



[Tweed and Textiles from Early Times to the Present Day]

The crofting way of life as it was lived in the Calbost area occupied the time of the whole population; both male and female during the four seasons of the year in a fully diversified way of life. Their work alternated from agriculture, fishing, helping, weaving and knitting, cattle and sheep etc. etc. Some of that work was seasonal and some work was carried on inside during the winter months when it was difficult to participate in outdoor work because of the weather and the long winter evenings.

Distaff - 'Cuigeal'

The manufacture of cloth on order to protect him from the elements was one of man's most ancient occupations and spinning was carried out by the distaff and spindle from an early date, yet it is believed that the distaff is still in use in parts of the world today. The distaff was also used extensively in Lewis in times past.

A distaff is simply a 3 ft x 1½ inch rounded piece of wood with about 8 inches of one end flattened in order to hold the wool on the outer end as the distaff protrudes out in front of the spinner as she held it under her arm with a tuft of wool at the end. The wool from the distaff was then linked to the spindle 'Dealgan' or 'Fearsaid' which is held in the opposite hand and given a sharp twist by the fingers at the top of the spindle, in order to put the twist in the yarn as the spindle rotates in a suspended position hanging from the head. As each length of yarn was spun it was wound round the bottom of the spindle to form a ball and then more wool was released gently from the distaff in order to repeat the process until all the wool was spun.

The whorl is a round disc of about 11/8 diameter by ½ inch thick soft stone such as sand stone with about 3/8 inch diameter hole in the centre in order to slip it on to the light spindle of the distaff. The theory of the whorl was that it acted as a flywheel or weight at the bottom end of the spindle until there was sufficient yarn spun and wound round as a ball on the bottom part of the spindle. That made the whorl unnecessary and it was then removed and kept in the pocket of the ladies apron if they were outside attending or herding the cattle etc., when they passed their time usefully spinning with the distaff and spindle. Sometimes the small whorl-stones fell out of their pocket if they bent down and was lost in the long grass and in the course of time when these round mysterious objects were found by a generation that did not always understand what they were for, superstitions arose around them.

It was said, that they were formed by snakes using their saliva and they called them snake stones - 'Clachan-Nathrach' - and credited them with certain healing powers for animals such as curing sprained ankles or muscles in cattle by sprinkling or bathing the affected parts with water in which the Clach Nathrach was immersed. The arrival of Christianity dispelled all such futile superstitions from here long ago. There are many whorl stones preserved in Lewis to this day and from time to time some are still found in the ground.

Nowadays the spindle 'Dealgan' is only used to twist two or more strands of yarn together, as two-ply usually for knitting purposes. Even the shape and size of the present day spindle has changed to being much heavier, particularly at the lower end. In that way it is no longer necessary to use a weight like the whorl stone and it became obsolete. Sometimes when a whorl stone was not available they used a small potato instead.

Archeological excavations in various places produce ancient tools, among them may be found the whorl stone sometimes. When the Stornoway airport was being built in 1941, a burial chamber was uncovered well below the surface of the ground where, a whorl stone, a weaving comb, pottery and a stone weight was uncovered. It was felt that it was the grave of a woman and that the tools she was using were buried with her.

It was estimated that the grave was perhaps 2,000 years old. That grave proves that weaving combs and whorls were used in Lewis a very long time ago.

Weaving combs

Weaving combs were usually made of bone and they were used for the same purpose as the reed in a loom, in order to press the weft yarn firmly in between the warp yarns.

Dyeing the wool

The crofters shear their sheep about July and in times past they used all their wool domestically. They spun it into yarn for knitting as well as weaving it into cloth for domestic clothing and blanketing. The first process after washing the wool was to dye it. Island fabrics were always dyed in the wool never in the fabric. They did not have access to large vats and the dyeing had to be done in comparatively small quantities. That meant that they had

difficulty of scale and accurate repeats. That problem was helped when the Congested Districts Board which was established in 1897 supplied many crofter communities with large dyeing boilers to enable them to dye larger quantities of wool. One of these C.D.B. boilers came to Calbost and it was used extensively both for dyeing wool and heating the water at the loch for the weekly wash of clothes and the annual wash of blankets, which was then laid out on the green to bleach, 'Todhar'.

