

Photograph »
Richard Pibbs
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Made in Britain
Alex Bilmes



Alex Bilmes »
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Walpole
British Luxury

MADE *in* BRITAIN

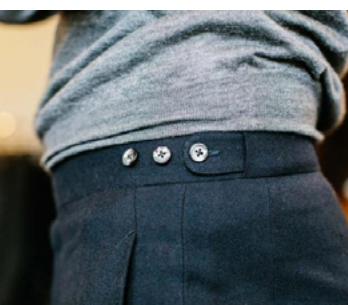
Necessity – plus desire, imagination and dogged
determination – is the mother of invention.

WORDS ALEX BILMES

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Opposite & top ▶
Wedgwood: disrupting
Ceramics Since 1759

Above, left ▶
Alfred Dunhill game-
changing lighter and
pipe-smoker's gadget –
a gold-rimmed briar
pipe has a miniature
solid gold umbrella
which can be clipped
to it - in case of rain.
Catwalk – dunhill today.

Left ▶
DAKS – inventor of the
self-supporting trouser.

In 1759, Josiah Wedgwood was a potter with a problem. His trouble was porcelain. At 29 years old he was already in business for himself, with his own premises in Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent, but Wedgwood found himself unable to make the most precious and prestigious of ceramics. He was undeterred. A resourceful man – a man of science as much as art, with a cussed, questing nature – he began a series of experiments with clay that would produce three of the most celebrated ceramics ever developed: Queen's Ware, Black Basalt and Jasper. In doing so, he revolutionised British pottery, creating beautiful, luxurious products, earthenware and creamware, that were as desirable, but less costly, than porcelain. The British pottery industry became a world-beater.

Wedgwood was, to use a term associated today with the technology start-ups of Silicon Valley, and the many, many businesses that wish they were a technology start-up from Silicon Valley, a disrupter. He seriously disrupted the businesses of his European competitors – the Dutch, the French, the Italians – many of whom were forced to follow his lead and develop 'unglazed' tableware of their own. And all because one young man – a combination of tradesman, artist, inventor and entrepreneur – decided that since the product he was hoping to sell didn't exist, he'd have to make it himself.

In this, he typifies the restless, relentless, bloody-minded spirit that has defined, and in many ways continues to define, British luxury. Appropriately, you might say, Wedgwood's is a pattern that repeats throughout history: a transformative product conceived as the result of a very specific desire, on the part of one forceful personality, for its existence.

In the first decade of the 20th century, a certain Alfred Dunhill wanted to enjoy a smoke while driving his new-fangled motor car. Trouble was, on windy days, with the top down, his pipe kept going out. Inconvenient? One can only imagine. The solution: a "windshield pipe", impervious to the elements. But that was just the beginning. Dunhill's real innovation came much later: the Unique lighter was the first of its kind that allowed smokers to light their pipes, cigarettes or cigars with one hand, leaving the other free to change gear or do something less important. Dunhill wasn't giving the public something they'd asked for, necessarily. (If they'd asked for it, someone else might have got there first.) Instead, he was scratching his own itch, and calculating that others would be tickled by his invention, too. This demonstrates a tremendous self-confidence, of course, but also a dogged determination to get something right. In luxury, obsessive perfectionism is – or at least should be – an entry-level job requirement, rather than a debilitating quirk of the personality. The result of Alfred Dunhill's relentless search for exactly the right thing is that even in these pallid days of mango-flavoured vapes, the Dunhill lighter remains the ne plus ultra of smokers' paraphernalia. I use mine to light my Jo Malones.

DAKS was founded as a bespoke tailoring business in 1894, occupying one room above Middlesex Street in the City of London. Its creator, Simeon Simpson, soon realised the potential for quality machine-made tailoring and the company grew fast throughout the early decades of the 20th century, a pioneer of then ultra-modern – and rather infra dig – ready-to-wear. But the label's genius moment came in 1935, in response to the knotty problem of how to swing a golf club cleanly while wearing braces. ▶



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► Simeon’s second son, Alexander Simpson, had a brainwave, and so the self-supporting trouser was created, requiring neither belt nor braces. On such unexpected peccadillos, empires are built. If Alexander hadn’t been a keen golfer, the rest of us might still be holding up our trousers by hand.

