

Knowing the ropes

Kate Lyon meets the woman at the helm of Rope Assemblies . . .

[UK] Although it is true to say that there are more women in our industry than when this veteran writer first made contact with a flightcase back in the 1970s, there are few who would deny that this is still a world dominated by men. So, it was refreshing to discover that there are no fewer than 13 women working at Rope Assemblies; three of them in managerial positions, with Linda Martin steering the ship as MD.

The company, which became part of the Unusual Group in August 2017, manufactures essential items for the industry that might not appear on a rig list but - with their quality control and detailed attention to safety and design - do go a long way to keeping all concerned safe and protected in what is recognised as a potentially hazardous working environment.

"The company was originally set up by Terry Hitchen and his wife in 1986," opens Linda Martin. "Terry had spent most of his working life in the wire rope industry. From the start, Rope Assemblies made up steels, bonds and the like for the theatre and entertainment markets as well as securing customers in the construction industry that we still have today. Within 10 years, the workforce had grown, with the company then employing seven members of staff with some work, such as welding, out-sourced (we now do this in-house)."

"The fact we happen to have more women than men on our staff is purely coincidence," continues Martin. "For us as a company, it's not about being 'pro-women', it's about employing the best people for the job - regardless of gender. Yes, you will find that the heavier, more physical jobs are filled by men while the time-consuming, often fiddly jobs are dominated by women - so, in some ways you could say that gender stereotypes still exist and will probably always exist to a point. However, we would never discriminate against a person for a role based on



↑ Just some of the women behind Rope Assemblies

→ St Paul's Gateway, constructed as part of the London Festival of Architecture

↓ Linda Martin, MD



Photo: © Osman Marfo-Gyasi



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- Linda Martin

their gender. All we want to know is 'can you do the job?'. If the answer is 'yes', then that's all we need to know. To be a female-centric company in such a traditionally male industry is something that makes us proud. We know that sexist attitudes are rife in this industry - as it is in many others."

Still based at the same Retford site where it was established, the company

expanded its floor space significantly in 2002 to accommodate the growing business. Similarly, the workforce continued to grow; today, there are 18 members of staff, of whom 11 have given between 12 and 21 years of service - always a notable indicator when assessing a company's general ethos and working environment.

Martin continues: "As

we have expanded, we have continued to supply some products that have been on our order books since the beginning - and the longevity of our workforce means we have a uniquely skilled and experienced staff. Items such as safety bonds, steel rope assemblies and rigging equipment remain consistent requirements for the industry. For example, the same wire assemblies are still being used in most venues and with regards to manufacturing, we still use the best quality presses from Talurit to crimp the wires.

"However, the evolution of the rigging industry and the materials available has necessarily altered specifications over the years. Polyester slings and webbing slings, along with other rigging equipment followed, with fibre rope assemblies being introduced in the late '90s. These days, standards have become more specific, dictating what materials one can use and where. For

instance, the use of soft steels (encased in a polyester outer) is now endemic. As requirements changed quite quickly, we took the attitude of 'yes, we can do that', and then our team figured out how or where. We've always made sure our customers get the best and most reliable service, and we have our staff to thank for that sort of commitment."

Although a significant proportion of Rope Assemblies' work is taken up with items that are integral to every rigging job, be it large or small, the company is also taking on more projects that are design-specific and have to be manufactured to a client's precise needs. These contracts are all too often subject to the end client's NDAs, but the precision and skill required demonstrates clearly why Rope Assemblies has become such a valued part of the Unusual Group in the past year.

An excellent recent illustration that *can* be reported is that of an architectural

structure designed by ScottWhitbyStudio: a gateway to St Paul's underground station constructed as part of the London Festival of Architecture (*pictured, facing page*). Echoing the 17th century design features used by Christopher Wren, the structure used a lightweight wire under tension to suspend hundreds of anodised aluminium poles. In just three weeks from initial contact with the client, Rope Assemblies was able to complete the contract both on time and within budget. ScottWhitbyStudio's project leader comments: "I am sure we will approach Linda and the team first, the next time we get involved in a project where their knowledge and quality of products can help. The entire experience of working with the Rope Assemblies team made for a stress-free experience."

As for long-term development plans, Martin has clearly got her eye on developing this side of the business. "We are not sitting

still, but gradual expansion is the more sustainable pathway for the company and our team here. We are now distributors for internationally-respected companies that seamlessly complement what Rope Assemblies manufactures and supplies to the industry. Our name is out there: we are engaging in more marketing and always try to do one meaningful trade show a year. For this year, it will be PLASA Focus Leeds."

And as for the 'politically correct' gender question: "Our customers aren't stupid - they're buying a quality product from us, getting the best advice and service we can possibly give, and for them, the gender balance is really quite irrelevant. I'm sure you could ask any one of our customers if it makes a difference and I'm sure they couldn't care less who wears the trousers - because in reality - we all do!" ☺

➤ www.ropeassemblies.co.uk

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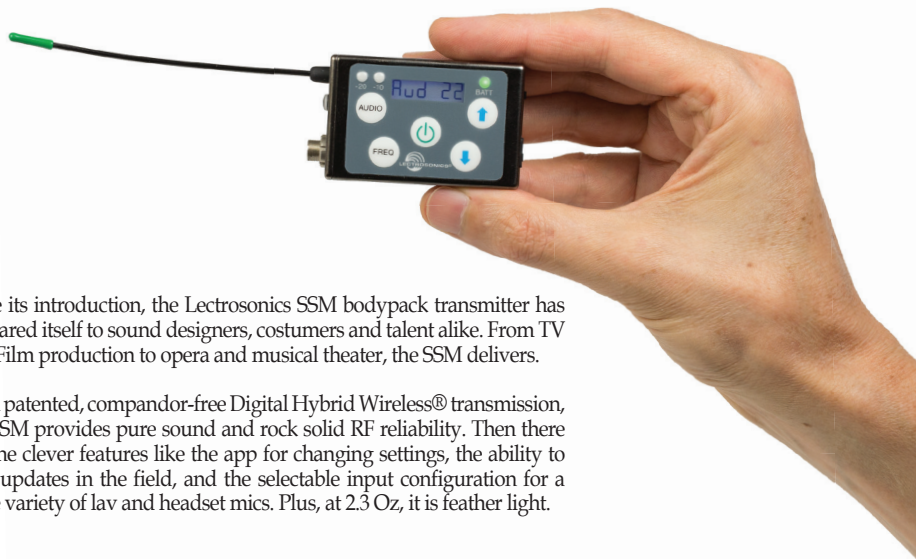
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