

MATERIALS TEXTILES INDUSTRY

Organic tweed from the Isle of Mull

PHILIPPA WATKINS, WGSN 19.12.06

The first organic Scottish wool tweed is being produced from a rare and ancient breed of sheep on the Isle of Mull, off the west coast of Scotland. WGSN reports.



Ardalanish tweed products

This unique new cloth, a finished tweed, has been awarded Scotland's first organic certificate as recognised by the Soil Association.

The organic process all begins on the south-west corner of Mull at **Ardalanish Farm**, where husband and wife team Aeneas and Minty Mackay have been farming organically since 1997. The couple have built up a flock of small, black Kyloe Highland cattle and Hebridean sheep.

The wool for the tweed comes from the native breed of Hebridean sheep, uniquely adapted to the environment of the Hebrides to withstand the harsh climate. The breed had almost disappeared a century ago, but now the Mackay's flock is one of the largest in the country.

The fleece, finer than wool from the more common black-faced sheep, **comes in natural colours ranging from black to chocolate brown through to silver grey.**



Ardalanish tweed

Historic riding habit designed by ShonaghK

The fleece is sent to Bradford for scouring by **Haworth Scouring**, whose new **effluent treatment plant and waste water filtration and recycling processes have earned them organic certification.** Carding and spinning is done by the trading arm of the **New Lanark Heritage Centre**, a beautifully restored 18th century weaving village, now a World Heritage site.

The wool yarn then comes back to Ardalanish Farm for weaving. Here, in a small restored stone cowshed, is **Isle of Mull Weavers** - founded in 1987 by Bob and Kathy Ryan and who installed their looms last year.

Fact file

- Ardalanish organic tweed is the first organic wool tweed produced from a rare breed of sheep in the Isle of Mull.
- The Hebridean and Shetland sheep, from which the fleece is taken, are raised on organic farms.
- All textile processes, including scouring, spinning and finishing, have been certified as organic by the Soil Association.
- Weaving on the farm is with natural, coloured fleece.
- Products include fabric for jacketing, hats, waistcoats, blankets, shawls and scarves.
- Ardalanish tweed featured in an exclusive collection for the Paris Fashion Show.
- Products can be bought from the website.
- The Soil Association conference will take place January 26-27 at Cardiff International Arena. It will focus on the urgent need to develop new food and farming system models. Ardalanish organic tweed will feature in the Fashion Show.

Contact

Isle of Mull Organic Weavers
www.isleofmullweavers.com

New Lanark Heritage Centre
www.newlanark.org

The Soil Association
www.soilassociation.org

The natural colours of the Hebridean sheep are used in various combinations in the weaving, mixed with the natural white and fawn of Shetland wool (another ancient Scottish breed), which has also been organically grown and processed.

Finishing is the last link in the production chain for organic certification. Organic cloth finishers **Schofield's of Galashiels** have worked to achieve the necessary eco standards and recently received their organic certification.

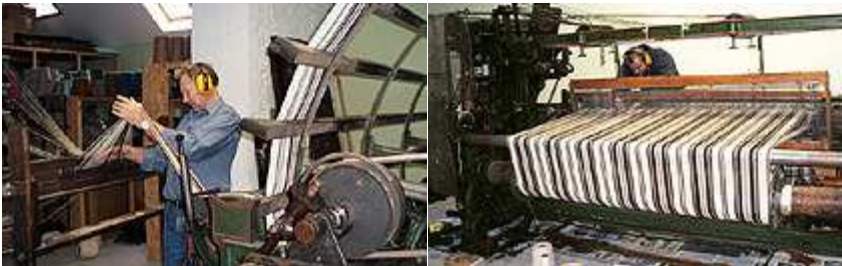


Hebridean sheep

The **country tweeds and fabrics are used for jacketing, hats and waistcoats (US: vests) and the mill also produces blankets, shawls and scarves.** All products can be bought through the mill's website.

The whole project only came about through the support and collaboration of companies with organic processes, and this can also help small producers. "I am so encouraged that these people are collaborating and working together. We could not do it without their knowledge and skills," says Minty Mackay.

"We have had a brilliant response, showing at various events," she continues. **"We processed a ton of raw fleece last year, which is being doubled this year."** Paying a fair price to Hebridean and Shetland sheep breeders for their wool also encourages them to go organic and look after their environment by using native breeds of sheep.



Warping and weaving

The farm also welcomes visitors to learn about organic farming methods. Visitors can observe the whole weaving process and also buy the products at the farm shop, all the while admiring the rugged country and beautiful coastline.

"We bring an educational aspect to our business," says Minty, "showing people the primary importance of understanding the land and its needs and of allowing sustainable ecological relationships to develop with animals which have evolved with the environment."

There has been a surge of interest in **organic textiles, as highlighted by the fashion show to be held at the Soil Association's conference in Cardiff** in January, where organic tweeds will be featured.



Ardalanish tweed products

The Mackays see the production of organic tweed at Ardalanish as part of a wider movement and educational process. "The message is getting through. We are starting to see the return to farms as part of small communities, **integrated into sustainable ways of life and a gradual return to traditional methods** - in both farming and textile production."

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