Burberry, both the stateliest and the most thrusting of British luxury brands, was founded in 1856 when Thomas Burberry, a 21-year-old draper’s apprentice, established a small outfitter’s shop in Basingstoke, Hampshire. The first London shop opened in Haymarket in 1891, and by the end of the century the company’s Tielocken coat – a predecessor of the famous trench – was seen adorning British officers during the Second Boer War.

By 1906 the shop had become an emporium and the brand had unveiled gabardine, an innovatory new fabric that was breathable, weatherproof and tearproof. But the brand’s defining moment came when Burberry developed the trench coat, so called because that’s where the front-line First World War Officers wearing it became bogged down. The Burberry check lining was added in 1920s and the trench remains perhaps the most totemic item in British fashion. Its origins might be in the mud and stink and horror of the Somme and Passchendaele, but today you’re more likely to spot one sauntering through St James’s, parading down the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré or meandering along Madison Avenue.

The raincoat I use, which bears the reassuring legend ‘Handmade in England’, was constructed in Manchester by the marvellous British label Private White VC. It is made from Ventile, a weatherproof cotton developed in the early 1940s in response to a very specific demand: RAF pilots, shot down by the Luftwaffe over the North Sea, kept freezing to death before they could be fished out of the water. The introduction of Ventile immersion suits prolonged pilots’ ability to endure the freezing conditions, in some cases by hours. Truly a life-saving British invention. No less importantly (that’s a joke), Ventile now keeps fancy types such as myself dry while we rush from meeting to lunch and back again on damp days.

Much more recently, and less dramatically – though with perhaps a little more glamour – in 2005 British photographer Adam Brown was on holiday in Rajasthan with friends, celebrating one of their number’s 40th birthday, when his lightbulb moment occurred. Sitting around the hotel pool, he realised that while the women looked fabulous in their swimsuits and bikinis and sarongs and kaftans and elegant cover-ups, the men, including Brown himself, looked a mess.

Why, he wondered, was there no swimming short available

that would take him from beach to bar without looking like either Peter Stringfellow in a pair of unsightly budgie-smuggling Speedos, or David Cameron in a pair of dayglo board shorts? Brown knew what he wanted: a stylish, flattering, tailored pair of shorts that could work both as swimming trunks and at holiday lunches and drinks parties. He couldn’t find any because, he realised, they didn’t exist. So, like Josiah Wedgwood and Alfred Dunhill and Alexander Simpson before him, Brown took matters into his own hands. He designed his own shorts – with side fastenings, not unlike those developed by DAKS – and set up a company to make and sell them. He called the shorts the Bulldog, and the company Orlebar Brown. Today the result of Brown’s brainwave is worth many millions of pounds. And now no smart British man (or any man, for that matter) can be excused for looking less than stylish as he lounges by the pool, or props up the beach bar.

All this, of course, is to make it sound as if the defining moment is everything, and then it’s simply a question of iterating and reiterating that one idea, over and over. In fact, all the firms named above continue to innovate. Orlebar Brown today sells sweats and knitwear and sunglasses and sneakers and jackets for men and women and kids. Like Burberry with its trench, the brand will probably always be best known for its most singular innovation – the men’s short you can swim and socialise in – but it’s now a brand with full seasonal collections. The T-shirts are particularly good.

So it’s not only a spirit of disruptive invention and reinvention that defines British luxury. It is not only creativity and craftsmanship, though clearly these are fundamental. It is a certain strain of dissatisfaction with the way things are, a fussiness, perhaps, that leads some individuals to refuse to accept the status quo. To say that if you want a thing done well, better do it yourself.

It will be no news to anyone reading this that we Brits are serial inventors. The tin can, the steam train, the jet engine, the chocolate bar (invented by Joseph Fry, the real Willy Wonka), the telephone, the tank, the toothbrush, the bicycle, the lawnmower and – yes – the World Wide Web, all are British. Think of James Dyson and his bagless vacuum. Or Trevor Baylis and his wind-up radio. Think of the 4th Earl of Sandwich placing some cheese between two slices of buttered bread. You may say that these things are not luxury items, and you would be right. But is it not a particular kind of luxury to have exactly the thing one wants, not the things one is offered by others, nice as they might be? Remember that next time you Dyson behind the sofa while eating a sandwich (from a Wedgwood plate, obv’s) and smoking a weatherproof pipe. In your Ventile swimming shorts. I know I will.



Pictured ►
Burberry’s 2020
version of their
timeless Trench coat.

Opposite ►
Orlebar Brown
Bulldog swim shorts.
Private White VC
Ventile Mac.



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