



A Miller's tale

THREE COMPANIES MILES APART BUT ALIKE IN HISTORY

Location, location, location... it's critical for house prices but how often do we consider its impact on the commercial world? In a global economy and internet age inspiration comes to us from every corner of the world but as these established and respected textile manufacturers prove; local history, pride and a sense of place can provide the strongest and most enduring platform for business survival...

The inventors of khaki - the colour of the military - in 1775, recipients of three Queens Awards for Innovation and owners of a 200 year-old archive used by Hermes, Lauren, Vuitton, Boss and more - Fox Brothers is not a company one would expect to stumble across on a country ramble in Somerset.

Specialising in wools and worsted cloth, it has been up and running for over 200 years, down in Wellington, a cosy Doomsday town. This fact alone sets the company apart from other mainstream weavers – competitors in this industry tend to be found up in Northern England, or further afield in China and India. Yet Fox Brothers thrives in its Southern setting, achieving its competitive advantage by producing products like the Fox Lightweight Flannel – the Worlds lightest.

The Fox Family planted its roots here over 200 years ago, and worked the fruits of the land – in those days the 'fruits' were in fact sheep – to its advantage. Initially a cottage industry, Thomas Fox built the business up employing hundreds of local people. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, Fox Brothers was able to bring all the weaving processes under one roof. Self-sufficiency didn't stop there, ancillary crafts also took place within the premises, basket weaving to make the containers to hold the yarns; bookbinding to create the docu-

ments, records and account books; metal forges and joineries to maintain machinery. And amazingly for over 100 years the Fox family even printed their own banknotes.

Today business may not be at such a scale, but Fox Brothers are still picking up accolades and working with international designers. The fabric woven by Fox Brothers has changed greatly over the last two centuries. The company archive shows just how rough and course early fabrics tended to be. Technology and research has refined the fabrics over the decades. With the introduction of cashmere and a reduction in the weight of the cloth they are now soft, light and wearable for all seasons.

These factors contribute to the on-going success of a rather old company founded on traditional production. Continuous modernisation - of fabric designs, of equipment, yet a constant awareness of the importance of the past seems to be the key to its staying power – their most recent Queens Award was for marketing their archive over an e-commerce system. In a world where production appears to be getting further away from home and products more removed from their origins it is refreshing and reassuring to know that pockets of originality longevity and quality can still be found on our shores.

...racks filled with cloths in vibrant colour palettes offer evidence of their willingness to depart from the muted industry standard...

A visit to the Isle of Bute can only be described as a Scottish Odyssey – thunderstorms and torrential rain contrast with piercing sunlight and seas of glass-like stillness. It is a beautiful place and home to a mill producing cloth of exquisite simplicity.

Since the 1700's the 1st Marquess of Bute and his heirs have been engaged with the economic development of the island and in particular the production of textiles. Initially focused on cotton weaving, water power was introduced in 1764 and several mills were established and flourished for over 100 years weathering the troubles of the American civil war and the decline of available cotton.

In 1947 the 5th Marquess of Bute founded a new textile company for the employment of local war veterans. Throughout the 60's and 70's the company specialised in tweed apparel fabrics for the American market but couture fabrics for the likes of Hardy Aimes were also made. In the late 70's, the father of the current Marquess was in the mood for a change and shifted production to solely upholstery fabric – 'Bute Fabrics' was born.

During the boom years of the 1980's and 90's Bute created a niche for themselves. Close relationships began then and endure today with furniture producers like Herman Miller. Bute became renowned for limited collection fabrics for specific interior projects – a set of Eames chairs in one of the mill's meetings rooms are covered in a special Ikat fabric made in the 80's and offer testimony to the company's skill. A recent tweed covers a second set of chairs and confirms that one of the most interesting things about Bute is their ability to com-

bine Scottish tradition with modernism and propel the two forward in a distinctly 21st century way.

There is a wonderful intimacy as one walks through the mill buildings. Bute staff are encouraged to explore all areas of production to gain an understanding of fabric creation. It's also a deeply Scottish company, almost all stages of production, from spinning to finishing take place in Scotland or on the borders and Bute is keen to keep it that way.

Around 1998 Johnny Bute took over from his father. Eager to make his own mark he is also passionately protective of the company's established ethos. Particularly inspiring is his openness to new design and development. Douglas Graham, the Managing Director, welcomes collaboration and enthuses about a recent project with design duo BarberOsgerby that resulted in an extensive 34 colour range of gem hued cloth called Skye.

