

Made in Britain

Once, Britain was heaving with outdoor gear factories. What happened? What is still made here, and is it any good? Sarah Stirling investigates

WORDS SARAH STIRLING



Peter Hutchinson Designs have been based in Stalybridge, employing local people, and at the forefront of innovative down gear for decades



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At Alpkit in the Midlands, a small band of cheery youngsters make bouldering mats, chalk bags and bike bags

THE sixties to the nineties was the British Golden Age of outdoor gear manufacturing. During this 30-year period, Rab stitched down jackets in Sheffield, Karrimor built rucksacks in Lancashire, there was an enclave of climbing gear companies in North Wales, and many more factories besides. They were instrumental in birthing many of our modern gear essentials. Sit harnesses? Invented in Britain. Waterproof-breathable jackets? Berghaus were first-movers here: they collaborated with Gore-Tex and made a huge contribution to their development. Then most of our factories shut down. Design remained in the UK but production largely moved overseas. Why?

Let's start at the beginning, because a really interesting thing about this British Golden Age is that it exploded out of nowhere. In the 1900s, a lot of the British countryside was privately owned, and it was only really the upper classes who had the free time and money to travel and indulge in emerging outdoor sports, like mountaineering. At this time, most outdoor gear was made in mountainous places like the Alps and Scandinavia.

After the First World War, the political reformer David Lloyd George argued that the British worker's idea of his value had changed: "No longer will he be content to be a wage slave, existing to produce only that which others may enjoy. Leisure is required." Addressing the House of Commons on the topic, the King agreed, and added that this

new leisure idea might improve the spiritual, mental and physical well-being of workers.

A significant marker of this change in attitude was the Kinder Trespass. Between 1600 and the early 1900s, increasing numbers of landowners had sought 'Enclosure Acts', removing public access from what had previously been 'common' or 'waste' land; fields and forests that everyone had rights to for growing crops, foraging, grazing and so on. Then, in 1932, 400 ramblers trespassed onto the highest hill in Derbyshire in an organised protest about access. This act led to the creation of Britain's first national park: the Peak District.

UK'S FIRST GEAR COMPANIES

To cater for growing interest, during the inter-war period, small drapers shops began to stock hiking and cycling gear. The first of our existing gear companies on the scene was, as far as I could find out, Blacks of Greenock. Originally a sailcloth company, they made their first tents in 1890, and gradually switched to this avenue as sailboats gave way to steam and the British countryside began to be opened up for recreational use. My research suggests that the next major outdoor gear manufacturer on the scene was Karrimor, founded above a bike shop in Lancashire in 1946.

The major boom in British gear manufacture, though, can be traced back to the 50s, when post Second World War regeneration schemes, mostly

originating in America, led to world-wide economic growth. More people than ever before could afford cars, hobbies and holidays; consumer culture exploded, and the outdoor industry along with it.

Because we didn't really have an outdoor industry in the 50s, a lot of stuff was imported. "We had Pierre Allain's rock boots from France, Eve down clothing and sleeping bags from Switzerland, Austrian Dachstein mitts and Norwegian knitwear," remembers Mike Parsons, whose parents founded Karrimor. "We paid a lot for European karabiners," added a certain Peter Hutchinson, "or made them ourselves."

What began as a way to save money, for some developed into a business venture. In 1961, Peter Hutchinson founded Mountain Equipment. "When I started up, none of the UK gear companies were around except Karrimor," he told me. "I remember the Berghaus lads starting up later."

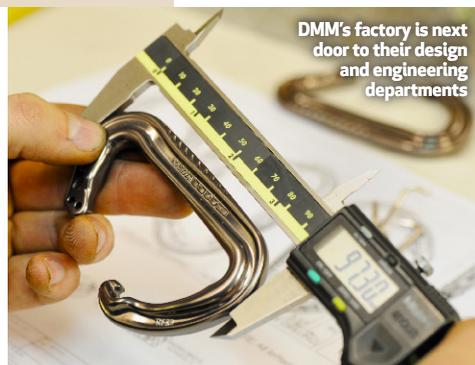
It was a similar story in America: Hutchinson recalls Yvon Chouinard, founder of Black Diamond Equipment, flying over from America to check out the British competition: "When he saw this ramshackle outhouse with two dirty guys heating up pegs in the fireplace, I think he realised he didn't have much to worry about." Soon afterwards, Hutchinson got a big order from Bob Brigham (yes, a relative of Ellis Brigham) and set up a proper factory.



