





HEISTERCAMP GUITAR STRAPS

This month we take a detour to look at the bespoke crafting of an item that connects a guitarist to their treasured instrument...

Words David Mead Photography Olly Curtis

If you've ever wondered where players like Ronnie Wood, Richard Hawley, Paul Carrack and Royal Blood's Mike Kerr buy their guitar straps, you need to turn your attention to a small family-run business nestling in the epic Devon countryside at Hatherleigh, within hailing distance of the wilds of Dartmoor. Here you'll find Heistercamp, makers of fine handcrafted leather guitar straps, all of which are made on site to their customers' specific requirements. On the day of our visit, the team of Nigel and Alaine Heistercamp and their two sons James and Craig agreed to make one of their straps so that we could witness every step of the process for ourselves.

The journey begins with choosing one of the rolls of different coloured hide from the selection stacked neatly on shelves in the workshop corner. More used to dealing with tonewoods than we are leather, we were curious as to the choices on offer. "It's veg tan [vegetable tanned] leather – for the environment, really, and the look," Nigel begins. "There are no artificial chemicals or anything like that in there. We use two types of leather: pull-up, which is used in the strap

we're making here – a veg tan hide that has been infused with natural waxes and oils and each hide, being a natural product, will soak up different amounts of both, which gives each strap a unique finish."

The term 'pull-up', we learn, comes from the fact that if you literally bend or pull the leather it changes shade. The Heistercamp team goes to great lengths to maintain the natural good looks within the leather they use. "We use full grain leather which is the term for all the natural creasing and markings that are left in," James tells us. "Nothing's taken off the hide – we love all the natural markings in the leather. A lot of people would use the top grain, which is the same, but they've just smoothed off the top and all the creases just disappear, which we don't particularly like because it's lost all of its character."

"We also do our super-soft leather," Craig adds, "which is, again, a veg tan leather but to make it more supple it's milled, where it's basically put into a big drum like a tumble drier and the more they turn it, the more supple it gets."

Once the appropriate hide and grade of leather has been chosen, a strip is cut off,

which is then scratched on the back to make it easier to glue onto the suede or leather lining, depending on which the customer has chosen. Then a template or 'knife' is selected, depending on the shape or design of the strap being made. "When we design a strap to start with we use a card pattern and cut the first few out by hand with a blade," says Nigel. "And then, if that's successful, we'll get a knife [template] made."

STRAPPING YOUNG STITCH

Next in the process, we see the knife and leather being put into a special press which cuts out the shape of the strap, with offcuts being used for the buckle pieces and loops. Essentially, this means that all the parts for the completed strap are assembled, with the exception of the buckles. Nigel describes what happens next, "Once all the parts are cut out, I'll stitch whichever thread has been chosen around the edge and then from there we'll brand the logos in and coat the edge and then from there we punch the holes in – the button holes and the buckle holes. The buckle pieces are riveted together... job done!"



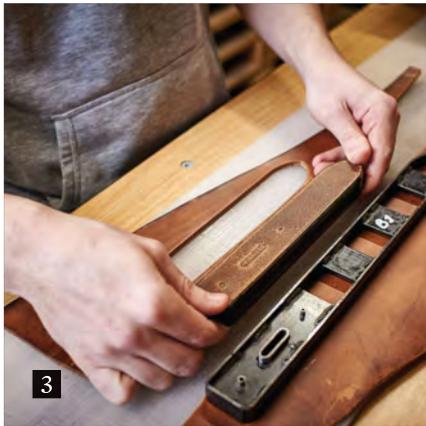
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1. Craig selects a hide from Heistercamp's stock of different colours and leather types



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2. After roughly cutting out a strip of leather, the back is scraped to ensure a better surface for gluing on the lining



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3. Having cut the strap to shape using a 'knife' template in the press, the various components are ready for assembly



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4. With the suede lining glued in place, the edges are stitched together on a sewing machine

We watched while the suede lining was glued on, buckles were attached, holes cut with a special punch and the Heistercamp logo branded onto the leather. The sides of the assembled strap were sealed, loops stapled and edges stitched until the finished article took shape before us.

It might be tempting to think that the Heistercamp workshop is brimful with modern computer aided design technology, but that's simply not the case. In fact one of the presses used in the process belongs to a bygone age and most of the undertakings are done the old-fashioned way, by hand using traditional tools. So is there a long-standing connection between the Heistercamp family and leather craft?

"The actual Heistercamp business has been going since 2006," says Nigel, "but the boys are the fifth generation of the Heistercamps in the leather goods trade. We've traced leather goods back in our family to my great grandfather in 1884." This would have been Gustavus Heistercamp, born in Belgium in 1856 and who ended up making living a restoring shoes. His son Camille came to the UK during World War I and took up an apprenticeship with belt makers Shillaker's, a company who was also the first to manufacture handbags in this country.

After returning to Belgium to do his National Service – in the saddlery section of the Belgian Cavalry no less – he returned to work at Shillaker's and by 1930 he had risen to director of the company. Camille's son David was introduced to the company, later leaving to head up Cox, a saddler. In 1986, his son Nigel, began working at Cox and, fast-forwarding to 2005, opened Heistercamp. But guitar strap manufacturing wasn't added to the Heistercamp catalogue until 2012.