They used a variety of vegetable dyes but perhaps the most popular in our area was lichen, 'Crotal' which they scraped from the plentiful rocks in the area. 'Crotal' produced a reddish brown colour, but the depth of colour depended on the quantity of crotal that was used for a given quantity of wool. There were no formal recipes and the worker went by appearance. It was not difficult to do if one observed how it was done and followed the process as the writer has done on more than one occasion. Necessity as they say is the mother of invention.

Among some of the other plants they used were heather, the roots of the water lily, elder etc., as well as peat soot etc, A list of over 40 vegetable dyes is given in Professor Scott's 1914 report 'Home Industries in the Highland and Islands', a library book.

In the early 1930s some of the Harris Tweed mills in Stornoway notably Messrs James MacDonald, & Co., the man from Habost Lochs, bought Crotal in bags from us as youngsters at 5/- or 12½p per bag. Probably they used it as a feature. The dyeing of wool with crotal was carried out in the following manner, a layer of clean wool was laid on the bottom of the boiler, or three-legged pot, followed by a layer of crotal and so on until the pot was nearly full. Then water was introduced until the whole was well covered. Sometimes the lichen was soaked for days in a warm solution of ammonia or alternatively a splash of what a tactful island woman called 'home solution', urine, 'Maighistir' was used for fastness. Then it was boiled for hours over a peat fire at the side of a stream or loch under constant supervision.

When it was cool the dyed wool was taken out and all the particles of crotal carefully shaken out of it vigorously and it was hung on a fence or spread out on dry stone wall or boulders in the sun and wind. When the dyed wool was thoroughly dry and clean it was bagged and put aside for the next process which was hand carding, a process usually carried out by women during the long winter evenings.

Wool carding

In earlier times crofting families very often employed maidservants and manservants. One of the duties of the maidservants was to card and spin the wool. It was customary for each family to manufacture one roll of Harris Tweed from their own wool each year. The manservant was employed on agricultural work as well as fishing.

Some of the merchants practiced the truck system of payment or probably the real truth was that the people paid in kind because they did not have the money. Wool was one of the items of barter and some merchants accumulated a lot of wool and employed carders and spinners to convert the wool into yarn. That practice went on in Valtos, Lochs until quite late.

Hand carding was very tedious and time consuming and the people of Lochs began to send their wool to the mainland. Mills very early in the 20th century were for carding only. The first carding mill in Harris was erected by Sir Samuel Scott the proprietor of North Harris in 1900 for the benefit of the local people. The second carding mill in Lewis and Harris was set up by Aeneas Mackenzie in 1902. It was operated from a belt in his Patent Slip Boat Yard. In time it became Newall's wool mills.

Mill spinning in Lewis did not start until 1909.

Spinning wheel - 'Cuidhle-Shniomha'

In time the hand spinning of the distaff was supervised by the march of science and now at the end of the 20th century spinning is developed to a fine art with sophisticated machinery that will mass-produce in five minutes more than many distaffs would produce in a lifetime. Even the well-known spinning wheel was a big advance in the spinning process and greatly helped the domestic manufacture of cloth. There was a variety of designs of spinning wheels.

They had a name for every single part of the spinning wheel and the community is indebted to 'Dwelly' for preserving most of them in his invaluable dictionary. The domestic manufacture of cloth was carried on in the remote offshore islands of Scotland and small other parts of Britain before the industrial revolution and Hebridean smallholders sometimes paid their land rent with pladding and blanketing. In 1656 pladding was one of the items of trade that was listed as being brought to Glasgow by Highland ships.

The full effect of the industrial revolution was slow to penetrate to the Outer Hebrides because of remoteness and poor communication and when a certain philanthropist thought of commercially one of the local products known as 'Clo-Mor', Big Tweed, it quickly caught on, on its own merits and it was soon appreciated on world markets, and a local cottage industry began to spring up round the product.

The nature of the crofting way of life in the Hebrides where every family had an annual supply of wool and a spinning wheel along with the necessary skills and technology to enable them to handle every aspect of the

manufacture of both yarn and cloth was crucial, particularly in the early transitional period from the domestic use of the product, to gaining for itself a commercial foothold in world markets without the aid of costly advertising campaigns and marketing structures. In that way the noble spinning wheel was a major factor in the establishment of the modern Harris Tweed Industry.

