The ‘Pod Shaving’ Revival: How Rural Entrepreneurship is leading to a Re-birth of Craft Production in Cricket Bat Manufacturing in England

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Abstract
The resurgence of craft (Kroezen et al., 2021) observed in a number of industry sectors reflects the success of new entrants in challenging the prevailing industrial orthodoxy. This study finds that in the UK, part of the sports equipment industry, responsible for the manufacture of cricket bats, has seen a surprising increase in new entrants over the last two decades. This re-structuring reflects significant changes in the sports equipment sector, that have included the rise of global sports brands and the offshoring of production. The emergence of a number of small independent bat makers, virtually all of whom are located in rural areas, are the focus of this study. It was found that while the backgrounds and prior experience of these rural entrepreneurs varied widely, they all shared a strong commitment to producing an authentic handmade product using traditional craft-based artisanal methods. This, combined with their embeddedness within their local communities and the extent to which the internet offered a cost effective route to market, was found to explain the emergence of this new wave of rural entrepreneurship.

Introduction

Studies in a range of industries have pointed to a ‘craft revival’ (Blundel, 2019; Luckman, 2015; Mignosa and Kotipalli, 2019) taking place in recent years as new entrants challenge the prevailing industrial orthodoxy by increasingly returning to craft production methods. The craft brewing sector is one widely reported and well studied example of this trend (Cabras and Bamforth, 2016; Smith Maguire et al., 2017). However comparatively little attention has been directed at other industries and sectors where this phenomenon is present. This study finds that in the sports equipment industry there has been a dramatic increase in new entrants entering the cricket bat manufacturing sector, despite the claims of some that this is an endangered craft. As one leading bat maker put it, ‘there used to be a magnificent seven, now there are about fifty little companies all competing with each other’ (Countryfile Magazine, 2013). This re-structuring reflects changes that have taken place in the sports equipment sector. These include intense competition from global sports brands using global value chains, the offshoring of production by several established UK brands, and more recently the emergence of a significant number of independent bat makers located in small workshops in rural areas. The latter are the focus of this study. They are typically small-scale producers with a strong commitment to traditional artisanal methods of craft production. A distinctive feature of these businesses is that a large proportion are found to be based in rural locations in many cases occupying premises actually located on farms. Hence they constitute interesting but as yet little studied examples of rural entrepreneurship. The characteristics of these rural entrepreneurs are analysed, together with the extent of their commitment to craft production methods and the basis upon which they compete.

Literature Review

In a recent review of the literature on rural entrepreneurship Pato and Teixeira (2016) maintain that it is a field that has generally been overlooked by entrepreneurship scholars. This view is borne out by other researchers. Stathopoulou et al (2004: 405) for example comment that, 'research on rural entrepreneurship is relatively sparse', while McElwee and Smith (2014: 433) observe that entrepreneurship research is generally, 'urban centric'. Despite describing rural entrepreneurship as an emerging field the same authors note that, 'rural enterprise is a seldom explored issue' (McElwee and Smith, 2014: 433). This is echoed by Deakins and Bensemann (2019: 1567) who maintain that research into small firms operating in a rural environment is, 'a neglected area of study'.

Of the limited number of studies that have taken place, McElwee and Smith (2014) note that a large proportion have tended to focus on farmers as entrepreneurs. In this context they point out that a recurring theme is that of farm diversification. This echoes earlier work by Wortman (1990) who suggested that interest in rural entrepreneurship had started to emerge in the 1980s brought about by changes in rural society, particularly re-structuring in agriculture brought on by a rapid decline in agricultural employment (Terluin, 2003). Pato and Teixeira (2016) suggest that this reflects a growing recognition that rural entrepreneurship could contribute to rural development and be a positive influence on employment and welfare in rural areas. Stathopoulou et al. (2004) portray these changes as emerging opportunities for diversification, noting increased demand for recreation and amenities and the quality of rural products and services as key opportunities.

