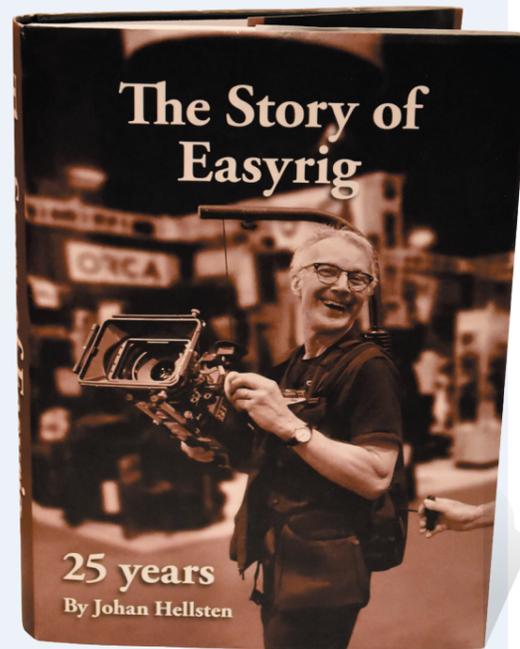


Book review:

The story of Easyrig

Johan Hellsten, the Swedish inventor of Easyrig, is a good friend to many in the GTC – not just through his support of the organisation as a long-term GTC sponsor, but also to the numerous GTC members who have relieved their backs from both short- and long-term damage by letting his ingenious rigs take the strain. To celebrate 25 years since the very first Easyrig was launched, Johan has collated his company's story into a lively, highly illustrated book, the pages of which are imbued with the infectious enthusiasm personality that has sustained Johan through both successes and knockbacks in the Easyrig journey. Zerb Managing Editor **Alison Chapman** has enjoyed reading 'The Story of Easyrig: 25 Years'.



The book, which is part company history and part autobiography, after a short background to Johan's childhood as the son of a bishop, properly starts with Johan working as a cameraman for Swedish Television (SVT), operating handheld for long, gruelling hours on the 1993 World Handball Championships. Suffering from aching shoulders, arms and back, and drawing on his experience and passion for hiking, he began to wonder if there was a way to transfer the weight of the camera from the shoulder to the hips (just as a well-designed backpack does). The result of his musings was the prototype Easycam (as it was called at first) constructed from an iron rod and some straps taken from an old backpack.

That was just the start of an inspiring tale of perseverance, ingenuity and responsiveness to industry and customer requirements, plus many other lessons learned that many a startup and developing business could benefit from. What comes across time and again is how sheer hard work and determination can overcome everything. From those early mockups using whatever was around in his garage, the rig has evolved into a sophisticated system that can support a range of different cameras, right up to a heavyweight full drama rig. At the core though, the early principles of suspending the camera on a 'string' and transferring the weight via a bar and vest to a belt on the hips have remained the same.

An eclectic mix of material

The book itself has a simple structure – 25 chapters, each covering a year from the first idea through to 2018. With its large number of pictures and extracts from articles published about the company along the way (including several from Zerb), the book has the feel of a personal scrapbook or diary – which, typically of the man behind it all, feels very approachable and friendly. And friendships and relationships are clearly hugely important to Johan – in fact, he ends each chapter with a statement from one of the many Easyrig customers from all over the world with whom he clearly maintains contact. The book is dedicated to: "my two daughters, Amanda and Rebecca and all those who I have come in contact with through my company".

Proudly Swedish

Another nice and actually fascinating touch is to include at the end of each chapter a mini wiki about a Swedish company – including some obvious ones like Ikea and Spotify, various photography related examples such as Hasselblad cameras and Gepe slides, but then, more randomly, who knew that famous Swede Alfred Nobel (after whom the prize is named) found his initial fame through inventing dynamite? Johan is clearly very proud of his home country and has

resolutely maintained all manufacture of Easyrig products in Sweden.