Hot-forged in Wales: DMM have been making climbing gear for 30 years



Heat-treating metalwork



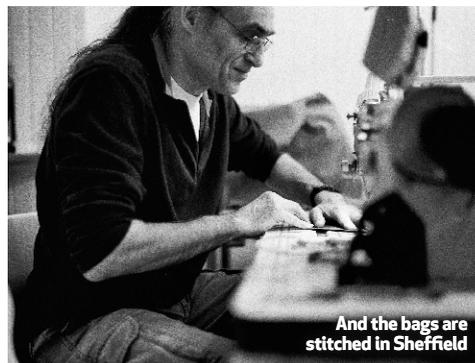
DMM's factory is next door to their design and engineering departments



The logo for the Wainwright x Millican pack was hand-drawn



The Harris Tweed comes from the Isle of Lewis



And the bags are stitched in Sheffield



PHD sew their down gear in Stalybridge



They source 95% of their materials from Europe



And down-fill their products by hand

“When I started out in the 60s, none of the UK outdoor gear companies were around except Karrimor. I remember the Berghaus lads starting up later”

Peter Hutchinson, founder of Mountain Equipment and PHD

THE INNOVATIVE 80s

The 80s was a period of intense innovation, competition and collaboration, both outdoors and in. Top British climbers like Don Whillans and Dougie Haston helped design the kit they needed for a new age in mountaineering. Whillans, for example, developed the Whillans Box tent (made by Karrimor), the first one-piece down suit (made by Peter Hutchinson) and the first sit harness (made by Troll). Berghaus and Karrimor's rivalry, meanwhile, pushed rucksack design to increasingly high standards. And Mark Wilson, who worked at Rab for 25 years — longer than even Rab Carrington himself — told me: “He was very hands-on and always asking our opinions. Sometimes so many changes were made to a prototype that a new jacket was designed.”

Walking their own factory floors allowed these founders to constantly innovate. So what happened to our outdoor gear factories? The answer is written in small text on white labels out of sight on many of our products: ‘MADE IN CHINA’. In the 1970s, revolutionary leader of the

People's Republic of China, Deng Xiaoping, allowed foreigners to invest in businesses in the country for the first time, and the shift towards capitalism began in that communist country.

OFF-SHORING REVOLUTION

In the West, investors began buying manufacturing companies — including outdoor gear ones — then selling the factory floor and ‘off-shoring’ production to China, because labour was much cheaper there. Once a few outdoor brands had made the move, others felt forced to follow in order to keep their prices competitive.

By the time Rab sold his business in 2004, manufacturing in the UK had become a unique selling point, so the new owners, Equip, considered keeping Rab's Sheffield factory open. By then, however, China had more advanced machinery and bigger factories than the UK. Rab still down-fill in the UK, but they moved the bulk of their production overseas.

Interestingly, around this time, Seattle-based company Thermarest did the opposite. Founder John Burroughs was a lone sheep, determined to

carry on making what he sold. In the 90s, he bought a dilapidated former Irish wool manufacturing premises and opened his first European factory.

Why Ireland? Of course, the country offers low corporate tax so presumably that was a factor; it's also English-speaking and relatively cheap to set up and run a company there compared to elsewhere in the EU. Now, Thermarest's European factory has 100 employees, exports to 22 countries and makes 200,000 camping mattresses every year.

STUBBORNLY BRITISH

Buffalo, founded in the 70s, is an example of a gear company that has never budged on its ethics: “We are proud of our workshop in Sheffield and happy to keep alive the heritage of British manufacturing.” Nowadays, most gear companies update and grow their ranges every spring and winter, hoping to entice shoppers. Buffalo, however, only make changes to their gear if they think it will make a real difference to the product, not because there's a new seasonal trend.

Made in Britain



Buffalo: made in Britain since the 70s



Thermarest's European factory is in Ireland



Alpkit's workshop is in the Midlands



The team are proud to represent British manufacturing



Improvements are made when necessary, not when fashion dictates



The wool for Finisterre's jumpers comes from a flock in Devon



Their socks are made in Loughborough



And their True North jeans are made in Blackburn

“ Britain has an incredible heritage of knitwear, and I am yet to see a more beautifully-crafted sock than one from these isles ”

Debbie Luffham, Product Director of Finisterre

THE WORLD'S FACTORY

As Western industries faded away, China developed into the 'World's Factory'. In Guangdong province alone, more than 30,000 textile companies employ more than five million people. The industry creates so much smog that when they close down production for national holidays they get a few sunny days in Hong Kong.

However, the low-cost, high-reward Chinese paradigm is ending. The country has one of the world's fastest-growing economies; Guangdong is home to the most billionaires in mainland China.

Factories generally reduce manufacturing rates per product if offered two things: a bigger order, and longer to process it. So, to try to keep costs low, many gear companies now have their whole product range finalised two years in advance, and they have more of it to sell.

“People used to covet down jackets,” muses Jim, one of the founders of British brand, Alpkit. “You repaired and wore them year after year. Now you hardly ever see old down jackets, do you? People buy a new one every few years.”

What began as a push to compete with other companies prices has resulted in whole industries being eroded in the West. It's also contributed to our disposable society; we have more stuff but place less value on it.

