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Why the French adore our style



We may not be Paris or Rome but Derbyshire has a fashion company which has won over those stylish continentals. Lynne Dixon meets the team at David Nieper in Alfreton. Alfreton images: Alex Cantrill-Jones

Versailles is an elegant part of Paris where well-heeled, fashion-conscious women have some of the world's most chic boutiques on their doorstep.

So where do a sizeable number of these French ladies choose to buy their clothes?

Would you believe me if I say from Alfreton in Derbyshire?

OK, be as sceptical as you like, but the plain fact is that many French women absolutely love the garments designed and made at the David Nieper fashion house in this small, unpretentious Derbyshire town.

And the biggest customer base in France for these beautifully made, high-quality clothes is, believe it or not, Versailles.

I learned this and a host of other intriguing facts during a visit to the David Nieper factory in Nottingham Road, Alfreton, where managing director Christopher Nieper runs one of the most successful and impressive family-owned fashion manufacturing businesses in the country.

Showing me round the factory complex, Christopher took me to the despatch office where garments are carefully packaged and sent out to individual customers throughout the world. Pointing out several parcels

destined for women in France, he told me: "France is our best market outside the UK, which is very flattering considering it's such a fashion-conscious country. The women of Versailles, in particular, have access to some of the world's most upmarket boutiques, yet a number of them choose to buy clothes by mail order from a Derbyshire company."

The reason? "I believe it's the high quality and exclusivity of our women's wear that appeals to them. Also the 'made in England' label has great cachet."

It's the same with David Nieper customers in countries like Australia, New Zealand, the US, Ireland, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and the Caribbean. What these many and varied customers have in common is an appreciation of the design, the quality, the luxurious (and mainly natural) fabrics, as well as the coveted made in England tag.

Although the company originally began making nightwear over 50 years ago, today it manufactures an extensive range of fashionable, stylish, well-cut garments in sizes 10 to 28, aimed mainly at the 45-plus market.

The collection includes cashmere and merino wool knitwear, skirts, trousers, dresses, blouses, tunic tops, scarves, jackets and coats. Nightwear, lingerie and swimwear complete the collection, which is updated seasonally. The collections are created in the Alfreton design studio under the auspices of senior designer Elizabeth Edwards, who has worked with some of the biggest names in fashion, including Betty Jackson and Mulberry. Every process of garment creation, not only design but also pattern cutting, sampling, production, pressing and ►

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Main image: Christopher Nieper. Inset above, Pete Oldham organises fabrics; the classy Nieper branding; a seamstress at work. Far left, David Nieper nightwear.

fashion heritage

quality control, is done under one roof. "What's more, each garment is personally signed by the seamstress who is proud to put her name to it," Christopher, 50, says. He's particularly proud, too, of the company's reputation for first-class customer service. "We get hundreds of letters a year from satisfied customers and our team even provides a bespoke garment ordering service."

His father, David, founded the Alfreton company back in 1961 and is still actively involved with its creative direction. Since the early 1960s, despite the trials of several recessions and the sad demise of the East Midlands' textile industry due to most manufacturing going overseas, the Nieper family clothing firm, almost uniquely, has gone from strength to strength.

"At the start my father manufactured quality nightwear here, supplying it to high-class department stores and independent boutiques throughout the UK," Christopher says. "But as the high street retail scene changed over the decades, he made the decision to begin retailing by mail order direct to individual customers."

When launching the mail order business in the early 1980s, the firm began a discreet advertising campaign in newspapers and magazines. The decision paid off and today the brand – which recently ventured into TV advertising – has around 750,000 customers worldwide who regularly order garments via the internet and the company's glossy mail order catalogues.

"We produce 18 catalogues a year, translated into several different languages, and it's all done here on site – the photography, the printing and the despatch to our customers' private addresses," explains Christopher. "We use a London-based photographer and models from London, who all come here for the photo shoots."

Today the firm, much expanded from its humble beginnings, employs 230 skilled people and last year recruited 40 new staff. Over the past two years, online sales have shot up by 63%.

Christopher firmly believes a happy workforce is a successful workforce. Walking through the factory he knows everyone by name and how long they've worked there – in several cases up to 25 years.

He says: "It's our culture that everything is carried out in-house, right down to the company's own carpenter, gardener and flower arranger. We also believe in serving home-cooked food to our employees in the company canteen. There are no vending machines here!"

The luxurious fabrics used in David Nieper garments are produced in Europe. "We tour Italy, Germany, Austria and Switzerland to search out the companies left who make fabrics for the haute couture market. Most of the fabrics we use are produced by small family-owned mills in the foothills of the Alps, where the fabrics are washed with pure, natural Alpine water."