Hand warping - 'Deilbh'

Warping, like all other processes in the making of 'Clo-Mor' tweed by the crofters in the Outer Hebrides improved greatly in the 20th century. Earlier on there were no warping sticks as we know them in the 20th century. Warping was done by inserting pegs in between the stones in a wall and earlier still warping was done by fixing pegs in the earth or clay floor. In the very early days there were only two strands of yarn used by the warpers. It was during the 15 years' life of the Congested District Board from 1897 to 1912 that big improvements were made in the way, all aspects of the manufacture of the cottage tweed industry were carried out. In 1898 the Board decided to set aside a sum of money in order to give practical instruction and training in the manufacture of tweed, to the crofters of Lewis. Mr Alexander Lamont was appointed and his salary was paid by the Board.

Mr Lamont improved the warping techniques, the dyeing of the wool, introduced new designs, and introduced the tying-in of the tweeds into the looms. He taught the warpers to use more strands of yarn and they progressed from 10 ends to 12 ends, later 24 ends, 36 ends and 48 ends in the warping process.

When my father retired as a weaver in 1924 he had never used more than 10 ends when warping and he always dismantled the warping sticks after warping a piece. He never tied in tweed in the loom. He always threaded each individual thread through the heddles and reed. At that point the wooden weaving looms was removed from our kitchen and housed in a thatched weaving shed and my elder brother John took over the weaving, a large proportion of which was done for local people at that time, but he also wove for Newalls. John was very progressive and very soon he introduced two major improvements. He was the first person in the area to introduce tying-in the warp to the end of the previous tweed in the loom and my father was far from pleased with his modern ways. He also introduced warping with 24 ends which was a very big improvement. At that time, and long after, all warping was done by the weaver and there was no extra payment for warping. Eventually warping was done in the mills and most of the young weavers did not know how to warp tweed. Local hand-spun yarn came to the weaver in the form of balls and the warper had two long boxes sectioned off in order to accommodate one ball of yarn in each section of about 9" x 9" instead of a bank that was designed to take the caps that came from the mill.

Normally nowadays, a warping stick is a 12" long and that is 1½ weavers yards because a weaver's yard is 8 feet long. To produce a weaver's yard of tweed a person has to have 2lbs of Harris yarn, approximately 1lb for the warp and 1lb for the weft. If therefore one has 80lbs of yarn in one colour, he warps a piece of 40 weaver's yards long and that will finish as approximately 85 yds. The warping frame is designed at 12 feet long for easy calculation of length of warps.

Producing a web of 'Clo-Mor' tweed entirely by hand as in the past, was a very slow and tedious process and as the subsistence economy was giving way to a money-based economy there was less and less hand carding and later on less and less hand spinning as people were changing over to the use of mill spun yarn. In the early part of the 20th century some people adopted a middle course by using mill spun yarn in the warp and hand spun yarn in the weft. Such tweed was referred to as 50/50 and of course it commanded a higher price than tweed made from 100% mill spun yarn.

We remember well the last hand-spinning that took place in Calbost. It was done by Mrs Mary Ann Smith wife of Angus Smith, 5 Calbost in the early 1930s. She set her mind to producing a web of mill spun warp and hand spun weft. She washed, dyed and spun the weft herself on the spinning wheel and she had it woven for her by my brother Murdo Macleod 8 Calbost, 'Peter' on the wooden loom, 'Beart-Mhor'. The 1930s were years of depression and Mrs Smith could not find a market for her 50/50 tweed. It lay in the house for years until eventually it was sold at the empire exhibition in Glasgow in 1938. It was the custom that the weaver was not paid for local tweeds until the web of tweed was sold and by that time Peter was away in the merchant navy but he was duly paid when he came home on leave.

Once the Orb-stamp was amended in 1933 production of mill spun tweed increased dramatically and the mills expanded. Until then there was only two mills in Lewis, Newalls and Kenneth Mackenzie. Mr. James Macdonald from Habost, Lochs, set up a mill in the early 1930s and he was the first mill to introduce finishing machinery. Later on in the 1930s Thomas Smith of Peterhead set up a mill in Stornoway. Warping with 48 ends was adopted everywhere and sometimes with 72 ends for special repeat patterns. Eventually machine warping was adopted because hand warping restricts the design of the patterns.

