



Clang,  
clunk,  
bang,  
whirr

Or as Daniel Harris of the London Cloth Company describes the workings of his Fifties loom: 'Yarn up, yarn down, yarn left, yarn right.'

The rhythms of the old mechanical world provide a rackety auditory background that could hardly be more different to the digital 'ping' of emails or the neat marimba rings of the mobile phone.

Pre-digital machinery is generally dirty, noisy and extremely heavy. Yet, even as the wooden shuttles shoot back and forth through the taut verticals of handspun yarn, there's a certain comfort to be had from this old-school rattle and hum.

After all the excitement of the late 20th-century technological revolution, who'd have thought we would be nostalgic for the old stuff – and not just as collectables, but to use? And the irony is that it's the 20- and 30-year-olds of the digital generation who are rediscovering the pleasures of cogs and handles.

'Computers could do this so much more easily and quickly,' says Simon Goode, 29, who's set up old Letterpress machines at the London Centre for Book Arts. 'But there's not the same satisfaction with the end result.'

It's easy to understand the gritty, rough-edged appeal to artists and craftspeople, from the DJ Jeffrey Disaster who is mixing 78s on four old gramophones to Goode, whose East London studio is open to all. But there are sound financial reasons behind this renaissance. Jonathan Church of Joseph Cheaney & Sons, shoe manufacturers, replaces old machines with old because they are cheaper to buy, easier to repair and are better for doing small runs.

Harris, aged 30, agrees. 'Weaving is a business, not a craft. The modern equivalent of a big loom like this would cost me £77,000. There's no way I could have started out spending that kind of money.' ▶

## There's life in the old cogs yet

There's a surprising industrial revolution going on as the generation that grew up with mobile phones and games consoles discovers the joy (and economy) of clunky old machinery

Words **Tiffany Daneff** Photographs **Julian Love**

DANIEL HARRIS  
London Cloth Company

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'It's all very steampunk,' says Daniel Harris of the half-dozen oil-black looms, mills and heaps of esoteric spare parts crowded into this small studio at the back of an otherwise unremarkable Victorian terrace in Hackney. A half-finished length of brown- and oatmeal-flecked cloth, destined for a well-known fashion label, is growing on one of three Dobcross woollen looms, the green cast-iron treadles suspended in midair.

Since he launched the London Cloth Company in November 2011, Harris has been fêted by the fashion world, which has flocked to admire this zeitgeisty urban micromill. It's got everything: it's retro, niche, eclectic, beautiful, British and handcrafted.

But Harris wants none of this. His dream is to find bigger premises outside London where he can upscale, bringing in the three looms he has waiting in store and so provide work for more people, not just himself and an assistant.

'If you're ever going to bring manufacturing back to this country, you've got to do it on a big scale.' He's on track; having already paid off his initial investment, he is now into profit.

The mill, which last year won the Textile Society's Professional Development Award, was funded from his previous career designing and making costumes, which has taken him from dressing drag queens in Australia to creating the purple outfits for the Cadbury campaign that ran through the London Olympics.

The first loom he bought was a wreck, so he melded together two old machines from the Fifties and Sixties. How on earth did he know what to do? By working it out bit by bit – with advice from a weaver hundreds of miles away on the west coast of Scotland.

'Alan Bush is awesome, amazing,' he enthuses. 'He's 81, I think, but he is online and there was an awful lot of emailing photos backwards and forwards.'

Now he is producing 30 to 60 metres of cloth a day and is using natural British yarns to produce regular new collections of tweeds and twills. He is currently working on the Japanese Spring/Summer 2014 collections.

[londoncloth.com](http://londoncloth.com), 077222 44182

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JONATHAN CHURCH  
Joseph Cheaney & Sons

**Jonathan, 51, is a fourth-generation shoemaker.** 'My parents,' he says, picking up a well-worn wooden last, 'had so many of these they used to burn them on the fire. Although we still have hundreds, I couldn't bear to do that now.'

