

# I've been a nitwit, says fashion boss

The founder of Boden tells **Isabella Fish** that a series of mistakes led the catalogue giant to fall apart at the seams

Admitting to your customers that you've been a "nitwit" is, as sales pitches go, a bold one.

But that is exactly what the catalogue fashion line Boden plans to do, after making—in the words of its founder—a "catalogue of mistakes".

The company has axed its struggling menswear business and revived the catalogue that brought it to fame after the preppy British clothing brand fell into the red last year.

To accompany the rebrand, it will send loyal customers a series of apologetic emails including phrases like, "Sorry, I'm a complete nitwit. I effed up."

The London-based seller of women's, men's and children's wear made a £4.4 million loss before tax in the year to the end of December, compared to a profit of £22 million the year before, according to figures seen by The Times. Turnover fell 2 per cent to £350 million during the period. Customer numbers dropped by 5 per cent to 1.8 million.

In an interview, Johnnie Boden, the founder, said his brand had lost its way and vowed to get it back on track.

Boden, 62, said his colourful clothing brand, a favourite of the Duchess of Cambridge and the prime minister's billionaire wife, Akshata Murty, had recently made a "catalogue of mistakes". It had gone "too young" with its womenswear and "upset a lot of customers", greatly scaled back the distribution of its popular catalogue, and struggled to stand out in a tough menswear market.

Boden set up his brand in 1991 with a small menswear range. Womenswear was launched a year later, followed by childrenswear in 1996.

Menswear has been outperformed by the latter two categories for years and was an area of the business that Boden had been struggling to "get right", Boden admitted.

He said: "It was too small and it became a self-fulfilling prophecy because of that. We've also struggled to compete against the likes of Charles Tyrwhitt with its promotional deals. We need a new model and we will eventually restart it again, but not quite yet."

On womenswear, its best-performing category, Boden said: "We forgot who we were. We changed the product too much. We had less colour, we had shorter silhouettes and we had the sorts of products that were on trend, which is not very us."

To win back customers, the company



Johnnie Boden, whose clothing catalogue was once a staple of middle-class homes, found a fan in the Duchess of Cambridge but acknowledged that its menswear had lost its way and that it had changed its womenswear too much



is reviving the catalogue that was once a staple of middle-class coffee tables, and will send out its self-effacing emails. Its founder knows the campaign is a risk. He said he showed the emails to one woman "who thought it was completely unfunny. We might get lots of complaints, but we just have to do something a bit different."

Boden, who describes the firm's catalogue as its "bible", said he had been itching to get rid of it for years. He said: "Paper prices have gone through the roof. We were sending out 160-page catalogues, which became very, very expensive to distribute. We knew we had to cut back distribution because digital was the future, but we cut back too much."

The return to old-ways will coincide with the launch of its autumn/winter '23 season collection, which is designed to showcase the brand's new direction.

During its past troubled year the company closed its only shop, which opened in 2017 on the King's Road in London, as rents were "too expensive" and it failed to improve sales.

The business also sells via its website and through third-party retailers, including John Lewis and Nordstrom in America, its biggest market.

The company has been a constant on Britain's fashion retail scene over the past 32 years. Its boss was awarded a CBE in June. Boden said that he felt like "a fraud" for receiving it after the recent losses and had even admitted so to Prince William, but was adamant the company would get back on track.

He said: "These things happen. You look at Apple — that almost went bust. James Dyson and his electric car, that didn't work ... Gucci was once on its knees. I've made a ton of mistakes throughout my career and managed to overcome them."

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## Hannah Rogers Comment

**A**t Copenhagen fashion week this month, a trendy young buyer from a luxury designer e-tailer asked me where my shoes were from. She was shocked (or was it appalled?) when I told her they were from Boden, but I wasn't surprised she had noticed them: I have been hunting out what the fashion set would deem "surprisingly" stylish finds at Waitrose Woman's favourite shop for years.

That's got nothing to do with my age: I am 30. It's because I think there is a great deal that Boden womenswear gets right. I love that its shoe range goes up to my size (a UK 9) but I've extolled the quality of its jeans range in these pages too. I'd go there for knitwear and basics any day — not to mention a Breton striped top.

Yet recently I noticed my friends had cottoned onto Boden, too. Yes, I said when they asked, its stock was looking noticeably cool. Not for much longer, perhaps: the trendier direction we were drawn towards is what Boden now says is what it has got wrong.

That's fine, but in an effort to win back its older customers, I hope it doesn't forget its future shoppers. It should look to the likes of Me+Em and Sézane if it wants to appeal to all age groups; to attract mothers, but their daughters too.

I don't know any men who shop at Boden. My 34-year-old husband doesn't; nor does my 59-year-old dad. But why? In part, the competition: jeans and T-shirts from Uniqlo and Arket cost less and are cooler; M&S's tailoring and cashmere is second to none. Forget Savile Row: Spoke makes tailored trousers you can order online for no more than £95 these days. There are better options for blokes all round.

I suspect the real problem is that Boden never evolved its menswear, as it has its women's collections, from its original preppy style.