Weaving

The art of weaving goes back a long time but it was during the last 100 years that local cottage weaving changed from the primitive to the sophisticated thereby enabling the local cottage industry to survive in competition with the most modern technological weaving systems that can be installed in factory conditions.

One of the original settlers at Calbost, Murdo Morrison 1797-1870 was known as 'Murchadh Breabadair', 'Murdo Weaver' which indicated that either he or his father was a weaver. The loom in use at that time was the 'Beart Bheag', small loom, so called in order to distinguish it from the 'Beart-Mhor', big loom which came to Lewis at the very end of the 19th century.

The writer's mother was also one of the early weavers at Calbost, Ishbel Nicolson, 8 Calbost, 1873-1942. She learnt the art of weaving from relatives at Balallan as a teenager just before 1890 and that was on the Beart Bheag which was the only kind of loom in use in Lewis at that time. The shuttle in the Beart Bheag was projected through the shedd in the warp like a school table loom. It was my mother that taught my grandfather and my father how to weave.

The Beart Bheag continued in use in Lewis well into the 20th century but unfortunately none of them survived the throwaway super-tidy sophisticated society of the 20th century.

Beart Mhor - Big Loom

The first Beart Mhor to come to Lewis was that of James Mackenzie, 4 Gravir, Seumas an Haboist, born 1850. He acquired his loom in the very early 1890s. There are examples of this big wooden loom preserved here and there in Lewis and Harris and some of them are still in use. Mr Mackenzie was ahead of his time in many respects, a self-taught man. Among his achievements was the building of a large off shore fishing boat, planned and built on his own on the beach at Gravir. His brother Kenneth Mackenzie was said to have been the first teacher in Lewis with a university degree. He was head teacher at Airidhantuim.

We do not know where did Mr Mackenzie get his loom from, but it was probably from the Scottish border country. Apparently he was not very keen to disclose the source of supply and as it is in many respects an adaptation of the Beart Bheag with certain improvements, Kenneth Nicolson, 11 Calbost 1843-1929 felt that he could overcome Mr Mackenzie's reticence by copying the new loom. A self-taught joiner and builder, he proceeded with his plan to construct the second Beart Mhor in Lewis, but when he came to the heedless, the reed and shuttles he had to go to James Mackenzie for information about possible suppliers, but James was uncooperative and Kenneth being a determined person responded by saying, 'Cha'n aithne dhomh nach dean mi chuis', and he went back home and inserted an advertisement in the Highland News which was the weekly newspaper that circulated in the area at that time. The response was gratifying and very soon Kenneth Nicolson's loom was the second Beart Mhor at work in Lewis about the mid-1890s.

At that time almost the whole production of Harris Tweed was carried out by the crofters and rural merchants and when Kenneth Nicolson Calbost moved to Stornoway with his family in 1902, his friends advised him against the move because they felt he might not get enough weaving work in Stornoway to sustain himself and his family. That was the year Aeneas Mackenzie installed a small carding machine on one of the belts in his timber yard. There was no spinning machinery in Lewis at that time. Mr Nicolson was known in Stornoway as 'Am Breabadair', the weaver, probably because he was the only weaver in town.

While the industrial revolution put an end to cottage weaving on the mainland, the full effects of the revolution was slow to reach the Scottish offshore islands and cottage weaving continued there long after it was killed off on the mainland by competition of the mass production of industrial factories. After a while the glamour and romance attached to home spun and the aroma of the peat smoke in the crofters' thatched cottages as well as natural dyes etc., acquired a certain shop value which created a demand for the Hebridean hand-made product. The 'Clo-Mor' which the humble crofter had hitherto manufactured for his own use also acquired a reputation for quality and durability and more and more buyers were attracted to it.

Obviously Lord and Lady Dunmore, the proprietors of Harris were perceptive people because it is on record that they were the first to appreciate the qualities of the cloth that was manufactured by the local people for their own use and they and their staff began to wear it. Then they introduced it to their shooting and fishing guests from the south in the 1840s, hence the first time 'Clo-Mor' was commercialised and as it happened to be in Harris, it was natural to apply the English name of Harris Tweed to the Hebridean product.

Commercialisation of Harris Tweed had not progressed much at the end of the 19th century but it is said in the 'Scott Report industries in the Highland and Islands 1914' that the tweed industry had made great strides by 1906 and further evidence of this is afforded by the conviction of a person in London who sold an imitation power-loom fabric as Harris Tweed in 1906.

