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FF Meets... OSPREY LONDON | Graeme Ellisdon

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Fashion Forte catches up with Graeme prior to the new opening of the new outlet store in Ashford.

Designer, retailer, brand owner and businessman, Graeme Ellsdon founded OSPREY LONDON in 1980 with just £500, creating a collection of beautiful handmade leather belts. Today, OSPREY LONDON has eight award-winning outlet stores, with a London flagship store in at 27 Regent Street, St James' on the corner of Jermyn Street.

1. Briefly introduce yourself to us please.

I'm a retailer, entrepreneur, designer and MD of OSPREY LONDON, which celebrates 35 years of luxury leather accessories this year.

2. What's the story behind OSPREY LONDON and what inspired you to start the brand?

As a teenager, I always had a job - I had a paper round and then worked in a hardware store and I really enjoyed interacting with the customers. Throughout it all, I always knew I wanted to run my own business. At that age, I didn't know what specific form that would take, but I've always believed in the

business. At that age, I didn't know what specific form that would take, but I've always believed in the value of hard work and caring about your product and your customers.

3. You tried a series of jobs before you started OSPREY LONDON: what kind of jobs did you take?

I went travelling across Europe. I worked the olive harvest in Crete and for a while I based myself in Italy as an ad hoc English teacher and occasionally playing the piano for a Florentine opera diva - strange but true. It wasn't until I was back in the UK, that I began to plan launching what would become OSPREY LONDON. I think that business, like life, is all about timing and seizing the opportunity.

4. You had no formal design training, but do you think that would still be possible to make it in such a competitive industry today without formal training?

We learned on the job, hand-cutting and stitching our belts in a hayloft in Hertfordshire. As a father to three children, you might expect me to say that education is everything and of course, it is hugely important, but formal training can only get you so far. To succeed in fashion or indeed in any competitive business, you need an insight into what your customer really wants; you need to have the right attitude; a determination to succeed; an ability to know when to take risks and when to walk away. You have to care - and you have to make your own luck!

5. So how easy do you think it is for young designers to take the same route you took 35 years ago? What advice would you give aspiring designers and entrepreneurs?

I don't believe the same route still exists: the sales landscape has changed beyond all recognition. When we first started the business, it was still possible to pick up the phone and get an appointment to see a buyer at the big department stores. You could hire a stand at London Fashion Week and Paris Fashion Week and take a huge quantity of orders in your first year, if you had really desirable products. Today, the high street is a very different place and the big department stores buy much more cautiously. However, in some ways, I would say it's actually easier today than 35 years ago: if you've got a great brand and a brilliant product, today's aspiring designers can go direct to the customer online.

6. OSPREY LONDON started off as a belts brand: what inspired you to expand into bags and accessories?

We saw an opportunity! Whatever your business, you need to develop new ideas, new lines, new products to interest your customers and for me, bags and leather accessories were a natural progression. Today, we have our own OSPREY LONDON stores where, in addition to our leather collections, we also have our own home fragrance, gifts, scarves, sunglasses and watches. A couple of our stores also feature our own café: food and hospitality is an area that I'm particularly passionate about. Your readers really should come and take tea in our flagship store café - the setting is a world away from the bustle of Regent Street above and the cakes are delicious!

7. Leather is an important element of OSPREY LONDON: how do you think leather has evolved in the world of fashion?

For me, it's all about the leather. I spend four or five months of the year travelling around the world to work with leather craftsmen to ensure we're getting the best, like the new OSPREY LONDON

collection of men's vachetta leather bags. (image being sent) Leather is an expensive natural material, so it's perhaps not surprising that lots of high street brands today use alternatives - but nothing can ever smell or feel as good as real leather.

8. You like to work alongside the craftsmen at the bench, rather than sketching or designing on 3D software: how important do you think technology is in fashion?

Technology has an important place in fashion, particularly if you're manufacturing to scale, but I enjoy the physicality of the crafting process. I typically respond to a particular leather and so it's key for me to pick up the bag to see how best to place the handles and at what height they should be. You can't really do that on a screen or on paper: you have to pick it up and touch it.

9. You travel all over the world and have been based in Hertfordshire in the UK all your life: what's the attraction?

I'm really fortunate that I can travel so widely, but when the sun shines, there's nowhere better than the English countryside.

10. You and your wife Alex recently opened a beautiful flagship store in the heart of London at 27 Regent Street St James's: what can we expect from OSPREY LONDON in the next 5 years?

We are as passionate about this business as I was when I first started out at 25 years old and you can imagine that the flagship store opening was a major milestone for us as a brand. We're ambitious for the business, but given there has to be an element of surprise, all we can say is that we're excited to be working increasingly with British makers on new collections and new product categories.



The Auden Briefcase, £745. Designed in England, handcrafted in Italy, it comes in (red, black or chocolate) Vachetta leather and is made in very small quantities. The strap is detachable - ideal for the daily commute.

Graeme was speaking with Fashion Forte Editor Codelia Mantsebo.



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