Nigel picks up the story: "We started with belts and bags and then it was our original web designer, who was a guitar player, who said, 'Why don't you make guitar straps?' So we did a few prototypes and the business just took off from there, really."

"We've traced leather goods back in our family to 1884 but only started making guitar straps in 2012. The business just took off from there"

"And now, it's probably taken over the whole business – it's our top line of product, more than belts," adds James. We wonder if there was any additional tooling required for making straps rather than belts or bags? "It's a similar process, certainly to belts," says Nigel.

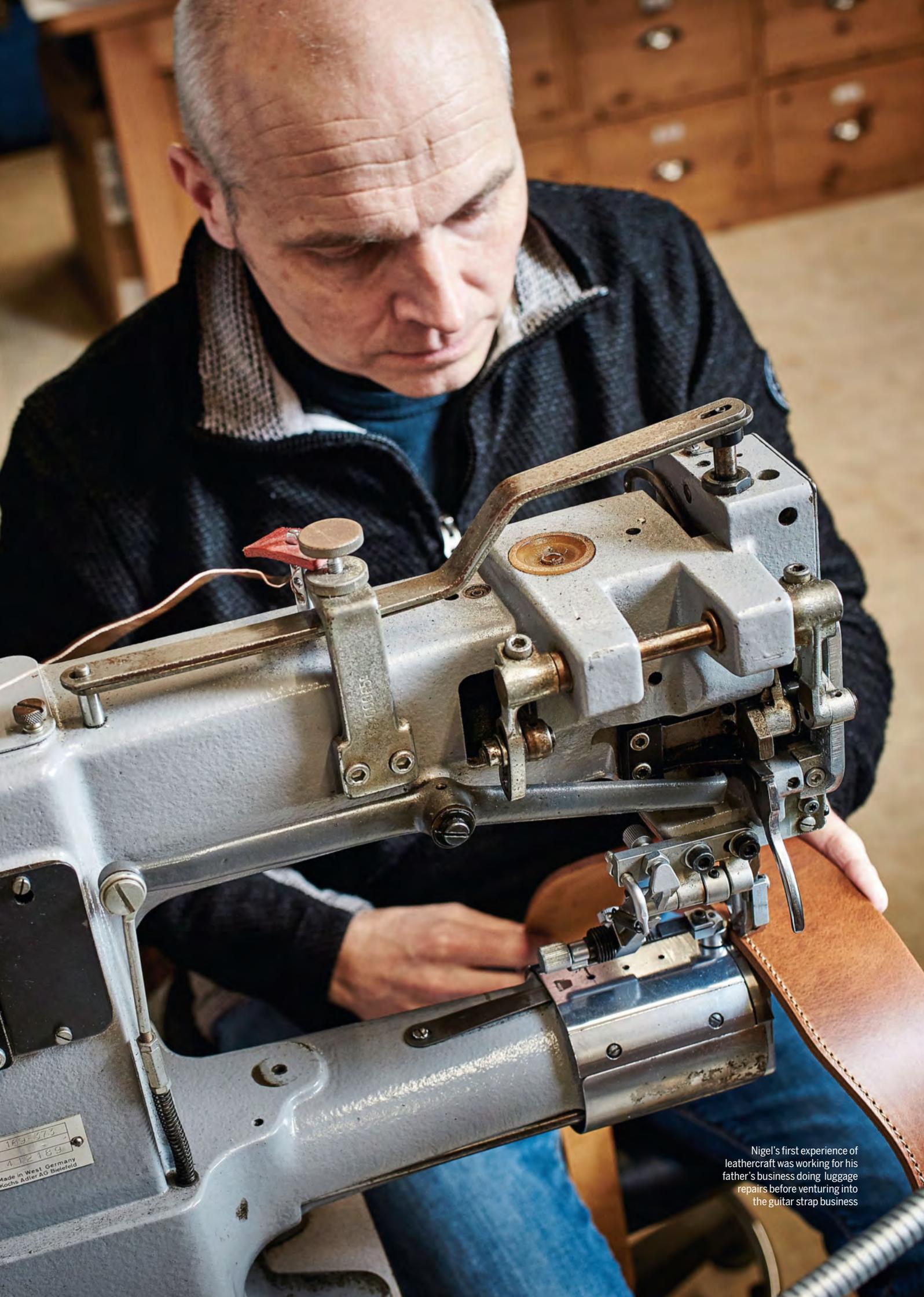
"Effectively, most of our straps are just a long belt with an extra buckle on it," laughs Craig.

EXTRA BELT-ONS

Seeing as all the straps made are bespoke orders via the company's website, we're curious as to how diverse the requests received are. Let's start with widths. "Standard width seems to be about two-and-a-half inches," says Nigel. "Most of it has come from customer feedback, really. Some people want three-inch, some four, some two-and-a-half, some want it padded and you slowly begin to realise what people are looking for. Like adding a pouch for a wireless transmitter – we just listen and if we can do it we will."

