

Birkenstock in Britain

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In 1991 Francesca Luard, a journalist for the *Daily Mail*, wrote of Birkenstocks that it was “extraordinary but true, these clumpy but comfortable shoes are all the rage. Previously only seen on the feet of long-haired vegetarians they are now essential footwear for well-heeled groovers around soho.”¹ This comment is indicative of the change that took place during the 1990s in Britain, taking Birkenstocks from a niche shoe popular with alternative groups to a mainstay on fashionable feet everywhere.

The 1990s were, in Britain, a key decade for the re-imagining of Birkenstocks, not just as an orthopaedic comfort shoe but one that was also highly fashionable. This chapter considers how a number of cultural events during the 90s repositioned Birkenstock as a “fashionable” shoe brand, and how they have retained popularity since. Firstly, the chapter considers Robert Lusk, a pioneering shoe distributor and managing director of Central Trade Ltd, and how he brought Birkenstocks to Britain. It will then turn to question how various fashion trends of the 90s helped to ensure that Birkenstocks became part of the fashion conversation in Britain, before finally turning to consider why two pairs of Birkenstocks featured in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s (V&A) 1994 exhibition *Street Style: From Sidewalk to Catwalk, 1940 to tomorrow*, and what this suggests about the continued legacy of Birkenstock shoes in Britain.

Robert Lusk and Birkenstock

Robert Lusk’s relationship with Birkenstock began in the 70s when he recognized that there was potentially a market for these alternative shoes in Britain. Lusk is an American-born entrepreneur and, prior to selling Birkenstocks, had sold his own handmade bags and sandals at both Kensington Market and Portobello Road market in London, and also imported handmade Afghan goods. In the 70s, Lusk expanded his business and began to look for other footwear to sell, which would potentially appeal to people engaged with the hippy or alternative lifestyle. He started selling Frye Boots from America and Danish clogs, and soon acknowledged that Birkenstocks would complement these brands, offering high quality, comfortable footwear. Lusk’s relationship with Birkenstock would endure, and he sold Birkenstocks in Britain for more than forty years.

Lusk opened his first Natural Shoe Store at 22 North End Road, W14, London, but by 1976, had relocated to 21 Neal Street, Covent Garden, purportedly the first footwear store in the area.² When Lusk relocated his business there, the area was just starting to become an

¹ Francesca Luard, “Buzzwords”, *Daily Mail*, 1 August 1991, 20.

² Jill Geoghegan, “The Natural Shoe Store Ceases Trading”, *Drapers*, 19 October 2018. Available online: <https://www.drapersonline.com/news/the-natural-shoe-store-ceases-trading> (accessed 1 July 2022).

exciting new location for independent shops and restaurants, with many stores catering to alternative lifestyles, including the pioneering vegetarian restaurant *Food for Thought* at 31 Neal Street. In 1979, Ann Galloway wrote of the area:

The new Covent Garden is the most vital thing to have hit London since the Chelsea of the early Sixties. It is also contagiously friendly, perhaps because the resettlement of the old market is still patchy. The character that is beginning to emerge is, above all, one of originality and personal involvement.³

Retailing in Covent Garden in the 70s was, as Lusk suggested, a “different proposition” to what it became. Property was available, and rents and business rates were “not crushing.” He suggested that “it was possible to find a small shop, open up without great problems and present yourself to the public.” Furthermore, he found that it was easy to advertise in magazines, and it “didn’t cost a fortune to get your message across.”⁴ It is symptomatic of Lusk’s success that by 1981 he was able to open a second store at 325 Kings Road.

Certainly, in the 70s and 80s, it was primarily an alternative market that Lusk targeted. It should be noted that at this time, in Britain, the most popular shoe styles were platforms and sky-high heels for both men and women. Birkenstocks became popular with those looking for comfortable shoes which could also be seen as healthy for the feet. Although the customer demographic was quite broad, as Lusk suggested, older consumers found a “great deal of relief” with Birkenstocks, and these were seen as shoes that were “approachable” and practical. However, as he went on to indicate, Birkenstocks were also appealing to a younger consumer too who was “willing to take a chance on something different.”⁵

Kate Moss, Birkenstock, and mainstream fashion acceptance

Beyond Lusk’s sale of Birkenstocks, one editorial feature was to catapult the brand into the mainstream in Britain. In July 1990, Kate Moss, then a sixteen-year-old, unknown model, appeared in an 8-page editorial feature in the British music, fashion, and culture magazine *The Face*. Moss was casually, and even minimally dressed in each image, although significantly, the only shoes seen throughout the editorial were Birkenstocks. This helped to introduce Birkenstock sandals to a wider audience, and ultimately ensured that they became one of the most fashionable footwear brands in Britain during the 90s.

