

**M**aybe it says something about the state of the nation that the 150th birthday of the bowler hat has gone pretty much unremarked. It's associated the world over with "Britishness", but who in Britain wears one now? A few City diehards; stewards at farming and equestrian events; off-duty Guards officers; porters at Oxbridge colleges; and Orangemen on the march. Hardly Cool Britannia.

Moreover, the bowler has been keeping some unfortunate company in recent years. It was a bowler hat, as worn by Captain Keith Brown, that came to symbolise the fiasco of the 1993 Grand National, as he started, stopped, restarted then abandoned the Aintree steeplechase. It was a performance straight out of the bowler's rich comic history, a fine mess worthy of Laurel and Hardy.

What was the favoured headgear among English hooligans running amok on the streets of Marseille during the 1998 World Cup? A plastic bowler hat, emblazoned with the Cross of St George. And then this year Mike Tyson heaved into London and got fitted out in a bowler at James Lock & Co, the St James's Street hatters which produced the very first bowler, back in 1850. When he later entered the ring to dispatch Julian Francis,



his phalanx of minders all wore them.

If, as fashion historian Alison Lurie notes, what you wear on your head is a sign of the mind beneath it, then the bowler is in urgent need of repositioning. Stephen Smyth, the softly-spoken manager of James Lock, concedes that it has a stigma: "The dog ends up with the bad name." It would be easy to characterise

the bowler as a washed-up relic left by the receding tide of old Britannia. Yet it has played so many roles – and continues to reinvent itself. From advertising icon to erotic prop, it is the great chameleon of headgear.

The bowler richly deserves a birthday celebration. You can keep your Homburg or trilby; the bowler – or "Derby", as the Americans call it –

has had a far greater impact on society.

A classic of functional design, it started life as workwear – the original hard hat. William Coke II, later the Earl of Leicester, had become vexed by the way his gamekeepers kept losing their top hats while riding through the wilder parts of his estate in Holkham, Norfolk. He commissioned James and George Lock, as the St James's hatters

was then known, to produce a snug-fitting, domed hat with a low crown that wouldn't get entangled in overhanging branches. In short, a crash helmet. It's said that when he went to pick up his order, Coke tested its strength by placing it on the floor and standing on it. It remained intact, and, for 12 shillings, the first ever bowler – named after Lock's Mr Bowler who made it – was purchased.

Ever since that day in 1850, this amalgam of rabbit fur and shellac has taken a knocking. Laurel and Hardy got through scores of them: trodden on, crushed, run-over, eaten. Laurel and Hardy *were* the bowler; pride often dented but always popping back up again, eager to be of service.

The bowler's comic associations mean it will never lose its place in our affections. Before Stan and Ollie, Charlie Chaplin milked the paths of an ill-fitting bowler; it pointed up the gap between his middle-class aspirations and desperate circumstances. By Chaplin's day, of course, the bowler had migrated from its rural beginnings to become an image of mass society – as grimly evinced by an old US news photograph of a lynch mob showing every man



Hat tricks: (from top) taking a head shape using a *conformateur* at James Lock & Co; head shapes on file; bowler hats awaiting customisation and fitting; the company's kiln room, where the hats are heated and shaped to fit individual customers

pictured in a bowler, including the one hanging on the end of the rope.

That's the kind of darkly ironic image to which the bowler has so often lent itself. You can pin all your prejudices on it. It became the businessman's headwear of Weimar Germany, which is why Adolf Hitler vented his *petit-bourgeois* fury on its innocent crown. The Nazis contemptuously declared it the *Judenstahlhelm* – the steel helmet of the Jews – and the poor bowler duly disappeared from public view.

In less deranged hands, the bowler's classic connotation of male bourgeois conformity made it an obvious target for subversion, from the surreal, bowler-hatted mannequins of René Magritte to Oddjob with his lethal steel-rimmed bowler in *Goldfinger* to Malcolm McDowell's bowlered gang of teenage thugs in *A Clockwork Orange*.

