

eau to be in england

Revived grand houses, rebellious noses and self-taught are mixing it up to bring an edgy new freshness to British perfume. Expect the unexpected, says Vicci Bentley. Photograph by [unreadable]

Throughly mannered lavender water and discreet rose soaps, wholesomely clean guest-room courtesies turned dust-gatherers in bathroom cabinets. Hardly pulse-racing stuff, unlike that cheeky little Eau de Quelques Choses that's so compulsive it occupies its own compartment in your bag.

But back in the day, English and French perfumes were arch rivals. Dignified English houses such as Creed, Yardley and Floris – all established in the golden era of 18th-century perfumeries – flourished royal warrants from courts at home and across Europe. But by the late-20th century, many of these grand family houses had undergone successive buyouts, their recipes radically altered or simply lost. Yardley, for instance, is now owned by L'Oréal, a personal care company which invests in heritage brands. Having secured the patronage of Empress Eugénie, Creed decamped to Paris in 1854, from where Olivier Creed, great-great-great grandson of the founder, and his son Erwin continue to create classics such as Green Irish Tweed (from £82, 30ml). Only family-owned Floris remains staunchly rooted in London's St James's, home of scented sartoria, where in-house perfumer Shelagh Foyle's bespoke services are still keenly sought (£2,500, 100ml).

For the rest, what went wrong? Quite simply, progress, according to perfume historian Roja Dove. In the late-19th century, the first synthetic molecules that propelled scent into a modern, fantasy-led era made natural scents seem naïve by comparison. Soon after the first world war, the first designer scents – Chanel No 5, Dans La Nuit by Worth and Lanvin's Arpège, to name a few – emerged from their flourishing fashion houses and cornered the cachet. Overnight, "fancy French perfume" reeked of prestige, while English labels were relegated to the toilettries division. "Compared to complex, full-bodied French perfume with its lingering sillage, the simple, single-note English style was considered neither lasting nor refined," explains Dove. "The smart set continued to buy their toilet waters from Jermyn Street, but always wore French to dinner."

After nearly a century of French hegemony, the idea of Chanel No 5 in a spray-off with Devon Violets has a faintly ludicrous whiff. But – whisper it – over the past decade a rapprochement between old rivals has been steadily distilling. British perfumers are back on the radar – on both sides of the Channel. Former Serge Lutens nose Christopher Sheldrake now works as deputy perfumer alongside master in-house perfumer Jacques Polge at Chanel. Lyn Harris, founder of London house Miller Harris, has created Note de Peau (€160, 100ml), an Oriental in the grand chic style, for the institutionally French department store Le Bon Marché. And Yorkshire-born product designer James Heeley, now based in Paris, is seducing European fashionistas with his curiously English scent style.

Old houses too, are having a breathy new lease of life. Having resurrected Queen Victoria's favoured Crown Perfumery from obscurity and stamped it with his own name, entrepreneur Clive Christian has turned No 1 Imperial Majesty into a global cult classic (£2,700, 30ml). Famously known as "the world's most expensive perfume", it also comes in a collector's version in a Baccarat crystal bottle, security-delivered by Rolls-Royce (£115,000, 500ml). Christian's less flamboyant but stridently feminine X (from £1,020, 30ml) was Bergdorf Goodman's top-selling scent last year.

It was a quirk of genealogy that resulted in the revival of one of Britain's most significant perfume dynasties. Founded in London in 1835, Grossmith garnered royal warrants from Queen Alexandra and the courts of Greece and Spain. Yet like so many others, by the end of the 1970s the house had slipped out of the family and into liquidation. Now, after more than 30 years of dormancy, it's back in action thanks to former property



tree not only unearthed relatives he didn't know he had, but also original moulds, formulas and even scents. But reviving the family firm was a high-risk business. "We had no money, but decided not to approach investors," recalls Brooke. "That would have been like selling the company again." Instead, he sold shares and real estate to recreate Victorian and Edwardian Orientals – Hasu-no-Hana (£165, 10ml) inspired by Japanese lotus; Phul-Nana, "a bouquet of India's choicest flowers" (£130, 10ml); and exotic Shem-el-Nessim (from £150, 10ml), inspired by an Egyptian festival celebrating the first day of spring.

In this royal wedding season, history repeats itself with Grossmith's latest revival, Betrothal (from £195), originally created in 1883 for Princess Mary of Teck's engagement to George V. Brooke commissioned Robertet in Grasse – a manufacturer known for its quality natural ingredients – to coax this surprisingly lively, faintly powdery, woody floral tease back to life. Charged with the task of effectively rewriting a century-old formula for a more urbane generation, nose Melanie Carestia at Robertet was keen to strike the appropriate "wow" note. "The original overdose of geranium and jasmine made it hard to get the balance right," she recalls – a problem she solved with an initial burst of neroli, audaciously carnal civet and velvety vanilla.

That an English fragrance was made in Grasse is no irony. Grasse remains modern perfumery's alma mater, thanks to its unique microclimate, making it the source of many of the world's finest floral ingredients. John Lipscomb Grossmith, son of the original John, finessed his art there; essential work experience if you're competing on a European playing field. But these days, there's more at stake than competitive enterprise. In a market near-stupefied by mass-market wafts, a world-class tutelage is often the springboard for the convention-bending creativity that's earning a new generation of British perfumers "wild card" acclaim.