The shoot was styled by Melanie Ward, and her description of working on it clearly portrays the relaxed, causal attitude surrounding it:

We went out to the beach at Camber Sands a few times. It was all very instinctual. It felt totally organic: friends hanging out, dressing up and taking photos. There was no grand plan to start a whole new Cool Britannia moment, we were just having fun. I always wanted the clothes to look effortless, real, character-driven like the subject was wearing their own clothes and we

³ Ann Galloway, “Shopping in Covent Garden”, *Harpers and Queen*, July 1979, 52 and 58.

⁴ Company Archive Birkenstock [hereafter CA Birkenstock], Interview with Robert Lusk, 21 February 2019.

⁵ Ibid.

were documenting them. I collected up a mix of clothes I liked – some mine, some vintage, customised, even some designer – and put them on Kate.⁶

Ultimately, all of the clothes Moss wears in the shoot look relaxed, or as Ward put it, “effortless” and “real.”⁷ The editorial portrays Birkenstocks as comfortable shoes, part of a new, very different way of dressing than had been seen in the 80s. The images in *The Face* quickly became iconic, they helped to launch Moss’s career, but also unquestionably led fashion journalists widely to pick up on Birkenstocks.

The appearance of Birkenstocks in this editorial was largely thanks to Julian Vogel, founder of PR Agency ModusBCPM, who worked closely with Birkenstock and the Natural Shoe Store for fifteen years. He stated:

Melanie Ward and Corinne Day (Photographer) used to come into the office all the time and hang out, and then they came in one day and said: ‘We just want the ugliest shoes you’ve got.’ And then they found these Birkenstocks, and they put them on Kate Moss.⁸

This idea of the shoes as “ugly” was in many ways central to their appeal as a cool, “new” shoe in the 90s. Indeed, many of the key cultural movements in Britain during the 90s, from Cool Britannia to Britpop to grunge (an American import, but still important in Britain), rejected the idea of beauty and aesthetics in the traditional sense. Previous decades had seen an increasing interest in clothing and footwear which was comfortable, certainly the 70s, for example. There was a plurality to the acceptability of comfort in fashion in the 90s. Moreover, one of the key appeals of Birkenstocks was that they transcended fashion trends, working well with a broad range of outfits and styles. As Claudia Levy suggested in 1994, “the sports sandal is set to become something of a fashion perennial. Comfortable yet trendy, Birkenstocks look right with almost anything, from slip dresses and drawstring trousers to jeans and trouser suits.”⁹ This can also be understood as part of broader change in fashion, with casual clothes increasingly coming to dominate the fashion scene. By 2003 Libby Brooks suggested that, “comfort has now become an acceptable part of the package for many forms of footwear [...] there has been a marked decline in the purchase of formal shoes over the past decade.”¹⁰

Whilst by the 90s, casual, comfortable shoes were more widely accepted by consumers in Britain, there was a need for some diversification by Birkenstock in order to appeal more broadly to fashion consumers. Until 1994, Birkenstock sandals were produced in a relatively limited color palette. However, Lusk persuaded Birkenstock to diversify the color palette. Initially, Birkenstock were resistant to making the shoes in a broader color range. Lusk

⁶ Melanie Ward, *The 3rd Summer of Love*, *The Face*, 17 April 2019. Available online: <https://theface.com/archive/kate-moss-summer-of-love> (accessed 05 July 2022).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Anon, Interview with Julian Vogel, 2022; available online: <https://www.theworldsbest.events/blog/julian-vogel> (accessed 27 August 2022).

⁹ Claudia Levy, “Just What the Doctor Ordered,” *Daily Mail*, 28 July 1994, 41.

