

Art and SOLE

From widening insteps to shampooing slippers, there's an impressive degree of artisanal skill needed to keep us well-heeled. Violet Henderson meets the masters of shoe repair

Photograph by Jenny van Sommers

during my three years at *Vogue*, friends, family, obscure acquaintances have all come to me with questions, many, many questions. “Do you think I can wear a long dress to a four o'clock wedding?” “Where is the best place for a blow-dry/manicure/vintage clothes in Seville?” “What shall I get my nephew's second cousin once removed for her birthday? She likes fashion and unicorns.” But the most frequently asked question, and this always surprises me, is “Where can I get my shoes mended?” As the sorry bag of broken stilettos guiltily discarded at the back of my wardrobe can attest, until a month ago, I had no idea either.

We Brits are very good at buying shoes; in 2015 the retail market value for footwear

amounted to £10.2 billion, which equates to roughly 250 million pairs of shoes bought that year. That we are less good at getting them repaired is a cultural malaise. Since the Sixties, the cobbling trade has been in steady decline – it is obvious that buy! buy! buy! thrills, in a way that repair! repair! repair! does not. Some shoes are now even made in ways that mean they cannot be repaired.

Meet Tony Stylianou of Kelpis shoes. Manolo Blahnik's preferred cobbler is stationed at the southern end of the Fulham Road. He looks sadly at the white Adidas Stan Smiths on my feet. “They are fashion trainers,” he says with a shake of his head. “You can wear those shoes for two seasons maximum, and then you'll have to chuck them. Their rubber-cum-plastic sole was poured into a mould. You can't resole that. Anything you try to attach to it will just melt.” And beware, the same goes for all

driving shoes, most platforms and many sliders. “The best you can do,” he laments, “is clean the uppers” – cobbling talk for anything above the sole of the shoe. “It becomes just a patch-up job, and I don't really want to do patch-up jobs.”

Fewer and fewer people want to do cobbling at all – it's little wonder that I've been bombarded with enquiries. “This is not a job most 17-year-olds want to dive in to,” says Tony, who opened his shop in 1988. Like most cobblers, Tony trained under his father, and after a couple of years, set up on his own. His hands, wrists and most of his forearm are black from his morning's work, which begins every day at 7am. “Cobbling is hard,” he says. “And you have to have a feel for it. It's a vocation.”

And it is artisanal. Aside from a finishing machine – a large whirling rectangular contraption that noisily polishes, sands, >

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Patent-leather heels,
£475, Christian Louboutin



smooths and buffs, and can cost anything upwards of £30,000 – this is a trade implemented by skilled hands on hammers, anvils, nails, awls (long pointed spikes that look like murder weapons on a Hitchcock set and are used to punch holes in leather), quills, needles, even candles. The cobbler's tool kit is extensive, and often not orderly. "It is very physical work," says Tony as he holds a metal last as gently as a newborn lamb. "You can't let your concentration slip."

Kelpis may look inauspicious, with its muddle of implements jumbled atop two wooden worktops, but great things have happened here. *Vogue's* style editor described Tony and his partner Andrew as nothing short of magicians after they removed a big sooty footprint from her canary satin Manolo Blahnik slipper. "We have different kinds of stain-removing chemicals we try on all sorts of different materials," Tony says. "If it is raw silk, there will be lines in the fabric that draw in the dirt; that makes it difficult. It is removing grass stains that is virtually impossible." There goes any hope of me salvaging my once-ivory wedding shoes (now green from too much dancing on a wet lawn). "I could dye them," offers Tony, who is fast becoming my favourite new friend. "Dark colours work, light colours do not."

Tony shows me a customer's blue leather heel, which looks as though it has been scraped through a gauntlet of razors. "Little nicks are easy to mend. We just fold them down and sand them, then we melt wax on to the area and seal it with the finishing machine," says the cobbler breezily as he does just that. In no time at all, the heel looks like new. And what of last season's furry Gucci slipper, which has, like a pomeranian, an uncanny knack of picking up dirt in its sweep? "I'd probably shampoo the fur first," he explains, not quite able to contain a wry little smile. "And then I'd put a small lift on the sole, just to keep it a helpful half-inch off the floor."

Although cobbling may be declining, it is very far from dead. The recession re-energised Britain's attitude to "make do and mend"; between 2008 and 2009, when banks collapsed and the retail market plummeted, high-street cobbler Timpson recorded a 12 per cent increase in revenue. And then there is, on a very different recession-defying trajectory, the rise and rise of the investment

shoe, which is essentially footwear so expensive that it requires looking after.

