



INSIDE STORY

Dragon breathes fire into fabric

Karl West

ROSEMARIE BOON rubbed her fingertips over the grey flannel, checking the cloth for imperfections.

The chief designer at Fox Brothers, the 240-year-old Somerset fabric maker, is one of a dying breed — skilled textile designers who use a mix of artistic and mathematical skills to make high-quality cloth.

Boon works out the complicated sequence of spools of yarn loaded onto the mill's looms. In the 20 years since she joined, traditional skills in fabric design and weaving have faded away in Britain as cheap competition from China and Turkey has taken over.

"There just aren't Rosemaries around — there are probably four or five like her in the country," said Douglas Cordeaux, managing director of Fox and former design director at Pepe Jeans.

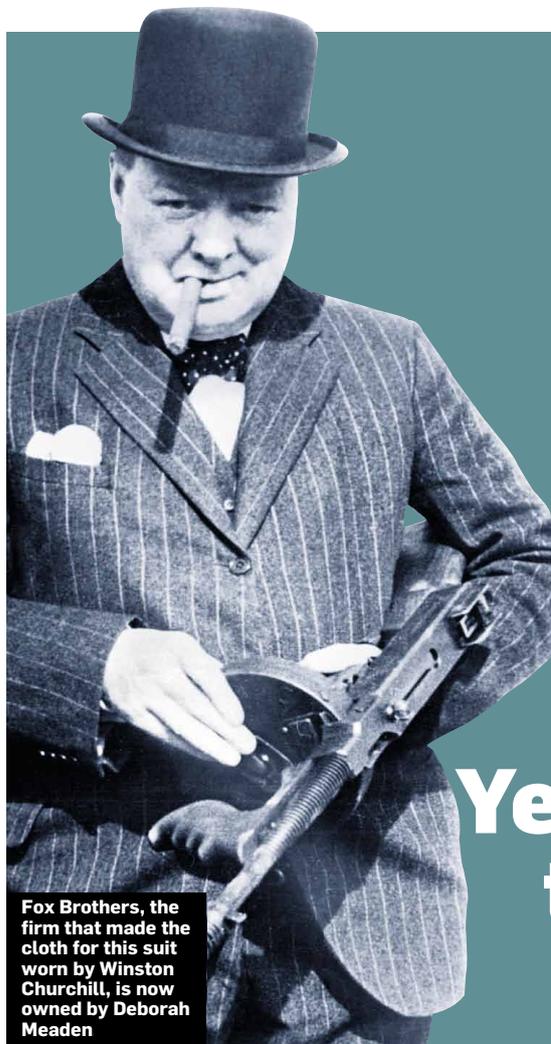
Cordeaux rescued the company in December 2009 with his friend and business partner Deborah Meaden, a regular on the BBC show *Dragons' Den*.

The TV dragon firmly believes the historic company — which invented flannel and developed khaki — can have a viable future if it focuses on the high-value, high-quality end of the market.

It sells its artisan fabrics to top Savile Row tailors and fashion houses such as Ralph Lauren, Dunhill and Louis Vuitton.

A niche player like Fox can't compete with bigger foreign operators that can make huge volumes of cloth at a fraction of the cost.

Boon is a link between Fox's past and future. The designer can



Fox Brothers, the firm that made the cloth for this suit worn by Winston Churchill, is now owned by Deborah Meaden



Yes, this was their finest flannel

draw inspiration for her creations from an enormous treasure trove of information contained in the Fox archives.

These are stored across the road from Fox's ugly 1970s factory in Wellington, Somerset, in the more sumptuous setting of the Counting House, a handsome Victorian building where the accounts office of the original mill site was located.

Intricate floor tiles run through the hallway into the building. Hefty leather-bound catalogues sit upright in a large bookcase. Each contains a multitude of Fox cloth swatches.

These giant volumes are the equivalent of ancient recipe books, comprising much-cherished family favourites passed down through the generations.

It is an Aladdin's cave for fabric geeks. Cordeaux said it is a huge hit with customers, who often send

teams of textiles experts down to research different time periods.

"If some designer or fashion brand wanted to produce clothing with a 1920s theme, they could come here and find out precisely what was being worn," he said.

The fabric industry is in Cordaux's blood. He studied textiles at Chelsea College of Art and is descended from a Huguenot family of silk weavers who operated from Spitalfields market in London.

His passion is evident as he rifles through the catalogues and points out the subtle flecks and strands of colour woven into what, at first glance, looks like plain grey flannel.

"These sorts of understated cloths are what the British do very well," he said.

Meaden agreed: "Fox isn't flash. It's deeply and quietly beautiful."

The company was established in 1772 by Thomas Fox, the head of a Quaker family, in Wellington.

It is renowned as the inventor of flannel. But Fox also helped to develop the serge drape mixture now known as khaki.

Fox's khaki played a role in the demise of the British Army's traditional red coats, after its soldiers were easily picked off by opposing forces in the first (1880-81) Boer war in South Africa.

At its peak, during the 1920s, Fox employed 5,000 people, but the company fell on hard times as sales were lost to cheaper foreign producers.

By the time Meaden and Cordaux swept in to save it in 2009, the company had only 15 employees and was bleeding cash.

