



Wool Wonders



Mel Doel wonders why knitting lost its popularity but is pleased to reveal that it is now going through something of a revival - it's the new yoga if you like.....

One of my overwhelming memories as a young girl is the hours on end I spent winding wool and chatting with my mother. The wool used to come in big skeins and my job would be to sit there arms outstretched with the wool wrapped around my skinny forearms as my mother rolled it up into balls. I used to ache for hours afterwards.

Oh, but the rewards. We all, and there were five of us kids in the house, wore woollen jumpers. Scratchy and itchy ones, stripy ones - always warm and cosy. Little mittens with a string to pull through the arms of our coats so we didn't lose them. Then, as we got older and more fashion conscious we'd beg my mum to knit cute and cuddly angora creations and multi coloured Dr Who scarves. They lasted for years. Being the oldest of three girls I was the lucky one. I got to wear the jumpers and cardigans brand new. My poor sisters lived in my cast-offs for years. Wool, it seemed, never wore out. And when a hole did eventually appear in the elbows, out would come the darning needle.

So it was a natural progression; as soon as I was big enough to handle a pair of knitting needles I was taught to knit.

As my sisters caught up I then taught them in turn. We only ever knew a baby was about to be born in the family or in the street when work on the big jumpers stopped and my mother turned her attention instead to tiny little white confections. Bonnets trimmed with pearls and feathers, sweet little cardigans, and of course shawls and blankets to welcome the new baby into this world.

Nor did it stop there. My first job as a trainee reporter took me to Merthyr Tydfil. Right next door to the newspaper office was the wool shop. It was one of the busiest shops in the town.

But where did it all go? Suddenly knitting went out of fashion. The shops closed down and it became rare to hear that soothing clickitty-clack of the knitting needle.

Well I am pleased to announce that knitting is going through something of a revival - it's the new yoga if you like. It's huge in America. The list of celebrity knitters is staggering; from Julia Roberts to Secretary of State Madeline Albright, and no, this hobby's not just for women! Just ask Russell Crowe, apparently he loves to knit.

Celebrities, politicians and the 24 million active knitters and crocheters in the United States, not to mention millions more worldwide, are all partaking in fibre art! Why? Stress relief, creative outlet, tactile pleasure, sense of accomplishment, meditation...the benefits are endless.

And here in Wales it's a similar, if maybe a slightly more subdued story. I wanted to find out why.

Most wool gathered from sheep farms here in Wales goes off to the Wool Marketing Board. 10 million kilos is produced in Wales and the borders each year. Most goes into the carpet industry, with up to 10 per cent going to China.

A combination of problems in this very volatile world market means

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that this year many farmers have been receiving little more than fifty pence a fleece. It often actually costs more to shear them.

But a growing band of specialist wool producers is hoping to keep the age old art of knitting and weaving going, so as with many of my pursuits of the old crafts my journey starts on a farm. Not as you might think, though, alongside a warming fire in the kitchen of an old

farmhouse but out in the sheds of a farm just a few miles out of Builth Wells, where Lesley Wickham has a flock of 300 sheep.

Now, these aren't just any old sheep. As well as producing animals for meat, Lesley has been developing a special flock to produce beautiful and naturally coloured wool. A walk through her barns is a feast for the eyes. Colours ranging from almost jet black through a range of browns and greys right down to lovely shades of cream, all bred for their fleeces. And their wool doesn't need dyeing.

"With more environmental concerns these days it's important to keep pollution to a minimum," says Lesley, who is proud that her fibres don't need any chemicals or additions. The products she knits from her home produced wool are sold at farmers markets and through specialist shops. Often the amount she earns barely covers the amount of time she puts in, though. One of her jumpers took 60 hours of spinning!

She's part of a revival in the woollen industry in Wales that's being supported by Glasu, a European Union funded programme that helps and encourages rural areas to think about the long-term potential of their area and their products.

Is there a revival? "Yes," says their spokesman Lee Price. "It started back in 2001 when we did a research project and found there was a gap in the fibre processing market. After shearing most farmers send their wool to the British Wool Marketing Board and maybe get up





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to 20 pence a kilo.”

Many farmers like Lesley are keen to make a bit more from their fleece - but the problem until recently was how? Most of the mills that would in years gone by have taken the fleeces have closed down.

But now a new mill in Wales is set to fill that market gap - and help people like Lesley.

Robi Manley keeps a flock of Angora goats on the Black mountains and when the mill that used to turn her mohair into knitting yarns closed she realised she would lose a valuable market and a business that gave her so much pleasure. It was a gamble and a huge adventure - but after months of deliberation and searching for the right equipment she's opened a mill in Brecon which could offer wool producers a new way to make money and revive an age old craft.

Woolcount Ltd has been set up to fill a niche in the market for specialised, small scale contract spinning; for while the bigger mills, such as those in Yorkshire and Huddersfield, deal with batches at least ten times larger, and the much smaller scale mini-mills deal at best with 5 kg of fleece per day, her mill deals with up to 300 kilos a week.

This exciting start-up project is being supported by Glasu as it will add value to local produce, thereby creating a stronger market for local wool.

“More than that,” says Robi, “we offer a real benefit for breeders from all over the UK.” Fleeces from across Britain now find their way to Brecon from as far away as the Scottish Isles.

“They can now have their fleeces spun into top quality yarns at economic prices. As a fibre farmer myself I know the amount of work that goes into producing one year's crop, and the implications for a small enterprise if it is spoiled through poor processing.” said Robi.

“I just hope we can really build up the woollen industry in Wales. This is an opportunity for farmers to regenerate the woollen industry.” says Robi. To back this growth a new wool emporium has been set up at Penybont near Llandrindod Wells to showcase the very best of Welsh wool and to make sure the craft continues. Courses are being held from spinning to hand weaving.

But what about the knitters; are they around any more?

My journey to find out more about the Welsh woollen industry ended over a cup of tea in a bustling house at Builth Wells with a knitting circle - though not quite the knitting circle I had thought I would find.

Remember the old knit and natter groups? Well, they've moved on a bit these days. I joined up with the Stitch and Bitch group, as this group of women call themselves, for a good old chat. The 30 women who meet every week - sometimes in the local pub - love nothing more than a good gossip while they exchange patterns and tips.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking of this as some sort of pensioners group - oh no. Aged from 10 to 75 years, they're a cross section of females.

“Knitting is the new craze. Do we bitch? Sometimes maybe, yes, but it's just fun. A bit of knitting and a bit of fun. You make new friends and keep the old ones - it's really sociable,” one of them told me.

You might think that youngsters these days would turn their noses up at hand knitted garments but anything the knitters can produce is keenly snapped up. Nothing is wasted either; scrap bits of wool are turned into teddy bears and sent to children in the third world. Other teddy bears are sent out with the emergency services here in Wales to comfort children at road accidents and fires. The group loves the new wools now being produced in Wales.

It's been a fascinating journey - and once again I am delighted to see that steps are being taken to stop another age-old craft from dying out. Now then, where are those knitting needles?

Images: Ian Nicholson

Mel Doel presents Country Focus on Sunday morning at 7.30am on BBC Radio Wales. The programme is repeated on Tuesday evening at 6.30pm. Radio Wales 93-104 FM; 882 & 657 MW; Ch 0117 Digsat; Ch 719 Freeview; and DAB