¹⁰ Libby Brooks, *Success de Sandal*, in: *Guardian*, 30 June 2003. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2003/jun/30/fashion.beauty> (accessed 10 July 2022).

stated, “we had to guarantee that we would pay for the materials if we were going to make them in color and they did not sell.” The gamble was however a success. The increased range of colors Lusk suggested “woke the customer up [...] that this was not just black and brown, you know, this came in colours, and this was fun [...] fun for your feet.”¹¹

It is striking that in the mid-90s, coverage of Birkenstocks by the fashion press in Britain increased dramatically, thanks to the more diverse range of colors that Birkenstocks were available in, and the work of Vogel to ensure that they were seen on the feet of celebrities. It is clear that the demand for Birkenstocks consequently increased considerably: a stand-alone Birkenstock store was opened by Lusk at 37 Neal Street in the spring of 1996, and Birkenstocks were, by then, stocked by almost 100 retail outlets across the UK.

Birkenstocks and the V&A

In November 1994, a new exhibition opened at the V&A, called *Street Style: From Sidewalk to Catwalk, 1940 to tomorrow*, which set the tone for diversifying the types of fashion or dress that might be seen in a museum exhibition. On display as part of *Street Style* were two pairs of Birkenstock sandals.

Whilst *Street Style* did not open until Winter 1994, as early as 1989, anthropologist Ted Polhemus was already lobbying various V&A staff to put on the exhibition. In a letter proposing potential exhibition ideas he suggested:

it is appropriate that a British institution like the V&A should mount an exhibition celebrating street style as it is Britain which has always, and to mind, will always, lead the world in this field [...] Tourists more and more come to Britain as much to photograph the punks as to see the Crown Jewels. Yet Britain rarely, at least officially, celebrates its leadership in this area. A major exhibition at the V&A could go a long way towards correcting this situation.¹²

The exhibition was eventually curated by Polhemus and internal V&A curators Amy de la Haye and Cathie Dingwall. “The Street”, the exhibition argued, was “a state of mind rather than a place – embracing not only pavement promenading but club culture, style magazines and the visual component of popular music.”¹³ Through the clothing of fifty-four different style groups, from homemade to haute couture, *Street Style* celebrated the fact that in Britain since the late 40s, sub-cultural and countercultural clothing had become an influential cultural phenomenon.¹⁴ Focusing primarily on youth fashion, the exhibition illustrated how, between the 40s and the 90s, the parameters of fashion had changed. As a 1992 document relating to the exhibition suggested:

¹¹ CA Birkenstock, Interview with Robert Lusk, 2019.

¹² Letter from Ted Polhemus to Linda Lloyd Jones, 16 January 1989, in: Victoria & Albert Museum Registry Street Style Exhibition files, MA/28/502 [hereafter V&A Registry].

¹³ V&A Registry, MA/28/502, Information sheet, November 1992.

¹⁴ Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, Manchester 2004, 123.

It has traditionally been accepted that new, interesting fashion ideas invariably start at the top end of the market and ‘trickle down’ to the high street. This may once have been the case but today, if anything, the reverse is more typical with new styles bubbling up from street level to influence even high fashion.¹⁵

Prior to *Street Style*, the museum’s collecting policy, as Lou Taylor has suggested, was still oriented to acquiring “a comprehensive and international collection of objects of the highest artistic merit and quality.”¹⁶ However, for *Street Style*, the policy was radically widened. Some garments were lent for the exhibition, but most were added to the V&A’s permanent collection. A real plethora of different garments and accessories were collected, in order to recognise and celebrate the importance of street style to British culture. By collecting these garments, the V&A aimed to create a legacy beyond the exhibition, and to form a vital street style archive, accessible to future dress, fashion, and social historians for display and research.

The early 90s were a prescient moment for this type of exhibition, as an information sheet connected to the exhibition suggested: “in the 1990s, there has been an extraordinary explosion of choice as dozens of different ‘looks’ rub shoulders in a sort of hypermarket of style.”¹⁷ No longer did one fashionable “look” dominate for a season, or perhaps more, rather there was a plethora of different looks which were broadly accessible to consumers. Birkenstock sandals fitted seamlessly within the broader narrative of *Street Style*: They were unquestionably an example of a trend which had “bubbled up,” starting as a counter-cultural trend, yet by the 90s appealing to diverse markets. Furthermore, the aesthetics of Birkenstock sandals, as has previously been suggested in this chapter, ensured they worked with a variety of different garment types.