Building the business (literally)

Not surprisingly, as the company has grown, it has needed more buildings to house the expanding factory. So far, normal – but what is quite remarkable is that, as these buildings have been required, Johan has designed and built them himself, utilising local friends and companies – to the extent of even felling the trees and physically constructing the buildings. Amongst the ephemera included in this eclectic personal memoir of his company are some nice line drawings of the buildings that would lovingly be erected to house the next phase of the company. Whenever a building project was underway, Johan would employ local youngsters to work through the summer, for instance, painting the buildings. He believes it is important for young people to feel their worth and earn money rather than just being given it.

What really comes through in the book is just how much Johan appreciates and rewards all the help he has received through the years from camera professionals, dealers, technicians, companies and his family. As someone who has known Johan for years through the GTC, I can vouch for this personally. Although I don't often manage to get to exhibitions in person (and have never owned an Easyrig), I would frequently find that he hadn't forgotten me and would find a way of getting an Easyrig mug, tool pouch or other little gift delivered to me. Johan seems to really enjoy meeting and building longlasting relationships with his customers, many of whom have had their working lives transformed and extended by Easyrig.

to prove that you could handhold the (in those days very heavy) camera steadier and for longer than the next cameraperson. It was a great skill to have – but at what cost? As a 5'4" quite petite (in those days) camerawoman shooting *The Bill* at a time when the programme was pushing the drama boundaries with longer and longer, ever more complicated shots, all entirely handheld, I was determined to show I was capable of holding that camera steady for hours on end. You developed techniques and learned how to do it well – but years later I still pay the price with residual problems in my shoulders and upper back. At the time though, if someone had offered me an Easyrig (in fact I think they did once), I would very definitely have rejected it as a sign of weakness that I couldn't 'keep up with the boys'.

Johan persisted with breaking down this perception though, gaining respected advocates within the industry who tried out the rigs, realised the benefits and began to promote them – early adopters included GTC members Darren Bramley and even our current Chairman Graham Maunder, both of whom feature in the book. Nowadays, many top drama and documentary camera professionals are proud to reference their smart choice to take along an Easyrig as standard on any shoot where they may be called upon to film handheld.

Working with the GTC

In fact, Johan clearly really appreciates his long relationship with the GTC and celebrates this within the book. A proud moment recalled in the book was receiving the GTC Seal of Approval in our 40th Anniversary Year and he has also chosen to reproduce within the book several of the articles we have run in Zerb over the years when new refinements of the system have been introduced (we first wrote about it in the magazine in 2000 introducing the new system as "A weight off your shoulders").

Whether you are an Easyrig user or not, there is much to enjoy in this book, be it as a shining example of how to build and sustain a company based on a passionate belief in the benefits your product can bring to its users, or as a lesson in how treating people well and respecting professional relationships really works – or maybe you just want to learn some interesting facts about Swedish inventions, companies and famous people!

The development of Easyrig

Easyrig prototype	1993
Easyrig 1	1994
Easyrig 2	1998
Easyrig 2.5	2001
Turtel Rig	2001
Turtel X	2006
Easyrig 3 Cinema	2007
Easyrig 4	2009
Easyrig Mini	2011
Gimbal Rig vest	2014
Easyrig 5	2015
Cinema Flex vest	2016
Easyrig 5 Strong	2016
Easyrig Minimax	2016
Swing stop	2017
Gimbal Flex vest	2018
Umbrella holder	2018
Line guide	2018
Quick release	2018



Many varieties of Easyrig

The Easyrig system has evolved over its 25 years to incorporate a gimbal mount and include a range of models optimised for different weights of camera. There is even a version where the vest has been adapted specifically for women, who had reported that the design was uncomfortable – another example of responding to customer demands.

In the early days, one of the biggest battles was countering the fact that using the rig would make the wearer look a bit stupid or 'weak'. This was decades before the advent of the handheld gimbal rigs that are so omnipresent now, so if a shot was not to be done on a regular mount, it was full-blown Steadicam or handheld; those were the only options. And it was a matter of professional pride (machismo even)



Fact File

'The Story of Easyrig: 25 Years' by **Johan Hellsten** is available from Easyrig distributors.

Easyrig (including the book) is available in the UK from GTC sponsor Production Gear: www.productiongear.co.uk

See more about Easyrig: <http://easyrig.se>

