

SPRING CLEAN YOUR GEAR LIKE A PRO

We visit the cleaning experts to learn how they keep riding kit in tip top condition – and how you can do it too

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE the feel of a new leather jacket. The reassuring heft and texture of the leather that speaks of both luxury and protection, the crisp clearness of the liner, the smooth action of the zips, the smell... what could beat it? Well, what about your trusty leather jacket, already nicely broken in to the shape of your shoulders and elbows, snug, fitting and reassuring?

Wouldn't it be great, then, if your first sunny ride of the year could be in your trusty leather jacket – which feels every bit as lovely as a new one, but still retains the extra comforting factor that comes with familiarity and a well-worn fit? The good news is, that's far from an impossible dream.

Spring cleaning your kit can give your favourite items of motorcycle clothing that fresh-from-the-box feeling. Better still, it's likely to extend the life of your gear, as proper cleaning and care will improve the condition of the leather, keeping it supple and stronger than if it's neglected. All kit can benefit from this kind of treatment – helmets, gloves, boots and even textile gear.

To find out how to look after riding gear, we visited the long-established king of cleaning, Damien Holt of Scrubbers Leathers (www.scrubbersleathers.co.uk/). He's been restoring motorcycle leathers and textiles to top condition since 1992. He showed us how he looks after leathers and explains how to clean your kit at home.



Damien Holt from Scrubbers Leathers, doing what he does best: scrubbing leathers

The best clean your leathers ever had

How the professionals get years of grime out of a leather jacket: slowly, carefully...



Prepare the leathers

1 Damien starts by removing the jacket's zip-in thermal liner, which can be washed in a normal washing machine, as well as taking out the back protector. He doesn't take out the elbow or shoulder armour though. "When it's held in place in zipped pockets, the zips are small and fiddly," he explains. "And with older jackets, those zips are fragile. You don't want to risk breaking one, so it's safer to clean the jacket with that armour in." Damien undoes – and empties – all the jacket's pockets and undoes the fasteners and size adjusters, such as at the waist and cuffs. Now it's ready to be cleaned.



Wash the interior

3 Between each scrubbing of the exterior, Damien also cleans the interior. Initially he soaks it with the water in which the soap-applying cloth has been wrung out. Then he takes a different specially made soap, inside a net bag to stop it slipping out of his gloved hand, and scrubs the interior, right down as far as the cuffs. Cleaning the inside of leathers isn't something you can easily do at home. "I can only do this because of the soaps I make – normal soaps are too likely to dry the leather out," Damien says. "If you can wash the liner without it touching the leather, you might get away with it, but that's really hard." He pays particular attention to the armpits and wrists, where we sweat most, then rinses the inside again with the soapy water.

THE DIY VERSION

You can follow similar steps to clean your leathers at home. The two things Damien doesn't recommend trying are washing the inside and conditioning from the inside, as they need specialist soap and conditioners that aren't commercially available.

Removing the crud

Don't use baby wipes, which may be good at removing dirt but they are designed to leave a dry surface. Leather wipes also tend to dry the leather out too much. You shouldn't use household cleaning products – even ones that say they're designed for leather. Cleaners with silicon or wax will block the pores in the leather. Soaps using animal fats can block the pores and go rancid, while alcohol- or solvent-based cleaners can dry the leather out. Damien recommends Giptone GT12 (www.liquidleather.com). For home washing it's often best to use just warm water – maybe with a small amount of Vanish dissolved in it. Use a soft cloth or sponge and clean small areas until the cloth comes up clean. It needs patience, not elbow grease. Let leather air-dry gently, avoiding direct heat.

Conditioning and feeding

While some products claim to clean and condition, the two are very different processes. Cleaning takes dirt out of the leather; conditioning puts oils back into the leather. The conditioner Damien recommends is Giptone GT13. Work slowly and systematically, in small areas at a time. Don't apply too much – conditioner takes several hours to absorb properly and is best applied in several coats. While you can apply a light coat to damp leather, it'll be absorbed best once the leather is dry. With all the conditioner absorbed, you can feed the leather with a leather feed such as Connolly Hide Food. Apply the feed in small areas, and allow it to soak in over several days before riding.

Wash the exterior

2 The first step is to get water everywhere. "Water's a great cleaner," Damien remarks. "It's a balance, because you can't let the leather get too wet for too long." He makes his own specialist soaps, to suit different types of leather. It's rubbed onto the leather with a damp cloth, then worked into a lather with a soft brush – again, he uses different brushes for different leathers or materials.

The brush gets into the zips and lifts dirt trapped between the teeth. To clean stuck-on flies and grit out of seams, pocket flaps and vent flaps, Damien gently uses the rounded back edge of a pair of scissors, once the soap has soaked in. Stretch panels of concertinaed leather, as you might find above knees or in the small of the back on one-piece leathers, need to be pulled flat and painstakingly cleaned this way too.

The first load of soap is removed with a sponge, which gently lifts the dirt off with the soap. Then the jacket gets soaped up and scrubbed again. In total Damien scrubs the leathers three times, though the dirtiest areas will get particular attention to make sure they come up clean. "You need to work in small areas," he stresses. "Do an arm, then the front, and so on. Really finish one bit before moving on to the next one."



