

The real story behind those kinky boots



Steve Pateman and actor Joel Edgerton who portrays him under the name Charlie Price in the film Kinky Boots

"I did the modelling for the catalogue and had to shave my legs" - Steve Pateman

STEVE Pateman's factory in Earls Barton looks not much different to any other Northamptonshire boot or shoe workshop.

Except that it has provided the inspiration for a Hollywood-backed movie that is expected to be the next big British film hit.

It all came from desperate times, when Steve faced seeing his family shoe-making business going to the wall like many other county firms that once made Northamptonshire the UK heart of footwear manufacture.

Rather than give up, the 43-year-old took a very alternative route to save his livelihood . . . transvestites and kinky boots.

Tomorrow Kinky Boots goes on general release nationwide, bringing Northampton and its ailing centuries-old industry to the attention of the cinema-going public.

From tears at the first showing of the film to the glitz of a West End premiere, it has been a rollercoaster week for the Northamptonshire shoemaker.

Steve joined his father Richard at the family shoe-making firm, WJ Brooks Ltd, in Earls Barton, in 1979 and eventually took over as managing director in 1993.

As the film Kinky Boots depicts, sales of traditional, hand-stitched leather brogues were already in trouble then as cheap fashionable imports flooded the market.

Many Northamptonshire factories collapsed, with – as has been well-documented in Northampton – the old, distinctive buildings turned into flats. WJ Brooks was heading the same way and Steve was forced to make redundancies.

"When you've been working in a factory for 23 years, it becomes your life, he said.

"There are happy and sad memories. The worst was when I had to make people redundant and break a tradition for the first time ever."

It was a random phone call from a woman from a fetish shoe shop in Folkstone, who asked Steve if he could supply her with ladies' shoes in men's sizes. The niche market of erotic footwear in men's sizes suddenly opened up for Steve.

Steve's designs and the manufacture process of his "kinky boots", which were sold under the name Divine Footwear, were documented in the BBC's Trouble At The Top programme, which was spotted by the Calendar Girls' producers at Harbour pictures.

"I did the modelling for the catalogue and had to shave my legs, he said.

"We then took our own exhibits to a shoe fair. I didn't wear them down the catwalk though like Joel (Edgerton – who plays his alter ego Charlie) did in the film and I wouldn't have done that. I was worried about that scene but when I saw it, it worked."

In fact Steve, his wife Sara – who is a teacher at Sir Christopher Hatton School in Wellingborough – and their nine-year-old son Daniel love the finished film.

Sara, aged 38, said: "I'm really pleased with it. We've all been involved in the making of a film that is set in life. It hasn't been built up and is as it would happen.

"We were amazed when the producers approached us about making the film and can't believe it's got to this stage, as so many never make it.

"It has been wonderful. We had a great time with the cast, a ball."

Visibly shaking with excitement at the London premiere on Tuesday, Daniel said: "I think it's brilliant, although my friends make fun of me at school. I think it will be a very funny film."

While Steve's Kinky Boots alter ego, Charlie Price, was initially very reluctant to follow his father into the dying shoe industry, Daniel is different.

"Probably when I'm a teenager, I'll help him out at the factory. I don't know whether I'll do it when I'm grown up though.

Steve was very involved in Kinky Boots' production from day one, acting as a consultant to the producers and the family even had a cameo role in the film.

He said: "I was involved from the first script and all the countless rewrites that they have to do. There were technical details that I advised on. There was only so much I could do though as I had sold the rights.

"I was given the option to have the main character named after me so I became part of it more. But I decided not to because I didn't want too many connections because some people will be offended, though some will love it. With Charlie Price, it's non-confrontational."

Steve's stiletto-heeled thigh boots, which were made in several designs, colours and leathers, were reinforced with a metal strut specially designed to hold a man's weight.

At its height the kinky boots made at Divine Footwear in the heart of the village of Earls Barton accounted for 50 per cent of WJ Brooks Ltd's production.

But since then production of kinky boots at Divine Footwear has unfortunately stopped.

"It happened in 2000 about two years after the BBC programme, he said.

"We were unfortunately let down by an American firm who dumped a big debt on us. We had to make the decision to stop production."

This was compounded by the fact that the niche market that Steve had so cleverly and successfully exploited had been caught onto by others. Again the cheap imports were creeping into the market.

The Northampton pattern, where at least 20 boot and shoe factories have closed over the past few decades, was starting again in the market of erotic footwear for men.

Although it no longer produces boots, Divine has continued to diversify sales into women's shoes, bags, scent, erotic toys and underwear.

Steve, who is also a part-time firefighter, said: "Kinky boots did keep us in business for that bit longer and it still is in a way."

While his livelihood was his prime concern when Steve took the brave step into the realms of producing erotic footwear, he hopes Kinky Boots will do more for Northampton and its struggling shoe industry.

"Northampton is mentioned far more than I thought it would be, he said.

"I was dubious about that in the beginning but hopefully it will be a wonderful, wonderful thing for Northampton.

"I would love it to help other shoe factories. Northamptonshire used to be the leading light but over the years it has declined. If this film can help stop that some way, then power to the elbow."