Jonathan Wood visited this well established family business to see how leather was produced and how it should be best cared for.

If you're running a vintage Austin or a 1976 Jaguar XJS, the chances are that the hides for the leather upholstery in both cars were supplied by the same firm. For Connolly Bros (Curriers) Ltd, to use their full title, have been in the leather business since 1878 when two brothers, John Joseph and three Frederick Connolly set up shop at 153 Euston Road, London, though in 1884 they moved to new premises in Charlton Street, which the company still occupies. Beginning in a small way with "while you wait" shoe repair service, it wasn't long before the brothers branched out into the saddlery business and so naturally gravitated to providing hides to the carriage trade.

But it was when the carriage evolved into the "horseless carriage" that the firm dramatically expanded, leading to many originating from the upstaging world of the coach and car and the new fangled motor car being forged by the eldest of Samuel's four sons, Frederick Ignatius F.I., whose friendships embraced such motorizing magnates as William Morris, Herbert Austin and William Lyons, had the foresight to see the tremendous potential for the company in the motor industry. He joined Connollys in 1912 and when leather was practically the only upholstery medium available, and 64 years later, the motor trade still takes around 50 per cent of the company's output of hides.

Samuel's other three brothers also entered the business: Joseph, Edward and Wilfred. The present chairman and managing director is Tim Connolly, who is Wilfred's son, while Edward's son David is company secretary and looks after export commitments.

My guide through the intricacies of the Connolly genealogy was Anthony Hussey, whose mother was sister to the four brothers. Anthony looks after the expanding furniture side of the business and it was he who escorted photographer Paul Skellett and I around Connolly's factory at Wandsworth SW19 to see just what was involved in the business of making a cow's hide fit to sit on.

One of the problems with hides is that they are very vulnerable to marking, as can be seen in the scratchy, fly-scoured scars and fly-scoured scars are the most frequent forms of disfigurement. Indeed, pleating is used so extensively in car upholstery, so that relatively narrow areas of leather can be used, thus minimizing the risk of marking. Around 50 per cent of the hides Connollys use are imported from Scandinavia as they tend to have fewer blemishes than the "home grown" variety.

The hides arrive at the factory having been already tanned at the company's tannery in Canterbury. The tanner removes the hair, splits the hide, the top half being used by the motor and furniture trade, while the lower section or "split", is used for leather coats and mattress-like. It is then soaked in a time honoured solution made from oak bark or mimosa, myrobalans and/or chrome. This ensures that it will not rot, dry out or crack.

Once at the factory, the hides are first inspected for any of the aforementioned marks and then sorted and graded. They are then soaked in water in a Connolly inspired machine to make them easier to handle and shaped to the required thickness. The motor industry favours 1.5m, while leather which is going to end up as saddles and bridle is, of course, different.

Having thus been graded, the hides go through a wet buffing process as some have too many marks and a very fine layer of top grain is removed to eradicate them. The particular hides subsequently given an artificially embossed grain. To restore any of the natural oils that may have been lost by the previous processes, the hides are then "wet drummed" and then put through a giant mangle to remove any surplus water.