The exhibition was a huge popular success, with 108,950 visitors (70,000 had been expected). The exhibition was also successful in appealing to a broader demographic, particularly younger visitors. 75 per cent of visitors were under 34, compared to a normal museum average of 35 per cent (not including school groups), and over 40 per cent of visitors were students.¹⁸

Two pairs of Birkenstock sandals appeared in *Street Style*; firstly, a pair of classic, light brown nubuck Arizona two strap sandals (T.726:1,2-1994), which Lusk indicated were amongst the bestselling Birkenstock designs in Britain,¹⁹ and secondly, a pair of Milano sandals in dark brown leather (T.657:1,2-1995). The Milano features a trio of adjustable straps. Like the Arizona, two straps span across the top of the foot while an added third strap wraps around the area above the heel. Both pairs of shoes were new and unworn, rather than being part of a “street style” outfit someone had actually worn. Furthermore, both pairs of shoes were displayed with contemporary outfits, pointing to the increasing fashionability of

¹⁵ V&A Registry, MA/28/502, Information sheet, November 1992.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 123.

¹⁷ V&A Registry, MA/28/502, Information sheet, November 1992.

¹⁸ V&A Registry, MA/28/502, End of exhibition visitor analysis, N.D. c 1995.

¹⁹ CA Birkenstock, Interview with Robert Lusk, 2019.

Birkenstock in the 90s. Indeed, the justification for the eventual acquisition of the Milanos states that “they were one of the most fashionable designs in shoes for 1994.”²⁰ Both shoes came, albeit indirectly in the case of the Milanos, from Lusk; the Arizonas were donated directly by Lusk/the Natural Shoe Store, whilst the Milanos were given by Vogel. One story the exhibition explored was the increasing fluidity of gendered fashion garments. Particularly through the more contemporary garments on display, it showed the possible experimentation fashion offered in terms of gender expression.²¹ Whilst one pair of Birkenstocks accompanied a menswear ensemble and the other a womenswear one, Birkenstocks were certainly part of “gender-neutral” fashion trends of the 90s, worn by all.

The two ensembles the Birkenstock sandals were shown alongside were both representative of a turn in the 90s towards more sustainable thinking, which, at the time, was generally branded as “eco”. It was appropriate that Birkenstocks were selected to be shown with such outfits because environmental concerns have long since been important to Birkenstock. They were one of the first brands to offer a vegan range, and also one of the first companies to do a complete environmental audit.²² Furthermore, Birkenstock sandals are designed for longevity, they are durable, and the different components of Birkenstocks – including the shoe’s uppers, footbeds, and treads – can easily be replaced.²³

Fashion Casual

The Birkenstock Arizonas were displayed as part of a menswear outfit designed by Katharine Hamnett called “Fashion Casual – Spring/Summer 1994”. This outfit consisted of trousers (T.168-1994), sweatshirt (T.169-1994), hat (T.170- 1994), and scarf (T.171-1994). The Birkenstocks were selected by Hamnett herself to complete the outfit, although documentation from the exhibition suggests that originally a pair of black, rather than brown sandals was requested.²⁴ It is unsurprising that Hamnett selected a pair of Birkenstocks to accompany her outfit when considers that Hamnett was an early pioneer of sustainable fashion. Hamnett established her business in 1979, and by 1989 had begun assessing how sustainable the brand’s practices were. That year, Hamnett commissioned a study into the social and environmental impact of fashion, expecting not to find anything wrong. However, the report indicated that the fashion industry was causing serious problems. Hamnett stated, “thousands of deaths from accidental poisoning in the cotton industry; people working in conditions worse than slavery; every single fibre and process was having a negative impact – of course the carbon emissions are colossal.” As a result of the report’s findings, Hamnett switched to organic cotton, avoided using materials which were made with potentially toxic chemicals like

²⁰ V&A Registry, Registry File no: 95/1591.

