

MOSS BROS HISTORY - INTRODUCTION

It is 1851. Crowds flock to the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park. Charles Dickens starts work on Bleak House. In Cornwall thousands of poor miners leave to join the great Australian gold rush.

The year also sees the death of artist Joseph Turner and author Mary Shelley. Abroad, California becomes the 31st American state to join the Union.

Elsewhere, in a quiet corner of London's Covent Garden, history is also in the making. Two small shops leased by Moses Moses form the modest beginnings of a company with a name so familiar to many today - Moss Bros.

Moses, a dealer in quality second-hand clothes, could hardly have guessed the impact his enterprise would have on the future of menswear as he laid the foundations of the current Moss Bros Group.

Nobody can be certain when the name Moss Bros first appeared, however it is known that in 1881, Moses moved the firm to nearby King Street. In 1894, Moses died leaving the business to two of his sons, Alfred and George. Within five years, when the shop was rebuilt, the Moss Bros name stood proudly over the door.

Each of the brothers had his own strengths, which dovetailed perfectly with the others'. George was a clever cutter, Alfred a talented clothes buyer, while a third brother Lewis - though not a partner - was a persuasive salesman. The business grew with some success until 1897 when Alfred's readiness to help a friend had a significant and beneficial effect on their fortunes. Charles Pond, an eccentric rich stockbroker and talented amateur actor, had fallen on hard times. Though still welcome in the finer houses of London, he was reduced to 'singing for his supper' at the musical evenings popular at the time.

Pond no longer had the fine clothes necessary for these occasions. So, like others before him, he took his problem to Alfred, who generously lent him smart outfits. In time, Pond took the loans for granted, causing Alfred to exclaim: "It's about time you paid something for these clothes," and a fee of seven and sixpence (37.5p) per hire was agreed.

From this modest one-man venture grew the renowned Moss Bros Hire service, which now operates in most high streets in the country and hires out more than (insert number) suits each week at the height of the season.

From the earliest days, Moses had shrewdly bought spare suits from fashionable Savile Row tailors. Later, he expanded the ready-to-wear department by buying remnants and employing skilled independent tailors to make up his suits. It wasn't until the early 1900s, though, that the quality of George Moss's skilled cutting combined with the master craftsmanship of the Savile Row tailors convinced customers that ready-to-wear was worth considering. Bespoke tailoring was becoming more expensive and many ready-made garments were produced by machine while Moss Bros suits were still hand finished. This helped to put the firm ahead of the competition.

Another turn of fortune brought Moss Bros its reputation as suppliers of military uniforms. After the Boer War, a collection of army oddments tucked away in a cupboard in the King Street store had little hope of finding homes. Military men came to Moss Bros for their everyday needs, not for their uniforms. But in 1910, an assistant named Martin successfully kitted out two officers in military frockcoats and later found the perfect uniform for another officer from Ireland. This soldier was so pleased that he recommended Moss Bros to all his friends. "At this rate," said Martin, "we'll not be needing a cupboard but a complete department!" And so the Military Department was born.

At the outbreak of World War One in 1914, vast numbers of newly commissioned officers descended on King Street for their uniforms. The pressure on staff was enormous, with some sleeping on piles of clothing after exhausting 15-hour days!

In 1914, Alfred made the firm into a limited liability company. His nephew, Monty Moss, a skilled buyer and a friendly member of the team, fell at Passchendaele in 1917.

Peace returned, and Moss Bros soon demonstrated that it had lost none of its flair and appetite for innovation. During the 1920s, mass-production of cars was in its infancy so horses were still important, particularly in the countryside. Moss Bros was already well known for riding outfits, so it was a natural progression to add a Saddlery Department in the basement at Kings Street.

In 1924, King George V insisted that Ramsay MacDonald's new Labour Government dressed correctly at court. Ministers were happy to wear a uniform rather than comical knee breeches, but were worried about the cost. The company was justifiably proud when the King's Private Secretary suggested that second-hand 'levee' dress could be had at Moss Bros for just £30 complete!

Harry Moss, Alfred's nephew, had joined the business back in 1909, when he was only 13. He was destined to be the next 'Guvnor'. By Christmas 1921, he was just 25 and already a Director. As Moss Bros went from strength to strength in the 1920s, Harry concentrated on ready-to-wear. Each suit had to pass his personal stringent quality checks. Indeed, he would try on every jacket and overcoat regardless of size to test its balance and feel.

By 1934, Harry was Managing Director. Alfred Moss died in 1937 but not before he had stamped his personality on the company. His passion for quality and his inspiration were important legacies for the business.

During the dark days of the Depression in the 30s and with war clouds looming, people's tastes became more frivolous. Customers looked for light relief with Mediterranean cruises, choosing Moss Bros to dress them suitably. This triggered the first of the famous Moss Bros story booklets, 'All at Sea', which, predictably, was about cruising.

