INNOVATORS: SARAH HOWCROFT

Now more than 40 years old, outdoor brand Rohan says it likes to talk about products that are not new, which is unusual. It likes clothing that's tried and tested and it likes products that are stuck, unused, in cupboards and wardrobes to find new owners. Change for change's sake is not the Rohan way. Innovation, though, is, and always has been, as co-founder, Sarah Howcroft explains.

The woman who said hello to science



The brand believes it was the first, in the UK at least, to take a scientific approach to designing and making outdoor clothing.

Sarah Howcroft

UK-based outdoor brand Rohan was born as a result of a chance meeting between a young textile chemist and the woman who became his wife and business partner but who, at the time, was working for the summer at a petrol station. Convinced that they could bring better clothing to walkers and climbers, Paul and Sarah Howcroft moved to Skipton in the Yorkshire Dales and set up their company in 1972, with start-up capital of less than £100 and the catchy name of Designers and Manufacturers of Mountaineering Gear.

Absence of glamour

Mr Howcroft died in a motorcycle accident in 1993, but his wife continued to be involved in the running of the brand for many years afterwards, stepping aside only recently to continue to indulge her own passion for the outdoors, to run a website called Rohantime for fans of the brand and, most recently of all, to set up Gift Your Gear, an initiative to encourage hikers and climbers to give away still usable clothing and equipment they no longer want so that a new generation of outdoor enthusiasts can get the benefit of them. If not a unique idea, it is still an unusual thing for people in the outdoor business to do and, now that so many brands are owned by investment capital firms and run by executives with MBAs, is unlikely to become widespread. Ms Howcroft would, we hope, forgive us for saying she is of a different generation, the first generation of outdoor brand founders and leaders, who set up companies because they believed passionately in making the mountains and the moors more accessible to people who craved space and fresh air at the weekend. Concepts such as catwalk shows, tie-ups with rap artists and Hollywood and expensive sponsorship deals with already-multi-millionaire sports stars in their early twenties are

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far from the thoughts of the Rohan co-founder. She and her husband were only in their early twenties themselves when they began the project that became their life's work. There was little glamour; they spent their first winter in a tent in the parking area of a national park.

Genuine improvement

To this day, Rohan makes a point of encouraging its customer to think of the jackets, shirts, trousers, socks and other products it sells as a long-term investment. It says its clothing is "tried and tested" and it is definitely not a supporter of change for the sake of change, but it does frequently add new products to its collections if it thinks they represent "a genuine improvement on what went before". Recent examples include the Nightfall jacket, which has goose down, a measured fill power of 800+, a 28 grammes-per-square-metre polyamide shell and a durable water repellency finish, and a range of superfine merino ("nature's finest technical fabric") baselayer tops.

It has some 60 shops all over the UK. As a whole, it describes its collections as consisting of protective, versatile, fast drying, tough, light and highly packable items, offering "pure function and reliability, pared down and stripped out", and with the technology "hidden" to make the garments suitable for wearing in town as well as in the country.

Good for the soul

Sarah Howcroft says walking continues to matter a great deal to her. Over the years, she says she has come to pay scant attention to the distance or the degree of difficulty. "It's about the person doing it and what they get from it," she says. "We all appreciate how walking is good for our health, but I think it's fundamental for our spiritual wellbeing. It's part of my life.

This passion for walking, climbing and being outdoors was an important part of the motivation for setting up Rohan, Ms Howcroft says now. "But the other passion was to do something challenging and interesting and to change the way people dressed. By the 1970s, people were wearing cotton shirts [to take part in outdoor activity]. This was a big no-no, and still is because of the problems of it cooling when you sweat a lot. It became apparent when we were climbing, walking and doing all the things that we loved doing that the gear available was very poor; it hadn't changed since World War II, really."

She says that she and her husband were the first, "certainly in the UK, undoubtedly", to begin to look at outdoor clothing from a scientific point of view. "Some of the Austrian companies were working quite hard at the time in the skiwear industry," she continues. "We had a great group of alpinists and they did a lot of the testing of the mountaineering kit for us, and we did a lot of it ourselves. We were always developing and searching for other fabrics."

Ms Howcroft says Yorkshire's textile traditions were the main reason for setting up Rohan in that county. She describes a triangle going from Skipton east to Leeds and west into Lancashire and says it was, even as late as the 1970s, "very rich in small fabric producers: spinners, weavers and knitters". She says developments in engineering functionality such as moisture management and temperature regulation into fabrics have made the challenges Rohan confronted in its early days much easier to cope with, but insists it's a relatively recent development. "The fabric industry has developed so much in the last ten or 15 years, but if you go back 20 years, or 30 or 40, it was a whole different ball game," she says.



Rohan prefers "tried and tested" to change for the sake of change. And it wants its products to last.

Rohan

Lasting impression

Rohan's insistence on offering the tried and tested and on eschewing the ephemeral led Sarah Howcroft to launch the Gift Your Gear idea. "I've always been interested in how long the kit lasts," she explains, "and in what happens to it when it isn't being used. There must be vast amounts of this kit that isn't being used because there are vast amounts of it produced." Her contacts with youth groups go back a long way and she describes them as being "permanently short of good-quality outdoor kit", even more acute now with recent cut-backs in public funding for these bodies. Gift Your Gear is about gathering unused, unwanted outdoor clothing and equipment and "redirecting" it to youth groups and to charities who specialise in introducing young people to the outdoors.

The initiative began in 2012 and has already provided help to 350 charities and youth groups. These groups vary in size, from national organisations such as The Prince's Trust and The Calvert Trust all the way down to local scout and guide groups. The only criteria they have to meet are to be working with young people in the outdoors and to agree to put the clothing and equipment they receive into what Ms Howcroft calls "gear pools", so that the largest number of people possible can benefit from them. Clothes that are made to last can go on and on and on, she says.

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