SUSTAINABILITY: HARRIS TWEED

In terms of performance textiles, Harris Tweed would seem not to rank very highly, although long-lasting and traditionally fashionable, and early attempts to scale Mount Everest certainly proved that wool has a place in helping to survive inclement situations. Its continuing story illustrates an example of sustainability and why authenticity is becoming increasingly important.

Island storytellers attract global audience

Scotland's textile industry is based on wonderful raw material in the shape of the wool from its large population of sheep (the flock size today is more than 6.5 million and sheep outnumber people by almost 30%). Perhaps the most famous cloth Scottish weavers ever made from this wool is Harris Tweed, with Harris referring to one of the biggest and most remote of the country's Western Isles and tweed to the woven fabric that producers in Ireland, Wales and Scotland have traditionally made. The weavers on Harris have long been particularly skilled at it, with the fabric the island's most famous product.

Oldest registered trademark

And it is still famous throughout the garment-making world, so much so that it carries its own certification, the Orb Mark, the oldest still-in-use registered trademark in the whole of the United Kingdom; it dates back to 1906. It has also been used by Nike in its footwear collection. Only cloth that has been made from 100% pure new wool that is dyed and spun in woollen mills on the islands, is handwoven by weavers who live there before being returned to the local mills for finishing can claim to be authentic Harris Tweed and this authenticity is protected by law and jealously guarded by the Harris Tweed Authority, an independent body made up of local people, so that weavers and mill-workers will continue to have work on the islands, jobs being essential for keeping remote communities thriving.

Authority chairman, Norman Macdonald, who has lived on Harris and run his accountancy business there for 40 years, is quick to point out that, while Harris Tweed must be made in the Western Isles, it is not restricted to Harris itself. People on neighbouring islands have the same traditional skills and access to the same pure new wool and the body he chairs recognises their cloth as authentic Harris Tweed too.



Harris Tweed from Hebrides Mill.

Harris Tweed Authority

Cloth that comes from the land

"The archipelago of islands stretches for 300 kilometres," Mr Macdonald explains. "But we are on the periphery of Europe and the population is only 26,000; it averages out at only nine people per hectare. It's a most beautiful part of the world and you really can see that the cloth comes from the land. It's a high-quality, luxury cloth, made by hand, using yarns made from a kaleidoscope of dyed 100% virgin wool and woven by highly skilled artisans working from their own homes. These islands are the only place in the world where this cloth can be made."

Weavers are artisans, working in loom-sheds in their own homes, often combining spells at the loom with other work, such as looking after animals and land, fishing and bringing up families. They work closely with the three Harris Tweed mills that are operating in the area now, all three, curiously, in Lewis, which is part of the same island. The mills, which carry out dyeing,

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Luxury fashion brand Griffin sources all of its wool flannels in the UK and Harris Tweed regularly features in collections.

Griffin Studio

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blending, carding, spinning, warping, finishing and other parts of the process, employ hundreds of people which, Mr Macdonald points out, makes them vitally important sources of jobs in a remote region like the Western Isles.

Pioneer performance fabric

He says the cloth they produce together is a soft, breathable, warm, durable and versatile material and was well known for its protective and practical attributes long before the dawn of the modern technical textiles industry. As an example, he points to George Mallory.

Mallory was the English mountaineer who, according to some researchers, may have been the first person to summit Mount Everest. At the very least, he came within a few hundred metres of the summit during a famous expedition in 1924, but was lost and died on the mountain. It took 75 years for members of a special expedition to discover his body, buried in the snow. When they found him, the party was astonished to see that Mallory's clothing of choice for the climb had been a Harris Tweed suit. "It was a performance fabric long before the ones we see today," he says.

Farm to fashion

A well known figure in the wool industry, Peter Ackroyd has worked as a consultant in the past to the Harris Tweed Authority. He likens the links between the cloth and the islands to the French concept of 'terroir', so prevalent these days in food and wine, in which geographical authenticity is so important. "This is also very well understood among modern clothes designers," Mr Ackroyd continues, "who want to link farms and the land to fashion. And Harris Tweed ticks so many boxes: it's natural, sustainable, biodegradable, it's hand-woven and it is more or less carbon neutral. It is the most amazing fabric and is being increasingly appreciated by high fashion and, I think because it is such a sustainable fabric, Harris Tweed managed almost to triple production and turnover during this recent recession. The market is currently asking for exactly what the Harris Tweed industry can produce."

Peter Ackroyd first became involved with Harris Tweed in the mid-1970s, when the material was given preferential status for entry into the US market. Now he singles out Japan as a market in which it is enjoying particular success; it now accounts for 30% of all sales of the cloth. "I travel to Japan very often and I see in every department store and on every brand the name Harris Tweed," he says. "We live in a time of what is called 'ingredient branding'. When manufacturing is global, we look to the fabric as the thing that denotes the quality of a garment. This was happening in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s; the fabric was the thing that stood out in a suit, jacket or any type of garment. I congratulate Harris Tweed; it's iconic and is probably the most sustainable wool fabric in the world."



The Harris Tweed process

Shearing: The Harris Tweed story begins with pure virgin wools, and even though most of the wool is grown on the Scottish mainland, in the early summer the island communities join together to round up and shear the local sheep dotted throughout the landscape.

Washing and dyeing: Once sheared the wool is taken to the factories of the main tweed producers where it is washed and dyed.

Blending and carding: Coloured and white wools are blended to exact recipes to obtain the perfect hue. It is then carded between mechanical, toothed rollers that tease and mix the fibres before it is separated into yarn.

Spinning: The yarn has a twist put into it as it is spun to give it maximum strength for weaving. The spun yarn is wound onto bobbins to provide the ingredients of weft (left to right threads) and warp (vertical threads).

Warping: This vitally important process sees thousands of warp threads gathered in long hanks in a specific order and wound onto large beams for delivery, together with yarn for the weft, to the weavers.

Weaving: All Harris Tweed is hand woven on a treadle loom at each weaver's home. The beam of warp yarn is "tied in" to the loom by hand. The weaver will then set up the weft threads, pulling bobbins of yarn through a series of guides to be woven into the warp threads by a rapier. Once ready, the weaver begins to weave, always observing, correcting, mending and amending their creation until complete.

Finishing: The tweed returns to the mill in a 'greasy state' for darners to correct any small flaws. Dirt, oil and other impurities are removed by washing and beating the cloth in soda and soapy water before it is dried, steamed, pressed and cropped.

Stamping: The final process is the examination by the independent Harris Tweed Authority, before application of the famous "Orb" trademark, which is ironed onto the fabric.

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