

THE ALCHEMY OF LEATHER

# BRIDGE OF WEIR

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For more than thirty years, the interiors of Volvo cars have been graced with the finest leather from Bridge of Weir Leather Company in Scotland. Because behind every luxurious piece of Bridge of Weir leather, you'll find over a century's worth of craftsmanship, knowledge and expertise. In fact, many consider it to be the finest automotive leather in the world. Well, why else would it be in your Volvo?

**EXPLORING THE SKIES** on Concorde, setting sail aboard the iconic cruise liner, the Queen Elizabeth II (QE2), or pulling away in style from Paris Gare de l'Est train station on the Orient Express. For many this still represents the pinnacle of luxury travel, from a time when no expense was spared in making passengers feel comfortable and special. But even though these examples are from a bygone age, our longing for luxury and comfort remains – no more so than when we're in our cars. So, how can we experience a similar level of luxury today? Well, the secret lies in the leather.

#### **PART OF A FINE HERITAGE**

It's no coincidence that this article began by mentioning Concorde, the QE2 and the Orient Express. Yes, they are all prime examples of luxurious first class travel, but they all have something else in common – they all featured exquisite upholstery crafted from the finest Bridge of Weir leather. The very same leather that allows you and your passengers to experience luxury travel every day. Because behind each piece of Bridge of Weir leather in your Volvo, you'll find the same levels of care, craftsmanship and knowledge that went into the leather used in George and Ray Eames iconic armchair, the chairs in the clubhouse of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews and last, but certainly not least, the seats that grace one of Britain's most esteemed institutions, the Houses of Parliament. So, as you can see, the leather in your Volvo is part of a very fine heritage.

Founded in 1905 and situated on the outskirts of Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, Bridge of Weir is now the oldest independent automotive leather manufacturer in the world – and the leather produced there is

considered by many to be the world's finest. A true family business in every sense, the company's roots can be traced back to 1758 and there are now sixth, seventh and eighth generation members of the family working there, all of whom are leathersmiths. This has resulted in a unique leather manufacturing process steeped in tradition and shaped by leather making skills that have been passed down through the generations.

"I used to get brought round the factory on a Saturday morning by my grandfather. I'm seventh generation since the business first began in 1758, so it's kind of in the blood," explains Bridge of Weir's Sales Director, Jamie Davidson, whose great-grandfather, Arthur Muirhead, founded the company way back in 1905.

"It was my great-grandfather who decided to move to Bridge of Weir and set up a factory that would produce leather for the transport industry," continues Jamie. "There wasn't so much industry in the area at the time, so there was a lot of good people looking for work. We've now got third and fourth generation employees here at Bridge of Weir. People are so important in this business. No two hides are the same, so we have to inspect every single one. And you can't do it without the human eye."

When Bridge of Weir Leather was founded, the city of Glasgow was synonymous with manufacturing quality and engineering excellence. The ships, trains, buses and trams that were built here were among the best in the world and they needed quality leather to match. It was leather from Bridge of Weir that was chosen to supply the finishing touch. As time went on, and their reputation for outstanding quality grew, the company began to focus more on supplying leather for the automotive industry.

And it was their pioneering work in this field that first caught the eye of the designers at Volvo Cars. Today, Bridge of Weir supplies the leather for almost all Volvo models. But how did this relationship between Scotland and Sweden begin?

#### IT ALL BEGAN WITH THE VOLVO 740

"We started with the Volvo 740 back in 1983," explains Jamie. "The upholstery we produced was a single-tone colour, which is what most cars have today, but interestingly we then developed a two-tone, almost cloud-like effect on the leather. So it almost looked used, like a good antique armchair that gets better with age." It was Bridge of Weir's work on another Volvo model, however, that really took the two companies relationship to the next level. "The big turning point for me was the Volvo 850. We were sole supplier, which was very unusual. But by that point Volvo had the confidence to give us all the colours for that car. That really cemented our relationship."

But Jamie believes the relationship between Volvo Cars and Bridge of Weir runs deeper than simply business. "Both are good honest companies and I think we've got a lot in common. Volvo's catchphrase is 'quality, the environment and safety'. I'd like to think we stand up for the same values." The two companies also share cultural and geographical similarities. Gothenburg and Glasgow are both industrial cities, both are situated on the west coast and both tend to live in the shadow of their supposedly more cosmopolitan capital cities in the East. Perhaps it is this underdog status that has resulted in both cities having such proud manufacturing heritages.

"I really feel there's no barrier between Scotland and Sweden. There are many similarities between the Gothenburg locals and the west of Scotland/Glasgow locals with their backgrounds in heavy engineering and shipbuilding – they even share a similar sense of humour."