These emerging opportunities for agricultural diversification have been reflected in the rural entrepreneurship literature. This is heavily weighted around the themes of rural tourism, a field that according to Hernández-Maestro and González-Benito (2014: 84) has attracted 'widespread research attention', and the sale of farm-based quality food products. The first of these, namely rural tourism encompasses a number of variations or sub-fields. These include green tourism or eco-tourism, agri-tourism, adventure tourism and even cultural tourism. Interestingly work by Bessiere and Tebere (2013) manages to bridge both themes being concerned with the link between rural tourism and food heritage in rural spaces.

Lane and Kastenholz (2015) identify the 1990s as a period when rural tourism as a form of rural entrepreneurship began to attract the attention of researchers. They note how rural tourism unlike other forms of tourism does not require large scale capital investment, being created largely by recycling and revalorizing existing properties and heritage resources as tourist accommodation and attractions. They maintain that at this time rural tourism was seen very much as an antidote to a countryside losing jobs through the modernization of agriculture. Studies have explored a variety of aspects of rural tourism including the motives of rural tourism entrepreneurs and the analysis of support policies for this form of tourism. Examples of the former include Ateljevic and Doorne (2000), Getz and Carlsen (2000), and Hollick and Braun (2005), studies that explored the idea of rural tourism attracting 'lifestyle entrepreneurs', that is individuals seeking a business activity that would support a particular lifestyle rather than provide opportunities for profits or commercial growth. The latter included studies such as Hernández-Maestro and González-Benito (2014) and Sharpley (2002) that explored and analysed the kind of policy measures that would enable rural communities to support tourism and provide scope for economic regeneration of rural areas.

The theme of quality food is taken up by a number of researchers (Goodman, 2003; Maye and Ibery, 2006). Goodman (2003:1) refers to this as the ‘quality turn’, noting that the demand for quality foods has presented significant opportunities for new entrepreneurial activities. Highlighting ‘place based and socially embedded alternative food practices’, he stresses the importance of local foods and regional identity. These he portrays as part of a move away from industrial food production ‘with its standardized quality conventions and logic of mass commodity production’. This is a theme taken up in the UK where McAdam et al. (2014: 836) echo this kind of differentiation in a study of artisan bakers. The differentiation is through focusing on, ‘provenance and quality’, designed to differentiate artisanal bakers from ‘large scale industrial plant bakers’.

A similar competitive strategy appears in a study of small farm-based cheesemakers in the US (Paxson, 2010). This found farm-based artisan cheesemakers pursuing the notion of ‘terroir’ (Paxson, 2010: 444), that is the development of cheeses that, ‘reflect the distinctive qualities of a place’, in order to differentiate their products from the, ‘utterly consistent product’ of industrial cheesemakers, derived from ‘standardized ingredients and hypersterile conditions’.
Paxson (2010) notes how this form of rural entrepreneurship is a comparatively recent trend. Originating in the 1980s, she attributes this to the growing popularity of farmers’ markets in the US. The trend has gathered momentum with the number of small scale farm-based cheesemakers more than doubling in the decade since 2000.

Research into farm-based artisanal cheesemakers has also been a feature of research into rural entrepreneurship in the UK. Like Paxson in the US, Blundel (2002: 1) researched small farm-based cheesemakers, and in a similar way drew attention to the, ‘long-standing tension between industrial and artisanal modes of production’. He highlighted the importance of entrepreneurial behaviour by these rural enterprises in relation to a complex and dynamic food industry supply chain. He noted the way they were able to take advantage of opportunities arising from changes in distribution networks in order to market their products.

Cheesemakers also figured in a study of rural entrepreneurs conducted by Tregear (2005). This study also included meat and fish processors, brewers, bakers and confectioners all of whom were located in relatively remote rural areas in the counties of Northern England. Although the focus of the study was the motivation driving these rural entrepreneurs, a particularly significant finding was the extent to which they too relied heavily on differentiation as a competitive strategy. As Tregear (2005: 12) explained all of these artisan producers operated in markets dominated by large scale industrialised manufacturers, but, ‘their status as artisans … gave them a specialist marketing cache appealing very strongly to a growing segment of affluent consumers willing to seek out and pay a price premium’.

