

# Mulberry

## Chilcompton, Radstock

Reputation and quality mean everything in the glamorous world of luxury leather goods – so handbags and accessories manufacturer Mulberry has to be just as discerning as its A-list clients when it comes to training the people who make its products.

Its highly-experienced employees can hold their own on quality against the likes of Cartier, Louis Vuitton, and Chanel, whose handbags are vying for the same shoulders, but a company survey four years ago revealed that the average age of Mulberry's workforce at its Somerset factory was 55.

Decades of craftsmanship and expertise were in danger of walking out the door with a gold watch.

"It's very important to Mulberry to keep manufacturing in the UK, so we started an apprenticeship scheme to introduce young people into the company and build up skills," says Samantha Parkins, Product Engineering Manager at Mulberry's base in Chilcompton. "We're using the older generation to train the younger."

No apprenticeship scheme existed to cover the specific needs of a luxury leather goods manufacturer like Mulberry, so the firm turned to outside training providers for help.

"Bridgwater College was the most accommodating and helpful of all the colleges we looked at – and even though it didn't have a leather goods apprenticeship set up, it did have other experience and knew how an apprenticeship should work. It created a Leather Goods Manufacturing Apprenticeship for us, adapted from one used by the footwear industry, and sourced specialist tutors who understand leather.

"We also wanted the students to be trained here rather than having to go to the college in Bridgwater, not least because they had just left school and didn't want to be back in a classroom. The logistics of getting them down to the college and back again would have been very difficult for us and would have cost the company a lot of time and money. But, thanks to Bridgwater College, the training's all done on site and the apprentices just have to come into their normal place of work."

The college starts by helping those without the right GCSE grades in Maths and English achieve Key Skills

qualifications. The remainder of the 12 to 18-month apprenticeship consists of a Level 2 NVQ in Leather Goods Manufacture, assessed on the factory floor to learn the practical side of the job, and a Technical Certificate which covers the theory for three hours each week in Mulberry's training room.

**"We're really delighted and would recommend the college to anyone"**

This underpinning knowledge covers a vast number of subjects including the history of Mulberry, where leather comes from and how it's processed – including a visit to a local tannery – the machinery involved, and health and safety. The college has put 22 people through apprenticeships in three intakes so far, and Mulberry is hoping to add another 10 this summer.

"Not everyone wants to go to university," says Samantha. "Some want to do something with their hands instead. But they're not limited to the factory floor here. The apprenticeship is a good grounding for them and they have the chance to move on. One former apprentice is now a quality assistant, one works in product engineering, and another is in product development.

"One of our trim-cutters, who also started out as an apprentice, is now training to become an NVQ assessor. We take him off the production line when we need to and he helps assess the new intake of apprentices. And they won't be the only ones. For example, we're thinking of encouraging our apprentices to become our future trainers."

All of this could not have happened, she says, had it not been for the co-operation Mulberry receives from Bridgwater College.

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