SOFAS
BY SAXON

LEATHER GUIDE
Your ultimate guide to leather
We’re delighted you’re considering investing in classic leather furniture from Sofas by Saxon. We know you couldn’t choose a better manufacturer – and by the time you’ve read this guide to leather, you’ll understand why.

All of our furniture is lovingly hand-made by real craftspeople right here in our Lancashire workshop, using time-served techniques which are hundreds of years old.

No one works harder to make furniture in the traditional way: the result is extraordinarily strong, long-lasting, comfortable and beautiful.

One of the most important aspects of our furniture is the leather we use.

**What is leather?**

Real leather is a natural product. It’s skin, so just like our own skin it breathes, it’s hard-wearing, and it’s warm and cosy. And every hide is unique, bearing the marks of its natural origins.

This means that good quality leather will always show scratches, growth marks, the hair-pore structure, and areas of different fibre density. In no way do these detract from the quality or durability of the leather.

**From skins to leather**

Animal skins are turned into leather when they are cured (a process commonly called ‘tanning’). Cattle skins are known as hides, and these make up the majority of the leather used in the manufacture of upholstered furniture.

**Grading leather**

Many retailers classify leather by grades. This can cause some confusion, because customers may be encouraged to believe that the more expensive or higher-grade leathers are of a better quality. But this isn’t necessarily true.

**Why leather prices vary**

Tanneries only produce one quality of tanned upholstery leather. After that, various finishing processes are applied, and this is where the price variations occur. So while one leather may be more expensive because of the processes it’s been through, that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s a better-quality or harder-wearing leather.

**Balancing appearance with ease of care**

As a result, when the time comes to choose a leather Chesterfield, there has to be a trade-off between the natural appearance of leather and how easy it is to look after and maintain. Let’s look at this in more detail…
How is upholstery leather made?

Soaking the hide
When a cattle hide arrives at the tannery, having been salted to preserve it, it is then soaked in chemicals. This has two purposes:
• the hair follicles are dissolved
• the hide swells to approximately 8mm in thickness.

Splitting the hide
The hide is then split horizontally, through its thickness, and the topmost section (which contains the more hard-wearing exterior ‘grain’ surface) is cut away to be used for upholstery leather.

Tanning the hide
The hide now undergoes a tanning process using chromium-based chemicals. You’ll be pleased to hear that this modern method replaces the traditional ‘vegetable’ tanning process, which used plant extracts and urine.

Grading the hide
Once tanned and dried, the hide is graded by size and degree of scarring and blemishes:
• the ‘cleaner’ hides, which are less scarred, tend to be used for full-grain leathers
• hides with a degree of scarring are lightly buffed on their top surface and used to create corrected grains.

Types of leather used for furniture

Pigmented leather
Pigmented leather is the most durable leather, with a consistent surface appearance. It is used in the majority of furniture upholstery. The application of a polymer surface coating, containing pigments, provides real durability and greater resistance to soiling, scuffing and fading. This coating can be left plain or (thanks to modern technology) can be embossed or printed.

Aniline leather
Aniline leather is the most natural-looking leather, because the unique surface characteristics of the animal hide remain visible. However, since it’s coloured with dye alone, and not a surface coating of polymer and pigment, it’s less resistant to soiling, the effects of sunlight, and the absorption of liquids. (That said, sometimes a light, non-pigmented surface coating is applied to enhance the appearance of the leather, offering slight protection against spillages and soiling.) Because of its natural state, you should expect the leather to have some marks and shade variations. A special maintenance routine is required.

Semi-aniline leather
Semi-aniline leather lies somewhere between pigmented and aniline leather. It still retains a natural appearance, but is more durable than aniline leather thanks to a light surface coating with a small amount of pigment. This coating also means a more consistent colour and added protection.
Know your leather grains

Grain
The grain is the uppermost layer of the leather. However, it's also used to describe the tracery of fine embossed lines which cover the surface of most finished leathers.

Full-grain leather
This is a leather where the uppermost layer has been left untouched. When the natural smooth surface is retained in this way, any scars or blemishes simply prove the hide's natural origin. Aniline leathers tend to be made from full-grain hides. Semi-aniline leathers can also be made this way.

Corrected-grain leather
This is a leather where the uppermost surface has been very finely buffed to reduce the appearance of any raised scars. It's quite common for such a leather to be treated with a fine embossed 'grain' effect afterwards, which further helps to mask any scars and makes the hide more usable. Pigmented leathers tend to be made from corrected grains. Semi-aniline leathers can also be made this way.

Things to be aware of

You can trust Sofas by Saxon, because we only use the finest quality leathers. It's that simple. However, some companies take a different approach, so here are some of the things to watch out for:

Splits
At the beginning of the tanning process, after being treated to a chemical bath, the hide is put through a splitting machine to slice it through its thickness. The uppermost section (the hardwearing outer skin, or grain) is used to make upholstery leather. The lower section, or 'split', has no hardwearing grain surface and so is used to make suede items.

Some cheaper methods of leather production will coat one side of a 'split' with a heavy pigment, artificially creating the appearance of a grain. This is not proper leather, and doesn't have the same long-lasting properties. It is often patched together in less visible parts of furniture (the undersides of seat cushions, for example).

‘Leather’ from other animals
Some companies use ‘leather’ produced from pigskin or sheepskin. Not only is this not what you expect when you buy leather, but the skins are smaller, requiring the patching-together of smaller pieces.

Faux leather or leather touch
Faux leather is artificial/synthetic leather. It is usually made from polyurethane or polyvinyl chloride (PVC, or vinyl). Artificial leather is cheaper than leather, and more durable – because it’s not leather. It won’t stretch or breathe, and it doesn’t grow old gracefully the way real leather does – it doesn’t develop that beautiful patina and lustre with time. Unlike real leather, it is vulnerable to puncturing, snagging and tearing.
Why you can trust Sofas by Saxon
• We use only entire hides, of the finest quality, from cattle
• Our hides are sourced from the best Italian tanneries
• We only use leather that has passed the most stringent wear-and-tear testing
• You’ll never, ever get split leather from Sofas by Saxon
• You’ll certainly never see any faux leather from us.

Any questions?
We hope this guide has explained why choosing the right leather really matters. A top-quality leather will offer you years of hard-wearing, soft-touch comfort.

If you’d like further information about the types of leather we offer, please do get in touch with a member of the team at Sofas by Saxon – we’re always happy to help.

Learn more
We’ve included some links below to our website which we hope you find helpful, from ordering a brochure to finding out about our bespoke services.

See our ranges online
Browse 50 sofa types in over 80 leathers

Ask us for a brochure
See our stunning range of furniture

Ask us for FREE leather swatches
See the quality of our leathers

Find out about our leather matching service
We’ll search 1000s of leathers to find what you want

Want to use your own leather?
We’ll upholster with the leather of your choice

We make sofas to fit
Our bespoke service will make to the size you need

Find out about international shipping
Last year we exported to over 50 countries

Read our independent customer reviews
OVER 1000 REVIEWS