What emerges from the literature on rural entrepreneurship is firstly the extent to which it has been on the increase in recent years and secondly the extent to which, to judge by the research that has been carried out, so many of the businesses are farm-based and reflect the pursuit of agricultural diversification. There appears to have been little interest on the part of researchers into the establishment of manufacturing businesses in rural areas that are not connected in one way or another to agricultural diversification. This is something that the present study seeks to redress by exploring the recent growth of small- scale artisan cricket bat makers located in rural settings.

Research Methods

The main body of fieldwork for this study was carried out between October 2017 and March 2019. It included visits to five manufacturing facilities in the UK. The visits provided opportunities for extensive non-participant observation as well as conducting a number of interviews. Four of the facilities visited were small specialist workshops and one was a much larger factory plant. Interviews were conducted with a range of key informants (John and Reve, 1982) selected on the basis of their experience and specialist knowledge. These included business owners, bat makers, former players, coaches and retailers. Mindful of Curran and Blackburn's (2001) observation that research into small firms can be somewhat rudimentary because of an over-reliance on interviews and observation, additional data was gathered from a range of secondary sources. These included company websites, cricket related magazines and local newspapers, as well as specialist books covering various aspects of the game of cricket, together with biographies of players and company histories.

Background: English Bat Making in Context:

In Victorian times cricket bat manufacture was a cottage industry comprised of small workshops located in rural counties of the south of England such as Kent, Sussex and Hampshire. Here the traditional craft of 'pod shaving' (Barty-King, 1979: 159) was pursued as cricket bats were shaped in the time honoured manner from locally sourced English willow, using a range of hand tools such as drawknives, spokeshaves and block planes. These firms grew in number during the later part of the nineteenth century, as increased opportunities for sport and leisure (Vamplew, 1982: 549) led to heightened demand for sports equipment. The depression years of the 1930s however led to mergers and consolidation (Barty-King, 1979: 173). This trend was exemplified by the case of Slazenger. Noted as a manufacturer of tennis and golf equipment, they expanded into cricket through successive takeovers, enabling them to manufacture cricket bats on an industrial scale. The first acquisition was Gradidges in 1931 followed at the end of the decade by William Sykes & Co, a firm that had itself acquired F.H.Ayres some years earlier (Simpson, 2005: 70). Hence by the postwar years the production of cricket bats had ceased to be a cottage industry, having largely switched to factory production. Developments in technology meant that some of the larger firms were able to engage in something approaching mass production (Harris, 2020: 1436). By the 1960s there were just 12 cricket bat makers in England with the four largest concerns responsible for almost 75 per cent of total output and operating on a relatively large scale, each making around 35,000 bats a year (Barty-King, 1979: 175).

At this time English firms faced little competition from overseas (Barty-King, 1979: 175). Writing in the mid-1970s one study noted that at this time, 'Britain remains the only cricket bat manufacturer of any consequence' (Jones, 1976: 69). Bats made by Slazenger for example were used not only by many leading English cricketers but also ones from Australia, Pakistan and the West Indies (Tubervill, 2020). India and Pakistan were home to a number of bat makers, but they faced significant entry barriers when it came to breaking into international markets, since they had to rely on locally grown Kashmiri willow, which for climatic reasons did not offer the same performance qualities as its English counterpart.

In the early 1990s this situation began to change. The coming of economic liberalisation in India after 1991 (Tomlinson, 2013), meant bat makers there could at last import raw materials, including supplies of English willow. This meant they could now produce bats that matched their English counterparts in terms of performance. Economic liberalization also marked the beginning of closer integration of the Indian economy with the world market. Consequently global sports brands like Adidas and Nike began to see India as a major growth area for their products. They quickly latched on to cricket as a way of breaking into a market with which they were not familiar (Kidambi, 2011: 195). Lacking manufacturing facilities themselves, they turned to offshoring, contracting with established Indian bat makers to supply finished bats to which they attached their brand logo as part of a process that came to be known as 'white labelling' (Cole, 2015). The impact of market entry by the global sports brands led to a much more competitive market and one in which the English brands no longer maintained the dominance they had once enjoyed. Domestic production of cricket bats in the UK declined rapidly. Takeovers, plant closures and the offshoring of much production followed. Of the leading English brands Gunn and Moore and Hunts County were among the few bat makers of any size that retained significant production facilities in the UK. At Gunn and Moore this was only possible through a massive investment in automated technology.

