

Report on the Harris Tweed Industry
Adopted by the Lewis Association
at a meeting on 13th October, 1944

Importance of the Industry to Lewis:

1. The economy of the Island of Lewis rests on three industries, crofting, fishing and the manufacture of Harris Tweed.
2. Crofting and fishing are the Island's basic industries, and it cannot prosper unless they are restored to a flourishing condition, but, even at the best, crofting and fishing alone cannot support the present population of the Island to a reasonable standard, and the maintenance and expansion of the Harris Tweed industry is thus of vital importance.
3. The expansion of the Harris Tweed industry is especially urgent now that the problems of demobilisation are before us.

The Government has a responsibility to find employment for the hundreds of Lewis men and women who will shortly be returning from the services. After long years of absence from their homes, they are entitled to expect that employment will be found for them within their native Island. That cannot be done unless the Harris Tweed industry, or at least the weaving process, is protected from outside competition. The nature of the protection required is dealt with in detail later in the report, but here is the forefront: The Association staked a claim for full consideration for the men and women who can only expect to find employment at their homes through the expansion of the Harris Tweed trade. In this connection it must be borne in mind that the Lewis men and women in the service, having been for the most part employed on their own account, or unemployed, at the outbreak of war, will derive little benefit from the Act of Parliament guaranteeing discharged men reinstatement in their pre-war jobs. The Government is here faced with a special problem, to the solution of which the Harris Tweed industry can make a big contribution, if it is encouraged, developed and protected.

4. In the years immediately before the outbreak of war, the Harris Tweed industry was much the largest revenue producer of the three local industries. This is important in a community where the lack of cash producing industries has in the past prevented desirable and indeed essential improvements in their standard of living. Where a family is well provided with wholesome food from the croft and the sea, a few pounds of ready cash from the weaving of tweeds may make all the difference between poverty and comparative affluence.
5. Another valuable feature of the Harris Tweed trade is that the income accruing from it is well spread throughout the Island. Both town and country have benefited, although (as is shown later in the report), the benefits accruing to the rural districts are not as high, relatively, as many people suppose. Weaving is one of the few occupations which a crofter can follow on his own croft, and which brings in a reasonable cash return for the time and effort expended.
6. The Association's General Economic Survey has shown that the population of Lewis has been unbalanced over a long period of years, because so many men in the most active part of their lives have had to seek employment forth of the Island, either permanently by emigrating to the Dominions or U.S.A., or temporarily, in the Merchant Navy, the dock yards of the Clyde, or on construction works on the mainland. As a result employment must be found within the Island for many more women than the gross population figures suggest.

In the past, the herring industry has provided seasonal employment for large numbers of women as gutters and splitters, but it is generally believed that the post-war years will see a great change in this respect, due to the increasing use of machinery in the fish trade, and the reluctance of women to engage in such heavy work. If the Harris Tweed trade does not expand sufficiently to make up for any decline in the employment capacity of the fish trade, it is probable that large numbers of Lewis girls may have to seek employment on the mainland after the war with consequent hardships to the old people left alone on the croft. The people of the Island have accepted cheerfully the undoubted hardships caused by the wartime transference of so many young women to work on the mainland, but very great, and justifiable discontent will be caused, if in the post-war years these women are not able to find remunerative employment at their own homes.

7. To sum up, it can be said that the Harris Tweed Industry is essential to the economic wellbeing of the Island of Lewis, and it is the national as well as in the local interest that it should not only be maintained but expanded. Lewis had a serious unemployment problem in the years before the war, and there will be a

similar unemployment problem after the war unless new industries are introduced or the existing industries are expanded. None of the existing industries seem so capable of rapid expansion as the Harris Tweed trade.

Under a Government policy of full employment, the Island of Lewis may be placed in a very difficult position at the end of the war. Thousands of young men and women who have given their services ungrudgingly in the belief that at the end of hostilities they would be able to return to their native Island and build up a happy life among their own kith and kin, and in familiar surroundings, may be faced with the choice of 'the dole' at home, employment in mainland factories, or emigration.

For reasons which have already been sufficiently stressed in the General Economic Survey, Lewis is unable at present to stand a further large transference of population, and nothing is more important than to provide industries within the Island so that a period of economic tranquillity enables the Island to recover from the ravages of long years of emigration.

8. It may be asked why the Government should have any interest in encouraging the manufacture of cloth in the Outer Hebrides when similar cloth could be manufactured as well and perhaps more cheaply, in mainland factories. The answer is that the manufacture of tweed is one of the few industries which can be carried on economically in the Islands, and as an ancillary to crofting. The alternative is for the Government to face up to the gradual but inevitable depopulation of the Islands.

At a time like this when the vulnerability of the great centres of population has been shown to be the weakest link in Britain's defensive system, it seems unnecessary to argue the importance of encouraging the dispersal of industries throughout the crofting areas.

9. In the past the Harris Tweed trade has been an important factor in the economic life of the Island of Lewis. The trade has had its ups and downs, but never has it been as prosperous as in the years from the early thirties onwards, and especially since the introduction of the Harris Tweed Trade Mark in 1934 and the subsequent worldwide advertising campaigns of the Harris Tweed Association. It is no exaggeration to say that the Harris Tweed industry was the economic salvation of Lewis during a long period of depression in the fishing industry, and no effort should be spared to ensure that it is maintained and expanded in the post-war years.
10. Various proposals are made later in this report, some of them involving the assistance of the Government or the Board of Trade, but it should perhaps be stated at the outset that the people of Lewis themselves must make the first and greatest contribution to the prosperity of the industry, by showing their readiness to set aside motives of personal or sectional advantage, to work together for the wellbeing of the industry as a whole.