He puts it back on the stack of modern neon-yellow plastic lasts. This is one of the few technical innovations in use at Cheaney, which specialises in handmaking classic British men's shoes and has been doing so in this same factory, in the small town of Desborough, Northamptonshire since 1886.

The red-brick factory, Union flag flying, sits incongruously at the end of a row of family houses. Brass door plates gleam and inside hangs a splendid black and white photograph of the factory floor in the late 1890s. The machines are no longer belt-driven and the employees now wear T-shirts, but the tables on which they work are the same and the skills they use have hardly changed at all.

This is what drew Jonathan and his cousin William to buying the company in 2009. The factory was on a three-day week and to keep afloat they had to cut

the 130-strong staff by almost a third. Four years later, Cheaney is on a roll with three new London shops. Exports, especially in the Far East, are growing and they are working with brands such as Superdry, Toast, Gieves & Hawkes, new lines are due with Barbour and M&S – and staff numbers have grown to 140.

Where the tendency in many industries has been to update and modernise, the Churches celebrate tradition. Everything is handmade, from the cutting of the leather uppers to the burnished finish. There can be up to 160

processes in the eight-week production from 'clicking' (hand-cutting the leather) to 'closing' (stitching the leather uppers). Machines such as the rough rounder and the hot wax spinner are dedicated to a single process. Many, like the 1974 hole puncher were made by British United Shoe Machinery, which was the largest producer of footwear machinery in the world until it went bust in 2006. These mid- to late-20th century machines have the friendly rounded shape of old cars and a comfortable familiarity. When they break down, the

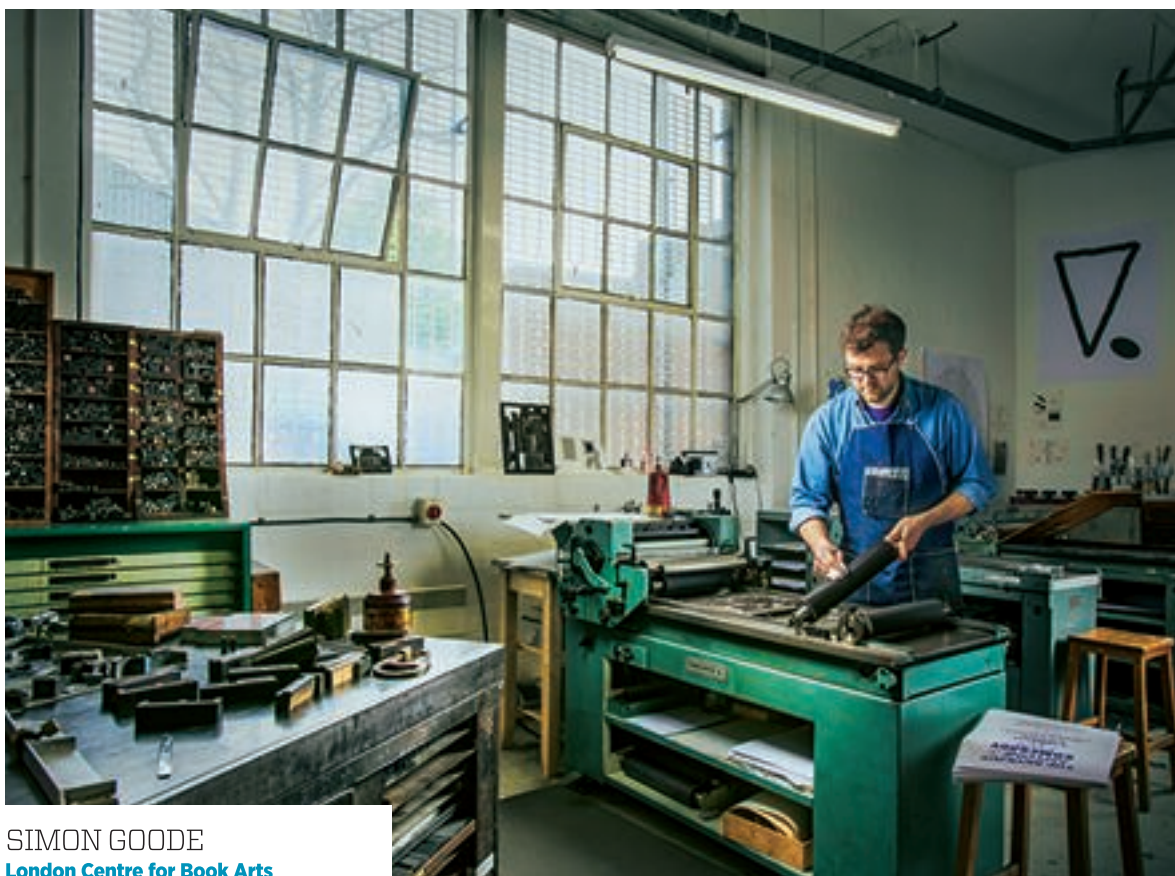
on-site mechanic can quickly fix the problem, finding missing bits in the garage of spare parts behind the factory.

