Wool ticks all the boxes

Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), a not-for-profit organisation that promotes the country's Merino wool industry, spent 2007 celebrating. Last year marked the two-hundredth anniversary of the first shipment of wool from Australia to Europe. The first bale for sale arrived in London in 1807 and, over the intervening two centuries, Merino wool from Australia has become the most sought-after in the world.

AWI is fiercely proud of its heritage, as last year's festivities show, but global product development manager, Jimmy Jackson, makes it clear that the organisation now devotes a high proportion of its resources to creating innovation, bringing new qualities into the wool that will deliver a list of benefits to the wearer when woven into cloth and sewn into garments.

"Retailers always need something new," he says, "and sometimes they don't even know what new thing they want. So what we try to do is create a menu to present to retailers at the start of the dialogue."

He's involved in discussions of this kind with 370 different retailers at the moment, in Tokyo, New York and right across Europe. As soon as they express interest in an idea on the menu, the move from mere dialogue to product development can be swift.

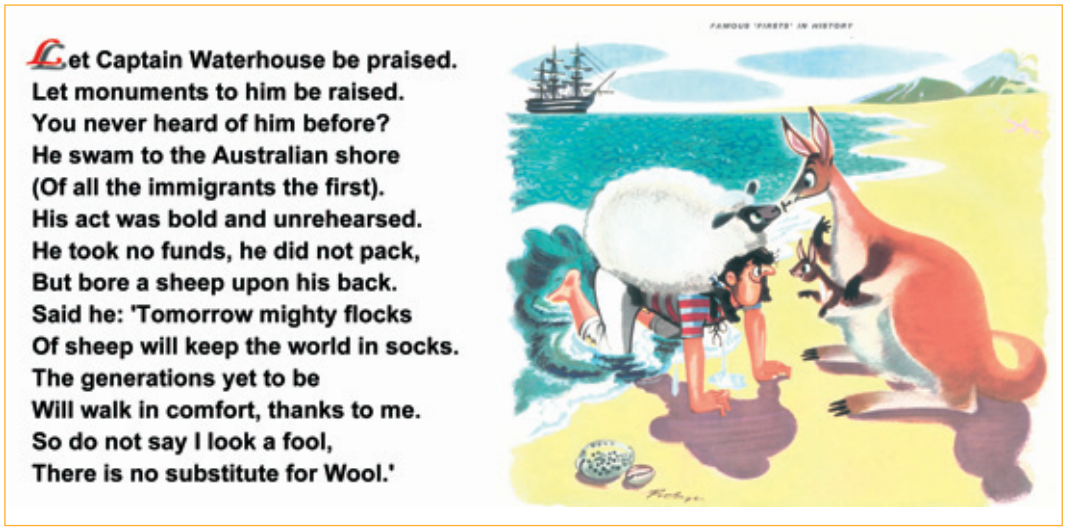
MerinoCare is a case in point. As the name suggests, it's wool that requires far less care because it's easier to wash, easier to dry and easier to keep stain-free. "It's also a product that cares for the wearer," Mr Jackson continues, "because it's a natural fibre, and one that also cares for the environment through these innovations, and because it's naturally biodegradable and sustainable."



Two centuries of heritage. Australian Merino Wool has become the most sought-after in the world.

Australian Wool Innovation

A seasoned (dyed-in-the-wool) industry professional from the north of England, Mr Jackson moved to Australia to take up his current position three years ago. He believes he's now working with the finest softest wool in the world, and that the fibre is becoming finer and softer every year. This adds to the esteem in which the apparel industry holds Australian wool, he argues, because "softness is associated with higher quality".



During the 1950s, the virtues of wool were promoted with the tag line "There is no substitute for wool". Light-hearted poems celebrated major events in history, from early ape-men through to the launch of the first satellites in space, and how wool might have altered the course of history. This poem refers to Captain Waterhouse who, it is claimed, landed the first sheep in Australia. Nearly 50 of these iconic advert-isements have now been traced and published.

Gibsons International, "There is no substitute for..." by Richard Proctor

Another of the fruits of AWI's investment in innovation is MerinoVisual. Again, the clue is in the name; this is a product that is more "visually exciting", Mr Jackson hopes. He says: "Blue jeans are the most popular garment in the world, and one of the ways brands have kept them popular is by producing new visual effects, such as a sand-blasted or bleached look. Well, we can do that with wool too."

Merino and microencapsulation is another recent development (see *WSA* November /December 2007). Mr Jackson describes it as "billions of tiny capsules" containing moisturisers or essential oils built into the fibre so that, when we wear a garment, we abrade some of them and gain the benefit of the liquids inside.

Added value

According to Libby Little, a communications consultant working with AWI, moves like these are essential as the demand for added value from consumers grows higher all the time. "Consumers are more informed and more empowered than ever before," she says. "They are seeking, not just benefits for themselves, but greater social responsibility from the companies they buy from. They are choosing the corporations they will buy from more carefully."

Her figures suggest that 45% of consumers in the United Kingdom have made it clear they will buy from brands that can show they have a lower carbon footprint. 'Green' is cool, and she points out that the fashion industry has embraced this idea enthusiastically for at least the last couple of years. She quotes Diesel as an example, whose 2007 advertising campaign highlighted the effects of global warming: in the artwork, water levels had risen to the presidents' heads on Mount Rushmore, the Great Wall of China was surrounded by desert, St Mark's Square in Venice was full of Polynesian parrots instead of pigeons.

"With Merino, the story is already there," she argues. "And consumers can connect with products that have a story. There's a small company in the Netherlands, Flocks, that tells you the full provenance of each sweater they make, the whole story—including the sheep's name, when it was shorn and so on."

If this sounds like a great deal of trouble for Flocks—the creation of Rotterdam-based designer Christien Meindertsma—to go to, it's worth noting that it is able to charge around $650 for one garment. This, too, is in keeping with what Libby Little has observed in the market: if retailers and brands get the story right, consumers are prepared to pay a premium.

Demographic boost

She feels that the demographic trend in Europe and North America is good news for Merino wool producers. She herself is a young woman living in, and loving, Paris, but you can understand why she speaks so passionately about her subject when you learn that she grew up on a sheep farm in South Australia.

Older people, she points out, are living longer, are healthier than ever before and have lots of money to spend; today's is the healthiest and wealthiest older generation we've ever seen. To put a figure on this, $7 trillion is the collective wealth of people over 65 globally. Women over the age of 55 in the US (where there is someone turning 50 every seven seconds) are spending an annual total of $21 billion on clothes, which is more than their under-25 counterparts.

Ms Little continues: "People are also ageing in a different way now. Many are in denial that they're ageing at all; 50% of people in the 50–59 age-bracket admit to thinking they're younger than they actually are. And we now have older actresses fronting advertising campaigns for the major fashion houses (Dior, with Sharon Stone, for example). The good news for us is that older people have a natural affinity with natural fibres. They're looking for something that's natural as well as classy and beautiful and Australian Merino fits all the categories."