²¹ V&A Registry, MA/28/502, V&A streetstyle design brief (first draft), N.D. C 1993.

²² Brooks, *Success de Sandal*, 30 June 2003.

²³ Alison Gill/Abby Mellick Lopes, *On Wearing: A Critical Framework for Valuing Design’s Already Made*, in: *Design and Culture*, 3:3 (2011), 320.

²⁴ V&A Registry, MA/28/502, Letters from Amy de la Haye to Nicola Boyd (Marketing manager, the Boot Tree Ltd), 30 March 1994 and 8 June 1994.

PVC and polyester, and also moved production back to Europe to ensure that workers were being treated fairly.²⁵ Since, she has been, as Alison Gwilt has suggested, “a vocal fashion activist,” encouraging consumers to take note of the critical issues affecting people and the environment and continually campaigning to improve ethical and environmental production practices.²⁶

Eco UK 1993

The Birkenstock Milano sandals were displayed as part of a womenswear ensemble designed by Sarah Ratty under her label conscious earthwear. The V&A called this outfit “Eco UK 1993.” The outfit consisted of a skirt (T.670-1993), jacket (T.671-1993), top (T.672-1993), necklace (T.494-1993), and hat (T.207-1994). Ratty was an early pioneer of sustainable fashion in Britain in the 90s and early 2000s, launching her conscious earthwear label in 1990. Ratty’s designs focused on environmentally responsible production and materials such as organic cotton, recycled fibers, and certified eco-conscious textiles.

Overall, the inclusion of two pairs of Birkenstocks in this exhibition points to the plurality of the brand; indicative of the various ways in which they were seen as fashionable by the mid-90s, suitable to be worn with a range of outfits. It also demonstrates that, in the eyes of fashion designers and exhibition curators alike, Birkenstocks were a trend from the street up, effectively a counter-cultural trend that by the 90s had infiltrated the mainstream. Finally, it must be seen that these shoes were part of the increasing development of an ecologically concerned consumer in Britain.²⁷ It is clear from other garments shown in *Street Style*, representing the “future” of fashion, that this was expected to continue to be a major concern for fashion consumers. One outfit, “future streetstyle 2045”, was described as follows: “all the garments and accessories in this outfit are recycled and biodegradable [...] because of their related chemical and biological constituents they can be recycled into an entirely new form.”

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It is however interesting that two pairs of distinctly “German” shoes were chosen to appear in an exhibition on British street style. This indicates in many ways how Birkenstocks have been “adopted” as a British shoe despite their origins. Whilst not all garments in *Street Style* were British, both of the outfits the Birkenstocks were shown with were. It can be argued that the popularity of Birkenstocks in London specifically is heavily representative of the melting pot nature of London fashion – a German shoe, brought to London by an American entrepreneur.

²⁵ Emily Chan, *Katharine Hamnett on Sustainability in Fashion*, 11 June 2019; available online: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/katharine-hamnett-on-sustainability-in-fashion> (accessed 1 August 2022).

²⁶ Alison Gwilt, *A Practical Guide to Sustainable Fashion*, London 2020, 26.

²⁷ Isabella Tree, *Cornish Pasties- Made in Germany*, *The Times*, 8 June 1996, 8.

²⁸ V&A Registry, MA/28/502, Anon, Future Street Style garments, 1994.

This chapter has demonstrated that the 90s were a pivotal decade for Birkenstocks in Britain. It should however be noted that London was at the center of this change. Whilst consumers outside of London purchased and wore Birkenstocks, buying their shoes from approved sellers or via mail order, much of Birkenstock's popularity was thanks to London associations. One only has to look at Luard's suggestion, cited at the beginning of the chapter, that they were worn by "Soho groovers." Indeed, even more specifically, Covent Garden was at the heart of this shift, bringing Birkenstocks into the fashion mainstream. This endured beyond the 90s, and until 2019, Covent Garden was still the location of the only Birkenstock mono-brand store in Britain. Birkenstocks were part of many of the key 90s trends, from cool Britannia to eco-fashion, brit pop to grunge. Their appeal in the 90s was largely related to their versatility and comfort, and indeed this has secured their enduring appeal with fashion consumers until today.