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how to spend it

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THE POWER OF THREE





Isabel Ettegui in the new Connolly store on Clifford Street, wearing Connolly cashmere raglan coat, £2,500, cashmere jumper, £610, and wool stretch trousers, £395

connately connolly

In the 1990s a new breed of male shopper appeared: Connolly Man. Now the legendary leather and cashmere emporium is back with a new collection that women will love too.

Nick Foulkes is first through the doors. Portrait by **Richard Grassie**

In the 1960s it was psychedelic boutique Granny Takes a Trip; the early years of the following decade belonged to Biba; by the 1980s it was Browns: over the years London has boasted certain shops that so perfectly encapsulate the values of their era as to transcend their retail identity and stand as symbols of their time. These are more than mere stores: among their habitués they inspire the same passionate devotion as football teams and rock bands.

In 1990s London, Connolly was that shop.

It is hard to explain the excitement of Connolly to anyone under the age of 35. To understand why we went so crazy for a small shop in a stable in a mews just off Belgrave Square that sold a few leather blousons, belts, shirts, cashmere pullovers, briefcases and such everyday necessities as an in-car espresso-

making set, it is necessary to know what London was like in the early 1990s. Back then it was a relatively sedate place that emptied at weekends. On the whole, restaurants were mediocre. Espressos were a relative novelty. There were shops, of course, but nothing like as many as there would be; in those days one could drop a pin at one end of Mount Street and hear it at the other.

While the boom years of the 1980s gave London a rash of money, the arrival of Connolly in the 1990s taught us to be tasteful. And now, six years after closing its doors, Connolly is reopening on three floors of an 18th-century house on Clifford Street. The surrounding excitement is almost in direct disproportion to the scale of the venture: the retail space is just 2,500 sq ft.

Connolly Leather, founded in 1878, is a resonantly British name: the benches in the Houses of Parliament are covered in it. The same goes for the seats of the great automotive marques: Bentley, Rolls-Royce, Jaguar,

Ferrari and many others have used Connolly leathers for their interiors. And in early 1989 Connolly invited fashion retailer Joseph Ettegui to sponsor a competition to design a chair for Joseph, the chain of clothes shops he launched in 1972 – the whimsical accompanying photography showed the perpetually stubbled Ettegui perched on an invisible chair. “It’s very sweet – Joe sitting in mid-air,” recalls his widow Isabel (pictured above) with a smile. “That’s how I met the Connolly family.”

“They were the most charming family, they produced a fantastic quality product, and I just thought the company had real potential. That’s when I decided that somewhere in there was a retail brand.” It was an idea that was to become a 25-year obsession.

Happily, Anthony Hussey, a senior family member and director of the company (his mother was a Connolly), felt more or less the same way. “I want Connolly to eventually become the English Hermès,” he told the *FT*

at the time. "Hermès leather is superb, of the highest quality, and that is what I intend Connolly to be."

Looking back with a fond smile, Isabel recalls a happy concatenation of circumstances. "The family said, 'Maybe we'll just do one collection,' and then, when I saw the mews, I thought this is where we're going to retail it. Joseph asked, 'Who are you going to do it?' 'I'm going to get Andrée Putman,' I replied, and he went, 'Don't be silly!' She'd done the interior of this incredible museum in Bordeaux and it was so beautiful. But I plucked up the courage and rang her. 'Would you consider doing a shop for Connolly?' I asked. She said, 'We'll have to find them a stable.' 'I've found them the stables, Andrée,' was my reply. And she came on literally the next plane and we did it." As for the stables' landlord, the Grosvenor Estate, "They were very supportive. In fact, the Duke of Westminster gave us a year rent-free because he was so happy to have Connolly in his mews."

Connolly seemed charmed, and when it opened in April 1995, London had seen nothing like it. Putman had left the loose boxes and mangers in situ, covered the floor in traditional granite "mews" blocks and painted the metalwork racing green. An upper floor with a skylight had a balcony with more racing-green railings. Large coloured hides were draped around the place. The stock seemed to fit into the environment rather than give the appearance of having had a shop designed around it.

And the merchandise was amazing. Sebastian Conran created a set of jump leads that cost £550, a £2,000 toolkit, and that in-car espresso kit for £850. Ross Lovegrove, who had worked for both Louis Vuitton and Hermès, devised a range of items that took a specially developed buttersoft leather and added details in aluminium, evoking the sleek modernity of motoring, and walnut veneer, recalling the instrument panels of vintage cars. The suit carrier he designed took this to extremes and included so much walnut it was hard to lift even when empty. Undeterred, the shop launched a highly expensive collapsible aluminium trolley by Seymourpowell to help move the suit carrier and other heavy luggage around.