As manufacturing prices in China have risen, many Western companies have sought out cheaper labour in countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. But, in countries that don't have a minimum wage or health and safety guidelines, how do you decide what is fair and safe? In 2012, Adidas faced investigations over claims that Cambodian workers were paid just £10 a week. In 2013, 100 companies signed a pact to improve the safety of garment factories in Bangladesh, after a building collapse killed 1,100 people.

SHADES OF GREY

There's growing concern, amongst both manufacturers and consumers, about where and how things are made. Not just the conditions of faraway factory workers, but also issues like transportation, pollution and animal welfare.

Because of this, Alpkit make what they can in

the UK: I visited and found a cheery band of youngsters making sewn goods like bouldering mats, chalk bags and bike bags.

A few other British companies have taken a similar approach: manufacturing what they can in the UK, and the rest overseas. Portugal has risen as a manufacturer's compromise: labour costs there are amongst the cheapest in the EU.

Is British-made always best, though? Tom Kay, founder of Cornwall-based surf brand, Finisterre, argues that ethics are paramount: “If we can make it here, we will. There are good and bad products, stories and factories in Manchester, Portugal and China. We always aim to make the best products we can in the most responsible way.”

Similarly, Lake District rucksack company, Millican, have focussed on building a supply chain of people, both in Britain and elsewhere, who care about ethics and are great at what they do.

CELEBRATING OUR HERITAGE

Both Finisterre and Millican take great pride in having a selection of show-pieces in their range, which celebrate the history of British



Lesley is the guardian of the last flock of British Bowmont Merino Sheep

manufacturing across industries such as tweed, canvas and wool.

You can smell British heritage in the Millican x Wainwright rucksack, which is made from Dundee canvas by a company that started out making canvas sailcloth, and is lined with Harris Tweed from the Isle of Lewis.

LAST MERINO FLOCK IN THE UK

Finisterre's search for the perfect warm and soft British wool, meanwhile, led them to the last flock of Bowmont Merino sheep on the planet. That wool is spun for Finisterre in Yorkshire, and dyed and knitted to a Fair Isle pattern in Scotland.

Product Director, Debbie Luffham, commented: "We're incredibly proud to have built this 100% British supply chain. It just makes sense to us to produce certain product categories close to home. Britain has an incredible heritage of knitwear. I am also yet to see a more beautifully-crafted sock than from these isles."

As with knitwear, we have a strong heritage in manufacturing climbing gear. There used to be four British factories making it in North Wales: HB, Wild Country, Clog and DMM. DMM is now the only one left. How do they make it work?

"Of course it'd be cheaper to have products made in the Far East, but imagine if we said to our staff, 'Right we'll sack you off and just keep a warehouse here!'" Chris, DMM's Brand Manager,

has a good chuckle. "Anyway, then we'd just be another 'Made in China' brand fighting it out at the lower end. We've had to continually reinvest in the blood and guts of the factory – technical processes, machinery – but it's worth it."

There are benefits to having your factory next door to your design and engineering offices. DMM know exactly what goes on in their factory and they've gained a wealth of experience: some of their staff have worked there for 30 years.

THE ANSWER IS TAILOR-MADE

What does the future look like? A recent report produced by the government optimistically called "Future of manufacturing: a new era of opportunity and challenge for the UK", revealed ironically low figures. Nearly 9m people were employed in British manufacturing in 1966; now fewer than 3m are. Manufacturing has moved on overseas: our old factories look like museums.

Another concern for the future: it remains to be seen how Brexit will affect companies that manufacture in Britain.

On the positive side, the government study suggested that manufacturing industries could grow here if Britain found a niche where it could compete with Asian factories, and suggested high-quality products, specifically-tailored to customer demand, made to order, at speed.

One man is already ahead of the game here. He's

experienced the rise, fall and tentative regrowth of the industry, and learnt a few things. Peter Hutchinson recalls the later years of running Mountain Equipment in the 90s: "I found myself with 90 employees, many whose names I didn't even know. Instead of talking to climbers about their needs, I had designers calling me about next years' colours." This was quite a change for someone who once tested gear destined for Makalu by sleeping in it in a deep freeze.

Peter sold Mountain Equipment in 1997, and set up a small factory in an old mill not far from his original farm shack, called Peter Hutchinson Designs (PHD), where he employed local people and began to custom-make down products.

The benefits of UK manufacturing were made clear to me a while ago when a friend ordered a sleeping bag from PHD, and was surprised to receive an email back from Peter Hutchinson himself. "He asked what I wanted the sleeping bag for, and said he wasn't sure I'd chosen the right one. He came up with various modifications to suit exactly what I wanted."

The future of British companies like this lies partly in your hands. Next time you need some new outdoor kit, will you scour the web for the cheapest deal? Would you be willing to pay more for gear that's made in Britain, reducing its mileage, and encouraging the regrowth of a once-great British industry? **oag**