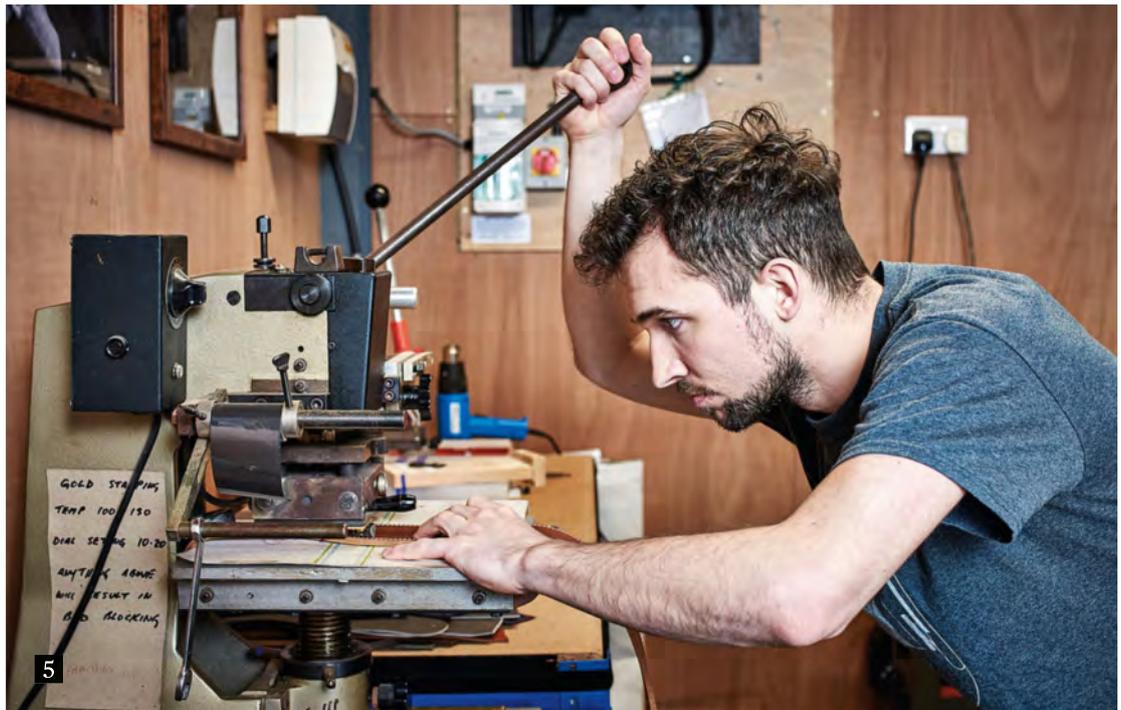
Practically everything a guitarist or bass player needs from a strap can be accommodated, with Craig adding: "We do little pick pockets, too."

What about the slightly off-piste requests? Have there been any really



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Nigel's first experience of leathercraft was working for his father's business doing luggage repairs before venturing into the guitar strap business



- 5. Branding the strap with the Heistercamp logo
- 6. Craig assembles the buckle piece to attach to the end of the strap
- 7. The strap is complete, attached to a guitar and ready to rock 'n' roll!



strange assignments? “We did a Brian May lookalike strap, because he has his slide in the strap,” James remembers. “We only went by pictures on that one. I’m pretty sure that he made it himself from an old belt or something and so we tried to recreate that for a particular customer.”

“If we can do it we will, normally for the challenge more than anything, because you’re always going to learn something,” adds Nigel.

One of the variables that Heistercamp will willingly address is adjusting the size of the strap peg holes to fit the different makes of guitar. “Any other straps that you’d find in a shop would come with a standard 8mm button hole – and that is our standard, too,” Craig begins. “But we offer specific holes for strap locks to make them easier to fit straight on – just a 10mm hole without the slit. Then we do the electric-acoustic with a 10mm hole at the back and the slit for the jack. We’ve also done just the 4mm screw hole for a Gretsch.”

STICK OR SWING

Another feature that seems to divide customers is whether the strap is lined with suede or leather – the difference being that the former will grip the player’s clothing so that the guitar remains still, whereas the latter will allow some movement. “We used to just do suede and then we had some enquiries at a guitar show with people saying that they liked them to slip and so we introduced them from that, basically,” Nigel confirms. Does the team think that

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this is associated with style in any way? “I thought that to begin with,” says James, “because if you jump around you want to swing your guitar around you’re going to want a slippery lining, but it’s more that people don’t like it pulling on their clothes or whatever and so they just want it to move a little bit, but enough, whereas suede would literally just grip to whatever you’re wearing and wouldn’t budge. So there wasn’t as much definition from different music genres or anything like that, it’s just down to the person and how they play.”

“We found that with the Ronnie Wood strap, we’ve sold them for acoustic guitars, so there’s no rule,” Nigel affirms.

And so the humble guitar strap takes its place amongst the bespoke items that can be made for the modern day guitarist. If you have any specific requirements you’d like to address or can picture the strap of your dreams, you might just find what you’re looking for from the team at Heistercamp.  www.heistercamp.co.uk