



Brooks saddles have been produced in Britain for well over a century. **Dan Farrell** visited the factory in Smethwick

Forever **leather**

Brooks is reputed to be the oldest surviving bicycle-related manufacturing company in the world. According to legend, in 1865 a young John Boulton Brooks, harness-maker and general leather worker, bought a Michaux Velocipede to replace his deceased horse so that he could travel to his father's works in Birmingham. Bruised by the unyielding wooden saddle, he looked at his horse-riding saddle and the first Brooks leather saddle was born.

Within a year JB Brooks had opened the Criterion Works in Great Charles Street, where Brooks were to remain for almost a hundred years. In 1882 JB Brooks filed his first patent. 'I was dissatisfied,' he stated, 'with the present type of saddle, which affords little protection against the shocks of cycling on our uneven roads.' Thus began an inventive career in saddles, bags and leather accessories.

Down the ages

Like so many other cycle companies, Brooks was absorbed into Raleigh Industries (in 1958) and hence into the Tube Investments Group in 1960. Shortly afterwards, as part of the Raleigh Saddle Division, Brooks moved to Downing Street in Smethwick along with Wrights Saddles. At this point, the TI group owned almost the entire street. More than 75,000 saddles, of leather and plastic, were being made every week by 1,500 employees.

As late as 1980, Brooks employed nearly 400 staff and

were still surrounded by cycle industry companies. Finally, in 1987, Brooks moved down the road to their current site, where they remain an unlikely survivor – the last remnant of 'Raleigh' manufacturing in England.

There have been close shaves along the way. The Criterion Works were bombed during the war, and were saved by efficient and courageous action by fire wardens. The Downing Street fire in 1969 nearly destroyed the factory. In more recent times, prompt intervention by two British

Photos by Brooks England Ltd & Dan Farrell



(Above) Cutting the saddle tops from 'bends'
(Left) Saddle rivets are expertly peened by hand

cycle industry chiefs managed to save Brooks, almost undamaged, from the bankrupt husk of Sturmey-Archer.

Today, it is easy to imagine that Brooks have been on their site forever. Of the most popular saddles, the evergreen B17, dates back to the 19th Century, and the coil sprung B66 was first seen in 1926. Many of the saddle making machines look that old, and many of the 30 staff have spent most of their lives at Brooks. Robert Martin has been making saddles for 50 years and Office Manager Steve Green has notched up 33 years of service.

Leather working

Entering the Brooks factory you are immediately aware of two things: first, the smell – a heady mix of leather and machine oil; second, the sense of history, for leather saddles are amongst the most traditional cycle parts still available.

Rows of heavy presses dominate the metalworking shop, a legacy of the days when the factory was making many more saddles than the 130,000 produced each year now. Blanking, raising and forming operations make up the multitude of cantle-plates, noses and saddle frames – Brooks make single-, double- and even triple-wire frames. Many of these machines run only once or twice a year, producing large batches of parts and then left slumbering for months. Others run almost continuously, like the splendid pair of huge wire-fed machines that produce the coil springs.

Historically, these two springs on the rear of the B66 (and others) were identical, but this made the saddle skew slightly to one side. This problem was solved by the simple expedient of building a second machine as a mirror image of the first.

Titanium seems incongruous in such surroundings but, as Production Manager David Lowe explains: 'Its use is entirely logical, as it can be worked by similar methods and machinery to steel, and we can halve the weight of the saddle frame. Titanium experts told us that what we were attempting was impossible, but that didn't stop us.'

Cyclists around the world have reason to be thankful for Brooks' determination, as the resulting Swift and Swallow saddles are highly prized amongst discerning riders.

Careful craftsmanship

Leather is delivered to Brooks in the form of 'bends' – large hides from the side of cows. Saddle tops are blanked out carefully, avoiding flaws in the material whilst wasting as little material as possible – although the remnants are used for handlebar grips and leather washers. Soaking and shaping follow, and hundreds of saddle tops sit on drying racks before receiving the attention of a skilful trimmer, who clamps each one in a press and cuts off the excess leather with a stout, razor-sharp knife.

Whilst the final assembly of many Brooks saddles is straightforward, those with large copper rivets require patience and skill. Each rivet head is peened by hand, and a



(Clockwise from top) Handcraftsmanship is integral to the whole process, whether assembling the saddle frame, preparing the metal plates for the back of the saddles, cutting the leather at the front of the saddle, or in the final quality control



“Each rivet head is peened by hand, and a single hammer blow out of place can ruin a saddle”

single hammer blow out of place can ruin a saddle. It's wise not to distract these craftsmen, particularly those who are chamfering the edges of top-line saddles – this is done in one smooth movement of a blade, and the consistency of the resulting chamfer is astonishing.

Made in England

Italian saddle giant Selle Royal have owned Brooks since 2002, so why are Brooks saddles still made in England? Cristina Wurdig, the Sales Director, explains. 'It is essential for us to retain the craftsmanship base, and we have an utmost respect for the heritage that exists at Brooks. To move saddle manufacturing elsewhere would destroy this.'

Whilst in recent years Brooks have launched new bags and baskets of overseas manufacture, Cristina is quick to point out: 'As Brooks expand into other historical cycle products we will use UK suppliers whenever possible, but we must put quality and function first.'

You get the feeling that within the company there has been some heated discussion on this subject of outsourcing. It is clear, however, that everyone at Brooks, whether based in England or Italy, is totally committed to saddle manufacture in Smethwick and feels a strong sense of responsibility to preserve and strengthen this. Sales of Brooks saddles have risen sharply in recent years and the company's future looks robust.

For more information about Brooks saddles, visit www.brookssaddles.com.