The Congested District Board advanced funds in the late 1890s free of interest for the purchase of improved looms. These cost £6 to £8 each to be repaid as to one third in advance, one third in six months and one third in twelve months. In 1899 there were 55 looms in Lewis. In 1906 there were 161 and in 1911 it was estimated there were about 300 looms in Lewis. It would appear that the above figures refer to new looms 'Beart-Mhor' as distinct from the 'Beart-Bheag'.

Fortunately far-sighted socially motivated people advocated the registration of a trade mark to protect the cottage industry as early as the 1890s and of course the conviction of a person in London in 1906 for selling imitation

power-loom-woven fabric as Harris Tweed as well as other instances of passing off brought home to people the urgent need to protect the industry.

In 1909 the 'Harris Tweed Association' was formed in order to apply for and administer a Harris Tweed trade mark. The 'Orb' certification trade mark was registered in 1910 as a hand spun, hand woven mark of origin and the association began to apply it to the cloth throughout the Outer Hebrides in 1911.

The original definition of the 'Orb' trade mark was:

Harris Tweed is a tweed, hand spun, hand woven, and finished by hand in the Outer Hebrides with 'Made in Harris', 'Made in Lewis', or 'Made in Uist or Barra', etc added as appropriate.

Originally the Harris Tweed Association Ltd. was a representative body but in 1929 the system of nomination was abolished and vacancies accruing thereafter were filled by co-option by the surviving members. It was not until 1933 that the definition of the Orb mark was amended to allow the 'Orb' to be applied to cloth made from mill-spun yarn so long as it was spun in the Outer Hebrides from virgin Scottish wool.

By that time each of the three spinning mills in Stornoway had a weaving department with a concentration of Hattersley Looms and even some double-width power looms which were used for the weaving of blankets at that time. It was fairly obvious that the weaving mill spun Harris Tweed as the last process associated with the croft and the old cottage industry was drifting into the mills and some far-sighted leaders of the crofters made it a condition of the 1933 amendment that a clause be inserted safeguarding the cottage weaving.

The new 1933 definition therefore reads as follows:

Harris Tweed means Tweed made from pure virgin wool produced in Scotland, spun, dyed and finished in the Outer Hebrides and hand-woven by the islanders at their own home.

All the looms were removed from mill premises except for the use of pattern weaving. In that way the industry was anchored to its original island homes and main selling feature, and it proved badly needed employment as it developed during the subsequent years.

Many people, particularly the small producers who relied on commission spinners for their yarn supplies were very unhappy with the way the 1933 amendment to the definition of the 'Orb' trademark failed to recognise that the industry was using mainland mill-spun yarn at least for as long as it was using island mill-spun yarn, and that island-spun yarn was recognised by the amendment whereas the mainland mill-spun yarn was rejected.

In fact most of the Stornoway spinners themselves built up their Harris Tweed business originally by using mainland mill spun yarn and therefore the 1933 amendment failed to acknowledge the true facts of the situation in Lewis and Harris, even although a substantial amount of the yarn that was used in the manufacture of Harris Tweed in 1933 was still mainland yarn. That discrimination caused a lot of bitterness in the industry down through the years. The Stornoway spinners undertook to supply all the yarn needs of the 'Orb' Harris Tweed Industry but failed to do so.

The Hattersley Loom

Lord Leverhulme the Lewis proprietor bought one of the Stornoway mills in the early 1920s and introduced the Hattersley Loom into the industry. His ambition was to concentrate the weaving into large sheds. At first it was single shuttle looms but in 1924 some 40 six shuttle looms came to the island. The first two Hattersley looms came to Calbost in 1933, one to Jack Macleod number 8 and one to John Nicolson number 11. The last wooden loom Bear Mhor in Calbost was still in use in 1944 when the 79 year old weaver, Calum Morrison, Calum Alastair Mhurchaidh 1875-1944 died suddenly with partly woven tweed still in his wooden loom. It was Peter his neighbour that completed the weaving of the tweed.

