



# Give it some welly

From its not-so-humble beginnings in London via a stint in the trenches and star turns on the Paris catwalks, the king of the boot room has been on an extraordinary journey, finds Deborah Nicholls-Lee

**O**N November 18, 1852, a 12-ton funeral carriage processed past London's Royal Horse Guards on its way to St Paul's Cathedral. Behind followed a riderless horse, its stirrups bearing an empty pair of handmade boots in tribute to the deceased. Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, was, of course, the

celebrated military leader who defeated Napoleon Bonaparte and was twice Prime Minister of Britain. Yet, for those of us who live in the countryside, his legacy is most commonly felt when we slip on our Wellington boots.

This pivotal figure in preserving our national sovereignty was actually partial to 'Hessian' boots, from the German province

of Hesse, before giving his name to the quintessentially English 'Wellington'. Curved at the top with a large tassel hanging over the front, Hessians were an encumbrance to riding and difficult to squeeze under trousers, which formed part of the civilian attire the Duke favoured when on campaign.





*Above: 'Devotedly serviceable': since the days of *Punch* praising Wellingtons in 1841, splashing in puddles has been a delight. Right: Paddington wouldn't be without his red pair*

Nothing about the Hessian boot made sense and he subsequently wrote to his shoemaker, one Mr George Hoby of St James's Street, London, to suggest something more suitable. 'He did not want a boot with continental connections or one that harked back to the previous century,' writes Adam Edwards in *A Short History of the Wellington Boot* (2006). 'He wanted an English boot that could stand proud anywhere in the world.'

The result was the 'Hoby', named for its maker; an unembellished boot with leather pull-on straps that was swiftly copied and popularised by the incorrigible dandy Beau Brummel, whose valet, writes Mr Edwards,

'would polish his master's boots with Champagne'. The stylish Hoby, which was nicknamed Wellington, also ranked highly for comfort. An 1841 edition of *Punch* described the boots as 'kindly considerate to the calf, amiably inclined to the instep, and devotedly serviceable to the whole foot'. Hessian boots, by contrast, were described as 'like dogs that have had their day'.

Queen Victoria was reportedly intrigued by the Duke's unusual footwear and inquired what type of boots he was wearing. 'People call them Wellingtons, ma'am,' he replied. 'How absurd!' she exclaimed. 'Where, I should like to know, would they find a pair of Wellingtons?' →

## Wang on a minute...

Creating the 1st Duke's boots in rubber is a small indignity compared with the indecorous act of Welly Wanging, a mainstay of the British country fair. Here are four facts about this silliest of sports.

- Welly wanging reportedly originated from an altercation in a West Yorkshire pub, when one farmer spilt ale onto the trousers and boots of another. The furious farmer chased the offender from the pub, hurling a welly after him in his rage. The feud became legendary in the village, leading to an annual re-enactment in the form of a welly-throwing contest
- The verb 'to wang', meaning fling, most likely originates from the onomatopoeic noun 'whang', denoting a resounding blow. It continues to be common parlance in Yorkshire, where 'it's wanging it down!' signifies a heavy downpour
- The village of Upperthong, where the farmers' set-to took place, hosts the World Welly Wanging Championship. This highly competitive game operates under strict rules. The boot must be a Dunlop green, size 9; the run-up can be no more than 42 paces and waiting time for a gust of wind to give maximum propulsion is limited to one minute
- In a clear sign of the sport's universal appeal, the records (male and female) for the longest throws are not, in fact, held by the British. The Finns Teppo Luoma and Sari Tirkkon hold those titles, with distances of 209.9ft and 134.1ft respectively





Above: Even for a spaniel puppy, wellies offer reassurance. Below: In 1916, the Aviation Pattern was advocated for 'general trench wear'

With the royal seal of approval, Wellingtons swiftly became a staple of the aristocracy and middle classes and, thanks to their association with the much-admired Duke, were cast as a symbol of patriotism and pride. Designed to give the Duke more freedom on horseback, the Wellington also offered the perfect marriage of panache and practicality needed for country pursuits and soon eased itself into almost every corner of upper-class life.

The cachet of Wellington's reputation still resonates today. 'Items associated with the Duke are of tremendous value because of his status as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of British generals,' stresses Eli Dawson, curator of Bankfield Museum in Halifax, West Yorkshire, home to the Duke of Wellington's Regiment Museum. On display is a pair of Wellington boots with spurs thought to have belonged to the Duke in his latter years. The shape of the feet that once wore them lingers in the cracks and creases of the ebony leather and the meticulous stitching



speaks to his well-documented attention to detail in matters both military and personal.