"Whereas the French are conservative and precise, I'm the rebel who pushes boundaries and takes risks," says Lyn Harris, one of the first noses to up the ante in favour of British scent and whose Miller Harris label celebrated its 10th anniversary last year. Harris maintains that her old-school Robertet training underpins her "natural-meets-fantasy" style. Take her exhilarating Fleurs de Sel (£110, 100ml) – the wild pull of the ocean disturbing the familiarity of warm skin. "I worked the traditional chypre and salt accords with ambrette, iris, birch and a touch of suede – notes that you'd never think could be harmonious, yet somehow are," she explains. "It's about knowing your craft and how far you can go with it." At a time when synthetic molecules dominated perfumery, her goal was "to put natural back – everyone thought I was mad." Except her clients: the bespoke waiting list at Miller Harris is a year long (prices on request).

"With British scents, you can expect the unexpected. That's where we've been able to forge ahead," confirms Ruth Mastenbroek, a former president of the British Society of Perfumers, whose work at fragrance house Quest International (now Givaudan) includes the best-selling grapefruit-scented candle for Jo Malone. "At the time, grapefruit wasn't considered a prestigious note, but spiked with tangerine and peppermint, it sparked a trend," she recalls. Her first eponymous eau de parfum (from £50, 50ml) has taken three years to perfect. It's an olfactory autobiography, with childhood memories of mossy woods beneath English garden flowers pepped with fruity zest. The unexpected? "Green pineapple and pink pepper on a classic moss and patchouli base gives a clash of sweetness and piquancy," she says.

If thinking out of the bottle defines the new "Britscent", both Harris and Mastenbroek are also taking ambient fragrance to a new level. Mastenbroek's

Clockwise from top near left: Ruth Mastenbroek RM, £80, 100ml. Heeley Oranges and Lemons, Say The Bells of St Clement's, £98, 100ml. Miller Harris Fleurs de Sel, £110, 100ml. Grossmith Betrothal, £375, 50ml. Illuminum White Datura, £100, 100ml. Clive Christian X, £190, 50ml.

olive oil (£14, 250ml) or choose scent-inspired wallpaper (£75 a roll) thanks to Harris's collaboration with British interior designer Karen Beauchamp.

Over in Paris, philosophy graduate turned lawyer turned designer James Heeley got bitten by the scent bug a decade ago. One of a growing breed of self-taught "punk perfumers", Heeley was designing vases for florist Christian Tortu when he met the late perfumer Annick Goutal. "She introduced me to a whole new palette, one that I could

control from inside the bottle to the outside design," he recalls. "I knew what I wanted but didn't have the technique to put it together," he admits. "I started as artistic director, briefing perfumers. Now I work more creatively as a nose, writing basic formulas for technicians to fine-tune." Fifty per cent of perfumery is taste, memory, intuition and emotion, he reminds us – all of which inform Heeley's Oranges and Lemons, Say The Bells Of St Clement's (£98, 100ml), a joyfully zesty tribute to Blighty.

"I wanted to make a classic English cologne, but through the eyes of a foreigner. So I thought, 'What do I like?' Marmalade on cold buttered toast; and I still can't go to work without builders' tea," he confides. Adding jasmine and ylang ylang to time-honoured citrus notes gave a softer, more feminine twist, he says.

Heeley believes his "outside-in" perspective also enables him to define the English style so popular with the arty set in Paris and Milan. "I've lived in Paris for 10 years, yet everyone tells me I'm so English. There are moments when I don't understand why, but when I come back, the first thing that strikes me is that English habit of taking something old-fashioned and traditional and making it go hand in hand with modern," he explains. "There's something quintessentially Jermyn Street about colognes, a fresh but dandy underground element that exists side by side with the classical." Think of Guy Ritchie's film *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, where gangsters wear suits but speak with cockney accents; or a beautiful woman in a tweed cap and jacket.

More seditious still, Britscent's newest bad boy Michael Boadi advocates scent self-rule. "I want people to have their own interpretation of my fragrance," he claims. Once a high-profile hairstylist working on shoots for the likes of Chanel, Gucci, Etro and Missoni, his trips to exotic locations inspired Illuminum, a collection of pared-down scents, each based on a succinct eight ingredients (from £70, 50ml). Tribal Black Tea mingles mystery and humanity, like a flash of bare skin under incense-heavy monk's robes. Boadi's own favourite, White Datura, has a spicy, voluptuous, damn-it-all indolence. Boadi's aim is to demonstrate that British perfume can prove an unconventional force to rival the best of them. His tactics are visceral. "I do my research on people with regular professions who know nothing about perfume, but wear it because it's exceptional and different," he reveals. "I like to challenge and be challenged. I'd rather hear, 'Oh!' than, 'Amazing.' That's what makes me happy." Way to spray. ♦

GETTING SOME FRESH AIR

Le Bon Marché, 22 Rue Sèvres, 75007 Paris (+331-4439 8000; www.lebonmarche.fr). **Clive Christian**, www.clive.com and see Fortnum & Mason, Harrods. **Creed**, 020-7630 5040; www.creedfragrances.co.uk. **Floris**, 89 Jermyn Street, London SW1 (0845-702 3239; www.florislondon.com). **Fortnum & Mason**, 181 Piccadilly, London W1 (020-7734 8040; www.fortnumandmason.com). **Grossmith**, 020-7355 0355; www.grossmithlondon.com and see Roja Dove Haute Parfumerie. **Harrods**, 87-135 Brompton Road, London SW1 (020-7730-1234; www.harrods.com). **Illuminum**, see Roullier White. **James Heeley**, +331-4523 3216; www.jamesheeley.com and see Les Senteurs. **Miller Harris**, 21 Bruton Street, London W1 (020-7629 7750; www.millerharris.com) and branches/stockists. **Roja Dove Haute Parfumerie**, Urban Retreat, Harrods, 87-135 Brompton Road,