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THE RAKE

THE ANDREW WOODS OF CLASSIC ELEGANCE

Exclusive interview

BILLY CRUDUP

He is a golden god

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CONTENT KINGS

Connolly, the century-old leather maker that upholstered the best automotive marques in the golden age of motoring, is back with a new store in London's Mayfair. If the city learnt how to be rich in the eighties, Connolly taught it how to be stylish...

by **nick foulkes**

I am not especially fond of the term 'curated content': as well as being mildly pretentious it has become tired through overuse... which is a pity, as it describes the appeal of the newly opened Connolly shop on Clifford Street in Mayfair to perfection. However, it does Connolly a disservice, in that, as a relatively new term, it might imply Connolly is a new shop, whereas the truth is that Connolly was a concept store selling curated content long before either of those terms had made their way into the retail marketing manager's book of clichés.

Connolly, as we know, provided the upholstery for all the best automotive marques in the golden age of motoring (whenever that was), and I still feel slightly guilty when I think how many cows were killed to cover the interior of my old Bentley. I can imagine herds of ruminants were driven to extinction to cover the ceiling, seats, door panels, headrests, dash roll, sun visors, gear stick, and what have you. But Bentley was just one of the many brands that Connolly supplied, and if the seat of your bespoke trousers was not gliding across the upholstery of a Ferrari, Rolls-Royce or Jaguar, it was polishing the leather in the Palace of Westminster, where Connolly covered the benches of the Houses of Lords and Commons. And if, by any misfortune, you did not drive a smart car or were not a member of the upper or lower chambers of the greatest of parliaments, you would have doubtless encountered Connolly leather on your transatlantic trips aboard the Queen Mary and the QE2 or your supersonic flights on Concorde. Even if you happened to be the monarch, there was no escaping the stuff: Connolly upholstered the carriage in which Edward VII was hauled to his coronation, and, to this day, Jonathan Connolly is the Queen's currier.

When it came to retail, Connolly was the best shop to open in London during the 1990s — or, put it this way, it was the new shop in which I spent the most time. If the eighties had taught London how to be rich, the city learnt style from Connolly during the 1990s.

The shop was in a mews behind what is now the Lanesborough Hotel, and even though there was no passing trade (it was down the end of a cobbled cul-de-sac, behind high gates), if you spent long enough in that Andrée Putman-designed interior, the whole world (or at least that bit of it worth knowing) would pass by. Lady Di (the Princess of Wales, if you are under 50) was always in and out; Valentino was another regular; and no less a panjandrum than Ralph Lauren declared that it was one of his favourite shops.

I got to know about Connolly because of Joseph Ettedgui, the late eponym of the Joseph shops. Joseph was one of the men who did much to transform London from one of the world's

quieter and duller capital cities into the city it is today. It is hard to imagine how chic his shops were, with their steel and glass stairs and cool dark marble interiors. Joseph understood that shopping was a leisure activity and that a visit to a shop had to be an experience. He put chic cafés into his shops and opened his own restaurants; he was often at the bar at Joe's in Brompton Cross smoking a cigar; and he also opened a little place you might have heard of called Le Caprice, where he employed a young Chris Corbin and Jeremy King (the decorative scheme is still the same). As well as clothes and food, Joseph sold furniture and collaborated with Connolly on chairs.

It was while working on this project that his wife, Isabel, fell under the spell of Connolly. The more she looked at the business the more she saw a luxury goods brand hidden within the company's storied genetic helix. John Joseph Connolly and Samuel Frederick Connolly had made their names as suppliers of harness leather, and it occurred to Isabel that there was another firm that had also started out making saddles and done rather well when it branched out into other lines of merchandise: located in Paris, it was called Hermès. Never a woman to set her sights low, Isabel decided she was going to open the British answer to Hermès, only where Hermès referenced the equestrian world in its designs and motifs, Connolly would use motoring as its inspiration.

