

Seat of power

The Scottish family firm that has made opulent leather – for Concorde, the QE2 and Aston Martin – for more than 250 years. By David Green

A CAR IS such a personal thing and yet our relationship with it is limited to a few familiar points of contact. Even if you relish looking at it, there are few things you will actually touch: one being the leather of the steering wheel and another being the leather of the seat.

The feeling and quality of that leather will be vital to your perception of the luxuriousness of the car. Irrespective of what your car looks like, if the leather is too shiny and too artificial the magic will evaporate. So often I have jumped into a car with luxury pretensions only to be let down by the driver's seat.

Some of the finest things in life are remarkable for their invisibility; they just feel right. Leather is one such luxury. Although most high-end car manufacturers now understand this, none, to my knowledge, runs a ranch or a farm, nor has the resource and know-how to produce their own leather.

This is where Bridge of Weir comes in. It is one of those wonderful companies that make leather products that many of us would have sat in, without us being aware of the craftsmanship and expertise that has gone into making them.

The company can trace its roots back to 1758, but has been creating leather goods in its present guise since 1905. And not just any old leather goods. The facility, in a rural setting near Glasgow, has been responsible for the leather in Concorde, the Orient Express, the QE2, the original Charles Eames lounge chair, the British Library and the



benches in the House of Commons, and many other distinguished clients. Its work on car interiors goes all the way back to the Ford Model T. Nowadays many of the world's finest car-makers look to Bridge of Weir to supply leather, including Aston Martin, for which it is the exclusive supplier.

Visiting the facility and observing the attention to detail in the process, it is not hard to see why this is the leather of choice. In the same way as when you drink a fine Scottish whisky and daydream about the source of your pleasure, Bridge of Weir, with its own loch and wild countryside surroundings, is the sort of place you hope your leather might come from. The soft water of the area that is such a vital ingredient in premium whisky is also a key factor in the production of the finest hides.

The business is a family one in the truest sense. Jonathan Muirhead, the chairman, is the grandson of the founder; his son James is the sales manager; and a cousin working in the laboratory can proudly claim to be the eighth generation of an extended family that has been in the business for more than 250 years. The way these artisans make leather is ancient in its roots, a process that Jonathan Muirhead believes comes from alchemy: "An optimum blend of the highest technology and hand craftsmanship."

When you see the transformation from rawhide to the exquisite leather, it is not difficult to believe in a kind of magic. The hides come to the factory from farms mostly in a 60-mile radius. They come from the most responsible local sources that adhere to the five freedoms of animal welfare and the hides are a by-product of the beef industry. (Dairy cattle are never used because their hide becomes too stretched.)

Some things in the process have never changed – the hide is still stretched slowly in the same frames, operated by multiple workers, as it was 100 years ago. What has changed is the introduction of modern techniques such as laser cutting, which can achieve a level of finish that would have been unimaginable in the past. Another development is

the impressive focus on the environment. James Muirhead talks of creating "possibly the world's only low-carbon leather", which is because of the company's attention to its ecological footprint and an innovative on-site thermal energy plant that harvests waste and converts it back to energy for the manufacturing cycle.



STITCH IN TIME
Bridge of Weir has been making leather goods in its factory near Glasgow since 1905. Left: how it looks today

The way that the firm moves with the times and yet is firmly anchored in the customs of the past is the secret to its longevity. "[We are] striving at the forefront of quality, technology and innovation, while trying to become the world's most environmentally friendly leather manufacturer," James Muirhead says.

Bridge of Weir certainly produces a most high-end and beautiful British product – and one that is constantly evolving. Today its colour-matching department can match a leather interior to your favourite lipstick or Farrow & Ball shade. There aren't many manufacturers of car parts that will go quite that far.



1906

The ill-fated Lusitania is launched. No expense was spared in its design, which featured upholstery by Bridge of Weir



1911

The first Ford Model T production plant in Britain opens. Bridge of Weir leather is used in the cars' interiors



1956

Charles Eames uses its leather for his chair and ottoman, first made as a gift for the film-maker Billy Wilder



1965

Thunderbirds begins on British television. Bridge of Weir leather featured in Lady Penelope's vehicle



1976

Concorde, the supersonic airliner, makes its first commercial flight, the company's leather on its seats



1981

The DeLorean is released. It was the first time a "soft" leather trim had featured in a production car