onto the canvas of the bags with such precision, even when a state-of-the-art sewing machine is involved. The man who sews the corners of the front flaps of the Hadley bags has to fold the flap four times at just the right angle while sewing to get the three-dimensional corners perfect. I'd call that handmade.

I've nearly finished my guided tour and get ready to do my piece-to-camera introduction for the video that will come out of this, when I realise that I need to double ▶



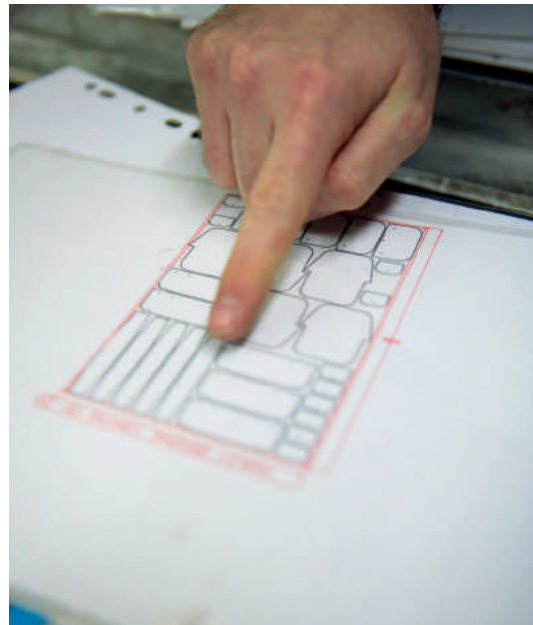
FACT:
Changed to camera bags when Martin Billingham discovered how popular the bags were among photojournalists in New York

Top: A collection of old bags, drawings and curiosities will soon be displayed in a museum in the factory.
Bottom: The design stays true to the original bags, and is meant to last longer than a fashion range.



FACT:
Billingham first started out making fishing bags in 1973





VIEW OUR VIDEO OF THE BILLINGHAM FACTORY ON THE PP WEBSITE



The hides, canvas and foam parts go through around 50 stages of skilled production, from the cutting of the leather straps to the final stitching of the parts.

FACT:
The canvas used for Billingham bags is tested to make sure it can withstand 19 meters of water pressure



check some facts and years. I pop back into the drawing room to ask Harry, and find Martin Billingham sitting at his desk, not paying attention to me until Harry prods him to tell us that he started the business in 1973 making fishing bags. This is an area where people fish, and at the time it seemed like a market with high demand. Martin Billingham and his wife moved the production out of their house and into their first factory in '77 and turned the production into camera bags in '78, when he found out that that's what photographers in New York were actually buying them for. Martin Billingham speaks with a soft, quiet voice. I feel humble next to this man who started the creation of such a respected product and yet does not brag or put himself in the limelight. My presence almost feels a little intrusive to his quietness, so I excuse myself and head for the door, when suddenly he looks directly at me and we share a little moment. "Nice glasses", he says and smiles. As with most businesses, Billingham has had its ups and downs.

Billingham's Korean distributor has doubled their sales within a year. The next market they plan to enter is Russia. Harry puts a large part of Billingham's success down to sticking to their guns and not paying too much attention to fashion and trends. "You listen to clever business people who say that you've got to keep an eye on the competition and then you listen to even more clever people who will say 'forget about the competition and focus on what you're doing.' Make sure what you're doing is right for what you're supposed to be doing." Billingham bags are meant to be used as work bags for twenty years, not to fit into a fashion range that will last a year, he points out. A visit to the Billingham factory would not be complete without a peek into the museum room. It's not an actual museum yet – more like a loft full of mysterious wonders. Old shotgun cases that Martin's father used to hand stitch, framed, original drawings of bags with measurements and colour indications, an old bicycle and the original, red and white

"It's cool to be a photographer now, and everybody's got a camera. People want to invest in good stuff... So why not invest in a good-quality camera bag?" Harry Billingham



There have been times when the factory nearly closed, but the Billinghams have managed to curb the trend every time. In the last year, the production has expanded massively. Oddly enough, Harry admits, because he decided to increase the prices. "It became my job to organise the new price list and I was looking at the costs and thought if I'm gonna take over this company we need to adjust the margins. So we made the decision to put the prices up. It's cool to be a photographer now, and everybody's got a camera. People want to invest in good stuff. Manufacturers like Canon make a lot more lenses now than they used to, and you get amateurs spending lots of money on those. So why not invest in a good-quality camera bag?"

Billingham sign from the old factory. This, to Harry's annoyance, has been painted over by someone who couldn't keep inside the lines of his father's original artwork. "I'm not going to try to fix it, I'd risk ruining it completely," he says and caresses the old, wooden sign with care. If I haven't already been convinced that Harry lives and breathes the family business, I get a final proof as I'm about to leave. Harry digs out his business card from a pile of mess on the working table in the drawing room; a piece of soft, light-brown leather with Billingham's logo and Harry's email engraved. Martin Billingham chuckles quietly, and Harry smiles: "People said I was being silly when I had them made, but I thought it was a nice touch." ☑

The recent expansion into America and the far-east has also helped sales.

www.billingham.co.uk