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Run of the micro-mill

Daniel Harris is the founder of the London Cloth Company and uses antique looms to revive a dying industry



Daniel Harris by a warping mill

“Isn’t this a beautiful place to work?” says Daniel Harris. We are wandering around his east London workshop, a vast shed behind a terrace of Victorian houses, home to the [London Cloth Company](#). “This is the only micro-mill to have opened in London in the past 100 years,” he says, carefully moving between the hulking looms.

Harris, 30, is a self-taught weaver: he founded the London Cloth Company in 2010 and since then has single-handedly built the machines that surround us, many of which can’t be seen in working order outside of specialist museums or collections. “I’m using traditional methods and machinery to try to kick-start a dying industry,” he says.

Some of the looms here date back to 1850 and have been sourced from retired weavers as far-flung as the Scottish Highlands and south Wales. The machines have seen better days: look closely and you can see rust and watermarks, the result of being abandoned in defunct, flooded workshops.

“They are all in full working order,” Harris says, before explaining how the machines work and the basic principles of weaving at breakneck speed. He sits down at a large, foot-operated, wooden loom and starts kicking his legs; the shuttle clacks from side to side, adding another row to the twill. “It’s a fiendishly complicated design and threading the loom can take several days,” he says. “Though once the preparation is done, it’s easy – some of the machines can weave up to 40m of fabric a day.”

Passionate about reigniting the manufacturing industry in Britain and conserving diminishing skills and crafts, Harris sources raw material in the UK and, where possible, uses recycled yarn. “We employ traditional techniques that have not changed for decades,” he explains. “We weave to industrial standards but on a small scale, undertaking all stages of the weaving process in-house, with the exception of professional fabric finishing.”

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A 1950s loom

Tweed began humbly, as the homespun, black-and-white checked blanket, or “plaid” favoured by Scottish shepherds, Harris explains. “Wrapped around the body, the cloth served as protection from rain and cold, or even to warm lambs.” But tweed was destined for greater things. Staying at Balmoral Castle in Scotland, Lord Clarendon, foreign secretary during the Crimean war, noted: “I am told that it is de rigueur to clothe oneself in tweed directly.” In 1867, when the Prince of Wales wore a suit of tweed, the transformation from poor man’s cloth into royal garment was complete and manufacturers struggled to meet demand. The industry hit a peak output of 7.6m metres of cloth in 1966. But things have slowed since. “The vast majority of mills closed a long time ago,” says Harris.

Still, labels such as [Ralph Lauren](#) are never slow in spotting an opportunity to splice a bit of British heritage into their brand. Last year, Harris created a wool twill on one of his antique looms for it, made from Shetland wool from yarn spinners [R Gledhill](#) of Oldham, England. It was used to create a waistcoat. Harris also supplies cloth to [Tiger of Sweden](#) and a handful of London-based fashion designers.



Tweed, denim and mohair bolts of cloth

Without a doubt, the final cloths – mostly tweeds and lightweight selvedge denim, from traditional patterns to novel designs and bright colour palettes – are beautiful. London Cloth Co may be one of London’s only micro-mills, but, as Harris says, “I’d rather sell more and do more work than sell a little bit for a lot more. We’re filling the gap for smaller companies that want a bespoke, hand-woven fabric.”

In the next couple of years, Harris says he plans to open the mill to the public, offering demonstrations and revealing the history behind some of the machines. “England used to be one of the key cotton weaving markets in the world. I don’t want to let that rich heritage go to waste.”

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/64a759d6-96c6-11e2-a77c-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2sJdaZ1gG>