Printed shirts, bright polo shirts and deck shoes designed to be worn in Padstow might once have been popular with Waitrose Man — but they really are not what most of them want to wear now.

# Financial woes leave royal glove maker in need of a hand

Helen Cahill

A leather glove maker favoured by the royal family is on the brink of collapse after almost 200 years.

Pittards has filed for protection from its creditors for a second time in a move that threatens hundreds of jobs. The business, based in Yeovil, was founded in 1826 and has produced gloves for the royal family and emergency services.

It employs around 200 people in Britain and 1,000 in Ethiopia to make premium gloves and other leather goods, including belts and handbags.

Pittards' gloves, including smart, formal handwear and prickle-proof varieties for keen gardeners such as the King and Queen, are in high demand from police forces.

The company gets most of its hides in Britain, and hair, sheepskin and goatskin from Ethiopia where it has run a tannery since 2005. It is one of the few surviving operators from a long heritage of leather working in Somerset.

Marcus Fysh, Tory MP for Yeovil, said the manufacturer was a "very significant" business and that its financial troubles were "unfortunate"

because it supported hundreds of jobs. Fysh said: "Yeovil in the 19th century had an 80 per cent market share globally in glove-making." He said he had contacted the Department of Trade and Industry to see whether it could support the company.

The manufacturer secured a court notice to keep its creditors at bay earlier this month while it sought a buyer. It has now made a second court filing to seek protection from creditors for ten days while rescue efforts continue.

Investors have been unable to trade its shares on London since August 14.

Pittards has been seeking to raise new funding with a sale of extra shares in the business and it secured an additional time to repay debt owed to Lloyds Bank to support its efforts to continue trading. However, the company warned in June that it was operating "at or around the ceiling of



Nearly 200 years of history will be lost if Pittards closes down

its bank facilities". Pittards also told investors this year that the mini-budget last October was a "significant one-off event" that had affected the UK business.

The upheaval forced the company to unwind contracts designed to protect against the weakening of the pound at a cost of £1.5 million. Christmas sales were weaker than expected and directors warned that the business faced "inflationary pressures".

# Boden in the pink for royal date but red-faced over catalogue of troubles

The colourful owner wore amusing attire to collect his CBE but he has serious issues ahead, **Isabella Fish** writes

**A**t the ceremony for the new year's honours list, the self-described "contrarian" Johnnie Boden defied the strict investiture fashion rule book and sported his favourite candy-pink linen suit, which he had specially made for his 50th birthday. The Old Etonian stockbroker, who founded his clothing catalogue business in 1991, paired the two-piece with his signature fluorescent green spectacles that he bought for £5 from a Chinese website called iWear: he has 20 pairs and keeps one in every room, "just in case".

Fresh-faced and slim with a mop of strawberry-blond hair, he looked like a walking advertisement for his preppy brand when he collected the CBE for his services to fashion and retail from the Prince of Wales.

"My father, who was a soldier, would've said I was disgraceful for not wearing the traditional morning suit to Windsor," Boden says. "But I tried on my tailcoat the week before and thought, 'I can't do this'. I wore one for five years at Eton and it felt like a backward step. And, stupidly, it was a bet from a friend to wear the pink suit and I couldn't then go back on it."

Boden, 62, who once poked fun at "po-faced fashionistas", was being recognised for turning his mail-order business into a middle-class megabrand. He has built an army of fans for his colourful, retro-minded apparel, including the prime minister's billionaire wife, Akshata Murty, and David Cameron, who wore a pair of the brand's floral shorts on a Cornish beach in 2008, prompting articles on the rise of the "Boden Man".

The ceremony was "lovely, even if it did go on a bit", Boden says, as he muses over the day in his office in North Acton, London. Then he pauses, a rare instance of him being lost for words. "But I have to admit, I felt like a bit of a fraud when I collected the award."

This was because his brand has recently fallen into the red (which just so happens to be another favourite colour). The seller of women's, men's and kidswear clothing made a £4.4 million loss before tax in the year to the end of December, compared with a profit of £22 million in 2021.

Turnover fell 2 per cent to £350 million as customers dropped by 5 per cent to 1.8 million. During the year the company closed its only shop, which opened in 2017 on Kings Road in London, as rents were "too expensive" and it failed to drive sales. The business also sells via its website and through third-party retailers, including John Lewis and Nordstrom in America, its biggest market.

Boden, who splits his time between his Dorset and London homes, begins to talk about how he had confessed his "fraudulent" feelings to the prince, but cuts off when he remembers that recipients are not supposed to reveal their conversations with the royals.

Rather than playing the easier get-out-of-jail card and blaming



Johnnie Boden, at his investiture in June, is winning back customers after a change of direction led to a slump in fortunes

## Q&A

**Who, or what, is your mentor?**  
Julian Granville, Boden's executive chairman. He knows me well. He's intelligent. We complement each other. He's a better strategic thinker than I am. He's a better manager than I am.

**Does money motivate you?**  
Yes, up to a point. But there are many more things that are much more important to me.

**What was the most important event in your working life?**  
Meeting Sophie, my wife, who told me I was a failure and I had to do something with my life or she would



divorce me. That's when I founded Boden.