The pair have stemmed the £400,000 annual loss, and the tex-

ADRIAN SHERRATT / JON FURNISS

tiles firm is currently breaking even. “We are on plan,” insisted Meaden.

Fox’s reliance on tried and trusted production methods still appeals to its high-class roster of customers.

In the company’s red-brick factory, Boon chats to a loom operator preparing the machine for the next run of fabric. Several giant bobbins are added to the machine — the more complex the pattern, the greater the number of coloured yarns that are needed in the loom.

Modern mills have mechanised this process, but it still takes Fox up to five hours to set up a loom for an intricate fabric.

Meaden is now a passionate mill owner, but there was some initial reluctance. “When I first drove up outside in April 2009, I thought, ‘You have got to be kidding,’” she recalled.

She was out of her comfort zone. Meaden made her fortune in the leisure and tourism sectors and had little experience of traditional manufacturing industry.

But something happened when she and Cordeaux stepped into Fox’s reception: they were instantly gripped by the chuntering sound of the looms. “When we stepped over the threshold, something sounded and smelled right,” said Meaden.

It was the sound of stuff being made.

She was then struck by the nostalgic reminders of Fox’s glorious past that adorned the walls. The most striking was a wartime picture of a pugnacious-looking Winston Churchill, sporting his favourite grey chalk-stripe suit made from Fox flannel. “I just thought, ‘This is special,’” she said.

Meaden may be a recent convert to manufacturing, but she is now evangelical about the need for Britain to make and export more goods.

Last week she backed the government’s Make it in Great Britain

campaign to promote manufacturing in all its forms and guises — from engineering to textiles and ceramics.

The country needs many more businesses like Fox if the economic tide is to turn. It was revealed last week that the British economy shrank by 0.3% in the first three months of the year, more than the previous estimate of 0.2%.

Meaden insisted she was not clambering aboard a flag-waving bandwagon by backing the campaign.

“I’m not jingoistic. My whole thing is about honesty, and what we produce here is a beautiful cloth that happens to be British-made,” she said.

Is she frustrated that the coalition government hasn’t done more to help small businesses such as Fox flourish?

“I think a government should bring attention to issues and then step back and let natural forces take over,” she said.

“It would be nice to have help with capital allowances, or a more helpful tax regime. But we have received no help with this [at Fox].”

The green shoots of recovery at Fox have been nurtured by her investment in two new looms, added last year to the company’s six 1960s machines. It was the first investment in new machinery at the factory since the 1980s.

The looms are much faster and can produce up to three times more cloth than the older equipment.

An offshoot brand, called the Merchant Fox, was launched last October to boost the company’s profile by selling Fox-branded goods — such as bags, dressing gowns and cufflinks — direct to consumers through a website.

“We understood what we had here and it wasn’t going to happen unless we spent time and money,” said Meaden.

While the history and tradi-

tion of Fox Brothers is important, Meaden is clear that this is still a business investment.

“No business is sustainable if it does not produce a profit. We are not running a museum here. If there wasn’t a business opportunity it wouldn’t matter how nice it sounded,” she said.

Another sign that the patient has responded positively to Meaden’s medicine is the hundreds of rolls of fabric stacked in the loading bay to be dispatched. The company has drafted in reinforcements to cope with increased orders, boosting the workforce to 25.

“It’s amazing when you look at this shed and think that we are producing cloth for Louis Vuitton,” Cordeaux remarked.

The next phase of Fox’s rehabilitation will involve moving the operation out of the run-down factory and relocating a mile down the road at its original Victorian dye works and wet finishing mill.

This should be completed within 18 months. The building will give Fox room to grow, and the space needed to bring other operations under one roof.

At the moment, Fox produces the raw fabric and then sends it to West Yorkshire — to WT Johnson & Sons in Huddersfield, and Roberts Dyers & Finishers in Keighley, near Bradford — to be finished.

This process includes washing the cloth to get rid of the lanolin, a natural fat found in wool. It is then milled, pressed and rolled to create a finished product that is soft to the touch and thicker than the raw material because the strands are more densely packed together.

Meaden and Cordeaux want eventually to bring these processes back to Fox.

Such a move would provide another lift to the business, and to the town of Wellington, which is often overshadowed by its bigger neighbour, Taunton.

Meaden understands the importance of Fox to the town. She



NO BUSINESS IS SUSTAINABLE IF IT DOESN'T PRODUCE A PROFIT. WE'RE NOT RUNNING A MUSEUM

grew up in Somerset and still lives just a few miles from Wellington.

“Even though Fox is much smaller than it was in the past, it is intertwined with the town’s psyche,” she said.

Meaden attributed the affection local people have for the company to the way in which the Fox family ran the business.

The Quaker family built houses and schools for the workforce in Wellington, and Fox was one of the first employers to have a pension scheme and an on-site creche.

The company recently held a tea party and invited locals to come and share their memories of the business. Cordeaux, himself a Somerset boy, from Bridgwater, was surprised by the number of people who turned up — some showing off items of clothing made from Fox fabrics.

“They are proud that West Country people have bought Fox and not some multinational,” he said.

Meaden said descendants of the Fox family were “chuffed to bits” to see the business being slowly brought back to life.

So has her investment in Fox satisfied her head as well as her heart?

“Actually, it’s both,” she said. “If something grabs your heart then it will grab other people’s hearts too.”