

LET'S MAKE IT HERE

Did you know there are still more than 140,000 people employed in the manufacture of clothing and textiles in the UK? A few more than the prevailing 'nothing is made here anymore' view held by most people in the sector. It's not a huge number, not compared with how many jobs have vanished over the last 30 to 40 years, but there are still valuable skills and good quality products made here in the UK, and it would be to the industry's benefit if these can be preserved.

It was with this aim in mind that the UKFT (the UK Fashion and Textiles Association) began its project to create the Let's Make it Here database of UK manufacturing facilities. The database was conceived by new director general Eric Musgrave shortly after he joined the association in January, and it was a discussion with designer Nigel Cabourn at menswear show Pitti Uomo that got the idea rolling. An enthusiastic supporter of UK manufacturing, Nigel was concerned that if more companies don't start to make use of the facilities we have, those jobs and skills will be lost.

The need to preserve these jobs was driven home over the next few weeks, when conversations with other people at other shows revealed that many would like to manufacture in the UK, but with so few production units left, they were having difficulty finding potential suppliers. There was no helpful list they could use.

Clearly what was needed was some sort of central database, and who better than the UKFT to put this together? The original concept was a listing of CMT units, and using the UKFT's own data as a starting point, along with lists collected from within the industry, the database was constructed by UKFT deputy director Adam Mansell and website development firm Doublard.

Launched in April, it already has 350 companies listed, covering the whole production pipeline from yarn and fabric manufacturers to manufacturers of garments,



New UKFT DG Eric Musgrave

components and accessories, and Eric hopes this list will grow, and evolve, with continued input from the industry.

The database is simple from concept to organisation and use, he says. 'We have worked out a straightforward search facility that allows users to search by category, fabric type, geographical location, etc. Companies can register and search it free of charge, and content is updated by users, because the UKFT simply doesn't have the resources to do this. We envisage that users will be sourcing managers and designers – anyone who wants to find manufacturers in the UK. At the moment it is focused on the apparel industry, although there are some footwear manufacturers listed, and in time it may expand to include other areas such as interior textiles. We welcome any suggestions as to how it can be evolved or improved.'

In fact, it has already evolved. What started out as a listing of CMT units has already grown to include a number of smaller fashion companies who manufacture in the UK. 'Ultimately we will probably develop both strands, and enable companies to indicate whether they are manufacturers or brands, and there is also potential to allow additional information to be added to listings – this is something we will look at in time. The whole idea is that anyone who is interested in preserving



Luxury new chefswear brand Oliver Harvey is proudly made in Britain, and companies like this are encouraged to register on the database

these jobs enters all the companies they know who make in the UK, or encourages those companies to register, and we are relying on the industry to use its knowledge to keep it as up to date as possible.'

The reaction so far as has been gratifyingly positive for the UKFT. 'We have been pleasantly surprised by how many people are glad we are doing this, and now it is a question of spreading the word and encouraging the industry to make use of the database. We want to remind people that there are at least 141,000 people still employed in manufacturing and it would be nice if we could keep them in work. Received wisdom states that nothing is made here anymore, and that simply isn't true. And it's not just about CMT – are people aware of the fabrics that are available in the UK?'

'The database will operate on many levels. In some ways it is a business-to-business database, not business to consumer, but it is not beyond the realms of possibility for it to become a portal for brands made in Britain.'

However, Eric points out that the aim of Let's Make it Here is not to promote 'British is best', nor are companies on the list endorsed by UKFT. 'What we are saying to sourcing managers is please have a look at

what is available in the UK before you turn to overseas markets.'

It is a message that might fall more favourably on industry ears at a time when sourcing from abroad is increasing in both cost and effort. With labour, fabric and transport costs all rising, not to mention lead times extending, the cost difference between sourcing here or there is not as big as it once was. And manufacturers in the UK are increasingly adopting a 'can do' attitude in order to survive, making anything that is asked of them because they have to. Users might be surprised by just how much is still available to them in the UK, and the diversity of skills, and that is exactly what the UKFT hopes to achieve.

At 350 companies the list is well underway but far from complete. Eric has no idea how many listings it could eventually contain – far too little is known about the extent of clothing and textiles manufacture in the UK – but given the small size of most units, it could reach a much higher number.

'We are pretty pleased with Let's Make it Here considering that in January it didn't exist. Now we need the industry to support its activity, to get themselves listed and start searching. So, over to you...' ■ www.ukft.org/letsmakeithere