

The Origins of Harris Tweed

Martin Martin, in his book, 'The Western Isles of Scotland', first published in 1703 refers to the weaving of a tartan cloth which he saw during his visit.

When Captain Dymes visited Lewis in 1630 he listed among the exports from the Port of Stornoway plaid and tartan.

A spinning school was established in Stornoway in 1763 and later several such schools were to be found throughout the Island. These schools were not however for woollen spinning but for flax spinning.

Of course spinning was done in earlier times on a distaff, spindle and whorl and that method of spinning was still used in Lewis in the 19th century. I have a distaff and spindle in Calbost. 'congall' (The spinning wheel is a much more modern device).

Coming nearer to our own day, people kept as many sheep as they could for their wool and mutton. They washed the wool, dyed it with vegetable dyes, carded and spun the wool at home. I have seen a little of all these processes. Then they took the yarn to the weaver with instructions as to how they wanted it woven. They called the tweed 'clo-mor'.

It is said that the women of Harris were making a name for themselves as early as the 1820s with the excellent cloth they were weaving.

Marion and Christina Macleod who were born in the Island of Pabbay, in the Sound of Harris in 1810, are said to have sold the first piece of tweed recognised as such.

In 1845 they went to Strond in South Harris and took their weaving skills with them, and made a good impression on the Countess of Dunmore. It was Lord and Lady Dunmore who were the proprietors of South Harris at that time.

Realising the potential of the cloth the countess felt it could be commercialised and she took steps to improve the quality and designs by paying the expense of sending some Harris girls to Alloa to learn the weaving of intricate patterns. Now-a-days we would call it a residential training course.

The Dunmore's got the local weavers to weave the Murray tartan for them and they used the tweed both for themselves and their staff as well as introducing it to their guests from the south.

In that way it was said that it was the Dunmore's who first commercialised the local clo-mor and naturally it was referred to as 'Harris Tweed'. That was in the early 1840s. By 1850 Harris Tweed was gaining a reputation and it was sold to eager London customers.

Until about the end of the 19th century this cloth, of a rough homespun type, was made in a certain range of colours and check patterns in all the Islands off the coast of Scotland, both as a means of producing tweeds and blankets for the crofters own use, and also to supply a small market among the Highland gentry and sporting guests.

It was during the second half of the 19th century that Harris Tweed earned its reputation as a cloth of quality and distinction as well as the glamour of home-spun, natural dyes, peat fires and thatched cottages.

Up to the end of the 19th century, Harris Tweed was entirely a cottage industry, made entirely by hand. The tweed from the Islands was sold under a variety of names, as well as Harris Tweed, there was Lewis Tweed, Uist Tweed, St Kilda Tweed etc.

St Kilda: At one time, up to 1,000 yards was shipped from St Kilda by the Annual Steamer to Glasgow.

Domestic Use: We see therefore that cloth was produced in the Islands for domestic use before 1840.

Commercial: From the 1840s onwards the local handmade tweed was commercialised.

Philanthropy: We should note at this stage a number of philanthropic persons and agencies that helped to develop the Harris Tweed industry by bringing Hebridean tweeds and knitwear to the attention of the general public.

At the head of the list we put:

1. Lord and Lady Dunmore of Harris
2. Mrs Thomas, an Edinburgh woman who had a small depot for the sale of Harris Tweed and knitted goods in Edinburgh, at least as early as 1888. She moved to London at the end of the century and continued her activities there.
3. Lady Gordon Cathcart Proprietress of Uist.
4. Mrs Mary Stewart Mackenzie of Seaforth

5. Millicent - Duchess of Sutherland
6. Mrs Jessie Platt of Eishken
7. Scottish Home Industries Association
8. Highland Home Industries
9. The Crofters' Agency.
(The last named had a depot in Balallan for a while.)

Commercial Interests: The popularity of the Harris and Hebridean tweeds in the market place was duly noted by commercial interests by the turn of the century. They wanted to cash-in on the commercial potential of the name and good-will of Harris Tweed. Imitation Harris Tweed (power-woven) began to appear on the British and Continental markets and even as far away as Japan later.

Trade Mark: Mr R.F. Matheson, Factor for the North Harris Estate suggested in the 1890s, that the Harris merchants should obtain a trade mark but nothing positive was done about it then and the subject came up from time to time during the first decade of the 20th century.

In the passing may we mention that it was the Industrial Revolution that killed-off the croft and cottage industries on the mainland but such industries survived longer in the Islands because of our remoteness and communication difficulties.

Presently a demand arose in the industrial areas for crofter handmade goods because it was believed that machine made goods were inferior to handmade goods. People still believe that to be the case.

For the benefit of the young people may I mention that the various processes in the manufacture of home-spun provided a lot of work for the people before the industry was mechanised in the 20th century.

