

Hazel Pring

Winner of WLCow Stage and Drama Award at RWCMD 2024

Leather Shoe Making Apprenticeship in Sweden



Mark Beabey is a highly respected leather worker in the UK and Europe. Specialising in shoe making he has worked for the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds, the V&A, The Globe, made shoes for the British royal family and held a commission from the Swedish Royal Court. He has been living and working from his home in South-East Sweden for the last 30 years until a recent spine injury forced him to retire. I was fortunately able to take a unique apprenticeship opportunity, staying with him and training in his workshop for three weeks, split over two trips in 2024.

We got stuck in straight away, Mark showed me around his workshop, and we looked through his portfolio and the shoes patterns he had to choose what would be most appropriate for me to make to learn the foundational techniques. We settled on making a pair of turn-shoes as these are one of the oldest types of leather shoes, starting in the Middle Ages and developing in style through the centuries until the new method, welted shoes, came in in the 16th century.

While Mark's injury makes it difficult for him to physically do many of the processes that used to

be as familiar as breathing for him, he is a fantastic teacher and an absolute font of knowledge, not only in leather working and shoe making but also in the history of fashion, technology and culture. He made sure to teach me every step, not only the actual construction of the shoe but also the nuances of choosing the leather to work with, making the multi-strand threads and rendering the wax used to coat them as well as knife care and the specifics of how each tool has its role to play.

Because I was there on my own, we were able to take our time with each part, I made extensive notes and photographs and filmed parts of his demonstrations for my own continued learning. He also gifted me many books from his own library on leather work and historical clothing.

By the end of my first trip, I had completed a pair of turn-shoes and was halfway through the construction of a pair of welted boots with plans to go back in the summer to complete them, which I was able to do in August.

This apprenticeship was an invaluable experience for me, I have an even greater appreciation of leather working and the ways it can still be used today in the costume and performance fields as well as bringing back a wealth of learning and resources that I will draw on for the remainder of my masters and on into the future of my career.

My deepest thanks to Mark for his time, knowledge and perseverance in teaching me and to The Worshipful Livery Company of Wales for awarding me the Stage Award and making this experience possible.