The New Entrants: Small Independent Cricket Bat Makers

Surprisingly, given the overall decline in the production of cricket bats in England during the 1990s and early 2000s, the post millennium era has witnessed something of a revival with the establishment of a significant number of new entrants to bat making. However not all of these firms are true bat makers. They include some firms whose actual manufacturing capability is very limited, if not in some cases non-existent. These are the so called 'sticker companies' (Cole, 2015). They will buy in finished or part finished bats manufactured by someone else and then as one commentator observed, 'sand them down, slap some wax on them, apply the stickers and grip and claim that they are making these bats themselves' (Cole, 2015).

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Table one provides details of a sample of 12 new entrants[1] to bat making. All of the bat makers shown in this table are genuine bat makers. Although they are all small and for the most part relatively new, nonetheless they have developed a genuine manufacturing capability for producing cricket bats. According to one of the bat makers (Daniel Swaine interview 12th November 2017), the test of a genuine bat maker is whether or not they possess and utilize a bat press. This is a relatively simple but specialised piece of equipment used in the early stages of the manufacturing process. It comprises a set of rollers that exert a pressure of up to two tons per square inch on the roughly hewn cleft[2]. This is in order to compress the fibres and form a hard resilient surface on the blade of the bat. This strengthens and hardens the playing surface so that it can withstand repeated punishment from a hard ball (Jones, 1975). Given that bat presses are a somewhat old-fashioned piece of equipment they are hard to come by. Not only that, they require great skill to operate effectively. Hence obtaining and using a bat press indicates that a bat maker is seriously committed to manufacturing bats. All the firms included in the sample in table one have a pressing capability and hence can be considered genuine bat makers.

Characteristics

A feature of the bat makers shown in table one is that they are all located in rural areas. In this context rural is defined on the widely accepted criteria of areas of the country exhibiting a relatively low population density (Pato and Teixeira, 2016). Just how rural is the location of some of the independent bat makers listed in table one can be judged from the location column. Thus five of the twelve bat makers listed are actually located on farms. This does not mean they are companies owned and operated by farmers. Rather they are firms utilizing redundant farm buildings. The case of Chase Cricket is typical, for they are housed in a former tractor shed. Being located on farm premises endorses the claim that these firms are examples of rural entrepreneurship. The same applies to the four located in villages since these are locations where one will not generally find factories and industrial premises. Even the three firms located in market towns have a strong claim to being rural. The principal function of market towns like Malton in North Yorkshire and East Dereham in Norfolk is to service an agricultural hinterland.

In terms of size all twelve are small enterprises compared to their larger more established industrial counterparts like Gunn and Moore in Nottingham and Hunts County in Huntingdon. Both of these long-established bat makers produce bats on an industrial scale. Gunn and Moore (GM interview, 2019) for example manufacture 35,000 bats annually and Hunts County some 20,000. By comparison the largest of the new entrants, Chase makes 5,000 annually and is much the largest. Its nearest rival is Salix which produces half as many bats annually. The others in contrast typically make far fewer. Even Kippax, the oldest and most established, 'sells 1,000 of them in a good year' (Behrens, 2020). Most of the others produce significantly less. JEDi Cricket also based in West Yorkshire is typical, 'making just shy of 500 bats' (Bond, 2018) annually, although bat maker James Dollive reckons to repair almost twice that number in his workshop in the village of Skelmanthorpe.

Another very distinctive characteristic of the firms in table one is their comparative youth. Some of the well-known English cricket brands can trace their history back to the early days of the game. Both of the large firms mentioned earlier for example, have been around for more than a hundred years. Hunts County was established by the Trimmings family (Barty-King, 1979) in St Neots near Huntingdon in 1904, while Gunn and Moore was founded in Nottingham in 1885. Other large scale bat makers are even older. Gray-Nicolls was originally established in 1855 in Cambridge. With the exception of Kippax Cricket which was something of a pioneer when set up by former professional cricketer, Peter Kippax in the 1970s, all the firms have been established within the last thirty years. More than half of them have been established within the last fifteen years. The comparative youth of these small independent bat makers is indicative of the upsurge of entrepreneurial start-up activity that has resulted in a flurry of new entrants to the sector. It is in sharp contrast to the situation in the late 1960s when according to Barty-King (1979: 175) there were just twelve firms manufacturing cricket bats in Britain and almost all of them were long established. This trend of entrepreneurial activity indicates the extent of the re-structuring that has taken place within the sector in recent years and contrasts sharply with the industry concentration and consolidation that marked most of the twentieth century.