Where technology meets tradition

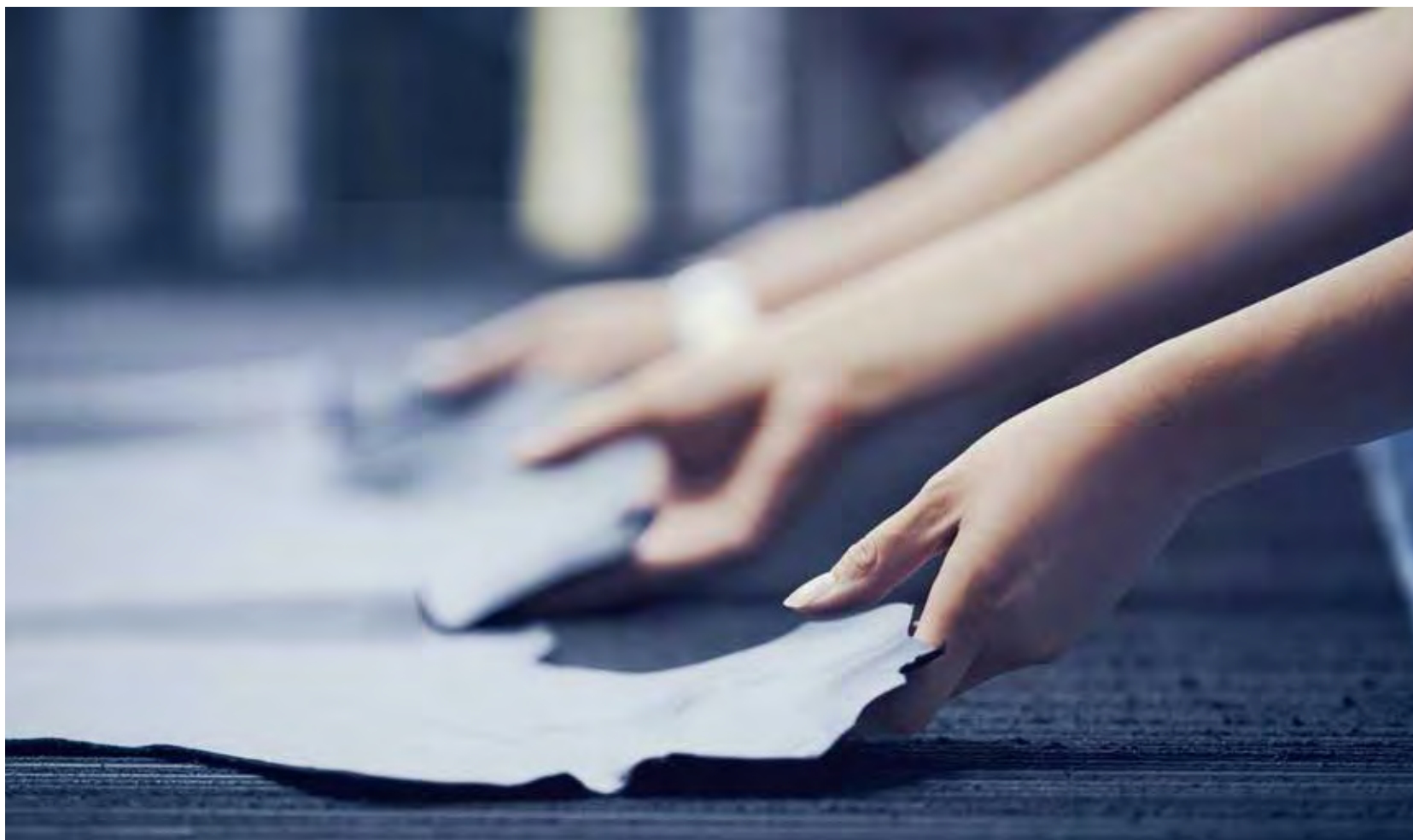
Today, we spend more time in our cars than ever before. As a result, a car's interior design is becoming more and more important to both customers and car manufacturers alike – especially as most modern cars are now able to offer similar levels of performance. So what is it that can make the difference?

"There are a lot of things that people look for in the interior of their cars nowadays," says Debra Choong, Head Designer at Bridge of Weir. "They look for details and bespoke design, but they also look for comfort.



You spend a lot of time in your car – it's like a living room – so comfort is a big issue. People are also becoming more aware of environmental issues. They like to know the story of where the goods come from, which materials have been used, so these are things we try and focus on as well as the design side of things."

Debra originally trained to be an architect and this has given her a unique perspective when it comes to designing upholstery. "I have always been interested in designing interior spaces, looking at where



people live, how their spaces affect them. So, all the training I have through architectural design has naturally evolved into what I do now at Bridge of Weir."

To come up with new design ideas, Debra and the design team combine innovative new design methods, such as 3D printers and digital embroidery machines, with the tried and trusted methods of the past. And it's this respect for tradition coupled with a willingness to embrace the latest design technology that enables

Bridge of Weir to remain at the forefront of leather manufacturing and design.