A second pair resides at Walmer Castle in Kent, the official residence of the Duke during his tenure as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, and the famous boots from the funeral cortege are at Apsley House, the London residence of the Wellesley family since 1807. Its occupants have seen enormous change, but one interesting detail appears to have stayed the same: 'I have a size eight,' Charles Wellesley, 9th Duke of Wellington, told the BBC in 2018, as he examined the precious boots. 'I think that's what he had, as far as I can see.'

Fortunately, perhaps, the 1st Duke would never see his beloved leather Wellingtons reimagined in vulcanised rubber. The year he died, American industrialist Hiram Hutchinson acquired the rights from the chemist Charles Goodyear to fashion footwear from this remarkably versatile new material. A year later, he opened a factory in France to make Aigle Wellingtons, still popular today. By 1856, the



From Dame Shirley Bassey in a diamante pair at Glastonbury (left) to the Women's Land Army (right), wellies take it all in their stride

product had arrived in Britain with the establishment of the North British Rubber Company in Edinburgh, now known as Hunter Boots.

When war broke out in Europe, a century after Waterloo, the Wellington boot went back to the battlefields, this time in the form of waterproof rubber boots, which were standard issue for First World War soldiers. More than a million pairs were distributed by the North British Rubber Company to help stave off the dreaded trench foot.

**‘As soon as he saw the Big Boots, Pooh knew that an Adventure was going to happen’**

With the First World War over, Wellingtons marched on, their association with escapades and excitement striding into children’s literature. ‘Christopher Robin was sitting outside his door, putting on his Big Boots,’ writes A. A. Milne in *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926). ‘As soon as he saw the Big Boots, Pooh knew that an Adventure was going to happen, and he brushed the honey off his nose with the back of his paw, and spruced himself up as well as he could, so as to look Ready for Anything.’

Later, Wellingtons crossed from utility into the fickle world of fashion. Glastonbury’s muddy fields have united both realms, with Dame Shirley Bassey performing in a monogrammed diamante pair and Kate Moss sporting Hunters with a sparkly gold dress. Members of the Royal Family have long been stalwart wearers of wellies. The late Queen issued two Royal Warrants to Hunter and she and the rest of her

family have led, fashion has followed with the humble rubber boot now strolling down the catwalks of designers such as Chanel, Celine and Burberry, embellished with ankle buckles, fabric panels and bold logos.

‘It’s the authenticity of the Wellington that has carried it through the different eras,’ says Caroline Lloyd, senior lecturer in Fashion, Marketing and Promotion at the University of Northampton. ‘When you see fashion brands using it, they are tapping into that heritage associated with a product that has evolved over decades.’ The Britishness of the Wellington also accounts for its enduring appeal. It is the countryside, sport and—above all—the weather, which people associate with

the UK, states Ms Lloyd, and the Wellington embodies all those elements. The welly has ‘democratised fashion’, she adds. Once a bespoke commission created for a Duke, today, ‘it can be worn by everyone’.

From fighting enemy forces to walking the dog in wild weather, the Wellington has become a symbol of adventure and resilience and an indispensable facilitator of outdoor life. In *Wellies* (2017), West Country poet Rebecca Rocker reminds us that the Duke’s boots make anything feel possible:

There are porches all over the country  
With lonesome wellies inside.  
If ever a storm is a-brewing,  
Put them on, take it all in your stride.

### Baring your sole

A row of wellies by the back door is a hallmark of a country home, but what signals might they send out about their owner?

### Green Dunlops

Picked up from the local garden centre or Mole Valley Farmers by a veteran of outdoor life who places function first. These boots are made for working and that’s just what they’ll do



### Dubarry Galway

Rubbing up against dogs and horses, these robust boots are as likely to be worn mucking out a stable as twinned with a tweed jacket and white jeans

at Badminton or Burghley. All your friends have them

### Striped Regattas

Bought to add cheer to a wardrobe designed around domestic drudgery and because you can step into them when holding a toddler with one hand and a dog lead in the other

### Gill Tall Boots

With their tie top and non-slip sole, these boots belong to a coastal dweller and have no doubt drifted to the porch

after a dinghy landing or yachting weekend. Cloudy white streaks part way up and a ribbon of seaweed caught in the sole recall carefree moments sloshing about in brine

### Le Chameau (left; Fairfax & Favor edition)

Keeping the labradors from scratching this Rolls-Royce of Wellingtons—sported by The Prince and Princess of Wales, no less—is the owner’s biggest gripe, but they do cut a dash