Rinse and dry

4 When the jacket is clean inside and out it's taken outside to be rinsed with clean water. "You have to be careful about how much water you use, as well as what soap you use," cautions Damien. "You can't let it stay too wet for too long." He's able to use a lot of water as the leathers never sit in it and he washes them

fairly quickly – and mostly because he has proper drying facilities. After the rinse, Damien lets the leathers drip initially, before moving them into a purpose-built drying room with a dehumidifier, where the temperature is controlled. It takes seven days to gently dry a set of leathers.

Condition the leather

5 After three days in the drying room, when the leather is still slightly damp, Damien applies the first coat of conditioning cream, to ensure the leather can never dry out too much. "A conditioner brings back the state of the leather and the feel," he explains, "but there's no point in conditioning leather until it's all clean."

There are commercial conditioners that can be applied to the outside. "Like the soaps, I also make my own conditioners,"

Damien says. "These can be applied to the inside of the suit, where it's absorbed much better by the leather."

After the leathers have had their full seven days in the drying room, they get another three coats of conditioner – and some items may need more. Every 24 hours another coat of conditioner is worked in with a soft cloth and left to absorb, which can take five or six hours. It's important not to apply too much and to apply it evenly.



Feed and protect... and re-clean every two years

6 Conditioning the leather gets it back to its best, but feeding the leather should keep it in that condition for longer. The process for applying it is exactly the same as for the conditioner. After the leather has

absorbed its feed, Damien applies a protective treatment to the surface, which should further help it stay in better condition for longer. "But to stay in perfect condition, a suit should get a proper clean every 18 months to two years," he says.



Prefer to leave it to the experts?
To get your kit cleaned professionally, Scrubbers Leathers take about two weeks for the full process. Prices start from £35, though you have to add your postage costs. Visit scrubbersleathers.co.uk for information.

VELCRO TRANSFORMED IN MINUTES



1 Velcro becomes less effective over time, but it can be returned to near-full stickiness. "The rough half is simply rows of hooks, which get clogged with fluff," says Damien.



2 Damien runs the tip of a blunt pair of scissors along the rows – one way, then the other – lifting the fluff and removing it. "You don't need any pressure," he cautions.

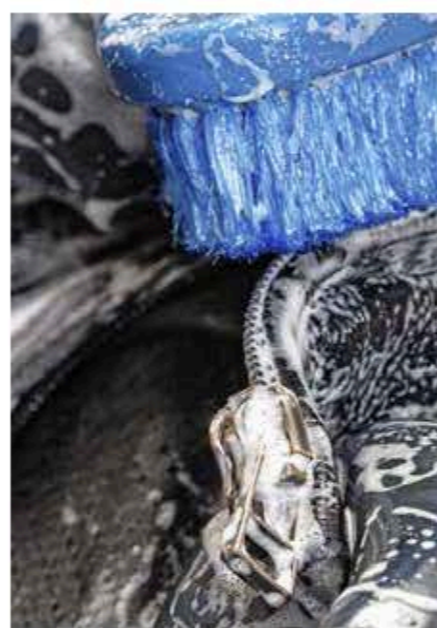


3 It's a remarkably quick process. Practice helps, but it takes Damien barely a minute to get the small patch of Velcro securing a cuff strap looking like new again.



4 The fluffy side also deteriorates. "You just need to give it a haircut," says Damien. Working in small areas, he trims the top half a millimetre off..

LONGER LASTING ZIPS



The process of cleaning zips starts when you're cleaning the leathers. Gently working the soft brush through the teeth starts to get the dirt out of the mechanism.



Check the male part of the zip – the hard, straight bit. If the material it's attached to is starting to fray, coating it with clear nail polish can stop it getting worse.



Clean zips need to be lubed. With metal zips you could use WD-40 or 3-In-One Oil, but Damien uses a special zip lubricant called Zippy Cool, worked in with a toothbrush.

HOW TO CLEAN YOUR TEXTILES

Damien also makes his own specialist soaps for cleaning textiles. He starts with a pre-wash solution, in which he soaks textiles for 24 hours before getting started. He then washes them by hand, in the same way as the leathers. This allows him to use different soaps on different sections of materials – important for textile suits that include panels of leather, hi-vis, anti-abrasion or other materials.



Don't be afraid to use the washing machine

The first and most important step is to read the garment's care instructions, as they vary from suit to suit. With all of them, though, you should remove any thermal liners, to be washed separately. Take out all of the armour (most textiles use Velcro-sealed armour pockets, not zips as leathers tend to). Open all pockets and undo all the size adjusters before washing.

Fabric softener can ruin waterproof membranes, so it's a good idea to wash a load of towels, without fabric softener, before putting bike kit in the washing machine – this ensures the machine is rinsed out.

Don't use household washing powder or liquid for bike kit. Use a technical washing product such as the widely available Nikwax TechWash. Rather than cramming the whole suit into the machine, Damien recommends washing jacket and trousers separately to get the best results. He also recommends then running them through two rinses cycles.

Drying and reproofing

Don't use direct heat to dry textile kit. Most needs to be air-dried, though Gore-Tex should be tumble-dried. Some of it needs to be ironed with a cool iron to reactivate its waterproof membrane. The suit's care label should tell you exactly what's needed.

While textiles don't need to be conditioned and fed like leathers once they're clean and dry, most will benefit from reproofing. Scrubbers make their own treatments, with different ones for different materials. At home you can use something like Nikwax TX Direct Spray-On, which builds up the durable water-resistant (DWR) layer on the material.

