

Selkirk-based textile house, Lochcarron of Scotland, is championing sustainability and localism with the launch this week of its first 100% UK-sourced kilt, writes **Kim McAllister**

WOOL already scores highly when it comes to green credentials, but one Scottish textile house is taking steps to boost its sustainability even further. Lochcarron of Scotland this week launches its 100% British product, having organised the full supply chain from sheep to cloth to take in only 400 miles.

“We worked with Spectrum Yarns to find a combination of British wool which was fine enough to use for our products, and we’ve come up with something which is 75% Scottish and uses the Cheviot breed of sheep. It’s a great breed, environmentally speaking, as it’s a mountain sheep so it’s not using arable land,” explained Dawn Robson-Bell, managing director of Lochcarron of Scotland.

“In fact, the specialists praise them as “hardy sheep who are good mothers!” she joked. “It is costing us a little bit more to produce this, but we’re not passing it on to the customers as we believe it’s the right thing to do.”

The search for the all-British product began before the pandemic hit, although the crisis did underline the risks of relying on wool from Australia and New Zealand. The climate in the southern hemisphere lends itself to farmers producing finer wools from different sheep breeds and so it is the more commercially mature market.

However Dawn and her team are keen to support UK farmers to build the industry at home; often it costs more to shear a sheep then can be recouped from the sale of the wool. “The demand is growing and we want to be a part of that,” she said. “The focus right now is on the meat, but it’s changing as manufacturers look to bring the supply chain closer to home. Eventually we want to be able to tell our customers exactly which farms the wool for our kilts and blankets has come from.”

Provenance has always been a big part of the kilt market, so it’s perhaps no surprise that Dawn found strong support from the key customers with whom she trialled the new 100% British wool.

“They love the British story, they immediately thought it was a great opportunity for them,” Dawn confirmed.

“They just can’t wait to get their hands on it now. With every piece of cloth, we record which yarns go into it. If a customer phones up and says they’ve just bought a length of Black Watch, is it 100% British? We can go into the computer system and tell them the exact percentages.”

It’s not just wholesale customers who appreciate these efforts, fashion brands are also very interested in provenance –and not just for the nice story. Investors are keen to scrutinise



■ Lochcarron’s new 100% British wool kilts have been enthusiastically received in trials with key customers

off-cuts are popular with craft groups and students.

“People buy wool products as a legacy – kilts in particular,” Dawn said.

“Kilts are often handed down through the generations and they’re a really beautiful heirloom piece.

“On the traditional side of the business, we work with investment pieces, they’re often for special occasions.

“The cloth is also a good investment for kilt hire businesses because it has a longer shelf life, they can turn it around and around and get more for their money. The fabric is not cheap but it performs well.”

The new 100% British wool is working its way through the mill, with many of the yarns already replaced. The intention is for 25% of Lochcarron’s annual purchase to be a completely British product, which amounts to a big investment from the company. Dawn admitted it would probably have been easier to start with a smaller project.

“Because of the way the quality was going to work, we’ve actually started with one of our best selling products – and so it’s quite a substantial amount that we’re converting to an all British source,” she said.

This policy is designed to ensure the longevity of the business.

“We’re the opposite of fast fashion,” Dawn said.

“We need to think about the value of what we do. You don’t get much more authentic than Scottish tartan, so if we can work on keeping the supply chain as local as possible while still making commercial sense, then it’s worth it.”

It may be early stages for the British wool industry to try to compete with the more mature Australian and Kiwi markets, but it’s a move that more and more British manufacturers are trying to make.

Finding the correct quality of the wool is key, and comes with inherent limitations – the size of the flocks and the resources they require, along with the volume of fleeces that make the grade, for example.

“I think we are all aware that there is the demand,” Dawn admitted. “Hopefully we can work together to meet that demand, and improve the industry and the commercial value. We want to improve the price that farmers are going to get to create an all-round better product.”

