

Tracing the history of a true design classic and its unbroken line of production from 1936 to the present day.

The story of the Playboy shoe began with Phillip Hutton, who, after a period working at Northampton's hugely successful A. E. Marlowe footwear company, decided to strike out on his own and on July 30th 1933 the Hutton Shoe Company Ltd was formed. By 1936, Hutton had created a completely new style of shoe with its patented plantation cradle sole construction: the 'Play-Boy' as it was originally called. The new construction method involved attaching the natural crepe rubber sole to the shoe by sewing it directly to the body, or upper. A piping water-proofing detail was then attached horizontally around the sides of the shoe and the exposed join and lower part of the piping was then covered by an inch-high strip of crepe ribbon, or 'foxing', all around the sides of the shoe to complete the unit. The new shoe was marketed as 'The Easiest Shoe in the World' and, for the first 10 or so years of its production, the Playboy was aimed at the sport and leisure markets, described as being 'the ideal shoe for Golfing and Walking', or 'designed to suit the spectator and participant in sporting pursuits, along with town wear'. In November 1937, it was reported that Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands had ordered her third pair of Playboy shoes, while in December of that year Hutton released an ankle-high boot for men. This featured a turned-over collar and was recommended for 'Motoring, Racing,

## The Story of Playboy Footwear: The World's Oldest Brothel Creeper

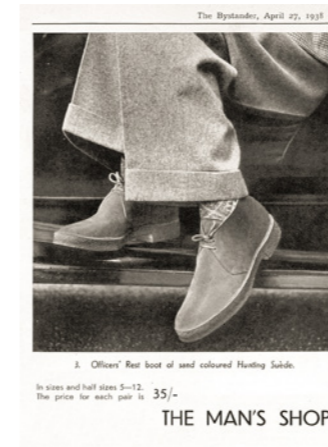
Text: Derek Harris

Football Matches etc.' The advert also carried the line 'Worn by Royalty'. By spring 1938 the boot had lost its collar and was being marketed by Harrods as an 'Officers' Rest boot'. With its suede uppers and heavy crepe sole, this marked the birth of what was to become the much-copied 'desert boot'.

During WWII, along with other brands, Play-Boy shoes and the ankle-high 'Officers' Rest Boot', or 'Chukka' boots as they were increasingly called, were heavily exported, mainly to America and Australia, as a large part of Northampton's shoe industry was mobilised to earn valuable foreign currency for the nation. In December 1947, an interesting snippet by Esquire, the pen name of a journalist for Australia's New South Wales Daily Telegraph, enthused about 'desert brogues' that could be bought for pennies in Cairo (now with a new name) and which were selling in Sydney 'at about £6 a pair'. Earlier that month he had described 'Playboys by Hutton of Northampton', the chukka boot as worn by British Army officers on balmy evenings at Cairo's Shepherd's Hotel. A first-hand account of the shoe's connection with the army's top brass, this is also confirmed by Merton Naydler in his 2006 book *Young Man, You'll Never Die*, which recounts the author's experiences in Egypt during WWII, where he recalls his purchasing 'crepe-soled chukka boots' and confirms their nickname as 'brothel-creeper'.

By 1949 other companies were keen to emulate Playboy's enviable popularity and eventually a 'desert boot' was mass-marketed in competition to Playboy's earlier creation, with a Goodyear welted sole as opposed to Hutton's patented construction. Post WWII, the Playboy brand continued to be exported worldwide. The 1950s saw the Playboy adopted by early British Teddy Boys and the earliest proponents of the American Ivy League style. Steve McQueen wore the Playboy Chukka boot as early as 1956 in the stage production of *A Hatful of Rain* and the 1958 film *The Blob*, right through to *Bullitt* and *The Thomas Crown Affair*, both released in 1968. Playboy's original Chukka boots were also his preferred daily wear. Jazz legend Miles Davis also wore Playboys for his 1958 *Milestones* album cover photo-session.

From 1960, Playboy's UK adverts referred to the shoes as



being 'built in a way so ingenious, so weatherproof, that we had to patent it. Handsome, comfortable shoes, for country and...town — which is where the style-conscious men can wear Playboy and get away with it.' The UK's Daily Herald newspaper of May 12th 1962 notably featured an article on British shoe exports noting that the Playboy shoe was receiving strong sales in Sweden This was the beginning of Playboy's long-term adoption by the Scandinavian countries. Meanwhile, increased market share and prominence in North America, where the shoe had become known as the Royal



ORIGINAL  
Play-Boy  
PAT. NO.  
392737  
Established 1936

Play Boy, saw the Chukka boot featured in the 1962 Student Yearbook of the North Carolina College, with Willie Hall, editor of the Campus Echo wearing his Chukkas while researching in the college library. This was the period where Playboy shoes and Chukkas really became adopted as part of the American Ivy League style which was to sweep the world during the mid-1960s.

The 1970s saw the crepe-soled shoes and chukka boots rebranded as The Original Playboy, the heels and soles also became thicker and chunkier for a newer look. Again, advertising in the USA, Canada and Australia showed that exports continued to be strong. Previously, plain suedes and leathers had been Playboy's mainstay, but now two-tone black and white brogues, elastic-sided, twin-buckled, and multi-coloured combinations entered the range. The November 1971 issue of *Ebony* magazine in the USA carried ads by the Original Playboy's new distributor, John Winter & Son of New Jersey, showing the above styles. By now the Playboy was increasingly being adopted as upper New York street-style.

Meanwhile, over in the UK, Malcolm McLaren & Vivienne Westwood's Let It Rock shop on the King's Road also stocked a rare custom-ordered pointed-toe version of the Playboy shoe. 1973 saw the Playboy trademark and tooling sold to

Sweden's Bjerkander group. Mid-decade, the pre-Stray Cats, back-to-the-roots British rockabilly scene of the mid-'70s saw Playboy chukka shoes and boots worn with jeans and donkey jackets, a reaction to the Rock 'n' Roll world of the longer-haired Teddy Boys with their brightly coloured drape jackets and creepers, which the rockabillys viewed with disdain. The Clash's manager Bernard Rhodes wore his Playboys with a Lewis Leathers jacket and the rest is history. Or, at least, the end of that chapter on how an officer's shoe was finally appropriated by the anarchistic tendencies of punk rock and later the early New York hip-hop scene.

In 2005, Danish company Fabian Trading acquired the Original Playboy trademarks and have run the brand ever since. This autumn has seen a mini collaboration with Lewis Leathers, while interesting new developments for this iconic footwear brand are in the works for the coming year. Perhaps a new chapter is about to be written?

playboy-footwear.com