Jessie Platt of Eishken was among a number of people and philanthropic agencies that encouraged the Harris Tweed industry. Mrs Platt provided an outlet for a substantial quantity of the crofter tweed that was produced in Lochs and we have seen an old note book in Eishken Lodge giving details of purchased of local crofter cloth for which she paid 3/6 a yd (17½ p) in 1889. That was a very high price at that time. In the late 1920s crofter tweed was selling so low as 2/6 or 12½ p and on occasion for much less.

Evidence of the esteem in which the people of Lochs held the Platts of Eishken is to be found in the illuminated address that was formulated by Mr Kerr the head teacher of Planasker School Marvig on behalf of the people on the occasion of the Platt's Silver Wedding Anniversary on 15/8/01, part of which reads: 'Nor can we allow this occasion to pass without acknowledging our deep indebtedness to you for the great interest you have shown in our local tweed industry.'

The people of Park and district always referred to Jessie Platt as 'Lady Platt' or the 'Lady' thus paying her the compliment of conferring on her an unofficial title, which many thought was hers by right.

In the early part of the 20th century there were seven or eight weavers in Calbost, all of them operating the Big Loom and working for the domestic industry. That was a weaver for every second croft.

Waulking - Luadh

The finishing of the 'Clo-Mor' like all the other processes was carried out in the homes of the people and the 'Luadh' was a social occasion attended by the writer and his compatriots on many occasions in our youth.

A team of six or eight volunteer young women took up position opposite each other on each side of the waulking board 'Cleath Luaidh' which was a purpose built large board, somewhat larger than a door, say 10 ft x 4½ ft. (Sometimes a door itself was used). The 'Cleath' was placed over two tubs, one at each end (tubs were usually made by cutting a 50 gallon oak cask into two equal halves). The cloth was soaked in one of the tubs in a strong solution of hot water and washing soda. The lady of the house supervised the work.

The supervisory lady brought a suitable length of the cloth on to the board, probably three or four yards per pair of girls after wringing all the water out of the cloth. The girls worked in pairs, one opposite the other pummelling and rubbing the cloth back and fore across the table, taking care to apply equal treatment to every inch of the cloth as they rhythmically pummelled to the lilt of their waulking songs.

There was usually a lead singer in the team and the custom was for the lead singer sometimes to improvise words spontaneously in a humorous fashion relating to some local event but more often than not linking the name of one or other of the young men present to a prospective girlfriend (sometimes a likely and eligible girl but certainly not always). The idea was to entertain and these lead singers were really capable. There were always a few young ladies and some not so young in every community that specialised in lead singing at 'Luadhs'. At one time every chore was performed to the tune of a work song. Stress was absent and they were happy at their work.

The purpose of waulking or finishing the cloth is twofold: to remove all the oil and dirt from the cloth and shrink the cloth both in width and length until it is a soft clean cloth ready to wear. The width of the cloth is shrunk from 32 inches as it leaves the loom to 28½ inches after finishing and four or five yards in the length of a full place.

It was an easy matter to over-do the shrinking and therefore the lady supervisor kept a constant watch by intervening every so often and measuring the width, not with a tape measure but with her hand - 'cromadh' which is the length from the knuckle of the longest finger in the closed position right round to the palm of the hand which is about 5 inches. Therefore five and three-quarter 'cromadh' was about 28½ inches.

It was absolutely necessary to keep the temperature of the water fairly high so that the cloth would not cool down too much. Cold cloth was almost impossible to shrink and therefore the team of girls worked fairly fast. A competent supervising lady ensured a fairly easy task for the team by keeping the water fairly warm. The children of the village looked forward to a 'Luadh'. It was not only a happy occasion but a time when there was always a hand out of a piece and jam which was highly appreciated because jam was only available on special occasions such as weddings and 'Luadhs'.

Up until the time of the amending of the definition of the 'Orb' Trade mark to allow Hebridean mill spun yarn to qualify for the 'Orb' in 1933, there were no finishing machinery in the islands and all tweed was either finished domestically by luadh or sent to the mainland for mill finishing, usually in Paisley. The new definition of the 'Orb' stamp required all the processes in the manufacture of Harris Tweed to be carried out in the Hebrides and Stornoway mills installed finishing plants about 1934.

Once finishing plants were installed on the islands the days of the domestic 'Luadhs' were numbered and the institution began to fade away after 1934. The merchants and small producers found it more convenient to send their tweed to Seedhill, Paisley and instruct the Paisley finishers to bale and forward their tweed to their customers who were usually in London or Leeds. Very little export of Harris Tweed was done in the 1930s or earlier.

