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It's Wool Week – time to celebrate the return of a great British industry

New Zealand might have those silky merinos, but Britain has a much finer array of sheep: just look at the [mighty beulah speckled face](#), the shaggy [Devon and Cornwall longwool](#) and the exquisitely named and [strikingly striped Zwartbles](#).

There are more breeds romping around our fields than any other country and [probably the most native breeds](#), too. It's what gave us a super-strong wool heritage, is one of the reasons the material was once our biggest export and is why the Lord Speaker must sit on the woosack in the House of Lords (in the 14th century the fibre was so vital to the success of the country that it was given this special prominence in parliament). Though the once thriving industry has faced massive decline, it is rising again – with good reason.



A Devon and Cornwall longwool sheep. Photograph: Alamy

"Wool keeps us warm, from our toes to the attics of our houses," explains Janet Alison, spinner and founder of the brilliant [Fibre-East](#) festival in Bedfordshire. "It's quality, environmentally friendly, sustainable, fire retardant ... nothing else compares." You'll find British wool in everything from mattresses and upholstery fabrics to [knitting](#) kits and catwalk clothing, although most regularly in the first three because it's heavier and more hard-wearing than, say, wool from Merino sheep in New Zealand and Australia, which is more typically used to make finer jersey knits.

[Fashion](#) hasn't entirely ditched Britain's woolly heritage, however. Happily, some designers, such as [Amy Hall](#), are committed to using it in their collections. And, while they might import fleece from the other side of the world, British manufacturers of the stuff are doing a roaring trade. Areas once renowned for their mills, such as Hawick in Scotland and Saltaire in West Yorkshire, have been regenerated, with big names such as Pringle and Lyle & Scott running factories there. Globally, there is such demand for wool that farmers are now being paid three times more for their fleece: it's a massive improvement, considering it once cost more to shear a sheep than you'd make for its pelt.

It's excellent news that Britain is falling in love with its woolly history once again. From Monday, even more people will be told the benefits as Prince Charles launches the fourth [Wool Week](#). You can take a knitting class in London or Edinburgh's John Lewis, host a Picknit or pick up one of 15 jumpers created by young designers for Wool School on the theme of "knitwear traditions of the British Isles".

Or, you could use it as an excuse to get better acquainted with those marvellous British sheep we have (stop sniggering at the back, I don't mean *that*). Buy a [skein of British wool from Sue Blacker](#), an exceptional champion of natural, local yarn, then dig into her book, [Pure Wool: A Knitter's Guide to Using Single-breed Yarns](#). Celebrate [Wovember](#) as well as Movember and read all about the deliciously named [Worshipful Company of Woolmen](#). Look back at [Woolsack](#), an incredible feat of knitting that saw every Olympian and Paralympian who competed in the 2012 games receive a cushion made from British wool. And take inspiration from the wonderful [Ellie Langley](#), who makes everything from wool corsets to, erm, felt coffins from her own farm's flock.

What will you be knitting or wearing during Wool Week? Tell us your favourite patterns, yarn shops and designers. Or, failing that, just the breed of sheep you think looks the funniest/cutest/oddest.

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