From sheep to cloth ... in just 400 miles



■ Wool is a sustainable fibre that biodegrades quickly

every stage of the supply chain to ensure their money is safe. “The paperwork we fill in from high end fashion brands has details about all kinds of things, including the types

of labour we use, which reflects concerns about human rights in some countries around the world. I’ve worked here for thirty years and I’ve seen the questions change to really focus on ethics and sustainability.”

Wool is growing in popularity thanks to its natural advantages when it comes to making environmentally-friendly choices.

It’s a sustainable fibre which biodegrades quickly, releasing nutrients back into the soil. It is produced by the animal every year when it is shorn for welfare reasons.

Shearing keeps sheep cool in the warmer months and reduces the risk of parasitic infestation and disease. It also reduces the risk of sheep becoming ‘rigged’ or stuck on their backs, which can make them vulnerable to attack by crows or other predators.

Wool wears well, repels stains and has natural breathability – so requires less frequent cleaning. It’s also an industry with very little waste – low grade wool is repurposed for a number of uses including insulation and

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A commitment to recycling locally is dyed in the wool

A KEY part of Lochcarron’s sustainability policy is to work with the local community whenever possible.

Dawn Robson-Bell has recently established working relationships with two local businesses to help with recycling some of the company’s waste products.

Sharp Polymer Solutions & Border Plastics Recycling and PegTog both collect plastic products to recycle them and give them a new lease of life.

“We’ve only found out about Border Plastics recently, they’re about nine miles away from us,” Dawn explained. “They take our big blue plastic drums that the dyes come in and also the little plastic cones the yarn sits on.”

Dawn was also impressed to find the start-up PegTog, also very locally situated in Jedburgh, which recycles plastic into bricks to create garden planters. “I was in the shop buying some

to try to get my garden into shape, and got chatting to the guy. We realised his products were probably made from mine! So isn’t it interesting how, when you start asking questions, you can find out quite a lot about how you can make these positive changes? It’s a lovely little circle,” Dawn said.

Lochcarron has an ongoing relationship with the charity ReusefulUK which has a network of ‘scrapstores’ all over the UK, five of which are in Scotland. It supports the reuse of unwanted resources for the benefit of children and communities. Clean reusable scrap materials, which might otherwise end up in landfill, are made available for children to play with. Lochcarron bundles up end cuts of cloth or unused yarn to support the initiative.

“Any seconds of accessories that we make or scraps of fabric, we convert into other products wherever we can,” Dawn said.



“We make up patchwork bundles and craft bags that can be sold for retail or donated. We’re always happy to donate so that different groups can be introduced to textiles.

We’re very conscious of the possibilities for everything we use and we actively scrap very, very little of our fabric or textile waste. We have found so many ways to recycle and upcycle.”

Perhaps the largest local company Lochcarron works with is the British Wool Grading Depot, six miles away. There, wool is collected and graded from farms across the Scottish Borders and around Scotland. “It can take up to five years to train as a sorter – the guys are unbelievable the knowledge they have, how they can identify what to you and I

■ Cheviot sheep, left, are renowned for the consistency and quality of their wool

would just look like a pile of greasy fleece,” Dawn joked.

“Their abilities are all astounding and they love what they do. They’re just so enthusiastic about it and knowledgeable. They love the Cheviot breed that we use for our wool, they say it’s one of the best because its consistency and quality is so good. It doesn’t appear to have been changed very much from its initial breeding, it’s very true to its lines, they can be traced back hundreds of years and that consistency matters to the quality.”

The wool sorting depot is another business with very little waste. All the wool is used for a purpose, even the fleece that’s marked by the farmer to identify his herd can be washed and reused.

“I mean it’s not a job everyone would do because the fleeces can be quite smelly, but the lanolin which occurs naturally in the wool means their hands will be the softest in the world,” Dawn joked.

“It’s extracted to be used in hand creams and it’s lovely. It’s great to be a part of an industry with so many environmental benefits.”

100
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