In Britain, there are plenty of places to learn shoe design – there is even a guild devoted to it, the Worshipful Company of Cordwainers – but learning how to mend shoes is not so straightforward, mostly a cobbling together of apprenticeships. There is certainly nothing in Britain that comes close to a college like Les Compagnons du Devoir in France, which sets the definitive teaching standard for France's shoe-mending trade, and requires its students do a lengthy five-year course. Over in Camden, Costas Xenophontos, who owns and manages Classic Shoe Repairs with his brother, is London-born with a Cypriot heritage. (His

says. "When we advertise a job online, we get many enquiries from abroad. Only the other day I met the most brilliant cobbler from Poland. But if they can't come over to work in Britain, then of course they won't. And that will have a direct impact on Classic Shoe Repairs." Costas pauses. "Yes, I am a little worried about the future."

The cast of cobblers at Minuit Moins 7 – an operation owned by Christian Louboutin, which repairs only the house's own shoes and has stores in Paris and London's Barbican – are all French; graduates, in fact, of Les Compagnons du Devoir. Unlike the uniformly male British cobbling population, here half the workforce are women. And they go about their business in high-heeled Louboutins, which is so French it's practically a cliché.

Minuit Moins 7 is, without question, the most elegant cobbler in London. Behind a pleasingly old-fashioned shopfront, on a black-and-white tiled floor, the staff appear unfeasibly good-looking and youthful in their uniform of plaid shirts, black jeans and tan leather aprons. Even the finishing machine here – which in every other cobbler looks like a sooty Tardis – gleams the same shade of red as the Louboutin sole. As it transpires, they specifically asked the factory to match the paintwork to their own Louboutin red.



Christian Louboutin's Minuit Moins 7 cobblers in Whitecross Street, EC1

father committed to the shoe business early, when he didn't have shoes to wear to school in Cyprus.) Costas now employs a team of 24. Just the other day, he asked his employees to say "good morning" in each of their native languages – he heard 11 different ways to say it. His company's multinationalism, he explains, is a response to the absence of British cobblers. "There aren't many about who are highly skilled," he says with a sigh. "It is a direction problem. In general, shoe repairing is not considered the master craft here that it is on the Continent. Everyone wants to be shoemakers – cobbling does not have the same pull."

Is he worried about the consequences of Brexit for his business? Costas recalls how in the Eighties and Nineties, finding cobblers was testing. The problem evaporated when Tony Blair relaxed immigration control in 2004 and he was then able to recruit cobblers from Europe. "I do worry about how easy it will be to find the master craftsmen my business depends upon in the future," he

A delightful man called Fabio, who has an encyclopedic knowledge of all things Louboutin, takes me on a tour of the building. We descend into the whitewashed basement, the back of which has shelf upon shelf of red rubber soles, red leather soles, delicate white lace used in the bridal collection, and crates (red, of course) of studs, bows, brooches, every Louboutin accoutrement you've ever seen. If something isn't there, they call the factory and courier it to the cobbler overnight. Fabio points to a pristine ebony Singer sewing machine, made in 1912. It could be in a museum, but at Minuit Moins 7, they use it almost daily to sew the stitching on broken slingbacks.

And yet, Minuit Moins 7 is not just an exercise in style. It clearly evolved from a need for the label to extend its creative control and stop the Louboutin name being diminished, after purchase, by bad cobblers and bad materials, compromising not only the way the shoes look, but the way they walk. As Christian Louboutin tells me,

“Using our in-house cobblers means the shape, fit, balance and craftsmanship are maintained.” And if any fake Louboutins come in to be repaired (Louboutin is one of the most counterfeited brands in the world), they are checked, and checked again, and sent back to their owners still broken.

Classic Shoe Repairs is the cobbler that nearly every other brand you’ve ever heard of sends its shoes to for mending (a cursory glance under the A-section of its database shows records for Acne, Alexander McQueen, Alexander Wang, Aquascutum, Aquazzura, Armani...) Unlike Minuit Moins 7, the shop floor here is bright, large and looks like a building society, although there is a very large pile of designer shopping bags filling a corner. At a single desk, a line of girls answer phones that never stop ringing. “We can recover the suede with a new section, if the damage really is that bad. Otherwise we can disguise it,” is a fragment of advice I catch above the clank, clank of cobbling from a concealed workshop beyond.

“I basically grew up in a shoebox,” Costas says, recalling only briefly his boyhood dream of becoming an architect. Decorating the walls of his office, deep inside his workshop, are thank-you notes from Matchesfashion and Net-a-Porter and swatches of every sort of leather. In fact, Costas’s impressive business success – they repair 600 pairs of shoes a week and 300 handbags – seems to owe much to his forensic attention to detail. “At the beginning of each new season I look through which new colours and materials are being used by manufacturers and try to source equivalents so we can prepare for the repairs,” he says. He has a network of tanneries and suppliers across Europe, although “the best are mainly in Italy. After all, shoemaking is their national profession,” he says. He has recently found a good kid supplier in Kent (like all the cobblers I meet, Costas says nothing beats calf leather to work with) and is proud to show me a special book of Jimmy Choo materials, bestowed upon him by the brand. “From this we can repair the shoes with what they were originally made with – but,” he warns, “I keep them under lock and key, just so there is no temptation for anyone to repair anything else with them. Their quality is phenomenal.”

