

Fjallraven's classic G1000 is a polyester-cotton blend and the wax is a mixture of paraffin and bee's wax. Waxed fabrics are water and stain repellent, as well as windproof and insectproof.

Fjallraven

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The iconic weatherproof cotton fabric retains a cult following while it seeks to appeal to new fashion and sportswear users.

Waxing lyrical for an outdoor classic

First came Barbour and Belstaff, then Ralph Lauren and Timberland, now Fred Perry, Nike and adidas have added waxed cotton jackets to their collections.

Fast forward to the 21st century: the cotton fabrics are still waxed in Scotland, but they now come in new styles, including pastel colours, and in finishes that strive to adapt to modern tastes. The distinctive characteristic of the outdoor classic is that it enhances over time, acquiring, through the years, a unique difficult-to-imitate worn-in aspect. "A waxed jacket looks best after 20 years," says Jimmy Campbell, British Millerain CEO, who has been wearing his Barbour for as many years. In an age of fast fashion, manufacturers have sought to expedite the "weathered" look with new finishes. A special matt finish developed by British Millerain has a pre-aged feel, that wears down with friction. This style can be washed and tumble-dried to accelerate the aging process and soften the fabric.

Finishes and fabrics can be "tailored to enhance the vintage look" says Martin Wigglesworth, co-owner and director of Halley Stevensons. And for those who dislike the wet and sticky hand touch of waxed cottons, Halley Stevensons makes wax blends that are drier to the touch. The company's new "sunwashed" range, to be launched for spring-summer 2013, features a series of light hued shades that are rare in waxed cotton collections. The range is offered in two styles: a super dry finish and a machine-washable wax. These products are part of the new dynamics in waxed cotton that have drawn the attention of fashion and sportswear designers. Since 2009, when the Scottish company first exhibited at Première Vision, in Paris, sales and workforce have doubled. "There is every indication that sales will continue to grow," says Mr Wigglesworth.

What's in the wax?

Though waxed cottons would tend to evoke natural ingredients, the wax is at least partly oil-based, and therefore petrochemical. The substance used by British Millerain is said to be a mixture of oil and jelly, and it can be applied on cellulose and wool fabrics. "Our formula is different from fluorocarbon chemistry in that water does not bead but is absorbed by the fabric. The cotton yarns swell, closing the openings in the weave," says Mr Campbell. In addition to its weatherproofing properties, the oil in the gel is said to be "self-repairing" after creasing.



Fred Perry Harrington jacket featuring a waxed British Millerain finish.

Fred Perry

Waxes come in many grades and consistencies, which Halley Stevensons blends in various combinations to obtain different effects. Cotton represents more than 95% of the company's production, while waxed silks, linens, and worsted woollens have been developed for fashion customers, says Mr Wigglesworth.

Nordic sportswear brand Fjallraven is also known for its classic waxed G1000 fabric, which continues to be used for a sizeable portion of the company's products, including the trendy Numbers capsule collection. Originally used for tents, G1000 is a 65% polyester/35% cotton blend that was first introduced to the brand's clothing ranges in

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Founded in 1894, Barbour continues to manufacture its waxed clothing in its South Shields factory in the North East of England.

Barbour

1966. "The polyester speeds up drying times and the long-fibre Egyptian cotton provides a soft handle," says David Picamoles, French sales representative for the company. Fjallraven applies a wax made in a mixture of paraffin and bee's wax which makes the fabric water-repellent, windproof and stainproof.

In response to the eco trend in fashion, both Halley Stevensons and British Millerain have looked into using natural bee's wax and applied it on organic cotton grounds. "Bee's wax is stiffer than traditional wax, which makes the crease marks more visible and creates a shiny surface on seams that some clients appreciate," says Mr Campbell at British Millerain. The company has experimented with other natural ingredients, including canola, olive and sunflower oil.

Bee's wax not only has a stiffer handle, it also darkens the fabric, says Mr Wigglesworth at Halley Stevensons. The fabric is 20 to 25% more expensive than standard waxed cottons. "It's a great story, but not a big commercial success." Much like rapeseed wax, "which has a distinctive look and smell, but an infelicitous name," he adds.

Do not wash, do rewax

Waxed cotton manufacturers seem reluctant to stray far away from the tradition. But waxed cottons can neither be laundered, nor dry-cleaned. Wiping the garment clean and leaving it to dry in a cool and airy environment is the only option available. "Many fashion brands cannot wrap their head around that," notes Mr Wigglesworth. At Barbour, customer services manager Jean Kershaw warns "those who do wash a waxed garment do so at their own risk."

Barbour recommends re-waxing garments every year, as the wax dries out over the course of time, especially if the garment is worn often. The company's rewaxing department in the United Kingdom treats 14,000 jackets every year. Currently employing twelve people, the service not only rewaxes but also repairs jackets, some of which have been passed down from one generation to the next. Barbour applies the same wax it has been using for over a hundred years, and continues to manufacture the waxed jackets in its South Shields factory, in the North East of England.

Though Barbour's product offering has evolved over the years, the company continues to be known mostly for its classic outdoor jackets in traditional green, navy or brown. The tones evolve into subtle gradated shades as repeated waxing darkens the colouring and repeated wearing lightens it. That special, irreproducible lustre is what makes waxed cotton such a unique, and truly iconic, fabric.



The Numbers Series is made in Fjallraven's traditional G1000 waxed fabric and is sold by select high-end retailers.

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