1. Wool had to be washed which was usually done near a running stream or at a loch.
2. Vegetable Dyes such as 'crotal' had to be gathered and I often engaged in the scraping of crotal from the rocks. In fact in the early 1930s the mills bought bags of crotal and Murchadh, Alastair Hamish (Murdo Macdonald 1 Habost) who went round the villages with a butcher's van collected bags of crotal @ 4/- a piece for James Macdonald Ltd Mills.
3. After the wool was washed it was dyed in a big three legged pot or boiler by the side of a loch or stream. (again I carried out the dyeing process myself in the 1940s when we could not get mill spun yarn in Stornoway.)
4. Until the 1930s the finishing of the crofter tweeds and blanketing was done at home, 'luadh', by a team of women. (again I recall attending many luadhs in the 1930s).
5. The first finishing plant in Stornoway was set up in 1933 by James Macdonald Ltd Wool Mills. Prior to that the mills sent their tweeds to the mainland for finishing (again I recall sending tweed to Seedhill Finishers in Paisley for finishing.)
6. I should have mentioned the carding of the wool which was a very slow and tedious process. It was usually done by the ladies and they used a dab of fish oil to help the process. Oil is used in the modern carding mills now-a-days in the same way.
7. After the carding there was the spinning on the wheel, which was again women's work.
8. Between, housework, cooking, croft work, knitting, carding, spinning and many other chores the Island women of yesteryear were very busy.
9. As a matter of interest in the passing, there were several spinning wheels working continuously at Valtos House, Lochs, from 1893 to 1901. Women were employed for the purpose.

The Congested District Board was established in 1897 and that Board took a keen interest in the tweed industry in the Islands. It was responsible for a lot of improvements, such as better designs, introduced by a paid agent of the Board, improved looms and large dyeing pots were also supplied by the Board.

We have one of the Congested District Board's boilers at Calbost yet, but I think a lot of the big three legged dyeing pots that may still be seen was supplied by the Board.

Looms: Beart-bheag - Prior to the 1890s, it was the beart-bheag that was in use. The shuttle was passed through the shed by hand much the same as the small looms used in schools. Beart-mhor - It is said that the first beart-mhor in Lewis belonged to James Mackenzie, 4 Gravir (Seumas-an-Habost). The date is given as about 1896. The second one was at Calbost. It was constructed by my grandfather, Kenneth Nicolson, 11 Calbost 'Coinneach Mhurchaidh' after he saw Seumas-an-Habost's loom.

However, when Seumas heard that Kenneth Nicolson was constructing a beart-mhor he would not let him into his weaving shed any more and he refused to give him information as to where he might purchase a reed. Coinneach said, "Cha n'ainneadh domh nach dean mi chuis", and he put an advertisement in the Highland News and got a lot of replies.

As already stated the Congested District Board assisted the crofters with the purchase of looms, and it was reported by the Board that there were 55 looms in Lewis in 1899. By 1906, there were 161 looms in Lewis; and by 1911 there were nearly 300 looms in Lewis (I think these figures refer to the new beart mhor type).

In Lewis the manufacture of Harris Tweed for sale was mainly done in Lochs and Uig, the two districts adjacent to Harris, at the outset. Later on it spread all over the Island - but generally speaking not until the 20th century.

Mainland Carded Wool: Increased demand for the tweed brought its own problems. The manufacturers of the cloth in the Islands wanted to increase their production in order to meet the demand. Carding was a slow process and by the turn of the century it was considered to be a bottleneck and ambitious producers began to cast their eyes on to the mainland mills in order to relieve the tedium of long hours of carding (In actual fact the motive was more profit).

Knitting Yarns: Crofters were already getting knitting yarn from mainland mills. They sent their own wool to the mainland for conversion into knitting yarn and it was a very short step to send their own wool to mainland mills for carding.

This was the very beginning of the mechanisation of the Harris Tweed industry and the process is still going on nearly 100 years later. Where shall it all end?

First Carding Mill: In 1900, Sir Samuel Scott the Harris Proprietor wanted to help the Crofters of Harris with their tweed and he set up a small carding mill.

In 1901, the following year, Aeneas Mackenzie, the man who operated the Boat Slip at Stornoway, brought in a carding plant and operated it with a belt from a shaft in his Patent Slip. It was called Patent Slip Wool Mills.

After Aeneas Mackenzie a Mr John Morrison operated Patent Slip Wool Mills but it would appear that he did not pursue the matter very hard. Anyhow the First World War started.

After John Morrison, S.A. Newall who was the last farmer at Aignish before the crofters raided that farm early in the 20th century, took over Patent Slip Wool Mills.

S.A. Newall had a butcher's shop on Francis Street and ex-Provost Roderick Smith related to me how Mr Newall bought his first web of Harris Tweed.

Newall was a man from Yorkshire but not a textile man. Roddy Smith who had a Chemist shop on North Beach Street took a walk over to No.2 Wharf as usual and who met him there but Sam Newall, and he related to him how a man from Lochs offered him a roll of tweed in the morning in order to settle his butcher's account. Sam Newall refused.

Roddy said to him, he was foolish to do that because the man probably had nothing else to offer him, and in any case he (Sam) was in the habit of spending a holiday in Yorkshire every year and surely he could dispose of that cloth in Yorkshire.

As they were talking the man from Lochs came into view on his way to his boat with the roll of tweed on his back. Roddy parted with Sam Newall and when he looked back, Sam and the man from Lochs were walking back to Newall's shop with the roll of tweed.

