

## THE UK WOOL INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE

**P. R. Ackroyd**

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Peter Ackroyd was born in 1950 in Bradford amidst the grime and the grandeur of the world's largest worsted manufacturing city in the middle of the last century. In those days more than 50,000 people worked in wool worsted top-making, spinning and weaving. Now only 5,000 work in the industry in the West Yorkshire region. Peter wrote this article very recently and thought it would be of interest to the cotton community:

'Looking through some bunches of rather beautiful and unmistakeably British cloths on Savile Row recently, I was reminded of the now silent siren voices that gleefully warned of the imminent demise of woollen and worsted weaving in West Yorkshire and Scotland, some twenty years ago.

So much has changed in UK textile manufacturing since the Second World War and long gone are most of the magnificent mills built at the height of the English industrial revolution that supplied army and Empire with regulation drab, serge and baratheia. Gone also are the once famous suppliers to the British High Street who left Leeds in almost indecent haste in the 1980s, and are now cutting and sewing their suits and jackets in the boondocks of an increasingly expensive Middle Kingdom. Several key players are looking at relocating back into the UK after an absence of many years. The UK wool textile trade that once employed 50,000 workers, now employs between 7,000/8,000; 10,000 if you include the carpet sector.

As manufacturing of any description quickly became a fraction of the nation's GDP and anyone who made anything in Britain was thought to have a slate loose, several entrepreneurial UK weavers of fine worsteds and tweeds sought to strengthen ties with some staunchly anglophile customers beyond these shores.

Happily, as cheap and nasty textiles and unsavoury fast fashion gained centre stage here at home, traditional British looks - often with a necessary artistic twist, in Glen checks, Prince of Wales checks, District checks from the Highlands, Harris, Shetland, Donegal and in many more renowned weaves - continued to be revered in the fashion capitals of the world. Classical worsted suitings, woven in Yorkshire in microns too fine for much of the UK market were (and still are) coveted by Arab emirs, Japanese and American businessmen and are even worn with pride by many a discerning Italian. The industry invests heavily in design, drawing on a wealth of talent from Britain's respected fashion and textile colleges.

So, it should come as no surprise that several mills in the UK, in order to thrive, have been successfully running at over 90% export for 30 years or more. Many manufacturers have strategically diversified production, adding interior and technical textiles to their lifestyle portfolios. The relatively recent success of premier British fashion brands at home and overseas has helped reverse an alarming supply side downward price spiral trend that saw poor quality cloths feature in high priced

goods. Today's informed consumers (particularly Chinese big spenders) are refusing to pay premium prices for products of dubious provenance and UK weavers are benefiting accordingly. In what seems to be something of a recent reversal of fortune, several 'better-end' UK retailers have begun to feature British woollen and worsted fabrics in their collections, even identifying the merchandise with the weaver's woven label sewn onto the cuff.

Perhaps it is always pertinent to remind those not involved in the trade that wool, unlike other fibres, is natural, renewable and flame retardant - qualities that 'tick a number of boxes' as health and safety and environmental concerns continue to loom ever larger. All of Britain's woollen and worsted mills support the remarkably successful Campaign for Wool, now in its fourth year and whose Patron, HRH The Prince of Wales is a keen advocate of sustainability and ecological accountability. Mills are well aware of the need to reduce the industry's carbon footprint and all participate in a number of climate change schemes.

There are now around 38 spinners and weavers of quintessentially British yarns and fabrics in England and Scotland who have invested heavily in both plant and people over the years. All can take great pride in saying they survived against the odds. There will inevitably be trouble ahead at the mill, for with any niche product, problems of critical mass, training and recruitment, sanctity of intellectual property and ensuing predatory pricing are all areas that will require constant vigilance and innovative leadership.

As the luxury market continues its rapid global expansion, I have no doubt that the role of suppliers at the cutting edge of fashion able to provide products of impeccable quality with the added value of tradition, heritage and lineage, will grow exponentially in the years to come.'

Peter R. Ackroyd

Peter wanted to add that Bradford, Halifax and Huddersfield are West Yorkshire towns twinned with Roubaix, Aachen, Verviers and Moenchengladbach. More from Peter about the niche wool industry at the conference in Bremen.