When a machine dies, they often replace it with something similar. 'Though we do have some new high-tech machines such as the laser cutter and the toe pull laster (which stretches the upper leathers over the last),' explains Church. 'But when these break down they can halt production while we wait for a spare part to be delivered.'

[cheaney.co.uk](http://cheaney.co.uk), 01536 760383



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**SIMON GOODE**  
London Centre for Book Arts

**'This is a beautiful machine to use,'** says Simon Goode, slowly turning the four-foot diameter wheel of a gleaming black Autovic art platen, a Fifties cast-iron printing press.

Goode is currently restoring the press so that it can be used once again by artists, enthusiasts and students at the London Centre for Book Arts (LCBA), the open studio he founded last October.

'A lot of students nowadays have no concept of how these machines work,' says Goode, 'which is a shame'. Without such understanding, so much history, culture and even language disappears.

Inside the former peanut factory, old printers' cabinets are stacked with neatly compartmentalised cases of type – fluid ampersands and glorious curlicued border patterns, minuscule 4pt letters. 'That font's never been digitised,' says Goode of one drawer on which is written in a neat, cursive hand: '12pt Hawarden'.

From a cupboard, patinated by years of use, he pulls out a rusted tin of Richardson's ink. Beneath the wormy crust, the oil-based carmine ink gleams. He dots it along the roller of one of

three Vandercook proofing presses, feeds in a sheet of paper and turns the handle. The press rolls away with a satisfying clunk and out comes a perfectly printed page.

'There's only one person left in the country who knows how to repair these,' Basil, now in his eighties, was one of a number of engineers who were licensed by the Chicago-based Vandercook Company. 'Everyone with a press knows him,' says Goode.

The LCBA is housed in a large studio on Fish Island in Hackney Wick. Bordered by the River Lea and Hertford Union Canal, this industrial landscape of former factories and warehouses lies in the shadow of the Olympic Stadium. Splashes of new planting, bright graffiti and, on a sunny day, bistro tables and chairs all confirm that the area is being reinvented by a new generation who take pleasure in its age and history.

In the mid-Eighties, universities embraced the digital revolution and sold off many of their presses and traditional equipment. 'Some were quite hasty in getting rid of them,' laments

Goode, who began buying up presses from eBay, eventually filling three and a half garages (belonging to family members) with the stuff.

He saved up so that he could take a three-month sabbatical from his day job in the publications department at the University of the Arts London to visit the USA, where there's been a long history of artists pooling resources to set up shared presses. Back home he financed the studio by (reluctantly) selling off two presses and started running printing and bookbinding workshops to bring in some income. Six months after opening, LCBA had broken even but – almost better – his success has attracted donations, such as the Autovic, from former tutors and enthusiasts (including the estate of Ted Hughes), delighted to find a good home for their machines.

*Help to support the LCBA by becoming a Friend of LCBA for £35 a year, and get discounted classes. [Londonbookarts.tumblr.com](http://Londonbookarts.tumblr.com), 020 8525 8221.*

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