

PEOPLE

LOCAL LIVES

PETER SCHWEIGER

Peter Schweiger is the owner of James Taylor & Son on Paddington Street. He is the fifth generation of the Schweiger family to make shoes. He lives in Amersham with his wife. They have two children and one grandson.

My father was a refugee from Nazi Germany. When he first came to London he worked from home, making orthopaedic insoles. It drove my mother nuts, because people would ring up at all hours of the night saying their feet hurt, so he eventually rented a shop at 57 Blandford Street.

My father and his business partner bought James Taylor & Son in 1952. Its Great Portland Street lease had expired, so they moved this much bigger firm into their tiny shop. Two years later they purchased the freehold on 4 Paddington Street. I was nine years old and helped carry boxes from one shop to the other.

After leaving school, I applied to train as a forester with the Forestry Commission. There were 4,000 applicants and only 40 places. It might have helped that I had the minister for agriculture, whom I knew through the Quakers, as a reference.

Doing piece work in a Hampshire forest was the hardest I've ever grafted. In the winter we'd clear rows of trees, but the backbreaking part was during the summer when we'd have to cut down all the grass, bracken and bramble that would grow up around them. You'd be bent double all day. I survived two and a half years of that before going on to train in north Wales. But then there were no jobs in forestry, so I spent a year working for a local authority.

In the meantime my father had died and his partner ran the business

at bigger and bigger losses. I decided to come back into the firm. I learnt as much as I could about shoemaking, attending evening classes and courses, including day release at the Cordwainers College. When my father's partner retired in 1972, I bought her share of the business at the tender age of 26. The staff were all much older than me. They saw me as some sort of upstart, a whippersnapper, and threatened to leave. I offered them a pay rise and they stayed.

At James Taylor & Son we're in the business of helping people forget their feet and enjoy life. We hand-make all sorts of orthopaedic shoes, and we also retail a range of ready made shoes, although we don't make these ourselves. Not everybody can wait three to five months for shoes to be hand-made, and shoes made one-off are much more expensive. They last for many years though, because they can be repaired. For ladies, that can sometimes be a problem as they tend to like new things, but we're able to source wonderful stuff like imitation leopard and zebra skins and all sorts of fantastic colours. We can also dye shoes to go with particular outfits.

We also make orthotic insoles and are always happy to help people with their existing shoes, customising and adapting them in various ways, which is much quicker and less expensive than starting from scratch. When I walk down Marylebone High Street and see people limping, I feel tempted to run up and tell them that I know someone who can help.

Before we dropped our NHS contract in 1990, I always thought it was wonderful how a char lady and a titled person would sit next to one another in



the shop and both go: "Ooh, my feet!" We still have a wide range of customers, because we'll have people who instead of going on holiday will save up to have a pair of shoes made. They think it's worth the expense, because the shoes will change their lives for the better.

I took up juggling 15 years ago. I did it as an evening class – before that I'd done one in clowning. It took me 10 weeks to learn to juggle three balls, a year to juggle clubs and a further year to pass them from one person to another. I can also juggle fire clubs. And the same with knives, I juggle them too – and shoes occasionally.

I'm involved with the St Marylebone Rotary Club. This year one of our members discovered that the Portman Early Learning Centre needed £30,000 for a minibus. Through her amazing organisation skills we managed to raise the money, and had the handover in Portman Square at the beginning of June. I welcomed the bus into the square juggling my fire clubs.

I love Marylebone and am very pleased that lots more trees have been planted in the area. Last winter we sponsored four trees to be planted in Great Portland Street and Weymouth Street, in memory of shoemaker James Taylor's great-granddaughters, Nancy and Peggy, who died in their 90s in the past year or so.