Happily, most of Connolly's customers had people to carry their luggage: Ralph Lauren enthused about it; Valentino was a frequent visitor; the Princess of Wales loved the belts, shirts and driving shoes, and had no inhibitions about trying things on behind one of the loose boxes (there were no changing rooms).

As well as its own leather goods, knitwear and driving blousons, Connolly was a place where you could get things that were simply not available elsewhere. Like proper espresso, the driving shoe, that other great Italian export, was then a rarity: Connolly was the first to stock the original Car Shoe, long before Prada bought the brand. "I had heard about this shoe and so I drove through France and Italy looking for it, and finally found it being made in garages in Varese," says Isabel. It was the first place in the UK I saw a Loro Piana quilted cashmere gilet – back then Loro Piana was still known mainly as a cloth mill rather than an apparel brand (*mirabile dictu*, it only opened its first shop, in New York, in 1993).

Connolly was a success and a new breed of male shopper emerged, Connolly Man. In 2000, outgrowing the mews, the shop moved to Mayfair and new Putman-designed premises on Conduit Street, and in 2005 the Ettedguis acquired the Connolly trademark. The same year Isabel and Joseph, having sold his eponymous retail chain, increasingly focused their attention on Connolly, bringing in personal favourites such as shirts by Charvet and leather jackets and coats by Parisian master Seraphin.

Shortly before Joseph died in 2010 the Conduit Street store closed its doors for the last time. But the brand



Clockwise from left: Connolly cashmere Weekender sweater, £750, cotton trousers, £360, and suede driving boots, £420. Leather Sea bag, £1,450. Small leather Hex wallet, £245, medium, £350, and large, £765. Wool Aran jumpers, £395 each. Suede driving boots, £420. Connolly x Mühbauer wool/fur felt fedora, £270



lived on in the wardrobes of aficionados. Jonathan Connolly, who now runs the automotive-leather side of the business and holds the royal warrant as the Queen's currier, speaks affectionately of "the little credit-card holders that we gave away at the launch. Most people I know still have one of those, and say, 'Where can I get another one of these?' They ask about them all the time."

"It's extraordinary," says Isabel. "I'll go to dinner and someone will go, 'Look, Isy, look what I'm wearing,' and it will be a Connolly jacket or a Connolly shirt or a Connolly jumper. My daughter's friends have started wearing their parents' Connolly."

However, it was only when she saw the site on Clifford Street, just around the corner from Conduit Street, that she took the decision to reopen. As sole investor in the new shop, she is under no illusions about the task ahead, but feels there is a place for a quiet independent voice among the big-brand cacophony.

"They're such huge businesses now," she says. "They have become behemoths that have to produce and produce and produce. I think it's ugly at times, that there's too much of everything and that there's too much on show... Edit it better, make it smaller and make it more personal. Don't lose the thread, don't lose the narrative, don't lose the customer."

It is in this spirit of picking up the narrative where it left off that Conran has been asked to update his jump leads and toolkit (both price on request), and the

store manager Ivan Calderon has returned. There will be a Charvet corner and Seraphin will be making remarkable leatherwear, including a blue suede boxer's dressing gown (£4,570).

But there are changes too. "They realised that they could be retailers as well," Isabel says of many of the brands that Connolly used to stock. "So they started their own shops, and that's why we now have our own collections." She is particularly happy to have Marc Audibert designing "a men's collection [from £280] that women look equally good in". Audibert has designed for many major fashion houses – Cerruti, Hermès, Prada and Ferragamo among them – but is best known for developing stretch fabric

with DuPont, earning him the sobriquet "the inventor of the stretch", although Isabel prefers to describe him as "the designer's designer". Elsewhere, Lorraine Acornley, who designed knitwear for Joseph, has created some truly spectacular pieces including handknitted unwashed-cashmere Aran sweaters (£1,500), each of which takes six months to make and can be ordered bespoke; and, using a plating technique developed for Connolly, pullovers (£325) that are cashmere inside and Shetland outside.

Isabel feels the new location combines the virtues of the previous two: it has the charm and intimacy of the mews, while being centrally located. She has called upon Parisian architects Patrick Gilles and Dorothee Boissier to design the space (Putnam died in 2013). "They've done all the Moncler shops and they do everything for Remo Ruffini [Moncler's chairman], his boats and his houses. They've done the Baccarat Hotel in New York. They did Joe's and my flat. That was the first job they ever did in London." And as well as designing the shop, they will also be responsible for the flat upstairs where she will live. In fact, she likes their work so much that as well as living and working in it, she will be selling it.

"The first floor will have some of their furniture, and they're doing special pieces for the shop; there's going to be a Connolly club chair. So funnily enough, we're going back to the very first idea: designing a chair with Connolly." ♦
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