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The last of the sliothar makers

by Liam Togher

THE uniquely fashioned leather ball may be the focus of attention at every hurling match but incredible as it may seem, there is now only one producer of sliothars in this country.

Meet Tony Berkery whose workshop in Doon is now the only place in Ireland where sliothars are made indigenously. In an era of outsourcing and multi-national trade, old style craft businesses are falling by the wayside and sliothar making is just one example.

Tony, who represents the third generation of sliothar makers in his family, reflects on how a once bustling industry is now in irreversible decline.

"One time we would have had ten people here making them. In the Summer season we'd have been flat out, whereas now we might get just a couple of days a week at it," he says.

"We're in the leather business for three generations. In every town there was somebody making sliothars. A harness maker or a shoemaker would have made them.

"That was part of the leather trade but some of these trades disappeared out of every village. Then some people, like us, got into it more seriously and made a lot of sliothars for many years, especially in my father's time. He would have made them in the thousands and maybe even the tens of

thousands."

Today the overwhelming majority of sliothars are manufactured overseas, with Pakistan the chief supplier.

Tony admits that the price of labour in such countries makes it difficult for tradesmen like him to compete in the long term.

"Most sliothars nowadays come from Pakistan, certainly the vast majority of them I'd imagine - maybe around 95 per cent or even 98 per cent. Any sliothar I come across is made in Pakistan. It comes as a big surprise to a lot of people."

"Business just goes to countries with cheaper labour and this is the reality. Let's take Pakistan, for example. You're competing with a wage of €20 a week and you can't close that gap.

Tony believes that the future for craftsmen like him in Ireland is anything but positive. He acknowledges that the recession and the multinational nature of modern business are factors.

"I think it's unlikely that the sliothar part of the business will survive in Ireland. A lot of other businesses disappear out of the country and we don't notice it as much. Maybe we just notice it when it's sliothars because it comes as a bit of a shock, but this sort of thing happens on an ongoing basis.

"It is a shame because of the business that it is. It would be like Aran jumpers not being made in Ireland anymore."



Tony Berkery, third generation craftsman.



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