



| HOW I BECAME A... |  
**BESPOKE  
BED MAKER**

For Alistair Hughes running a business making traditional beds involves juggling a variety of intensive and specialist skills from woodworking and polishing to sewing and preparing horsehair

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(Top left and above) Some of the traditional tools and needles used to make Savoir beds. (Top right) Each mattress is made by one person from start to finish. Lambswool and curly horse tail are valued as padding. (Right) Making a headboard is a painstaking process – here craftsman Dennis Taiwo tacks lining fabric to the back. (Centre left, top) Hourglass springs are tied together to ensure independent movement. (Left) Individual pocket springs in calico cases form the core of a Savoir mattress. ▶



**W**hen the Savoy Hotel put its 100-year-old bed-making workshop up for sale, Alistair Hughes jumped at the chance to buy a unique business with an amazingly rich heritage. Since then, the company has created a collection of handmade mattresses, headboards, bases and frames and has gathered a loyal following around the world, with showrooms in Europe, USA and Asia.

**How did you become involved?**

I worked as a management consultant for some years and, after stints in Sydney and Manila as well as London, I decided that I would rather run my own business. On my return from Australia in 1994, I began helping start-ups to raise capital, and it was from a contact made at that time that I heard that the Savoy was selling off some assets, including its Bedworks, which produced the first Savoy bed in 1905.

**What was it about the company's history that inspired you to take it on?**

I appreciated the provenance of the brand. The Savoy Hotel was founded by Richard D'Oyly Carte, the impresario behind Gilbert and Sullivan. Having travelled extensively, he set out to create the world's best hotel. It was the first in Europe to have a lift, electric lights in every room and a large number of en suite bathrooms. And since the hotel could not source the perfect mattress, it commissioned its own from upholsterer James Edwards. The Savoy bed was born in 1905 and such was its popularity that the hotel eventually bought the bedworks that supplied the mattresses. When I took on the mantle, I was adopting a rich heritage and I was keen to introduce the bed to a wider luxury market. We still make the Savoy bed today, known now as the Savoir No2.

**What were the early challenges?**

I always firmly believed that there was a market for bespoke beds. We spend a third of our lives sleeping, so it made sense to me that someone would seriously consider spending as much on a bed as on a car. I quickly discovered, however, that retailers did not share my enthusiasm. They treated beds as the poor relation to other furniture and it was not easy to challenge those perceptions. So, at first, we sold direct from our London bedworks, but clients told their friends about us, and that gave us the confidence to open our first showroom in London.

**Tell us about the craftsmanship**

Each king size bed takes between 30 and 120 hours to hand-make – most other beds on the market are produced in a couple of hours. The skill of the team allows us to use materials and techniques that give the very best results. Star-lashing (tying knots with a linen cord in a star pattern to link the springs) and stuff and stitch (creating stitched horsehair rolls around the edge of the base) are key to the very best beds, but these are techniques that are no longer widely employed elsewhere. Also, materials such as the long, loose, curled horse tail we use take great skill to handle.

**How large is the production team?**

We have two teams, with one bedworks in London and a second north of Cardiff. Out of a total staff of around 120, 80 are involved directly in production. The works include a woodworking shop, a machine shop (where cases and fabrics are sewn), a spray shop (for painted and polished finishes on trims), a carding shop (where the horse tail is prepared using ancient, leather-belt machinery) and the actual upholstery shops (where the mattresses, box springs and headboards are made). Each mattress or box spring base is created by just one craftsman, from start to finish. Being signed by its maker, every bed is unique.

**Is it difficult to find new craftspeople?**

These skills are no longer commonplace. We operate an apprentice scheme, but it is hard to find people committed to a career working with their hands. Nowadays, sadly, these kinds of skills aren't always highly regarded. Brands such as Mulberry in Somerset, or Bentley in Crewe, are UK manufacturers who have great export success and we admire that. Our team in Wales is very experienced and it's important to us to bring work to the area.

**Where do the materials come from?**

We try to buy raw materials at the earliest point possible. We have just bought our own spring making machines, so soon we'll be buying steel wire rather than springs. Most of our suppliers are in the UK, although we source our horse tail from Argentina and cashmere from Mongolia.

**Can you describe a typical day?**

Generally, I am at my desk by 7.30am. I always walk through the workshops to say hello to the team. My day might also involve a visit to one of our London showrooms or our concession at Harrods. I'll also talk to our dealer in Shanghai and will often meet with overseas visitors. Marketing, special orders or quotations are squeezed into the afternoon. I regularly liaise with our New York showroom before speaking to the London bases at the end of the day. It's normally 7pm by the time I cycle home.

**What is the key to Savoir's success?**

We offer great quality in terms of craftsmanship and materials; we have a fabulous story to tell and the ability to design a unique, bespoke product for our clients. In a stress-filled world, customers are increasingly appreciating the benefits of a good night's sleep. And that is what we are proud to deliver.

**How has the company evolved and expanded in recent years?**

The last few years have seen huge growth. Around five years ago, we took the decision to focus on exporting, via franchise. Our first overseas showroom opened in Berlin in 2009, and ten more followed across Europe, USA and Asia. Over 50 per cent of our beds are now sold overseas, and production has increased significantly. Last year, the First Minister of Wales opened a new production unit for us in South Wales. We are also just completing a project to double the size of our London bedworks. It's a very exciting time.

**What lies ahead for the company?**

We have a number of potential showroom owners keen to join us overseas; the next is likely to be in Taiwan. The real challenge is to make sure people understand the importance of a good bed, and that Savoir is the brand of choice. Buying a bed should be one of the most exciting purchases you make in your life. ■

**Savoir Beds, 020 7493 4444, [savoirbeds.co.uk](http://savoirbeds.co.uk).**



(Left and centre left) Cotton tufts linked by tapes are used to finish each mattress; they are positioned by hand using a long needle. (Below) The leather label denotes the bed model; the dark grey label is signed on the underside by the person who made the bed. (Right) Vernam Brown, known as TJ, stitches a mattress seam. (Bottom left) Rodica Grigoriu cuts Savoir's trademark ticking, designed by Richard D'Oyly Carte's wife Helen in 1905.



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