**Which person do you most admire?**  
I admire selfless people who help others. When I went to get my CBE, there was a chap who had set up a homeless charity and I really admired him. I thought, 'Crikey, I'm so selfish'. I admire them much more than they admire a businessman.

**What is your favourite television programme?**  
Oh, easy. *Succession*, below. And I've just watched a rather harrowing thing called *Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland* about the history of the Troubles.

**What does leadership mean to you?**  
It means being consistent. Being brave.

Being fair. And letting go of things that you're not very good at.

**How do you relax?**  
I've got this lovely horse called Dennis and I find it very relaxing when I'm out riding him. And Stella, my daughter, always says when I'm really sad to just imagine I'm riding him. That does it for me.

## CV

**Age** 62  
**Education** 1974-1979, Eton College; 1980-1983: Philosophy, politics and economics at Oriol College, Oxford  
**Career** 1983-1988: Barclays, plus SG Warburg Securities in London and New York; 1991-present: founder, Boden  
**Family** Married, three children

inflationary pressures for its performance, Boden — or "Bodger" as he's known to his friends and family — wants to own up to the company's "catalogue of mistakes". "We forgot who we were," he says. "This is the honest answer. We

changed the product too much. We went a bit too young and we upset lots of customers. We had less colour, we had shorter silhouettes and we had the sorts of products that were on trend, which is not very us." He also made the fatal error of

cutting back Boden's "bible": the catalogue that would flip through millions of letterboxes each year. The businessman had been itching to get rid of it for years because "paper prices have gone through the roof. We were sending out 160-page catalogues, which became very, very expensive to distribute. We knew we had to cut back distribution because digital was the future, but we cut back too much."

Boden, who owns a majority stake, is now on a mission to win back his customers. How does he plan to do it? By reviving the catalogue and sending apologetic emails to customers, including phrases like, "Sorry, I'm a complete nitwit. I effed up."

The bold campaign, which launches in September, coincides with the launch of its autumn-winter '23 collection, which will showcase the brand's reversal in product direction: back to bright colours, bold patterns and figure-flattering shapes.

Boden has also decided to pause the menswear business from this season onwards. The company has sold menswear since it launched, before it added womenswear and childrenswear to the mix. But it has been outperformed by the latter two categories for years and it's another area of the business that Boden has been struggling to "get right". "It was too small and it became a self-fulfilling prophecy because of that. We've also struggled to compete against the likes of Charles Tyrwhitt with its promotional deals. We need a new model and we will eventually restart it again, but not quite yet." It leaves the boss, who refuses to wear

anything other than Boden-branded clothes, in a tricky predicament: "What am I going to wear?"

Boden is "pretty confident" that he'll get the business back on its feet. "These things happen. You look at Apple — that almost went bust. James Dyson and his electric car, that didn't work ... Gucci was once on its knees. I've made a ton of mistakes throughout my career and managed to overcome them."

After studying philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford University, he went into stockbroking with Barclays, which he hated. "I was famously a very, very unsuccessful City man," he says. He then received an inheritance from a childless uncle and left to run a couple of pubs before turning to teaching, which he enjoyed, apart from the salary.

His interest lay in fashion: as a boy, he'd get "obsessed" about what his mother's friends were wearing. A banking secondment to Wall Street gave him the impetus. He was struck by the US mail-order system: it seemed busy executives needed easy access to good quality, casual clothing. After a series of threats from his wife, Sophie, who told him: "If you don't do it, I'm going to leave you", he launched a menswear brand.

Before long, Boden clothing was the relaxed lifestyle choice of the modestly comfortable professional classes, but he was expending energy and capital. "I didn't know how to manage. We ran out of money and my inheritance disappeared within three years. Then I hired this guy who I thought I could trust, but he turned out to be dishonest and defrauded the company. We lost everything. I had to give my house to the bank."

It was at least ten years before things became financially stable, thanks to the support of "a lovely chap called Julian Granville", who has been with Boden since 1995 and is now executive chairman. "Julian came in to stabilise things and he was so good at it," Boden says. "He's as much a part of the success of the business as anybody."

The company's change in direction is showing green shoots. Turnover is up 25 per cent on last year; knitwear sales are up 100 per cent, dresses up 83 per cent and childrenswear up 93 per cent. "But the real test will be next month," Boden says. "It's a really hard month as it's in between seasons and there's lots of promotional activity."

Is Breton still its bestseller? "No, not like it used to be. It's not so much on trend any more. Dresses are now our sweet spot. As the Americans say, 'One and done': you can get a nice dress and a pair of shoes and your outfit is done."

"Cracking" America has been a big part of Boden's success. "It's a huge growth opportunity for the business," Boden says. "Once we've rebuilt profitability we wouldn't rule out shops in America in the future."

What about the man himself? "I have absolutely no plans to move on, but I do have to think about the future. I'd quite like it if one of my daughters ran the business, but I don't want them to feel they've got to. One day we're going to have to have a grown-up conversation and talk about the future of Boden, but right now I'm focused now on sorting things out at the company: watch this space."