Married with four children and with his home



David Nieper boutique manageress Joy Walters with Christopher Nieper.

near Matlock, Christopher recalls that in his youth he had absolutely no intention of joining the family business. "I did a degree in mechanical engineering at Leeds University and only came here for a holiday job, which involved filling up the salt pots in the canteen! But I got sucked into the business and 25 years ago joined the company. I started off cutting fabrics, then got into work study and wages and gradually worked my way up. Ten years ago I was appointed managing director."

Four years ago, exasperated by the demise of numerous British knitwear suppliers, Christopher set up his own knitwear division on site and now has seven machines, creating ten new jobs. "All the knitwear is hand linked together to ensure a seamless finish and a superior garment."

He is passionate about preserving, developing and passing on to future generations the skills of knitwear and clothing manufacture that have been almost lost in this country. Not surprisingly, Christopher was keen to convey this message to Princess Anne and Prime Minister David Cameron when they visited the factory in 2011 and 2012 respectively.

Recently the firm launched its Fashion Academy to inspire young people to enter the UK clothing manufacturing sector. This initiative involves working with the University of Derby and Nottingham Trent University to run design com-

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petitions and create undergraduate scholarships and internships.

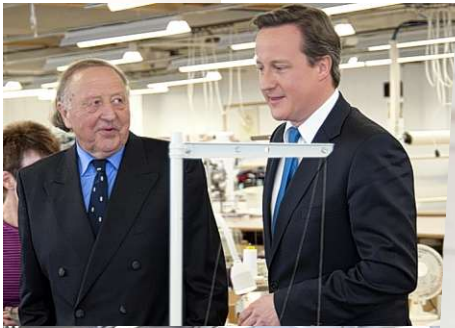
Last June the firm also worked with 120 local schoolchildren in a fashion design competition. "They visited the company and enjoyed tours before receiving their certificates and trophies," Christopher says.

"Regenerating the textile sector starts with stimulating the interest of young people. The more we can do to raise the profile of British skills and manufacturing, the better. It's important to see a renaissance of things made in Britain."

■ For more information on David Nieper, go to www.davidnieper.co.uk, call 01773 836000 or visit the factory retail shop at Saulgrove House, Nottingham Road, Alfreton DE55 7LE.



Above, Sandra Roberts in the finishing section. Right, David Nieper nightwear. David Cameron visited the factory in 2012. He is seen with David Nieper, below, and chatting to seamstress Shelia Rhodes.



Stylish art...

A perfect item of clothing is a work of art, says Christopher Nieper. "It's about colour, drape, fabric and balance, a combination of factors that makes a woman feel and look elegant and beautiful."

This is what his fashion company strives to achieve in the creation of its garments – almost certainly because fine art and music are in the Nieper family genes. The history leading up to the founding of the David Nieper fashion house can be traced back to Leipzig in Germany, where Christopher's grandfather, Ronald, was born in 1901. "His mother was a Scottish-born concert pianist who had travelled to Leipzig in Saxony to study music. There she met her future husband, Carlo Nieper, who was a portrait painter. His father, Ludwig, had been president of the Royal Leipzig Academy of Art in the 19th century," says Christopher.

Ronald lived happily in Leipzig with his parents until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, whereupon his mother brought him to Britain and settled on the south coast. "Because Germany was at war with Britain, it split the family up and Ronald, then age 13, never saw his father again."

When he was 20, Ronald (the family knew him as Ronnie) had to look beyond the south of England for work because jobs were scarce due to the 1920s slump. "He eventually found work in Derbyshire at the Viyella textile mills between Cromford and Bonsall and within five years moved to the John Smedley knitwear factory at Lea Bridge, Matlock. He started as a junior management trainee in the spinning department and spent the rest of his career there spanning 50 years, becoming very closely connected to the Smedley family. He brought his background of fine art to the business and for the last ten years was managing director."

Ronnie's son, David, was born and bred in Derbyshire and studied knitwear at college. Following in his father's footsteps, he also worked at John Smedley before setting up his own firm manufacturing nightwear in Alfreton with wife Rosemary. "Through his father, my own father was very influenced by the culture of a caring, sharing family business."

David Nieper began with a small collection of ladies' night dresses in fine Swiss cotton and over the years expanded the business to the key luxury brand it is today. Adds Christopher: "But it wasn't until the early 1980s, when we began circulating David Nieper catalogues worldwide, that the Nieper family in this country discovered the existence of the German branch of the family. It also came to light that there's a branch in New Zealand. Now we are in touch with our Nieper relatives abroad."