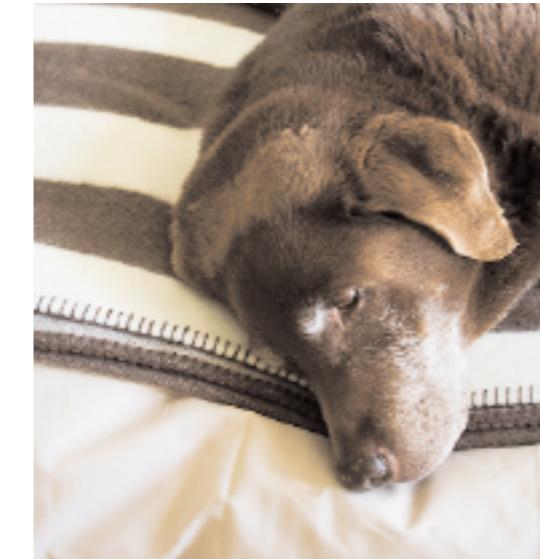
Previous collaborators include Jasper Morrison,

Tom Dixon and SCP and Bute are currently exploring new fabrics with the Glasgow based duo,

Timorous Beasties.

In a more specialist field textile researcher Shelia Clarke is working with the automotive industry to produce 'well being fabrics' for car interiors. An exhibition of her findings at the RCA displayed prototype car seats in bespoke Bute fabrics. In June this year the newly refurbished Royal Festival Hall reopened with bespoke Bute fabric on the chairs of the main auditorium. It's the contrast of large commercial projects with the intimacy of the experimental that is the company's unique selling point – they are flexible and able to research in areas larger companies can't reach....

Bute's archive of every fabric sampled over their history is proof of their longstanding appeal and towering racks in the store room filled with cloths in vibrant colour palettes offer evidence of their willingness to take risks and depart from the muted industry standard. Bute Fabrics signature of tradition with a twist will be written well into the future.



What makes a textile design good? It's a complex question and something the owners of Melin Tregwynt, a weaving mill in Wales, feel ardently about. They conclude, after much animated discussion, that it must have 'roots' and a strong foundation. It must stem from something meaningful and be executed with integrity.

Eifion and Amanda Griffiths nurture an environment where people work collaboratively to create interior and fashion textiles that evoke a timeless, archetypal sense of design. Indeed, the environment itself is steeped in history and personal memories.

Melin ('mill' in Welsh) Tregwynt in Pembrokeshire began its life as a corn mill. It became a woolen mill and was taken over by the current owners' grandfather in 1912. Through the 1920's and 30's it processed wool straight from the sheep which was then knitted or woven by local workers. There was a boom in the Welsh textile industry both during and after the war as wool for knitting was not rationed and was easily accessible, mills produced simple flannel and tweed cloth sold through local markets and a thriving cash economy supported the surrounding community.

Howard Griffiths (Eifion's father) left school at 14 to work in the family mill, a visionary man he learnt on the job and embraced the small scale industry and the tourism it inspired – the Griffith's front room was the mill shop and strangers were regularly invited in.

At this time the traditional 'Welsh Tapestry'; a heavy, densely woven double cloth was ubiquitous to the area and used to make bedspreads, blankets and garments. Stiff A-line capes and culottes bearing the large, geometric, contrasting patterns popular in the 60's are a vivid childhood memory for Eifion. Eventually Welsh tapestry died out – every mill in Wales made it and by undercutting rivals eventually priced themselves out of the market.

By the late 70's mills produced blankets and tweed fabrics but there appeared to be only one textile designer from the rural Crafts Board providing designs for all the mills – creating a glut of identikit fabrics.

When Eifion joined the family business in the 80's, his training as an architect drew him to the repetition, structure and rhythm of pattern. Softer hues replaced the vivid shades of the 60's but designs stayed the same. Subtle graduation and tonality of colour became the Melin Tregwynt trade mark. Producing soft, slightly felted blankets for The Shaker Shop in the late 80's and Designers Guild in the early 1990's enabled the company to retain and reinvigorate the Welsh double cloth tradition. What emerged was a more elemental design ethos, geometric fabrics that photographed well and looked good on the printed page – this pared down approach helped define the brand.

Determined to continue producing in Wales, Melin Tregwynt have thought hard about what they have to offer in a competitive market. A desire to push technique and equipment to its limits has prompted a more creative process of designing on the loom.

More recently, collaborations with the fashion design label Commes des Garcon on a range scarves and stoles and a relationship with Muji supplying fabrics based on Welsh doublecloth demonstrates the appeal of this local product with a story to tell. Strangely the Japanese market liked the more traditional Welsh Tapestry; they wanted a dense fabric with less drape and more yarn identity, almost architectural in its ability to stand up. Fabrics were selected from the Mill

archive and adapted coming full circle to acknowledge previous traditions. Birkenstock are also using Melin Tregwynt fabrics on a new range of shoes to be launched in Japan this year. This Welsh mill has come far and it's still putting its best foot forward...

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