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## **Fashion Craft Revolution – fanzine 4**

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### **'Harris Tweed – the fabric of a community'**

**Words by Catherine Glover**

The story of Harris Tweed can be traced back to 1846 when Catherine Herbert, Countess of Dunmore, commissioned local weavers to make garments for her estate staff on the Isle of Harris. The Countess also promoted the material to her social peers and it steadily grew to be a fashionable material of choice for country and urban pursuits, worn far further afield than the isles on which it originated.

The Harris Tweed Authority is the material's contemporary legal guardian and its brand guidelines claim: 'From remote crofts to couture catwalks Harris Tweed is the choice of fashion and interior designers who value its provenance, classic style and its ability to improve with age.' Indeed, it has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in alignment with the market's increasing appetite for authenticity, transparency and traditional quality crafts. Recent collaborations with fashion brands have included Stone Island, Dr Martens, Nike, Rag & Bone, Theory, Patrick Grant of Savile Row and Chanel amongst others, raising the profile of Harris Tweed internationally. Perhaps its most famous collaborator has been Vivienne Westwood who has elevated the Harris Tweed logo equal to her own.

This rise in demand has translated back to the local islander community where the population is increasing again, along with the number of weavers. In 2018, the Harris Tweed industry and the area of the Outer Hebrides was awarded World Craft City status. New creative off-shoots are also being established such as the brand Modren (Scottish gaelic for 'modern'), which makes hand-crafted bags. The designer Sandra MacLeod uses the Harris Tweed that her sister, Christina, weaves on their father's Hattersley Domestic Loom in the family croft – "I grew up listening to the clickety-clack of the Hattersley's not only from my parents' weaving shed but from many others on our road," Christina says.

"There is a focus on creating a cloth that wears well and outlasts any fashion cycle and that its owners will value enough to care for," Sandra explains. "The tweed will generally outlast most other components, so it's important that final goods are repairable or easily repurposed. I'm trying to get to the point where ultimately every element is compostable."

The connections that bind the community together are described by Sandra as intergenerational, cross-disciplinary, collegiate, intuitive, pragmatic and with a strong sense of heritage. "It's impossible to overstate how important people's skills are throughout the whole process from blending and spinning through warping and weaving to darning and finishing," she says. "Every process depends on hand and eye, on skills learnt and practiced. Those skills mean luxury is innate in this cloth."

That Harris Tweed's material authenticity is connected to both its provenance and creative process is undoubtable – even the colours of the tweed reflect the palette of the Hebrides. "The colours are never flat monotonous but reflect the vibrancy and vitality of our landscape," Sandra states. "It's the deep rich chocolate of newly cut peats, the copper glint of fading rushes, the haze of bog cotton, the occasional sharp note of bell heather and flag iris. You could transplant this process, but you'd never be able to make Harris Tweed anywhere else. It needs these people in this place."

*Catherine Glover is a senior lecturer for BA (Hons) Fashion Communication at the Northumbria School of Design.*

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