In an adjoining garage surrounded by bolts of supplies, accumulated over nearly half a century of business, Costas explains, “We don’t clear out much. Because we’ve found most materials eventually come back in fashion.” But he is hoping, though, that glitter dies a good and proper death.

“Nightmare stuff to work with,” he laments, “it always splits.” Neither does he wax lyrical about the properties of PVC and warns that poor-quality patent has a tendency to separate. His philosophy is, ironically, not to “cobble a shoe back together” but to refit it.

And as the shoemaker’s shoe-mender (don’t worry, they take private clients too) Classic Shoe Repairs has developed a sideline in consultancy, offering the brands they work with a free monthly workshop. “I take round supervisors from different companies, like LK Bennett, and I show them what we do, so that they know how to make the shoes better. And I’ll let them know if we’ve seen a particular problem with a particular line of shoes. I don’t charge for the service,” says Costas. “After all, badly made shoes make for difficult repair jobs.”

So what can a cobbler actually do? Behind

“Shoes are made to be kept a while – not just because they are expensive, but because it takes blisters and time to make them fit”

the wooden desk at Kelpis, marked by polish and dents and decades of successful transactions, I unveil the pair of Tabitha Simmons suede ankle boots I bought for a sum of money that might have paid for a second-hand car. They are at least two sizes too small for me. Tony Stylianou is firm in his response. “We can create one or two extra inches on a stretching machine to accommodate a wide foot in a narrow shoe, but there is nothing we can do if the length is too small,” he explains, despite my pleading. But those of non-standard calf size can sigh a breath of relief. “It’s easy to make a boot bigger or smaller.” To wit, Tony has fitted a pair of lady’s knee-high boots for a man with sizeable calves.

When it comes to repairs the golden rule is essentially this: anything that happens to the heel is not a disaster, heels can fairly easily be replaced. It is on the uppers that mending is more difficult – and more often than not impossible – unless there is an accommodating seam of stitching nearby the damage, and then a panel might be replaced. But it will be a hefty repair, which will come with a sizeable price tag.

Tony, however, makes a persuasive case for repairs. “I’d say your average shoe takes five

days of wearing all day until it is moulded to your foot. Shoes are made to be kept a while, not just because they are expensive to buy, but because it takes blisters and time to make them fit your feet,” he says. Although, of course, the ideal situation is that no shoe is ever even repaired, merely maintained. “If you’ve spent money on a pair of Manolos, you really should try to keep them in mint condition,” he says. Maintenance involves reheeling, resoling, a clean and a buff, done only with horsehair brushes (these are the softest and produce the best shine). If you wear a particular pair daily, this MOT should happen every six weeks, and for shoes worn occasionally, every six months. Unless your life is a blissfully cushy carousel of carpets and cars, as soon as you buy expensive shoes with leather soles, recover them with rubber. British damp and leather soles just don’t match; they can’t take water. As for this season’s penchant for velvet? Tony advises a lot of Scotchgard. And it is worth remembering, the longer the point at the toe of the shoe, the longer time the shoe will spend at the mender, scuffing being an occupational hazard.

There are provisions you can make to keep your shoes from too frequent visits to the cobbler. Store them away from damaging sunlight, in boxes or bags. Always spray suede with Scotchgard; it genuinely does save the leather from damage. Men’s shoes and women’s brogues keep their shape better if they are kept with wooden lasts, while stilettos and flats should be boxed up with cushioned shoe-shaped holders. Don’t store two different-coloured patent shoes together with the leather touching – they will absorb each other’s colour and you can’t eradicate that run. Shoes need wearing or the leather can crack, so don’t leave it a year to wear a special pair.

And if selecting a cobbler for your precious shoes sounds like a minefield, a good litmus test is this: pretend to a prospective mender you’ve snapped an exquisite £500 Aquazzura heel in that most common of urban footwear perils, a drain. Ask: how would they fix the heel back on? If the cobbler suggests glue, that messy leather-wrecking gloopy adhesive, walk out of the door. Broken heels should only be secured with a hammer and nails. Glue is for resoling and attaching new tips, the two jobs a cobbler will spend most of their time doing.

All the (very brilliant) cobblers I speak to are purists; you won’t see them being distracted by dry-cleaning or key-cutting. Nor do they need to be, because their skills are in high demand. Besides, as Tony says with foreboding, “You’ll see their lack of focus in the way your shoe is repaired.” Reader, you have been warned. ■