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Artisans: ever heard the yarn about tweed from Romney Marsh?

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A group of enterprising friends from Kent aims to follow in the footsteps of the Harris home weavers



Sheep grazing on Romney Marsh, Kent

Fifty-odd years ago, my late father arrived home with a brown jacket. It cost him a month's wages, which my mother was shirty about. He claimed it was an investment: certified Harris tweed, handwoven in the Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland. That stuff doesn't come cheap, nor should it. And in the late 1950s, Britons had never had it so good, so why not? He wore that jacket for three decades, which slowly transformed it into a pro-rata bargain.

Harris tweed is doing fine again, thanks to The Harris Tweed Authority, which was established in 1993 as a kind of guild for Hebridean home weavers whose products were part of a global marketplace. Jane Hepburn, who represents the authority, told me why its artisanal products remain special.

“The production process is quite complex. What starts as raw wool [shorn in June from blackface sheep] gets washed, dyed, blended, carded, spun, warped, beamed, handwoven, finished and finally stamped by the authority.”

Among these processes, the dyeing stage is vital: the phrase “dyed in the wool” applies. Unusually, Harris tweed wool is dyed as strands before being spun into a yarn, so it takes on myriad colours. The colours were traditionally gleaned from rocks and vegetation, principally lichens called “crotal”, then stewed in ammonia and fixed with urine to yield an unholy red-brown or orange soup. Though synthetic hues have long been used, yarns combining several such colours still convey the natural hues of the Hebrides.

The origins of Harris tweed (once “tweel”) are entangled. But the industry was formalised by Catherine Murray, Countess of Dunmore (1814-86) a Lady of the Bedchamber to Queen Victoria who resigned to help alleviate the Highland potato famine of 1846. She created jobs by regulating the production of the handmade cloth, and marketing it to the aristocratic hunting crowd.

In Kent, Pat Alston is following in the Countess of Dunmore’s footsteps. She is championing Romney sheep, which have grazed Romney Marsh since time immemorial. Here in 1936, her grandmother spent £1 on a scrap of coastal shingle and built the bungalow that Alston and her husband Robert now live in. The marshes behind them once supported the greatest density of sheep in the world. That was then. Fortunes have changed, with unemployment now about 26 per cent in the 18 to 24 age group. Alston’s friends, Anne Clifton-Holt and Faith Cowell, share her concern about the decommissioning of two power stations at Dungeness, the area’s biggest employers.

The inspiration came when she mentioned to a councillor that a local sheep-farming family had sent their wool to Wales to be cleaned, spun and woven. “Isn’t there a mill in Romney Marsh?” he asked. Her response was visionary: how about a Romney Marsh tweed, from Romney sheep, made by local weavers in the colours of the marshes — grey-blue sea, cerulean sky, grass punctuated by the odd fleck of clay-tile red?

Alston does not envisage the resuscitation of a local tradition. Kent exported its wool, and never knew tweed-weaving. No matter. A “hub” of artisans, such as The Harris Tweed Authority, could stimulate demand for a distinctive product and fuel the local economy.

“I thought I could wave a wand and it would happen. It doesn’t work like that,” she says. “We knew we wanted the project to be a social enterprise, putting any profits back into the community. As a retired diplomatic spouse, I had no commercial experience. However, I did have useful friends. One of them, a Savile Row tailor, put us in touch with Gordon Kaye, a worsted [type of wool yarn] manufacturer in Huddersfield. He proved to be an absolute gem.”

The friends then experienced the West Yorkshire weaving industry. The first stop, the mill of Chris Antich (C&J Antich & Sons, in Huddersfield) covers an area of three football pitches, where 70 staff operate machinery churning out 40,000 metres of cloth a week. On to Bradford, where Haworth Scouring company is the largest wool-processing plant transforming (in the words of the Romney Tweed company) “dirty fleeces full of muck and barbed wire into a virgin and smooth ‘top’, ready to be spun”. Lastly, John Walsh, of Abraham Moon & Sons in Guiseley, showed them a vertical mill, where scouring, dyeing, carding, spinning, designing and weaving happens in one building.

Trials proved that, like Harris tweed, it could be a viable cottage industry: volunteers toiled in their kitchens, dyeing and twisting yarn and weaving it into samples on their home looms. A Kentish designer, Ellen Hayward, drew up weaving patterns for the Romney tweed palette, developed by a coach-load of degree students at Central Saint Martins in London. Steven Hirst, a weaver from Huddersfield, road-tested the wool and patterns by weaving a 10-metre length, from which 74 designs for menswear were made. The warm reception convinced them that the demand was there.

Now funding must be found for a serious investment in premises. This is where the Romney tweed industry stands, at the birth of a tradition. If it works, I'm first in the queue for a jacket.

Photograph: Romney Tweed

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