



It's in the bag

Carradice cotton-duck saddlebags and panniers are emblematic of the British cycle touring tradition. **Jon Sparks** visited the factory in Lancashire

Carradice are rooted in the Lancashire mill town of Nelson. Embedded might be the word. So deeply embedded, in fact, that it takes me a few minutes even to find their home, in a century-old cotton mill masked by terraced housing. It's not the first premises they've occupied, but they've never moved more than a mile or two. A classic time-clock and an even older goods-lift are tangible links with Lancashire's great cotton-making tradition. And so are Carradice products themselves.

Carradice have been going over 80 years, though no one is sure of the exact date when it all began. One day Wilf Carradice, fed up with the saddlebags then available, decided he could do better. It seems he was right, as he was soon taking orders from other local riders, and then from bike-shops. The company issued its first catalogue in 1930, by which time Wilf's operation had outgrown his mum's back bedroom. By the mid-1930s the company was producing tents, sleeping-bags, clothing and even stoves, and supplying motorbike tourists as well as cyclists.

Forty years later Wilf, by then well past the statutory retirement age, sold the company to Neville and Sheila Chadwick. They brought the company back to its roots,

concentrating once more on products for cyclists, but weren't shy of innovation either; they were reckoned to be the first to make cycle bags from nylon and the first to employ reflective materials.

Today their son Dave is the Managing Director, a rangy enthusiast who's as keen to talk about recent exploits in mountain bike enduro events as about the company itself. And I could easily be distracted too, as we discover a shared enthusiasm for the new trails in Gisburn Forest... but it's not entirely irrelevant. This is a company that's deeply rooted in the cycling world.

Built to last

Getting back to business, I wonder how the company's coped with the recession, but Dave is upbeat. 'This year just gone was our best ever,' he says. Growth has been export-led. A weak pound may have helped, but it isn't really about price. Carradice products have a strong following in the US and Far East (notably Japan, Taiwan and South Korea) as well as European nations such as Germany,

Above: Susan (18 years in total with Carradice) sewing one of the classic cotton-duck bags

Bike pannier with double flap, designed to work as a briefcase



 **MADE IN BRITAIN**



The Barley saddlebag, named for the village at the foot of nearby Pendle Hill

Denmark and Sweden. These buyers mostly favour the traditional cotton-duck bags, direct descendants of those Wilf Carradice was turning out in the 1930s. The 'hand-made in England' tag gives a certain cachet, but these are also immensely practical and hard-wearing products.

Exports may have led the way but domestic demand has also held up well. Here some of the more innovative products feature strongly, like a cycle-pannier that converts to a briefcase. 'From a Brompton to a boardroom,' says Dave. But he's compelled, too, to point out that the old stand-by, cotton-duck, was waterproof and breathable long before Gore-Tex was even thought of.

As well as the standard bags used by cyclists like you and me, Carradice undertake a range of contract and bespoke work. If your postie delivers by bike, those red Royal Mail panniers were made here in Nelson. The core business remains bike-focused but of course the manufacturing skills can be adapted to other needs. For instance, experienced machinist Kelly is busy putting together small rucksacks that hospital patients can use to carry a drip-bag and pump, instead of having to wheel a tall stand everywhere. It's a complex job, marrying Cordura, clear plastic, straps, buckles and Velcro.

Pannier-racks and other metalwork are brought in from California, and the welded polyester sections for the waterproof CarraDry bags are made in China, but outsourcing isn't really what Carradice are about. As far as possible, everything is still made on site; for the core cotton-duck products that starts with cutting the fabric. Leather trimmings, too, are cut on site using metal dies and a no-nonsense hydraulic press that bears the name 'Little Eliza Jane'. Rivets are inserted using a foot-operated press.

However, to me – probably because I had to waste my time at school learning Latin instead of something useful – nothing is more impressive than watching Susan, Priscilla and Kelly turn bits of fabric and leather into smart finished bags using nothing more than a slightly scaled-up sewing machine. It's quick, deft and beautiful to watch.

Hands on design

All this is long-trying and tested technology. I wonder if there's a secret computer-aided design department in the basement, so I put the question to Dave. 'Design department?' he grins. 'That's me, and a pencil and paper. Then I cut it out and sew it together and see how it works.' Carradice's philosophy seems to be: 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' This approach only works because there's continuity here, and because Dave and many of his staff are cyclists themselves, and know what cyclists really need.

And of course continuity goes hand-in-hand with innovation. Like the bicycle itself, there are some fundamentals in bike luggage that haven't really changed –



but when there are changes to be made, a small company that makes everything by hand is well-placed to react quickly. If people want a handlebar bag with a dedicated GPS pocket, Carradice could probably have it on the shelves while some companies' marketing departments were still organising focus groups to decide the colour.

It's holiday time when I visit and half the staff aren't here. When everyone's in, I wonder how they manage to fit. I wonder, too, where Carradice goes next. They have sometimes struggled to keep up with demand, and the current production floor is overflowing with raw materials, work-benches, half-finished products and multi-tasking staff. Dave takes the question in his stride, and gives me an answer that exemplifies the no-nonsense, get-on-with-it philosophy: 'There's some space downstairs.'

Clockwise from top middle: Carradice managing director Dave Chadwick gets hands-on at the cutting table

Kelly working on medical rucksacks

Anya and 'Little Eliza Jane' stamp out leather sections



A 100% waterproof pannier that converts in seconds to a rucksack



Detail of the Bureau bag with removable padded laptop pouch