The joy of the bowler is that it can say different things, simply by the way it is worn. No other hat has that kind of flexibility – a quality not lost on a leader writer in *The Times* soon after the last war. "In certain forms, it can be infinitely prim and respectable, and in others it can, whether by the curliness of its brim or the rakish lowness of its crown, proclaim the wearer the most dashing of all dogs."

Paradoxically, its hard "maleness" has also endowed it with an inverted erotic power in female hands. It can be both reassuring and sexy. Lena Olin will be forever remembered in the film of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as Sabina, the exile who treasures her grandfather's bowler and, at one point, appears in the hat and practically nothing else. A more famous example is Liza

vital signs  
By James Hadley



Three steps to heaven: James Lock & Co uses a number of weird and wonderful devices to ensure that its bowlers fit perfectly. The first of these is a *conformateur*, which is placed on a customer's head to produce a paper template. This is then fixed on a plate (above), around which an adjustable wooden block is placed to replicate the template. The block is then placed inside a warm – and thus soft – hat, which takes on the block's (and thus the customer's) dimensions as it cools. Other tools of the trade include a hat brush (below), a hat stretcher (bottom, left) and a brim shaper (bottom, right), used to ensure that the brim curls properly.



# A hard hat to follow

It's 150 years old. It's crossed class and gender boundaries. It's Stan and Ollie and Liza Minnelli. Hats off to the bowler – head (if not) shoulders above all tiffers

think if you put enough intensity into an effort, you will succeed. It's also important that you develop good relationships," he adds, with that plum-in-the-mouth smile.

Ah yes, relationships. Klostermann, according to others, is very good at knowing the right people, as you have to do business in places like Indonesia and China. At the handover ceremony in Hong Kong, it was the Chinese who invited Klostermann, not the British, a point not lost on observers of the complicated local scoreboard of who's in and who's out.

He is also well connected with blue-chip big business, simply because so many high-level executives have moved through his clubs. Many are now back in the US and Europe in very senior positions. "Good relationships lead to good deals," he says succinctly.

And then, he adds, you need people you can trust on the ground giving you good advice. Captains of industry of the stature of Sir Peter Parker, perhaps, who was founding chairman of the London Capital Club's board of advisers. That, says Klostermann, is how you work your way around the knottier local problems.

"I used to have a boss who warned me about working in new countries. He'd say, 'Dieter, remember what they say in the Bible: 'I was a stranger and they took me in'. Hahaha!"

The Klostermann charm also works beyond captain-of-industry level. Noting that Bocket Hall had been used as an maternity hospital for mothers evacuated from north London in the last war, he issued an open invitation last year to any "Bocket Babies" – who include film director Mike Leigh – to return for a visit, which many have done. A PR offensive? Perhaps, but it is not the sort of gesture the average British toff running a stately home is likely to make.

What next? He wants to sort out that new residential club in London's West End. It will be like the St James's Club, he says, but with more dining and conference facilities, maybe 50-100 rooms. His only problem is London property prices. "They are a little over-exuberant," he says, frowning slightly. You get the feeling that he is a man who prefers to buy in recessions, then to open the doors to the public

when times are looking up. He is cross, though, that he didn't get the In and Out Club.

"No-one knows who bought it, huh? I think our concept was right for it. It could not be a pure hotel – the proportion of public space, reception space and drawing rooms, you wouldn't optimise that for a hotel, but as a residential club it would work."

Then there's Germany to conquer, and France and Italy. Yet he has no plans to move from Hong Kong, where he lives with his Asian wife Sidda and 12-year-old son Alexander, who attends the Swiss/German international school there. He has a nice house on the waterfront in the Tai Tam district overlooking the China Sea, a beautiful converted junk to play around in at weekends, and seems pretty settled. He loves Hong Kong's vitality and is full of praise for the Chinese for keeping their promises not to interfere with the way it's run.

