

1 Woollen flannel produced in Wales clothed British soldiers during the two world wars
2+3+6 Examples of Welsh woollen cloth at the National Wool Museum in Carmarthenshire



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Prince Jones was an important supplier of Welsh wool textiles

The heart of Wales

Designer **Sasha Kagan** offers her personal perspective on the history of the Welsh woollen industry



ONE THING I noticed when I moved to Wales in 1972 was that there were definitely far more sheep than people! Little did I realize back then how instrumental this would be to my career as a knitwear designer. The skill of weaving and knitting woollen fabrics dates back to prehistoric times, and through the centuries it has been one of Wales's most important industries.

Mid Wales has a particularly important place in textile history. Llanidloes, my local town, and Newtown ten miles away, had both developed as centres for Welsh flannel production, moving from cottage industry to industrial production by the first decade of the 19th century. A canal was constructed in 1821 to take flannel to England, allowing cargo to be sent directly from Newtown to Manchester. The enterprising Pryce Jones' Royal Welsh Warehouse in Newtown was the world's first-ever

mail order business. His catalogue of 1887 notes that he supplied "Real Welsh Flannel, direct from the looms, Gentlemen's Welsh tweeds, Shawls, Blankets, Hosiery and sterling value clothing for the poor."

Further south down in the Teifi valley, the counties of Dyfed, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire boasted as many as 325 woollen mills. Between 1890 and 1920 there was a constant demand for flannel shirts, underwear and blankets for the industrial districts of South Wales. The two world wars made huge fortunes for the mills as fabric was needed to clothe the millions of soldiers. After the Second World War the price of wool plummeted, however, and the mills began to close down.

The 1960s saw a short revival of interest in Welsh woollen textiles, with Mary Quant's use of tapestry cloth for her capes and mini dresses. In the 1960s and '70s Mid Wales became headquarters of another major textile and design business when Laura Ashley based her

production in Carno. The original Laura Ashley shop was in Llanidloes, and I well remember on sale days the queues of people going right down Great Oak Street; shoppers would descend on the town in droves to buy fabric at 50p a yard, Edwardian-style sailor suits and milkmaid dresses.

In 1984 I contributed to the story by having my first Designer Knitwear exhibition at Oriol 31 in Cardiff, to coincide with the publication of *The Sasha Kagan Sweater Book*. My aim was to show that hand knitted textiles could be considered as an art form as well as being a fashion statement and a garment to keep you warm. Jessie and Jamie Seaton, who later went on to found the brand Toast, opened their first shop in Carmarthen at around this time, selling handknits. They too were part of the 1980s 'Knitwear Revolution', when a great burst of British creativity occurred.

Quite suddenly and independently, individual designers brought a fresh approach to hand knits, and colourful,



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Helen Evans is one of the staff at the National Wool Museum



4 Mid Wales again became a centre of textile design when Laura Ashley opened her factory in Carno in the '60s 5 Sasha's 'Dolforwyn' cushion uses Cambrian Mountains wool produced in Wales



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Cloth on the loom at the National Wool Museum; this pattern is called 'Caernarfon'

often quirky, sweaters became very popular. If you couldn't afford a ready-made hand-knitted sweater you could buy a pattern, a kit or a book of designs and knit one for yourself. This movement resulted in a fantastic renaissance in the revival of interest in hand knitting; yarn companies began to offer both vibrant and subtle colours with lovely textures, and new yarn shops opened.

My American agent, Ann Stirling, played an important role at this time when she brought Andre Leon Talley of *Women's Wear Daily* magazine from New York to Wales. They visited Dylan Thomas's birthplace and used the venue for a great photoshoot of Welsh hand knits for the magazine. Lots of small cottage industries, like my own, began to export widely to the US and beyond.

Welsh wool today

Fast forward to 2004/5, when Powys received a Leader+ funding programme. I was on the steering committee of Glasu, an EU-funded initiative to bring trade to

hard-up rural areas, to assist innovative ideas that would help bring value to local natural products and stimulate the local economy. Wool and woollen products seemed an obvious choice, and we came up with the idea to stage a big festival that would bring people from far and wide to The Royal Welsh Showground at Builth Wells. Thus the Wonderwool Wales wool festival was born, and this highly successful model has been copied throughout the UK and done a sterling job to promote the use of British wool. It continues to grow year on year, and has been highly influential in the revival of interest in sheep breeding and the crafts of knitting, weaving and crochet.

Over the past decade the public has become much more interested in the provenance and sustainability of their yarn purchases; another Welsh wool initiative which fits the bill in this respect is The Cambrian Mountains Wool Project. Prince Charles, as patron for the Campaign for Wool, has shown great interest in this project and in 2015 he

opened an exhibition of innovative wool exhibits showcasing this lustrous fibre in Aberystwyth. I have used the DK weight in my cushion design for this issue.

For a comprehensive historical overview and information about the woollen mills that are still flourishing in Wales to this day, I highly recommend a visit to The National Wool Museum in Drefach Felindre, Carmarthenshire. The museum is housed in the original Cambrian Mills buildings which have all been sympathetically restored. The original mill machinery is in working order, and the manager, Ann Whittall, along with the 40 volunteers who work in the museum, are determined that their passion to keep wool and textile production alive in Wales gives me confidence in the future of Welsh wool. ☺

– For further information visit:
www.museum.wales/wool
www.cambrianwool.co.uk
www.wonderwoolwales.co.uk
www.sashakagan.co.uk