But what do Volvo Cars look for in their leather and how does Bridge of Weir go about bringing this interior design vision to life? "Volvo want very soft, natural-looking leather," explains Debra. "But they want it to meet high standards for wear-ability. It's an exciting challenge to develop a leather that has that magical combination of an ultimately natural look, but that is durable and has high performance qualities."

"We work in conjunction with the Volvo Cars Design Team," continues Jamie Davidson. "We try to visit their design department once a month and we have built a very strong relationship there." Bridge of Weir also holds an annual trends show where they present their ideas regarding future design trends and innovations. But developing a leather that meets the designers' demands is just the start, as Jamie explains. "Once you have the aesthetics, the feel, the colour and the touch, the leather has to then be tested in our laboratory. This is another challenge because Volvo Cars' specifications are quite rightly very rigorous."

Bridge of Weir has a full on-site laboratory, which allows them to carry out a wide range of testing every day. These daily tests include testing for emissions, durability, abrasion resistance and whether the leather causes fogging in the cabin. But they also carry out more extreme annual tests, which involve placing pieces of leather in a climate chamber for around eight weeks in order to monitor how the finish performs in both extreme high temperatures and extreme low temperatures. It's reassuring to know that when it comes to testing the materials that will go into your Volvo, nothing is left to chance.

#### A FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

Volvo Cars and Bridge of Weir have been working together now for over thirty years. And during that time, both companies have seen a lot of changes. Changes not only in design but also in manufacturing and processing techniques. A lot of these changes came about thanks to collaborations between the experts at Bridge of Weir and the Technical team at Volvo Cars. One of the biggest developments was the creation of a chromium-free tanning process.

Jamie takes up the story, "We used to chrome tan all of our leather, which is the standard tanning method used in the shoe and garment industry. But we worked together with Volvo Cars to develop a chromium-free leather, which is organically tanned with natural agents like chestnut, mimosa and Tara. That was a major change and that happened around the end of 1999." Not only is chromium-free tanning better for allergy sufferers, it's also better for the environment. Taking care of the environment is something Bridge of Weir has invested a huge amount of time and resources in, with the result that they now have the lowest carbon footprint of any leather maker in the world. They even have their very own, self-funded thermal energy plant.

Designed by Dr Warren Bowden, Director at SLG Technology, one of the sister companies to Bridge of Weir, the thermal energy plant at Bridge of Weir is a patented world first and a key factor in the company's mission to develop the highest quality, low-carbon leather. The leather industry generates a huge amount of waste – Bridge of Weir alone accumulates around 100 tonnes a day. But thanks to their innovative approach to resource management and recycling, this waste is now taken care of. 50% of the 100 tonnes is solid waste and this is dealt with by the thermal energy plant using a process called pyrolysis – which is basically a sophisticated oven where you dry the solid waste. This process lets off a synthetic gas, which is ignited and used to heat the two million litres of water Bridge of Weir uses every day. The other 50% waste is actually fat from which oil is extracted and sold to the Biodiesel industry. In the past, this waste would have gone into landfill, but now it's being used to make energy. Another significant environmental factor is that, of the two million litres of water Bridge of Weir use every day, up to 40% is recycled and comes from their very own loch. "I'm very proud that Bridge of Weir is a company that looks to the future. We need to be sustainable," says Jamie.

Bridge of Weir's focus on sustainability also extends to animal welfare. The company is proud of the fact they only source hides from suppliers that respect and observe the Five Freedoms, a set of internationally-recognised animal welfare standards.

#### PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE, PROUD OF THE PAST

But it's not just Bridge of Weir's forward-thinking approach to the environment that Jamie feels will stand the company in good stead for the future. "We've got the tradition, the raw materials and we've got the best people. We're very innovative and want to stay one step ahead. But most importantly we want to develop a leather that the customer doesn't realise they need yet."

And what of the past? Which of Bridge of Weir's clients are Jamie and Debra most proud of? Apart from Volvo Cars, of course. "Even though it was a little before my time, I love the work Bridge of Weir did for the furniture designers Charles and Ray Eames," says Debra. "When I was studying, those were the designs that were iconic to me. So, I'm very proud that we are a part of their story." And what about Jamie? "My favourite would be the House of Lords leather because you saw that on television almost every day if you wanted to watch politics. We did the red for the Lords and the green for the Commons. I was very proud of that."

Good enough for the OE2, good enough for Concorde and good enough for your Volvo. Bridge of Weir leather is a benchmark of quality, design and innovation. Here's to the next thirty years! ■



It's funny. I can't get into a car without touching the seats before I actually sit on them.

Jamie Davidson, Sales Director, Bridge of Weir Leather Company