Connolly was a sensation. Soon every well-dressed car contained a Connolly leather-bound road atlas and London A-Z (bear in mind this was the pre-app, almost pre-mobile, 1990s). If you wanted to make an offensive gesture to a fellow road user you did so using a pair of Connolly driving gloves with the necessary digits picked out in contrasting leather. If you were a proto-Bentley Boy at the wheel of a 1920s Le Mans winner, to protect your eyes with anything other than Connolly goggles was *infra dig*. And then there were the true motoring essentials: the cashmere-soft calfskin tool kit by Sebastian Conran, who also made the five hundred quid jump leads, and my personal favourite, the in-car espresso kit (in the 1990s no one had ever heard of a skinny latte and there wasn't an artisanal coffee shop every 20 metres).

The clothes were fabulous: Connolly driving blousons and driving shoes became a uniform. Moreover, it was the shop that broke new brands in Britain: Connolly was where I saw my first Loro Piana quilted gilet (LP was still primarily known as a cloth merchant rather than clothes maker), my first pair of Original Car Shoes (long before the brand was owned by Prada), and where I kept warm with my first Seraphin shearling (Henri Zaks made the leathers and sheepskins).

RUMMAGE



Connolly's flagship store on
Mayfair's Cliford Street.



Staff working on leather hides in Connolly's original factory, circa 1920s.

Having been a Connolly regular in the days of the mews was like having been a founder member of Annabel's or in the audience at the first live concert of the Sex Pistols. But *nihil durat in aeternum*: eventually Connolly grew up and moved to Conduit Street in time to surf the Mayfair hedge-fund boom, and by then the Ettedguis had bought out the Connolly family. Thereafter, Joseph became terminally ill and Connolly closed.

However, when Isabel came across an empty Georgian house on Clifford Street, she could not resist opening a new Connolly in a place that had something of the intimacy of the mews as well as a central location. The address was not the only thing to have changed, for the luxury goods market is a very different place compared to the 1990s. In the old days luxury goods were made by craftsmen; now they teach luxury M.B.A. courses at business schools.

In fact, it is precisely this proliferation of luxury that has given Isabel her opportunity. She wants to make luxury small and personal again, and not the sort of thing you will see everywhere. Sebastian Conran has made a few select pieces, including a shoulder-slung flask and glass set and a calfskin cool bag. Joel Parkes's large wooden bowls are more like contemporary sculpture: hewn from fallen trees, they are hand-worked and filled with English pewter, copper pins and pigments injected into the natural veining. Gilles & Boissier, who designed the shop, liked it so much they created a line of furniture to sell, so if you want your house to look like this exquisite store (and who wouldn't?), you can buy the tables, chairs, cupboards, and so on. Given that the much-missed

Joseph was a cigar smoker to rival Sir Terence Conran, there is a reassuringly strong and well-informed selection of cigar-related paraphernalia: if you need a silver and cut-glass billiard room ashtray with a wild boar's tusk, or for that matter an ashtray of petrified wood, you are in the right shop. There are also humidors and Edwardian leather cigar cases.

I don't drink, so I could not care less about decanting my sparkling wines, but if you are in need of a champagne decanter, Connolly claims to be one of the few places where you can get one. But when I did drink champagne I found that it tasted better in tankards rather than flutes, and if you share my refined tastes you will be happy to notice that Connolly has thoughtfully prepared a range of connoisseurs' crystal tankards handmade by William Yeoward.

And there are the old favourites: leathers from Seraphin; shirts and ties from Charvet; driving goggles, gloves and helmets; and some of the best knitwear in the western (or for that matter any) hemisphere: rugged Shetlands, heavy Arans, zephyr-weight summer cashmeres, fine-gauge Merinos, and any hand-knits *sur mesure*. There are even glasses by C.W. Dixey, spectacle and frame makers for Ian Fleming, Napoleon, Queen Victoria and Sir Winston Churchill.

But is it not so much Dixey's being long established and British that convinced Isabel of the synergies with Connolly? "They used to keep a cow in the basement of their Mayfair shop, so their customers could enjoy fresh milk," she said. Of course, at Connolly that cow would have been made into a car seat. ¹⁸

RESUME

Clockwise from top: a few examples of Connolly's leatherwork; Connolly's elegant and brilliant iconic label; elegant, the iconic driving shoes are simple and versatile; and this zippered leather pencil will age beautifully with time.

