

Hackney is one of the most diverse places in the UK. In this regular feature, we profile the borough's great & good or just plain interesting

Where Choo found his feet

By Sylvia Arthur

HACKNEY can claim many famous fashion alumni but none are as synonymous with style as shoemaker to the stars – Jimmy Choo.

A-listers from the worlds of film, music and the arts all flock to Jimmy's swanky central London boutique to get their mitts on his unique, handmade shoes for everything from glitzy parties to glittering premieres.

But when Jimmy arrived in London in the 1980s he couldn't have known how important a role the vibrant, creative atmosphere of Hackney would play in his life. The borough gave Jimmy his start in the fashion industry, as he went from struggling student to multimillionaire.

As an apprentice at the prestigious Hackney based Cordwainers' college, the Malaysian perfected his craft as a shoemaker – a family trade – while working part-time at restaurants and as a cleaner in a shoe factory to help fund his education.

"During the eighties I was in London for a holiday and a friend of mine told me there's a special shoe college in Hackney called Cordwainers'," Jimmy recalls. "So I said, although I had training from my father, it's always good to have an education and I didn't have a certificate. So I enrolled in the college to learn more and get more advanced."

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At the time, as is today, Hackney was a hub of offbeat creative talent. The artistic energy that buzzed through the borough's streets inspired Jimmy to stay local and in 1986, after leaving Cordwainers', he opened his first workshop, renting an old hospital building.

"Hackney was a fantastic place, very peaceful and very relaxed in those days," Jimmy says, nostalgically. "All types of designers and artists were in Hackney, and a lot of music stars. There was also a lot of factories and manufacturing, especially shoe manufacturing. It was a great place."

His craftsmanship and designs were soon noticed by those in

the know and it didn't take long before Jimmy Choo shoes became the must-have brand for serious fashionistas.

Patronage from celebrities and royalty, including Diana, Princess of Wales, led to Jimmy becoming an international fashion icon, and in 1998 his success was crowned when he scored an incredible coup – his creations were featured in a record eight pages of Vogue magazine.

In 2000, Jimmy was awarded the Malaysian equivalent of a state honour for his achievements and two years later he received an OBE from the Queen in recognition of his services to the UK shoe and fashion industry.

But even though he's mingled with the world's top names and continues to ply his stylish trade, Jimmy's love and respect for his Hackney roots remains as strong as ever. He said: "Hackney is a multicultural place. You have the Chinese, people from Jamaica, Ireland, Holland, all sorts of people who love to be in Hackney."

"I get my inspiration from that because it's very important that I love what I'm doing and I mix with people and get an idea of how they dress. It's fantastic, Hackney is a special place."

MORE INFO

Cordwainers' is now part of the London College of Fashion. For details visit: www.fashion.arts.ac.uk



Shoemaker to the stars Jimmy Choo (above), and a student at work on her creation at Cordwainers'



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