Another distinctive characteristic of all the newcomers to bat making is that they don't produce equipment for any other sport, instead they all specialize in the manufacture of cricket bats. This contrasts with the global sports brands Adidas who typically cater for a range of sports. Even some of the British brands cater for sports other than cricket. Slazenger is perhaps the outstanding example having been a leading producer of golf and tennis equipment for many years. The new entrants however are very much more focused. They specialize in making cricket bats. This reflects their size in that they simply aren't big enough and lack the skills and expertise to make anything else. However it does mean they can focus all their energy and expertise on the requirements of just one sport.

Entrepreneurial Motivation

Pato and Teixeira (2016) note that entrepreneurial motivation has been a major theme of research into rural entrepreneurship. They highlight the way in which rural entrepreneurs frequently run their businesses in a manner that reflects their personal values, interests and passions, rather than the pursuit of profit or growth. A similar pattern is evident among the new entrant bat makers listed in table one.

Just three of the twelve businesses listed in table one were founded by individuals who had entered bat making via what one might regard as the conventional route by undertaking an apprenticeship with an established bat making firm in order to learn the craft. Even so a very notable feature of the careers of all three individuals concerned, is that their decision to set up on their own was triggered by redundancy or re-structuring. John Dollive is typical. Having served a five year apprenticeship as a bat maker at Ace Cricket Bats of Elland near Huddersfield, he branched out to set up JEDi cricket following redundancy (Bond, 2018).

In contrast four of the firms listed, namely Aldred, Charlie French, Chase and Kippax were founded by professional cricketers who had enjoyed successful careers playing first class cricket. For the individuals concerned, namely Paul Aldred of Derbyshire, Charlie French of Nottinghamshire, Robin Smith of Hampshire, and Peter Kippax of Yorkshire, turning to bat making was motivated by a desire to retain a close link with a sport in which they had excelled and with which they were both very familiar and knowledgeable. As the website for Aldred Cricket explains, 'Paul Aldred knew that he needed to find another avenue to stay involved in the game that he loved' (Aldred Cricket website). Similarly in the case of JEDi Cricket, James Dollive's motive for setting up as a bat maker was recently reported as, 'I still think once you've got cricket under your skin that's it, it's your life' (Bond, 2018).

Nor were these the only individuals who had taken up bat making because of their involvement in the game. Pret and Cogan (2019: 592) observe that artisan entrepreneurship often involves individuals, 'turning their hobbies and passions into sustainable business'. This hobbyist route was the path followed by three of the new entrants to bat making, all of whom were keen club cricketers who sought to turn a passion into a business. Thus Robert Bidle who founded Robert James Cricket has been described as someone, 'who has always been passionate about the quintessentially English summer game' (Castle, 2017). Similarly Nick Nixon of Nixon Cricket in

Malton in North Yorkshire noted, ‘I’d always played cricket and been fascinated by cricket bats and how they are made’ (Berry, 2014). Hence interest in and engagement with the game of cricket appears to have been a powerful motivating factor in the decision to set up a bat making business.

This pattern of familiarity with and interest in the game of cricket has similarities with craft brewing where several researchers (Danson et al., 2015) have observed that entrepreneurship tends to be driven by ‘lifestyle’ factors rather than the pursuit of commercial opportunities.

Embeddedness

Another feature of much rural entrepreneurship research has been to identify the extent to which rural enterprises are embedded within their local communities. Among the new entrant bat makers two aspects of embeddedness stand out, firstly the extent to which their customer base includes amateur cricketers who belong to local village cricket clubs and secondly the way in which a number draw on locally grown supplies of willow as the raw material for the bats they manufacture.