"Sometimes I feel it is the local politicians causing the local uncertainties, you know?" he says, raising his eyebrows. (Klostermann has four clubs in China, and is negotiating to build one of his biggest in Shanghai, so good relations with Hong Kong's new owner are probably a priority for him right now.)

He is clearly someone used to working on the move, and running four houses means being organised. He says he is fortunate that it is easy to find good "service personnel".

You mean servants? Yes, he says, then tells me he's perplexed that his wife will never let him speak to them, and that he must issue instructions through the housekeeper. Strange, he thinks.

But isn't that how hotels are run? Maybe, but that was also why he left the hotel trade. Too hierarchical, not entrepreneurial enough.

"You know, this is something you can do till old age. You are creating something. And it is fun to be in the business of providing fun. I travel a lot and look at so many things. For me, it is not work but what you can create." Then he smiles and says, "I hope I didn't bore you with all that," and walks us outside to show me his lucky numbers. **FT**  
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Minnelli as Sally Bowles in Bob Fosse's *Cabaret*; she is brassiness personified in fishnet stockings and her bowler tilted just so.

Bowler hat-makers should be grateful to Fosse, whose fondness for the hat has ensured it a flourishing secondary life as a stagshow prop with an outré edge – including Madonna and striptease acts. It made a notable impression in the high-school cheerleader scene in the Oscar-winning *American Beauty*, where its appearance stokes Kevin Spacey's fantasies of sexual transgression with his daughter's blonde schoolfriend.

For a stage performer, the bowler has the virtue of flexibility. This once had social advantages, too, as the man from *The Times* recognised: "A man can sweep it off in a fine curve to greet a lady, sure that it will not betray him, whereas the softer hat is apt to come off in a hesitating, two-piece movement, doing no justice either to his chivalry or his deportment."

The paragon of respectability is always ready to spring a surprise. There was something ever-so-slightly edgy about Mr Benn, the cartoon character in the 1970s children's TV series, who set off to work in his suit and bowler, only to slip into a costume shop and indulge in assorted cross-dressing adventures.

In truth, the bowler has always crossed boundaries. It has moved from country to city, and across classes and gender. Managing the trick of being at once iconic and ironic, it is the quintessential item of post-modern headgear. Today, sighted on the head of a City lawyer cycling to work, the bowler may seem to denote the height of hidebound traditionalism. But looked at another way, doesn't it signal a slightly eccentric individualism, redolent of John Steed in *The Avengers*? Like some inverted punk foguee, it seems to say, "You may think

I'm a throwback, but I don't care".

A couple of years ago, the *Daily Telegraph* noted with regret that the Bradford & Bingley building society had decided to do away with the bowlered Mr Bradford and Mr Bingley as part of a revamp of its corporate identity. Yet when the new fascia finally appeared, they had disappeared but their hats remained, transformed into a multicoloured matrix of bowlers in silhouette. It was a canny move. Once again, the ever-flexible bowler had been reinvented, shorn of its old-fashioned connotations.

It's a sad irony that James Lock now sells the majority of its bespoke bowlers to overseas customers – mainly Americans on the upmarket tourist route looking for something quintessentially British. Might the bowler hat yet make a comeback in its birthplace? It seems a tall order, but in a modern culture, where designers shamelessly plunder the past, it's a natural candidate for rehabilitation from the prop cupboard.

Without doubt, it actually takes some front to wear a bowler on the street. Yet, as Oscar Lenius notes in his *Well-Dressed Gentleman's Pocket Guide*: "As a talking point, there is nothing quite like it, so long as one has the confidence to make the point."

At the turn of the last century, the bowler was seen as modern – progressive even. The ledgers at James Lock show that Oscar Wilde was a buyer, and Pablo Picasso, who appreciated English style, loved the bowler. "If you got the right celebrity into the bowler, all the stigma that's attached to it would just disappear," remarks Lock's Stephen Smyth.

It's a style challenge, to be sure, but at the beginning of a new century let's not write off the bowler quite yet. It might yet recapture its cool cachet. Besides, we are too much in love with the past to let it become the past. **FT**  
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