

SADDLE UP!

Meet the Somerset
leathermaker
whose handcrafted
bags are created
from old saddles
with such loving
care that she
has a year-long
waiting list

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PHOTO: AMELIA WATTS PHOTOGRAPHY



ife's best journeys are characterised by chance encounters, unplanned detours and unexpected opportunities. So, when I ask Caroline Strecker how her brand, Rag of Colts, came about, and she laughs and says it's complicated, I settle in for a good story.

'I come from a creative family of makers. My grandmother was a huge part of my childhood; she was the war generation so 'make do and mend' was a part of everyday life. She had five children and made all their clothes.'

Caroline's mother inherited those skills and used them to pursue a career in fashion. 'Mum went to Paris and trained as a pattern cutter. Throughout the seventies and eighties, she worked in various different boutiques and for different designers.'

There was another strong influence from Caroline's childhood too. 'My grandmother's father was a captain in the cavalry. He was in the army when polo was still a military and an Olympic sport – in fact he won gold at the Olympics. When I was growing up, my grandmother still had some of his old tack, beautiful pieces of saddlery leather that 60 or so years later were still in perfect condition – because of that, I've always loved old leather.'

FROM DOG COLLARS TO BEAUTIFUL BAGS

It wasn't until 2014 that these threads from Caroline's childhood became intertwined and created a thriving business. It grew, as these things often do, from a meandering conversation over dinner with a friend. 'He had a business in LA, and was looking to expand into dog collars but was concerned about the ethics of using leather. So, I said to him "Why not use old leather?" and told him why it's such a wonderful material. He said "You're clearly passionate about it, so why don't you make them and we'll sell them?"'

'Off the back of that conversation I did a one-day workshop learning how to make a belt – I figured that would be the same as a dog collar. I made about three dog collars and got distracted deciding to make myself a bag. That was the beginning!'



Caroline repurposes old, quality leather saddles for her bags.
Photo: Dave Watts Photography



PHOTO EMMALENS



Every part of Caroline's bags are hand made.

Photo: Dave Watts
Photography

It was another chance conversation at another dinner which turned her passion into a business. 'I had been travelling and was making websites to pay the bills. Someone at the dinner party asked me what I did, and instead of saying websites, I said: "I just made this bag."'

That spur of the moment decision effectively launched Rag of Colts. 'I showed my bag to the other dinner guests and people started ordering them on the spot. I had three orders that first night.' Since then, Caroline has been featured in major international fashion publications including *The New York Times Style Magazine* and *Tatler*, has 160k followers on Instagram and has a year-long waiting list for her bags.

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO OLD LEATHER

From the very beginning, Caroline knew she wanted to work with repurposed leather.

'My mum used to source vintage cashmere and cut the collars and cuffs off, darn the moth holes, and blanket stitch all the collars. It was just completely obvious to me that I would use existing materials, from an ethical standpoint, and my grandfather's tack room was my inspiration.'

Repurposing does bring its own challenges, however. 'Part of the timeline of repurposing that's hard to illustrate is the time it takes just sourcing it, finding suitable leather and then the preparation. I can literally spend a whole morning trying to find the right match of colour from the strap to the bag.'

'There's a feel to things; I don't work with suede or anything synthetic. Old saddles were so beautifully made, from such amazing materials. They come from all sorts of places – tack sales, polo yards, riding schools that are closing down. I'm really looking for the old-fashioned kind, without any padding. I'm a bit of a hoarder in truth, sometimes people offer me saddles for free, they're not necessarily what I'd choose to use, but I'll take them because there's always something I can do with them.'

Sometimes people bring her a saddle they're sentimentally attached to and ask her to create a bag from it. 'They might have had it in the attic for twenty years, or perhaps it belonged to a horse they've lost. I'll always work with what they have.'

While wear and tear is all part of the character of the bags, she's more discerning when it comes to the straps. 'They have to be very good quality, as otherwise they crack. If I have my hands on it, I can tell from the touch if it will hold up to its next chapter. Straps need to take the weight.'

Once she's sourced suitable material, she spends time preparing it. 'I take everything to pieces, strip it all down – it's a similar process to cleaning tack. It's important not to dry it out with too much water, and I've got an arsenal of suitable leather dressings for different needs.'

Even when the leather is beautifully nourished and supple, it's still physically tough working with it, especially as she does everything by hand. 'Ultimately my job is manual labour! The leather is between 3mm and 5mm, it is heavy duty, vegetable tanned leather, it's literally tough as old boots!'

'It's hard on the hands, it's physical work – I didn't realise how hard until I did some workshops and noticed how quickly people became exhausted or even developed cramps working on fairly straightforward processes. The reality of working with repurposed leather is that it's harder than it looks.'



PHOTO: EMMA LEWIS



THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Given all this, it's not surprising that Caroline's bags take hours to make and it usually takes at least a week to fulfil just one order. But despite the waiting list, she is determined to continue with the personal touch.

'I want to do the work, and I think that's integral to why people love the bags. It feels important that I'm making it and not having it made, that's a core principle for me, as well as the repurposed materials.'

A year ago, Caroline had a shop and an assistant, and she was able to turn the bags around more quickly, but she decided that wasn't right for her. 'It had been my dream, but I'd also become a mum and I realised I couldn't run my business the way I wanted and parent the way I wanted, so I closed the shop.'

Caroline had deliberately designed the shop with an open studio, so that customers could watch her at work, and she soon found she missed that connection. So, she started making videos for social media instead and, in another twist of her story, that was when Rag of Colts really took off.

'A lot of the feedback from customers is about the joy their bag brings them, because so much care has gone into it. These bags will genuinely outlast all of us, and if they don't, I take them back and fix them. I want them to be loved; I love them and they're hard to part with sometimes!'

And if you're wondering where the name Rag of Colts came from, there is, of course, a story there too. It's an old English collective noun, for a group of young, male horses.

'Years ago, a friend was looking for a name for a business, so I did some research for him and came across the expression Rag of Colts. I'd never heard it before, and loved it, but he didn't like it, luckily for me. So, I hung onto it and used it myself.'

It was obviously meant to be. ●

Caroline's made-to-order bags range in price from £595 to £1,500 and her order book will reopen at the end of 2026. For more visit: ragofcolts.com



There is a year-long waiting list for bags from Rag of Colts.

Photo: Dave Watts Photography



Caroline's bags take hours to make.

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