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Contemporary Men’s Fashion and British Wool Textiles

This paper extends and develops previous investigations into the ‘hidden’ design and commercial interactions between British woollen textile manufacturers and international fashion houses in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Research related to that topic has so far resulted in two exhibitions at National Museums Scotland in 2004 and 2005 and the book *Tweed*, of 2016.

Today, British woollen mills design and weave cloths for a wide range of international fashion houses, including Chanel, Commes des Garçons, Dries van Noten and Lanvin. The paper will discuss new research on the Lovat Mill of Hawick, Fox Brothers & Co. of Somerset and Marling & Evans of Yorkshire, thus providing a range of perspectives on woollen manufacturers based in the Scottish Borders, Yorkshire and the West of England. These firms are located in the three historically most important centres for wool textile production in the UK, which have all suffered contraction on a dramatic scale. Fox Brothers & Co., for example, is the last surviving mill in the West of England to make wool cloths for apparel. The contemporary design, production and selling activities of these firms will be investigated within the context of recent developments within the British and international woollen industry. That examination will include looking at the particular design and business relationships between British mills and international fashion companies, whereby the former usually remain discreetly anonymous and the fashion brand is the only name visible to retailers and consumers. Notable exceptions to this picture, whereby garment labels include the textile producers name will also be considered.

The paper will examine why global fashion companies continue to buy British wool cloths for menswear, despite the dramatic decline in the UK-based industry. Factors that will be investigated include design, quality, heritage, tradition, innovation and the appeal of authenticity and provenance to fashion houses that are looking to enhance their brand’s exclusive appeal within global luxury markets. The study will also explore the continued significance of British high quality tailoring as a design reference within contemporary menswear and how that impacts on the desirability of UK-produced wool cloths.