

# Connolly

## The Specialists

Jonathan Wood visited this well established family business to see how leather was produced and how it should be best cared for

**I**F you're running a vintage Austin or a 1976 Jaguar XJS, the chances are that the hides for the leather upholstery in both cars were supplied by the same firm. For Connolly Bros (Curriers) Ltd, to use their full title, have been in the leather business since 1878 when two brothers, John Joseph and Samuel Frederick Connolly set up shop at 153 Euston Road, London, though in 1884 they moved to new premises in Charlton Street, which the company still occupies. Beginning in a small way with "while you wait" shoe repair service, it wasn't long before the brothers branched out into the saddlery business and so naturally gravitated to providing hides to the carriage trade.

But it was when the carriage evolved into the "horseless carriage" that the firm dramatically expanded, the liaison between the upstage world of the coach and gig and the new fangled motor car, being forged by the eldest of Samuel's four sons, Frederick Ignatius, F.I., whose friendships embraced such motoring magnates as William Morris, Herbert Austin and William Lyons, had the foresight to see the tremendous potential for the company in the motor industry. He joined Connollys in 1912 at a time when leather was practically the only upholstery medium available, and 64 years later, the motor trade still takes around 50 per cent of the company's output of hides.

Samuel's other three brothers also entered the business: Joseph, Edward and Wilfred. The present chairman and managing director is Tim Connolly, who is Wilfred's son, while Edward's son David is company secretary and looks after export commitments. My guide through the intricacies of the Connolly genealogy was Anthony Hussey, whose mother was sister to the four brothers. Anthony looks after the expanding furniture side of the business and it was he who escorted photographer Paul Skilleter and I around Connolly's factory at Wandale Bank SW19 to see just what was involved in the business of making a cow's hide fit to sit on.

One of the problems with hides are that they are very vulnerable to marking, barbed wire scratches and warble fly scars are the most frequent forms of disfigurement. Indeed, pleating is used so extensively in car upholstery, so that relatively narrow areas of leather can be used, thus minimising the risk of marking. Around 50 per cent of the hides Connollys use are imported from Scandinavia as they tend to have fewer blemishes than the "home grown" variety.

The hides arrive at the factory having been already tanned at the company's tannery in Canterbury. The tanner removes the hair, splits the hide, the top half being used by the motor and furniture trade, while the lower section or "split", is used for leather coats and the like. It is then soaked in a time-honoured solution made from oak bark or mimosa, myrobalans and/or chrome. This ensures that it will not rot, dry out or crack.

Once at the factory, the hides are first inspected for any of the aforementioned marks and then sorted and graded. They are then soaked in water in a Connolly inspired machine to make them easier to handle and shaved to the required thickness. The motor industry favours 1.3mm, while leather which is going to end up as saddles and bridles is, of course, considerably thicker.

Having thus been graded, the hides go through a wet buffing process as some have too many marks and a very fine layer of top grain is removed to eradicate them. These particular hides are subsequently given an artificially embossed grain. To restore any of the natural oils that may have been lost by the previous processes, the hides are then "wet drummed" and then put through a giant mangle to remove any surplus water.

Up until recently all the hides were then stretched on wooden frames and dried in the open air, a traditional, though time consuming business. Now new Italian machinery has revolutionised the process. The hides are stretched and mounted on a hydraulically operated rack and then passed through an oven, which considerably streamlines the operation. A few are still dealt with in the old way.

Then comes the first of the staining processes and after drying, the hides are softened and then a second coat of pre-determined colour applied. Then on goes the main colour, there being around 7000 shades to choose from, a far cry from the days prior to 1927 when the colours were limited to brown, tan, red, green and blue. It was in that year that Connolly perfected their revolutionary Vaumol process, which allowed a tremendous variation of colour shades to be successfully used on leather.

Those hides that require it then have graining embossed on them and those destined for use on antique furniture are also specially treated, following a final dry drumming.

Unlike the furniture trade, the motor industry requires that the hides are sprayed only on one side. Each hide measures around 45 square feet and every one goes through ingenious though antiquated machinery that accurately measures the square footage, so that the customer doesn't have to pay for any holes that may be present!

Connolly's automotive customers aren't confined to the British Isles, for apart from supplying hides to Rolls-Royce, Jaguar (their biggest customer), Aston Martin and Rover, they also provide leather for upholstery Volvos, Renaults, Peugeots and

such Italian exotics as Ferrari and Lamborghini. In addition, they supply such extremes of the political spectrum as General Motors for use in the Cadillac and for the prestigious Zil, used by Communist party mandarins in Russia.

Apart from processing leather in large quantities (around 10,000 hides leave the company's head office every week), Connolly's also run a renovation department under the capable eye of Ken Cole. Write for full details to him at Charlton Street, Euston Road, London NW1 1JE.

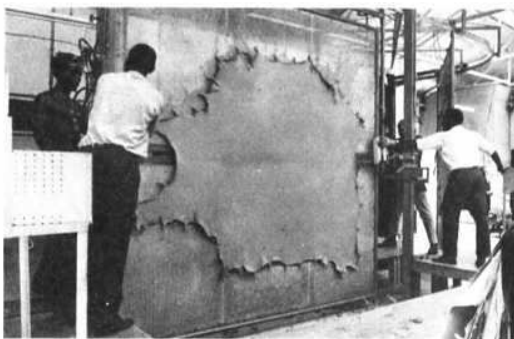
The service is a mobile one and the charge for renovating the leather in a car like a Jaguar or Rover is around £35. However, you can do the work yourself, at a cost of £7 to £9, but it's essential that you send Ken a piece of leather from the car's upholstery, snipped from an unobtrusive area. He will then have a small quantity of the correct coloured lacquer made up and this costs £2 20 per half litre. You'd use about 3½ litres on a car the size of a post-war Rolls-Royce. Hide Food, which costs 70p, is also required.

To carry out the process, the leather is first thoroughly cleaned with glycerine soap or a concentrated cleaner. A small brush should be used to remove any dirt that may be ingrained. While the leather is still damp, the hide food is applied, which is intended to return the leather to its original suppleness. It should then be left for 24 hours. The surface is then cleaned again and the lacquer applied. A second coat is often advisable, spraying providing a good, even finish. This work should be carried out in warm, dry surroundings, incidentally.

I asked Anthony Hussey what precautions you should take to make sure that your upholstery remains in good condition and he recommended that the leather should be washed with a good quality toilet soap and warm water every four months and then go over the interior about twice a year with Hide Food.

Also the company will supply hides for restoration projects, dyed to the correct colouring. They cost about £45 each. No less than nine are used for the upholstery on a Rolls-Royce though at the other extreme, a two seater MG would use about one and a half hides.

I left this well established family business, I must confess, in a state of some bemusement at the infinite number of processes required to make hide usable, pleasing to the eye and long lasting. Somehow the leather seats in my MGA won't seem quite the same again! ●



Left, restoring the colour of a leather seat at Charlton Street. Above, the hide being automatically stretched. Below, left, familiar names; the bins contain the upholstery dyes. Below, the machine that measures the square footage of the hides.

