

The Dunhill Saga: The Treasures of a Great House

Originally published in French and translated into English by Bruno De Figueiredo.
Eliane Georges, Gala (29 mai 2007). La saga Dunhill - les trésors d'une grande maison [PDF version].
France: Prisma Média (G+J Network).

The sound of opening copper grid gates resembles those of bank vaults as heavily guarded as Fort Knox. There is something valuable inside. The Dunhill cigar cave – humidor room in English – located on the first floor of the 48 Jeremy Street shop, in the middle of London's fancy district, is a high place of English luxury. For decades, some of these numbered chests are passed from hand to hand within the same family, from generation to generation. A brilliant idea – amid so many others! – of the founder of this celebrated house: in 1907, Alfred Dunhill had in effect imagined to offer his clients a highly tailored service, offering the preparation of a tobacco mixture most suitable to their palates. These nominal recipes are today relegated to a well-worn, leather-bound book entitled *My Mixture*, a sort of bible for the very select lovers of fine tobaccos. It's this little extra – which unswervingly attaches one to this brand – that has always been the force behind the house.

A history that coincides with the advent of the automobile

“To buy a Dunhill is to become a part of a club where recognition is achieved through subtle winks of the eye”, tells Richard Dunhill, the grandson of the founder, nowadays the lifelong president of the company. And his son Mark, general director for Great-Britain, adds: “Our ancestor had at once the genius of creativity and that of irreverence. This iconoclast facet remained in our company's DNA. The usual customers who enter our shops, be it in London, New York, Paris or Tokyo, expect to find objects not only of an irreproachable quality but, more uniquely, with that touch of humour that sets them apart. This makes it the perfect gift for the man who already owns everything”. The extraordinary saga of the Dunhill family harks back to the end of the 19th century with the advent of the automobile. Having become familiar with leather crafting since the age of fifteen – his father being a prosperous craftsman, specialising in saddlery and horse equipment – Alfred Dunhill falls in love with a new hobby, then the exclusive luxury for wealthy and eccentric playboys. The first automobile racing course between London and Brighton was created in 1896 to celebrate the liberation of the automobile driver, until this point forced to keep their speed at a maximum of 6.5km/h and forced to employ a man to wear a red flag in front of the car. With the abolition of this prudent law, the racer of the Victorian era could at long last let go and push the roaring engines of Panhard & Levassor, De Dion-Bouton, Peugeot and others to the thrilling speed of 19km/h. Even so, one needed a proper outfit to face the rough weather! Observing this trend, Alfred Dunhill hastened to create a flourishing company under the *Motorities* label, offering everything from leather rain coats to dashboard accessories, covering the whole universe of the Belle Epoque motorist's needs. “Everything but the motor” was the slogan found in his catalogue, filled with no less than one thousand four hundred and fifty-seven articles of the highest luxury and audacity!

An inventor bursting with humour

Having had problems with the police for speeding at an intoxicating speed of 35km/h, Alfred Dunhill came up with a pair of binoculars called *Bobby Finders*, said to allow its owner to “spot a policeman from as far as 800 meters, even if they are disguised as respectable men”. From 1902, the first Dunhill shop in Conduit Street was a sensation among English aristocrats, conquered both by this display of humour and matchless quality of its products, their butter-soft leathers and noble objects, ingenious and ahead of their times. With his mind always on alert, Dunhill was an expert in the art of anticipating the needs of his customers. “I begun in ignorance and learned everything from them, that is the business” said Dunhill, like this was his creed. After one of his friends lost an arm during the Great War, he invented the Unique Lighter, the first pocket lighter that could be lit with one hand. Later, at the request of an American client, he introduced a table lighter with a built-in clock, and not long after multifunctional cigarette cases made of solid gold, which he named the Compendium (including a pen, a champagne stirrer, lipstick, etc.). He was quick to expand his range of tobacco and pipes, a line of cricket and golf sportswear, as well as a line named *Avorities* to cover the needs of aviators deployed to combat in the war. He was carving out a reputation as a tongue-in-cheek gentleman among European officers in the front, sending packages of pipes and tobacco to the trenches accompanied by toilet paper! Having become the ne plus ultra among the English wellborn class, he was soon granted the supplier patent by the British Court by the hand of the young Prince of Wales – a regular customer, very much attached to the brand – who was a fashion trendsetter on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Dunhills lead the way

The opening of a sale that took five sleepless nights, so as to allow the tracking of an auction taking place on the other side of the world, via the wire, is a story he told with contagious enthusiasm. Eccentric even in their private life, the Dunhills themselves lived in great luxury, owning Yachts, Rolls Royce cars, giving into the vagaries of the Dandies and Don Juans, for all their power, charm and allure. After Alfred, tired of his family life, fled with the daughter of a fisherman, his brother Herbert Edward Dunhill, best known in the family as Uncle Bertie, took over the empire from his villa on the French Riviera or from the Bahamas. But Alfred's four children soon became ready to step in. When the company's headquarters were completely destroyed during the Blitz by German bombs in the night of April 17th, 1941, the Dunhills sons stepped in to resume sales the very next morning amid the rubble. Alfred's daughter Mary did not survive: she died at the age of twenty-four, briefcase in hand, waiting on the sidewalk for a taxi meant to take her to a management meeting she was going to preside over.

Subtle and funny

Today, the first Dunhill boutique, which has just opened in Paris inside the new Park Hyatt Paris-Vendôme at number 3 Rue de Paix, it uses exactly the same concepts as the parent company in London. Franco-Swiss architect Christophe Carpentier has accentuated the sober, masculine atmosphere with beautiful Victorian red, the new symbol for the brand. And, for the first time in France, the focus is on the ready-to-wear clothes – mostly popular in the United States and Asia – with fitting rooms where shirts and suits maybe tailored to fit. A

pleasure of which Madonna and her husband Guy Ritchie are already very fond of in the new 21 Old Bond street shop in London. As for the flamboyant spirit, which mark Dunhill considers as the essence of the brand, it is still there and very much so. Subtle and funny. Who would not burst into laughter at the sight of round dice or their "yes, yes" casino tokens? I bet they will be the lucky charms for Winter 2003!