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## Innovators flock to boost British wool trade

Inventors are using British wool for a variety of weird and wonderful new products, prompting an industry revival



The coarse wool from Herwick sheep fell out of favour as the UK's carpet industry diminished

Britain's wool industry, which for a decade was shrinking like a cardigan on a hot wash, **is bouncing back** thanks to demand for our coarse home-grown fleeces for a variety of weird and wonderful applications.

Over the past five years, a series of innovations have sprung up, creating products that use wool from all 120 breeds of British sheep – around 60 pure and 60 half-breeds.



British sheep have coarser wool than other breeds

British wool is unique because, unlike many other breeds of sheep, such as merino, British fleeces tend to be much coarser and scratchier. This was once a competitive advantage, when our carpet industry was booming. But as carpet sales slumped and the fashion for hard-wood floors swept the nation, wool prices plunged.

Britain's wool heritage stretches back centuries; the Romans were wowed by our fine wool weaving as early as 55BC. But it was in the 13th century that the industry peaked.

Raw wool became a prime export, shipped all over the world, and the material powered a domestic industrial age of

textile making and carpet production. Later, however, the technological advances in clothes manufacturing, rise of synthetic materials, globalisation – the glut of imports from China and Australia – and the decline of manufacturing eroded the British wool trade.

A decade ago, wool had become viewed as a byproduct and farmers began burning fleeces because it was no longer economically effective to lug them to market. This was when husband-and-wife designers Hannah and Justin Floyd **decided to try to come up with a new product.**

Mr Floyd, a product designer, began mixing wool with bio-resin to create a hardy and attractive material. The result was Solidwool, a sustainable alternative to fibreglass, which is being used in products from glasses frames to chairs.



“We were inspired by our home town of Buckfastleigh,” explains Mrs Floyd. “It’s an old woollen town. In 2013, the local spinning

company was closed down with the loss of 150 jobs and we decided to try to bring back the town's heritage in a modern way."

The pair approached the British Wool Marketing Board to secure the raw materials to make the composite. The BWMB was set up in the Fifties to help farmers secure a fair price for their fleeces. "The Wool Board recommended that we use Herdwick wool," says Mrs Floyd.

"It's one of the coarser wools and was used for carpet and underlay but as fewer British carpets are being made, farmers were getting just 40p a fleece."

The Solidwool founders were put in touch with James Rebanks, a farmer in the Lake District, whose grandfather used to pay the rent for two farms from one wool clip a year, but was getting just £200 from his flock's produce, "if he was lucky," says Mrs Floyd.



Solidwool founders Justin and Hannah Floyd

"The grey, blue Herdwick wool with its white guard hairs made the perfect raw material," she adds. "For us, the coarseness is a strength and it looks beautiful, almost fluffy until you touch it and it's smooth."

Plymouth University tested the material and found it to be stronger than all the other natural composites, including hemp.

It was made commercially available in February and there are already dozens of partnerships in the works, from Derbyshire-based Blok Knives, which uses it in some of its hand-made knife handles, to the cold water surf brand Finisterre, which is using it for a comb to wax surfboards. "We're small but growing very quickly," says Mrs Floyd.

Tim Simmons also stumbled into the wool business. His sister-in-law bought part of a wool felting business four years ago when a friend became unwell.

These felts were used for insulation but Mr Simmons and his wife Marty were keen to find more valuable applications for the material to differentiate their business from companies like Therma Fleece in Cumbria, which does a roaring trade with wool insulation products, a natural alternative to synthetic rockwool or stonewool.



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“I am a hi-fi enthusiast and I was very aware that people have used wool to dampen sound in loud speaker cabinets,” says Mr Simmons. “I started looking to see if we could treat rooms like the inside of a speaker cabinet.”

His company, Woolly Shepherd, makes woollen sound absorbers, such as the cloud-shaped “acoustic cloud”, £174, which hangs from the ceiling and absorbs the sound of neighbours walking on hard-wood floors.



The company is also making an acoustic screen for the Welsh National Orchestra, which will be used to help protect musicians sitting near loud instruments.

“We only use British wool because farmers here get a raw deal,” says Mr Simmons. “We could buy wool far cheaper from China but the coarse wool is helpful for our products.” Revenues have doubled year-on-year since 2013.

Sound absorbers may be a cottage industry but at Woolcool, based in Shropshire, the fluffy stuff is being turned into a life-saving product with global reach.

Woolcool used to make felt liners for boxes to transport food and still works with butchers Roaming Roosters and organic meat and veg box delivery companies Abel & Cole and Hello Fresh, but the company’s real growth market is insulation for the transportation of vaccines.



Woolcool makes innovative products to keep food and vaccines chilled



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“The World Health Organisation has reported that 50pc of vaccines arrive unfit for use due to temperature damage,” says Keith Spilsbury, the managing director. “When products are transferred from refrigerated vehicles to planes, they can sit on the runway in the blazing sun or freezing cold. With such high wastage imagine the risk to human life.”

In 2013, the EU introduced standards to ensure that vaccine boxes maintain an optimal temperature of between 2 and 8 degrees Celsius for 72 hours. “We can achieve 150 hours in a pack half the size of the competition’s and using half the ice you need for polystyrene,” says Mr Spilsbury. “It’s recyclable, reusable and biodegradable.”

The company, which will turn over between £3m and £4m this year, is targeting a vaccine market worth \$30bn a year. “This year we anticipate that we will use the fleece from two million British sheep,” says Mr Spilsbury.

Woolcool's new Life Guardian product, which is about to launch, and has been developed using a £1m research and development grant from the Government, will see the pharma division at Woolcool, which currently represents just 10pc of revenue, rise to outgrow food.

It is inventions like these that are helping to keep the British wool industry alive, with production around 30m kilos a year. Exports are on the rise, with finer wools being bought by Japan for futons, for example, and [Wool Week, a campaign fronted in the UK by Prince Charles](#), will kick off on October 5, prompting major high street stores, from Harrods to Selfridges, to turn their shop fronts to wool products for the duration.

“After the drop 10 years ago, we’re seeing real evidence of a turnaround,” says the BWMB’s marketing director, Tim Booth.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/festival-of-business/11875717/Innovators-flock-to-boost-British-wool-trade.html>