That was the first of many tweeds Sam Newall bought from the crofters.

I was curious as to who was the man from Lochs and in the course of my enquiries, Murdag 'Dimon' Macleod from 4 Garyvard told me that it was her father who sold the first tweed to Sam Newall.

The second one was sold to him by 'Alastair Rhuaridh' from 1 Garyvard.

Kenneth Mackenzie Wool Mills Ltd 1909: The next mill that was built in Lewis was that of Kenneth Mackenzie, 'Coinneach Alex Coinneach'. Coinneach Alex's grandfather, Kenneth Mackenzie 'Coinneach Bad-a-Cro' from the west coast of the Minch was the tenant at Crossbost when the Loch Shell refugees took over the former tack of Crossbost in 1843. He then moved over to Crobeg with his father-in-law John Macdonald. Alex, his son, subsequently moved to Stornoway and was engaged in the fishing there.

Coinneach Alex, his son, started to build a barrel factory on Lewis Street but he changed his mind and put carding and spinning machinery into his new building in order to supply the crofters with carded wool and spin their own wool for them. That was in 1909.

Later on Kenneth Mackenzie commenced to manufacture Harris Tweed on his own account.

The people of Uist and Barra had to send their wool to Harris or Stornoway for carding. After the First World War weaving died out in the Uists.

To Sum up: We see that the Harris Tweed Industry was originally a crofters' cottage industry entirely. By the beginning of the 20th century machine carded wool was being used.

- a. It was first supplied from the mainland then carded wool became available in Harris in 1900 and in Lewis in 1901.
- b. Early in the 20th century mill spun yarn started to come into the Island from the mainland.
- c. By 1909 mill spun yarn was available in Stornoway.

Merchants bought the tweed and after a while they began to make tweed on their own account - and that was the beginning of the small producers.

Merchants bought wool and passed it on to families that were willing to card and spin it and sometimes weave it - and they were paid by the truck system, which meant very often that poor families were exploited sometimes ruthlessly. The truck system continued until the Second World War, but the mills did not participate in it.

Around the beginning of the 20th century it was considered that it required 8 women spinners to keep one weaver fully occupied.

The first 30 Hattersley single shuttle 36" looms came to Lewis in 1919.

The first 40 inch Reed six shuttle came in 1924.

The Harris Tweed Industry used at one time about 1/3rd of the total Scottish Wool.

The definition of the Orb stamp confines Harris Tweed to virgin Scottish wool and considering that other users of wool are in the market for a share of the Scottish wool, it is possible that being tied to Scottish wool only might one day be a limiting factor in the production of Orb Harris Tweed, or alternatively that the demand for Scottish wool would raise the eventual price of Harris Tweed beyond what many prospective purchasers are prepared to pay.

In fact, being tied to Scottish wool in the past presented the Orb spinners from competing with mainland yarn Harris Tweed such as 'Shield' Harris Tweed etc.

'Orb' Trademark

It was the people of Harris that took the initiative in applying for a Trademark. The merchants of Harris were formed into an association called 'The Harris Tweed Association' of Harris.

To begin with they wanted a Trademark for Harris Tweed for the Island of Harris, but the Board-of-Trade advised them to apply for a Trademark for all the Outer Hebrides from Lewis to Barra.

Of course there were several other organisations interested in a Trademark as well at that time such as 'Scottish Home Industries', 'Highland Home Industries' etc.

At that time the tweed industry in Harris was mainly in the 'Bays' area and in Lewis it was mainly in the Lochs area and Uig.

The Orb Trademark number 319214 was registered in 1910. It was a certification mark of origin and the definition read as follows,

'Harris Tweed is a tweed, hand spun, hand woven and finished by hand in the Outer Hebrides, with 'Made in Harris' or 'Made in Lewis' or 'Made in Uist' etc. added as appropriate'.

The first cloth was stamped with the 'Orb' in 1911.

An association was formed to administer the Trademark. It was called 'The Harris Tweed Association Ltd.' and the first Committee of Management consisted of the following 8 persons

1. The Duchess of Sutherland, Dunrobin Castle

2. Mr William Harrison Agricultural Engineer, Lancashire
3. Mrs Mary Stewart Mackenzie Seaforth, Brahan Castle
4. Mr George accountant, Sussex
5. Mr John Macleod (Norman Macleod at first, Merchant, Tarbert)
6. Mr Donald Morrison, Merchant, Tarbert
7. Mr Donald Maciver, Merchant, Stornoway
8. Mr Malcolm Macdonald

Nominated as to two by

The Scottish Home Industries Association Ltd.
The Crofters' Agency
The Harris Tweed Association of Tarbert
The Lewis-Harris Tweed Association

Actually the two Lewis members were not on the management committee at first - not until 1912.

A special resolution was passed in 1929 changing the constitution of the Harris Tweed Association Ltd. to a self perpetuating association and I have often criticised the unrepresentative nature of the association and the extended length of service the members of the Management Committee serve, very often for life.

That now is the end of the period 1840 to 1912 and we have at this point an entirely handmade product protected by a certification Trademark.