

## Van Dal Excursion Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> April 2016



On a bright, sunny morning, thirteen members visited the Florida shoe factory premises in Dibden Rd, off Silver Street, Norwich. We began by watching a film of the Queen's visit to Norwich in 1952 and a b/w video of employees demonstrating the various stages of production and the skills involved. Avis Brown, who had worked in the shoe industry most of her life, gave each of us an envelope with literature, a pen and a 10% discount voucher. She explained some of the shoe industry's background, recent developments and all the processes involved in making shoes. A cow hide is cut thickly and then sliced into three layers. These are shaved, washed, dipped, dyed, stretched and dried (dyeing takes place abroad as there are no tanneries left in the UK doing it). The top layer is used for the shoe uppers; the middle layer is buffed up for suede; the bottom layer for shoe linings and socks. Avis handed out different samples for us to look at and feel, some of which looked like plastic such as 'moc croc' (paint sprayed with a patterned imprint), snake skin (also imprinted and polished); lizard (buffed up suede) and kid skin (like soft velvet). A cheetah patterned shoe was made from cow skin with the hair left and then dye patterned.



Some of the NNAS members on the Factory tour

Van Dal specialises in making stylish and elegant court shoes for ladies but also wedges, boots, sandals, loafers, pumps and more casual styles. It requires a number of suppliers worldwide with quality product coming from Italy, Portugal, India and China but many items are sourced from places around the UK. Avis showed us a 'last' (since the 1960s made of plastic not wood) on which the upper leather is shaped and stitched. She demonstrated the hinge mechanism by which the shoe could be taken off when finished. The thousands of different types of lasts are supplied by a business in Northampton. Historically, the uppers were cut out in the 'clicking' room (so called after the cutting sound made by the knives on the wooden boards) but now done by one operative with a machine. Uppers are backed by cotton which is stuck on using heat activated glue to give greater stability to the leather. A slashing knife shaped like a scythe was used to cut off the excess leather inside the shoe but this is now done on a machine. The toe-puff is also glued by heat plus a card stiffener is fitted to the back of the shoe. Avis explained that cardboard is attached to the inner-sole and a metal shank is used in high heel models to keep the arch up, which is why security clearance at airports often requires ladies to remove their shoes. The soles, made of resin or the best rubber which does not crack or result in holes, are finished in Leicester as are the heels made of plastic and covered in leather. Another company based in Norwich supplies the stamps for applying the Van Dal name inside the shoes. This brand was adopted in 1946 after one of the owners, (the Goodman brothers) saw a Dutch ship at Tilbury with this name which evidently means "flat, green land".



Avis explaining the cutting out of the leather Uppers and their stitching

The company moved from being a wholesale supplier to concession shops and now runs a very effective website. It has invested in new technology to ensure they remain competitive. All of the shoes are designed at the Norwich offices using the latest computer aided techniques. Extensive use is made of new plastic materials and new techniques like the screen printing of intricate patterns on the leather used for the shoes. One of the most innovative developments has been the Ion Mask water repellent treatment. Originally developed for



military use the process attaches a thin polymer layer to the shoe which not only repels water and assists in keeping the surface clean but also allows the foot to breathe. Recently they have made 'river-dance shoes' for the US market and the VIONIC orthopaedic inner sole to correct posture. Using traditional methods, the Florida factory produces about 1000 pairs of shoes a week for a niche market in ladies wider fitting footwear. The typical customer is in the age group fifty plus.



'River dance shoes' for the US market

The actual tour of the factory in which all the processes Avis had described were carried out, was very interesting especially seeing the machinery and their operatives at work. The floor space area was quite small and looked somewhat muddled if not untidy but everyone had their role and was very busy.



Part of the Factory Floor

The factory employees are not piece workers but salaried and can do every job which means they have the advantage of variety rather than being stuck on one task forever. Avis showed us the 'clicking' table where a variety of shapes used to be cut by hand. Nowadays machines do the work but the operators need good eye-sight to spot the grain and colouring of the skins and look for flaws, e.g. mosquito bites which leave holes. We watched the machine operators at work on cutting, stitching and moulding the uppers onto the lasts plus using cement and nails to secure the various pieces together. All the activities involve machinery and the separate processes of 'closing', 'lasting', 'pressing', finishing, passing and repairing, take place in close proximity often by single operatives with the considerable skill required to minimise errors and reduce waste.



Roy Carpenter an operative at work on the Factory floor

Many of the members took photographs and asked questions with Avis struggling to be heard above the noise of the equipment whilst coping with the fumes from the 'cement' glues used. We all thanked her for an informative and enjoyable morning.

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For a full history of the Florida Group (and many more photographs) see *The Story of the Norwich Boot and Shoe Trade* by Frances and Michael Holmes 2013 pages 158-163. Also the section about **Avis Brown** 239-246.

**Norwich Heart website** – [www.heritagecity.org/research-centre/industrial](http://www.heritagecity.org/research-centre/industrial) - has a summary about Van Dal Shoes written by Nick Williams

Edmund Perry, Hon.Gen.Secretary NNAS 2016