Learn the ropes

Niamh Ward meets with a woman preserving a traditional craft

Caroline Rodgers with her best-selling rope product, the dog lead

Dog walks are part of many morning routines around the world. If you're not on one yourself, you're seeing them take place as you drive by, or even through your window as you glance up from this month's *Dalesman*.

Just how many steps must these furry friends and their owners rack up each day, week, month even? Well, for owners who purchase their dog leads from Askrigg Ropemakers, they're at least comforted during their physical pursuits, come wind and rain, that their maker, Caroline Rodgers, has walked alongside them… in a way.

"I haven't got my Fitbit on, it's charging," says Caroline, as she walks back and forth at a steady pace along her five-metre rope walk, hand-laying strands of cotton at her unit in Askrigg.

This rope walk, able to extend to ten metres, is one of the traditional ropemaking machines Caroline purchased from Outhwaites of Hawes, opened in 1905, as the ropemaking factory closed in 2022, all employees were made redundant and then came an unexpected twist in Caroline's career.

"I spent my days in the hotel trade from the age of eighteen up until nine years ago," explains Caroline, "when I started at Outhwaites in 2016, as I knew the owners Ruth and Peter Annison. Peter asked me if I wanted a fulltime job. He said it's nine to five… no weekends… no Christmas. I said, okay you've sold it!

"Then, in 2022, we all got made redundant, so I came home to my partner Richard and said: 'What am I going to do? I don't want to go back into the hotel trade, and I don't want to see the heritage of ropemaking die in the area.' So, he told me to speak to Ruth and see if she'd sell me the machines, and she did."

And now, just five miles down the road, Caroline is keeping this craft alive in the Dales as one of only two women ropemakers in the country, and the only full-time maker in the north-east.

Not only does she kit up our canine friends with leads and collars, but she also produces cattle lead ropes, halters, skipping ropes and bespoke rope items.

"This is the traditional way, what we call hand-laying," she says, "because you're hand-laying the rope. Master Ropemakers in Kent are one of the biggest ropemakers in the UK, and their rope walk is a quarter of a mile long! Eventually, the plan with mine is to take it outside and go down the hill so we can make even longer ropes."

Heritage Crafts lists ropemaking as an endangered craft, recognising only eleven makers in the country. "Things like this are dying," says Caroline, "because people buy from Amazon or Pets at Home. When traditional ropemaking is gone, that's it, you won't be able to get it back again."

Caroline grommets her cattle halters

It was this passion for the craft which motivated Caroline to begin Askrigg Ropemakers in November 2022, when she converted her partner Richard's unit into her workshop.

Colourful cotton yarns

This may seem like an unusual place to find a woman originally born in Aldershot, Hampshire, yet in fact, Caroline was drawn to the Broad Acres from a young age. Her father, a paratrooper, moved the family up to Shipley, where Caroline was raised in the Westroyd area until the age of eighteen, when she moved to Barmston Holiday Park for work.

Only a year later, she moved to The Green Dragon in Hardraw, before relocating to Askrigg in 1990.

She sure has made the Dales her home — "I've not been anywhere since!" — with Richard and her son, a police officer, and now her granddaughter regularly visits the unit, eager to try out different knots and rifle through the colourful cotton.

"Every time I walk down, I've got to smile because I see the little lambs bouncing around in the field, it's beautiful. It's not so nice in wintertime, but I live there," she laughs, pointing across a nearby field, "so I've got no excuse, I can't get snowed in!

"I can be here some mornings at 6.30am and I won't go home until 8.30pm, and that's only because Richard's rung me and said, 'Are you actually coming home today?' You just get so engrossed in it," says Caroline, whose commitment has recently been recognised in nominations for Yorkshire Entrepreneur of the Year and Independent Business of the Year at the Yorkshire Choice Awards.

"I do a mixture of rainbow braid ropes and cotton, but I prefer cotton because it's sustainable and recyclable," continues Caroline. "About eighty per cent of my products are cotton, including the cattle halters, which at this time of year is crazy. Last year, I made 12,000!

"The dog leads are mainly for agricultural and country shows, but I've got a few pet shops that buy from me. I do trade, and I have one big customer down in York, Showtime Supplies, who I supply to."

Caroline's shows this year include Skipton Sheep Day, Ripley Show, Gargrave Show, Osmotherley Show, Reeth Show, Muker Show, Wensleydale Show and more.

There are certainly many strands to her rope, but Caroline loves the interaction. "I try to keep it local," she says, "and I love doing the shows because that gets the name out there, but I also love meeting people."

One talking point with customers is what traditional ropemaking involves, and this is a process Caroline is happy to unravel.

"When the cotton comes to me, it comes in these cones," she says, pointing to several bundles hooked up to a machine, "so these are all single strands of cotton." With a warning to shield one's ears, Caroline switches on her crossballing machine, explaining that to make an 8mm cross ball, thirty-three cones of cotton are required, which are threaded through the machine to make a thicker 'crossball'.

"At the moment, everything is made with a 12mm crossball, so once we've made an 8mm crossball, we need to make a 12mm crossball by putting the 8mm one back through the machine with the thirty-three cones.

"You can't buy machines like this; it has got to be at least fifty to sixty years old. From there, I'm making 18mm thick halters, so for an 18mm rope, you need two 12mm crossballs."

On the rope walk

And now it's on to the seventy-year-old rope walk, where Caroline is typically found getting her steps in! Comprising a fixed end with three metal prongs (for creating a three-strand rope) and opposite, a movable wooden sledge with only one prong, the machine puts twists in the rope after the strands have been positioned by Caroline's expert hands.

Caroline with Helen Skelton

Rishi Sunak is put to work

"The only thing that's been introduced to this is electricity, if you go behind it you can see one of the original handles used before," she explains. "You start by tying a strand of the crossball onto one of the prongs and then you walk down, put it across that prong and then walk back, and repeat." Even the speed of Caroline's walk can affect the stiffness of the final rope.

After securing the ends of each strand with ties, the machine is switched on: "It gets tighter and tighter, the sledge moves forward and you're off!" says Caroline, as she then secures the whole end with another tie.

"If I was to take off the rope now, it'd just spring up like a little coil. So, what you do is put a bit of a back twist on it," she says, using the traditional handle on the sledge end of the machine.

"We don't have any special gadgets here, you know, I have a coat hanger that I use to make skipping ropes! But because everything's quite old, they're simpler to fix because they don't have all these computer chips in them."

For her cattle halters, Caroline sometimes "grommets" the eye of the halter, creating a more "luxury" look, while for her dog leads, she must take a step back in time to when she first started working at Outhwaites and was tasked with hand-sleeving pieces of rubber or other materials onto the ropes… all day long.

"It does take a toll on your hands," she says, pointing to a scar from an operation six years ago to fix the bunched-up tendons in her wrist. "But now I have a little machine to help."

Despite some physical repercussions, Caroline's business continues to flourish, and she has even appeared on Channel 5's four-part series *Pennine Adventure*, meeting Helen Skelton. Not only this, but in 2023 former prime minister Rishi Sunak paid a visit to Caroline's unit where she showed him the ropes… and even had him attempt to make one! "I said, don't give up your day job," laughs Caroline.

"I love my job, it's a blast. If I could stay awake twenty-four hours a day, I would be down here," she says, displaying a level of dedication to an endangered craft which renders her items priceless. "It's just so colourful." Well, Brandy the Yorkshire terrier certainly agrees as he trots off wearing his blue, white and yellow dog lead… *Leads* United anybody?