When it comes to raw materials, bat makers generally rely on willow merchants like J S Wright of Great Leighs in Essex, the world’s largest supplier of English willow (Newman, 2013). They act as willow cleft suppliers, purchasing trees from landowners and farmers, felling them, cutting them into rounds, splitting the rounds into rough clefts and then grading them ready for the bat maker. However as one bat maker explained when it comes to obtaining sufficient willow of an appropriate quality, ‘the wood is a real problem’ (Daniel Swaine interview, 2nd November 2017). Today this arises in part at least from the fact that a large proportion of the 400,000 clefts (Newman, 2013) that JS Wright supply each year are exported to India and Pakistan. Consequently many of the smaller bat makers are keen to secure alternative sources of supply, by drawing on locally grown willow. Seven of the firms listed in table one claim to be active in planting willow trees locally. Daniel Swaine at Chase Cricket in Hampshire explained how, ‘in January I’m planting 100 to 150 [trees] and then I’m going to do that again for the next ten years’ (Daniel Swaine interview, 2nd November 2017). Given that it takes 15-20 years for willow trees to have reached a size where they can be felled, not all the firms who have active planting programmes in their locality will as yet be using supplies of willow that they themselves have grown. However sometimes firms will be offered willow trees by local farmers and landowners. As Andrew Kember at Salix Cricket in Kent noted, ‘if there’s trees offered to us and we think they’re suitable, we might you know, cut them and process the wood’ (Andrew Kember interview, 7th February 2018). However he went on to point out that, ‘It’s easier to buy clefts than it is to do the work yourself’.

The significance of local markets comprising amateur cricketers playing club cricket for small independent bat makers is apparent from evidence provided by a number firms listed in table one. XX Cricket claims to supply, ‘just about every club in Norfolk’ (XX Cricket website). More revealing are comments by James Dollive of JEDi Cricket who observes that in his part of West Yorkshire, ‘Within a two mile radius of this shop you need 200 players on a weekend because there’s so many teams. Every village pretty much has a cricket team which is good for me because its on my doorstep.’ (Bond, 2018). Similarly at Robert James Cricket, ‘Most clients are local club men’, (Castle, 2017) while Nick Nixon of Nixon Cricket, maintains that for him, ‘of greater pride …. are the bats he makes for cricketers of all ages around Yorkshire and the North East' (Berry, 2014).

A key factor in this niche of the market is the ability to provide product support in the form of a repair and refurbish service. Sponsorship means professional cricketers will receive a plentiful supply of bats. As Nick Nixon explains, 'if you're a county player … you'll get 20-30 bats every season, but when someone buys a bat to play for their village team that's different' (Berry, 2018). As James Dollive explains, 'People get attached to their cricket bats especially if they're scoring runs with it' (Bond, 2018). Chris Kippax makes the same point, 'They grow acquainted to them and if they like them they will make them last as long as possible' (Behrens, 2020). Consequently club players expect to be able to get their bats repaired and refurbished. This is where being local becomes important. It is much more convenient if the bat maker is local. Just how important this is to small independent bat makers in rural locations is evident from Chris Kippax who estimates, 'the business is split down the middle' in terms of the division between the manufacture of new bats and refurbishing and repairing of existing ones. James Dollive on the other hand estimates that in the course of a year he might repair almost twice the number of bats he actually manufactures.

Craft Production

The most significant feature shared by all 12 of the enterprises listed in table one is their commitment to craft production. Unlike the much larger more established UK based bat manufacturers like Gunn and Moore and Hunts County, who produce bats using factory-based industrial production methods, all the new entrants rely to varying degrees on traditional artisanal methods of craft production. These methods involve the application of hand tools by skilled craftsmen in a time honoured manner. The craftsmen for their part exercise personal judgement that draws on accumulated tacit knowledge. This is reflected in the emphasis they all place in their promotional material on their bats being handmade. There are several dimensions to the craft production methods they employ.

Firstly, they are based in workshops rather than factories. These are all relatively small. Chase, for example, which is much the biggest firm in terms of its output, is located in a workshop with just five employees, while many of the others like JEDi Cricket are effectively one man operations. None of the workshops is purpose-built. The five farm based enterprises are housed in redundant farm buildings. Chase Cricket located at Dummer Down Farm in rural Hampshire is typical, being housed in what was at one time the 'calving barn' although latterly it had been used as a tractor shed. The others are housed in workshops that have previously served a variety of purposes, including in one case a former blacksmith's forge.