With the outbreak of World War Two in September 1939, most of the Hire Department went into storage, and once again the Military Department came into its own. The priority was to set up provincial outlets. Following branches

in Manchester, Edinburgh, York and Bristol in 1939, Moss Bros opened the following year in Portsmouth with the naval business in mind. However, within just a few days, the first bombs on Portsmouth landed on the store. Undeterred, Company Secretary John Russell found a wooden hut which he somehow persuaded the Navy to tow across the harbour. The hut was erected outside Portsmouth Dockyard and continued to do brisk business well into peacetime.

Another landmark was reached in 1947 when Moss Bros became a public company, with the Moss family maintaining a controlling interest. By this time the company was advertising itself as the 'complete men's store'. However, women customers - buying and hiring riding kit, ski outfits and the like - now accounted for a bigger share of the business. Husbands were quite happy at this - they wanted their wives to find quality suits as easily as they did. And so, responding to customer feedback, a Women's Department was opened and it proved popular.

With rationing still in force, a Women's Hire Service was added for everything from evening dresses and gloves, to bags and even mink coats, plus entire outfits for brides and bridesmaids.

As society changed in the 50s and 60s, Moss Bros played to its traditional strengths but studied the trends. The company was still strong in riding outfits and saddles, despite the rise in car ownership. Television brought sports such as show-jumping to a wider audience. Many children, especially girls, longed to be the next Pat Smythe or David Broome, and parents came to Moss Bros to ensure their offspring looked the part.

Other major events of the 1950s brought society to Moss Bros. The funeral of King George VI followed by the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 were two of the biggest occasions in the history of the company. But, as with any family, triumph was intertwined with tragedy. The sudden death from polio of Alfred's younger son, Graham, in 1952 was a shock to the family. "A truly dreadful blow," declared Harry Moss, "in particular since Graham had the makings of another Alfred Moss." Fortunately, Alfred's elder son Basil and his cousin, Monty, were already well established in the company.

As the decade ended Moss Bros embarked on major development at King Street. An ambitious expansion took the store further around the corner into Bedford Street. By this time the company was catering for all the family - men, women and children.

The 'swinging 60s' produced steady growth, with Harry Moss at the helm, and within another decade Moss Bros had grown to no fewer than 100 stores nationwide.

The 80s witnessed some dramatic changes. In 1982 Moss Bros acquired the cloth and clothing company, Fairdale. Five years later Moss Bros founded The Suit Company, a chain of shops specialising in suits and accessories.

A major decision taken in 1988 had a profound effect on the company and laid the foundations for today's Moss Bros Group. The sale of the large site in King Street, Covent Garden, which by then housed not only the store but also offices, manufacturing and warehousing space, meant that capital was freed

up to allow for growth.

Moss Bros merged with Cecil Gee, which brought with it such prestigious names as Beale & Inman in New Bond Street and Savoy Tailors Guild, with its flagship store right next to the Savoy Hotel in London's Strand. Rowland Gee, whose father founded and named the Cecil Gee chain, became Managing Director of the newly formed Moss Bros Group.

When the doors closed for the last time at King Street in February 1989, the Head Office moved to Clapham, where it remains to this day.

But history came full circle when, early in the 1990s, the company returned to Covent Garden once again, opening a traditional Moss Bros store opposite the original site in King Street. In fact it feels less of a store and more a gentleman's club, complete with its own hire department.

While paying homage to the past, Moss Bros continued to plan for a successful and prosperous future. More acquisitions followed, beginning with Dormie in 1992 and then the Blazer chain of shops from Storehouse in 1996. Franchise agreements with Hugo Boss and the world famous Italian designer brand Canali allowed the Group to operate stand-alone stores in this country. There are now sixteen Hugo Boss stores operated by Moss Bros in the UK.

With the ebb and flow of fashion, no retailer can afford to stand still and rest on its laurels, and being in business does involve risk. In 2001, the Moss Bros Group introduced the 'Code' brand in a move into the casual market in response to the 'dress down' culture sweeping the country and the City of London in particular. Around 40 established branches - either Moss Bros or Savoy Tailors Guild - were converted into Code stores. The venture was only a partial success, and lessons were learned.

Following a period of consolidation, the Group's 'top team' was strengthened and the decision was made to axe the Code brand. It had been something of a gamble and proved to be the wrong idea at the wrong time. Code did not measure up against its competitors and many of the stores lost their existing customers without attracting new ones.

During the 2002-03 financial year the Moss Bros Group made progress, returning to profit in the second half of the year. The Group entered 2003, fresher and stronger and well placed to offer new and enhanced ranges to its customers.

The new millennium has witnessed fresh innovations for the Group. Moss Bros Hire opened its first hire concession on Cunard's QE2 cruise liner in 2003. Outfits to hire or to buy were on offer while the shop travelled the world. The Group also announced a partnership with Ascot Racecourse Limited to produce the Royal Ascot Collection, formalwear for those extra special occasions. MossDirect, the first internet and mail-order division was launched in August 2005.

Today, Moss Bros company values remain the same, as does the Group's commitment to quality service and products. A unique heritage, rooted in the 19th century, carried Moss Bros with great success through the 20th century. And, now, in the 21st century, the legacy of Moses Moses, Alfred Moss and

nephew Harry will underpin future achievements in bringing the very best in tailoring to the widest selection of customers.