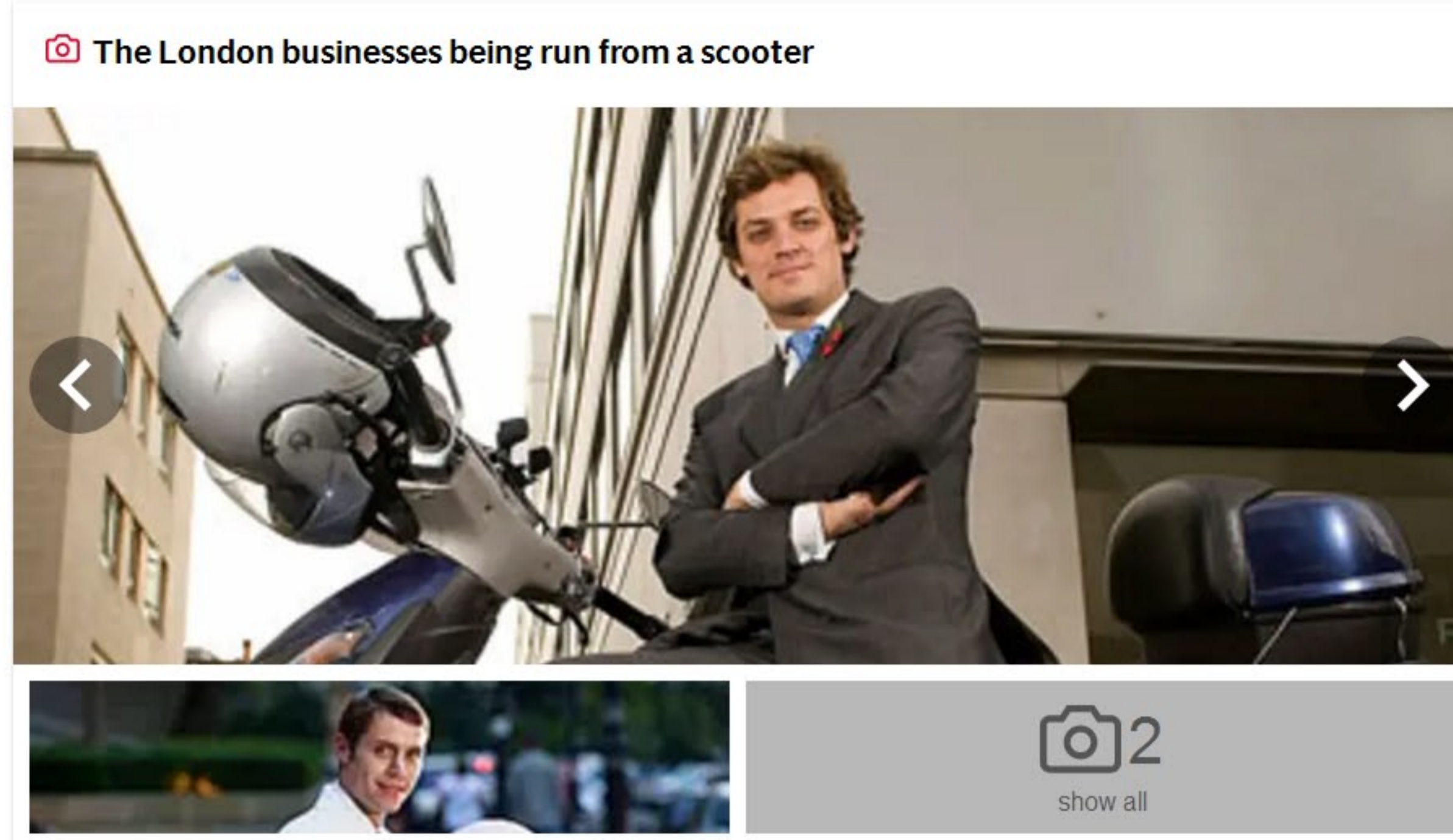


Lifestyle

The London businesses being run from a scooter

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Nice bit of schmutter: Charles Collingwood runs his bespoke tailoring business from the back of his scooter

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Charlie Collingwood has the impeccable manners, deft hands and immaculate dress sense you expect from a top London tailor.

The big difference between Charlie and other schmutter-merchants is that you don't have to slog back and forth to Savile Row or Soho to be kitted out in one of his bespoke Henry Herbert suits.

Charlie will measure, fit and deliver the suit at your convenience and at your home and office, and he can do this because he runs his business from the back of a scooter.

"It's a novel, first-of-its kind service," explains Collingwood, 30. "It's flexible and convenient for my customers, and because I don't have the expense of central London retail premises, I can keep costs down."

His handmade suits - "made in England with British materials" - start from a competitive £495, overcoats from £895.

What's more, his fleet of four branded scooters - not to mention the fact that he always wears one of his own, dapper suits in the saddle - is an excellent advert for the business.

Collingwood, along with a host of London businesses including handymen, estate agents and The Berkeley hotel's patisserie service, has realised that the scooter offers the ultimate in speed, economy and efficiency. Two wheels good, four wheels bad.

The trailblazer for this trend was "patrician electrician" Lord (James) Irwin, the son of the Earl of Halifax. Irwin set up the Handy Squad with two odd-job men and two 125cc Honda bikes and now has a fleet of 20.

"I wanted to run my own business," says the 32-year-old former investment banker, "and I thought there was a niche market for odd jobs that could be done by a single handyman on a bike carrying a small tool kit and [decorating] materials." The bikes have now been modified to carry a small stepladder, too.

It's all about "maximising utilisation". As Irwin points out, scooters are exempt from the congestion charge and most parking fees, while their speed and mobility means the Handy Squad can be quicker to arrive than most emergency-response plumbers and electricians.

He claims that "the AA followed our lead", introducing scooters for mechanics a couple of years later.

Indeed, the model is so successful that one of Irwin's former employees, Dennis Baltha, has set up on his own as west London's "scooter handyman".

Over in Camden, estate agent London Residential has invested in three Electrip electric scooters.

"When we opened the Camden office last year we rebranded as a green company, the first carbon-neutral estate agent," says lettings manager Chris Welch.

The bikes are ideal for meeting landlords or clients at flats, although Welch concedes they "are better in the summer months" and aren't powerful enough to carry more than one person.

These are not problems faced by The Berkeley hotel, which delivers its signature, fashion-inspired Prêt-à-Portea (sic) cakes to its discerning SW1 neighbours on a branded pink-and-pistachio Vespa: demand goes up in the festive season.

"The only way to deliver Christian Louboutin high-heeled biscuits and the latest Burberry trenchcoat cakes is aboard a style icon," says general manager Klaus Kabelitz.

And where London leads, the rest of the world follows. If Charlie Collingwood's plans come off, at least.

"Business is ticking over nicely at the moment despite the recession," he says, "but when expansion comes, the end point will be to have a Henry Herbert scooter base in every major metropolitan city in the UK and around the world." Scoots you, sir! ■

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