Despite a strong emphasis on the use of traditional methods, all the batmakers employ a limited amount of mechanization. However this is confined to fairly basic woodworking equipment such as band saws and powered sanders and in the larger workshops spindle moulders. The use of this sort of equipment is confined to the early stages of the production process where the initial shaping of the cleft is carried out. Not only that, where machines are used their operation is directed and controlled by craftsmen rather by computer. As Andrew Kember of Salix Cricket notes on his website, 'every stage is conducted and calibrated by a bat maker' (Salix Cricket website). The operation of a bat press to compress the fibres of the willow cleft for example, is a process that is very dependent upon the knowledge and skill of the operator accumulated over many years.

The final shaping of the bat, where the precise weight and shape of the blade of the bat and hence its ultimate performance is determined, is carried out by hand using traditional artisanal methods. As Jones (1975: 69) notes, 'For the final finish of the top-quality cricket bat, there is no substitute for the balancing eye and hand of the long-experienced craftsman using the tools of his trade'. Termed 'pod shaving', this involves the use of traditional woodworking tools like the drawknife, spokeshave and block plane, as part of a process that has changed little in over two hundred years (Barty-King, 1979). The bat which by this point has had the handle attached is secured in a vice and the craftsman then proceeds to gradually shave off slivers of wood from the back of the bat to achieve the desired weight and balance of the bat, a process described as, 'a continual judgement of shaving, smoothing fingers and hefting palm' (Jones, 1975: 69). Balancing the bat by hand and eye in this way is the most skillful part of the craft and results in an authentic handmade product.

Competitive Strategy

Given that the market for cricket bats is dominated by powerful global brands like Adidas, Nike and New Balance with heavily promoted products manufactured in low cost countries like India, how do these very much smaller new entrants compete?

A powerful explanation lies in Carroll's (1985) Resource Partition model. This posits that some markets over time become dominated by 'generalists'. These are large firms that are typically the product of successive mergers and acquisitions resulting in the industry becoming highly concentrated. As generalists these firms maintain a broad product portfolio comprising a wide range of different products. While their size means they have the financial resources to engage in heavily promoting their products, they will often be unable to meet the precise needs of some customers in particular market niches. This provides space for small firms to be highly specialized and compete by focusing on products for one or a very small number of market niches and attempting to meet the particular needs and requirements of their customers as precisely as possible.

This appears to be the pattern that has emerged in the market for cricket bats. The global brands are generalists in that they provide equipment for a wide variety of different sports including tennis, hockey, football and rugby. Although their products are heavily promoted, especially through sponsoring international cricketers, and appeal to many of those playing the game of cricket, what they offer is actually somewhat limited. As noted earlier club players typically get attached to their bats and like to keep them for more than one season. Consequently they look to have their bats repaired and refurbished from time to time. The global brands are unable to offer this kind of service certainly in terms of having the work carried out by the people who made the bat in the first place. Hence one of the ways in which the new entrants compete is by offering a range of services alongside the provision of the bat itself. Among the other services they are able to offer are customization, that is making bats to the specific requirements of a particular customer, offering an easily accessible locally based service and supplying a whole club where they are able to build up a relationship and acquire detailed knowledge of the requirements of several players.

Hence in terms of competitive strategy the new entrants such as the firms shown in table one, compete by employing what Porter (1980) terms a focus strategy, by focusing on a specific market niche. They specialise in one product, namely cricket bats and their market niche tends to be club players. Despite this bats produced by several of the firms in table one are used by professional cricketers playing first class cricket including some well-known international players. But, their main market will tend to club players playing for village teams. The competitive advantage would appear to lie in their accessibility and their ability to offer not merely a high quality handmade product but an appropriate level of product support as well.

