

The king of tieland

Alex Bilmes discusses neckwear with Michael Drake

Inexplicably – I ask him to explain, he can't – Michael Drake wasn't wearing a tie when I met him at his Clerkenwell factory recently. This was contrary of him, since Drake is Britain's neckwear king. His company is the country's biggest manufacturer of handmade ties, turning out between 4,000 and 6,000 a week for gentlemen's outfitters across the world. Drake's also does a natty line in scarves.

Next year Drake's will celebrate 30 years in business, 20 of which have been on Garrett Street, EC1. 'We were lucky,' he says. 'We got into Clerkenwell before it was trendy.'

Drake employs 46 people between this factory and his shipping warehouse off the Old Kent Road, plus 'another 45 ladies at home' – their homes, I think, not his. He's a hands-on boss, buzzing around his airy, glass-roofed premises exuding attention deficit disorder and poking his nose in wherever he fancies.

On the day I met him, Drake was hobbling up and down the staircase to his design studio, having sprained an ankle helping an elderly neighbour with some lawn mowing. I suggested that perhaps he ought to seek treatment, but Drake brushed such cowardice aside, wincing across his workspace in search of a particular pattern to show me.

A well-fed, tanned 60-year-old with thinning grey hair corkscrewing over his shirt collar and owlish spectacles, Drake is an Essex boy done very good indeed. He apprenticed at Aquascutum, eventually rising to head of design, before leaving at 29 to start Drake's with two partners. 'We're very niche,' he says. 'Basically, it's English style the way the Italians see it.'

Abroad, he's something of a menswear guru. He is revered in Italy, which is his firm's biggest single market, as well as in Japan, where Drake's has achieved a cache entirely disproportionate to its size. A leading Japanese glossy recently voted Drake's the world's fourth most desirable luxury brand for men, after Hermès, Patek Philippe and Levi's and ahead of Dior, Gucci, Rolex and all the rest.

At home, Drake's ties sell at the big department stores and, with other labels attached, on Jermyn Street and Savile Row. Drake's is also branching out into womenswear, launching an online store and considering a shop of its own, perhaps on buzzy Mount Street.

But Britain is a tougher market than Italy, Japan or the States. 'See these?' he asks me, holding up a bunch of black silk ties striped with chocolate, which will shortly be heading for Italy. 'Couldn't sell these in England.'

While he talked I watched a tie being made. From one of the scores of rolls of cloth arranged along a wall, I chose a sheet of woven navy silk with a white pin-dot design, overlaid with navy satin spots – like many of Drake's, a design from the Twenties. First, Ian Moseley, chief tie cutter, took his butcher's knife and cut around a series of cardboard patterns to create the three components of the tie: front, back and neck.

The standard width of a tie is 9cm, but I like mine a little thinner, so we went for 8cm. The extremely *au courant*, Drake tells me, are currently ordering theirs at 7cm, or even 6cm in the case of the edgy Mayfair fashion emporium Dover Street Market, but I'm not as brave as that.

For the tipping – the inside lining at tip and tail – I chose a 36oz pure white silk, while from the off-cuts of the blue fabric Ian fashioned the loop, the slip of fabric that holds the tail of the tie in place. Drake's prefers a flared tail.

Then a woman called Vera took over, leading us through a maze of workstations to a seamstress who used a sewing machine to bind the three segments and insert the tipping – this is the only part of the process not done by hand.

After the 'underpressing', another seamstress performed the 'hand slipping', inserting a wool and cotton bonded interlining and folding the tie fabric around it, pinning it and then sewing it by hand with thick, 40 gauge navy cotton thread.

All that remained was to sew in the loop and the labels and press it again. I left Drake's factory with a smart new tie and some stern advice from the boss man: one must always roll one's tie after a day of wearing it, and leave it overnight on a dressing table to relax before storing it; and one must never, ever dry-clean it.

What, I wondered, is a style-savvy but cack-handed chap like me supposed to do about the perennial problem of spilt egg or dripped Bolognese or drizzled red wine, if he isn't allowed to clean his tie afterwards: 'Chuck it away and buy another one,' says Drake. 'They're only 70 quid.'