Conclusion

One of the most significant features of the sports equipment market in recent years has been rise of global sports brands and the growth of offshoring. For cricket bats this has focused on the increasing dominance of Indian bat makers and their ability given economic liberalization to manufacture bats that match the quality of bats produced in the UK, but at much lower cost. In the face of competition from global sports brands and a switch to offshored production on the part of several leading UK brands, bat production in the UK has been transformed. Although some UK brands have survived by investing heavily in new technology, nonetheless there has been a dramatic decline in UK bat production.

Against this background the emergence of a significant number of new entrants to bat making in recent years is a notable development, even if their total output barely matches the output of any one of the small number of surviving UK brands. The scale of the new entry that has taken in recent years is further evidence of the ‘craft revival’ noted by many researchers. It suggests that the inclusion of bat making by the Heritage Crafts Association[3] on its *Red List of Endangered Crafts, 2021*, by virtue of a shrinking market share, ageing demogaphics and a declining number of producers, is overly pessimistic.

Hopefully this study has shown that craft production has been an important part of this trend. While most of the new entrants make some use of mechanization, nonetheless there is clear evidence that there has been something of a revival of traditional pod shaving methods. Not only are all the new entrants in this study workshop based, they make extensive use of traditional woodworking tools and techniques especially when it comes to the final shaping of the bat. In the process there is a heavy reliance on the knowledge and skill of the craftsmen. Some measure of this can be gained from the number of new entrants who have sought guidance from retired bat makers familiar with traditional artisanal methods[4].

In terms of competitive strategy it is clear the new entrant firms are pursuing a focus strategy aimed at a relatively narrow market niche. This niche comprises mainly amateur cricketers playing for local clubs, especially village teams. This is reflected in the way these firms specialize solely in bat making, offer bespoke bats that meet a player’s particular requirements and provide their customers with extensive product support through offering a range of repair and refurbishment services.

Finally the fact that all of the new entrant bat makers in this study are based in rural locations serves to demonstrate that this trend is a notable example of rural entrepreneurship and one that, given the background of the entrepreneurs involved, differs markedly from much of the prior research in this field.

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[1] One firm, Kippax, pre-dates the others by almost 15 years having been founded in 1976. Nonetheless compared to the established UK brands like Gunn and Moore, it is a relative newcomer and shares the characteristics of the other firms in table one.

[2] The term ‘cleft’ describes the piece of willow from which the blade of the cricket bat is shaped.

[3] Heritage Crafts Association (2021), *Red List of Endangered Crafts, 2021*. Available at: https://heritagecrafts.org.uk/redlist/

[4] One example of this is the case of Paul Aldred at Aldred Cricket who when starting out as a bat maker sought help and guidance from a retired bat maker who had previously worked for many years for Slazenger at Horbury in West Yorkshire.

Table 1
Small Independent Bat Makers

	Brand	County	Location	Est'd	Founder's Background	Embeddedness	Workforce
1.	Aldred Cricket	Derbyshire	Village	2008	Professional Cricketer	Repair & Refurbish	2
2.	Charlie French	Nottinghamshire	Market town	1991	Cricketer	Repair & Refurbish	n/a
3.	Chase Cricket	Hampshire	Farm	1996	Professional Cricketer	Repair & Refurbish + Local Sourcing	4.5
4.	H4L Cricket	Kent	Farm	2009	n/a	Repair & Refurbish + Local Sourcing	2
5.	JEDi cricket	W. Yorkshire	Village	2009	Apprentice	Repair & Refurbish + Local Sourcing	1.5
6.	Keeley Cricket	Sussex	Village	2017	Apprentice	n/a	n/a
7.	Kippax Cricket	W. Yorkshire	Farm	1976	Professional Cricketer	Repair & Refurbish + Local Sourcing	2
8.	Nixon Cricket	N. Yorkshire	Market town	1994	Farm worker	Repair & Refurbish + Local Sourcing	2
9.	Robert James	Norfolk	Market town	2016	Retailing	n/a	1
10.	Salix Cricket	Kent	Farm	1990	Apprentice	Repair & Refurbish + Local sourcing	3.5
11.	World Class Willow	Somerset	Village	2018	Engineer	Local Planting + Local Sourcing	2
12.	XX Cricket	Norfolk	Farm	2016	Professional sportsman	n/a	2

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