The Harris Tweed Association controlled the 'Orb' stamp and they had inspectors at all the finishing plants. Manufacturers completed a stamping application form for each roll they submitted for stamping duly signed and declaring where the yarn in the piece was spun and where it was woven. Garment labels were available from the Harris Tweed Association offices at the rate of one for every 3 or 4 yards stamped, and the manufacturer usually forwarded the garment labels within the bales. These labels were abused at one time and a serial number was applied to each label so that every label could be traced to the manufacture of issue in the event of any doubt.

Small producers

Money was in short supply in Lewis in the 19th century and shopkeepers accepted any form of currency the crofters were able to offer such as eggs, wool and labour etc. in exchange for the necessities of life. There was a long standing precedent for this form of barter by the tacksmen and landlords who accepted or indeed demanded agricultural produce and labour on lieu of the annual rent etc.

Unfortunately their exchange led to undesirable forms of the truck system in some instances, but more often than not the merchants themselves were the victims as they were obliged to accept the only currency these deprived

crofters could offer. In a way the merchants were providing a small service which the political and economic system failed to do.

In these circumstances local merchants found themselves holding quantities of wool that was not easy to dispose of and the more enterprising merchants began to convert their stock of wool into yarn and tweed by giving it out to local women to be washed, dyed and spun and then pass the yarn to commission weavers to be woven into Harris Tweed.

The resulting cloth was fairly easy to sell at least since the 20th century came in when merchants became aware of regular buyers of tweed in the south. The next step was that some of these local shopkeepers began to buy the finished cloth from the crofter and that helped the economy greatly.

The next natural step was the rise of local entrepreneurs known as small producers who were not necessarily shopkeepers but manufacturers of tweed in their own right by buying mill-spun yarn from commission spinners on the mainland because there were no spinners in the islands. That created a demand for yarn and in 1909 Kenneth Mackenzie 'Coinneach Alex' who was erecting a barrel factory on Lewis Street, Stornoway, changed his plans and installed the first wool spinning machinery in Lewis in his new factory buildings instead of a cooperage in order to cater for the increasing demand for the commission spinning of the crofters' own wool as well as the sale of yarn.

By the end of the first decade of the 20th century the tweed industry in the Hebrides was developing into a multi-strand industry with numerous crofter manufacturers. As well as the basic foundation of the industry mainly using their own wool, some of the crofters were producing hand spun cloth, others were producing a 50/50 cloth made from mill spun warp and hand spun weft. The small producers and some crofters were using mill spun yarn exclusively, some of which was mill spun in the islands and some on the mainland. In view of the way the industry was developing it became increasingly clear that it was necessary to protect the original hand spun Hebridean product by registering a trade mark and that was done in 1910 and the 'Orb Mark' was applied to the hand spun cloth from 1911 onwards.

Naturally the First World War created a demand for any Hebridean tweed whether it was stamped or not and the 1920s saw an explosion of small producer manufacture of mill spun cloth in Lewis, using mainland mill spun yarn as well as island mill spun yarn. Some of the mainland spinners established agents in Lewis for the sale of their yarn.

By the end of the 1920s and early in the 1930s elements in the industry agitated to have the definition of the 'Orb' trade mark amended in order to recognise the prevailing situation in the Hebridean Harris Tweed industry which was the fact that tweed manufactured exclusively from mill spun yarn was freely sold as Harris Tweed for decades and was therefore accepted as such by the buying public and therefore mill spun yarn should qualify for the 'Orb' trade marks. A strong Hebridean mill owners lobby agitated for the exclusive admission of island mill spun yarn and the rejection of mainland mill spun yarn.

A lively and sometimes heated debate raged for years with James Macdonald, a crofter's son from Habost, Lochs, who was at that time in the process of erecting a spinning mill in Stornoway in partnership with Gilbert Archer, a millionaire from Edinburgh, at the centre of the debate, and three Lochs religious ministers representing the crofters, Rev Murdoch Macrae, Kinloch, Rev Calum Maciver, Crossbost and Rev Norman Macleod, Uigen, a man from Kershader.

In the end the definition of the 'Orb' Trade mark was amended in 1933 in order to allow for the stamping of island mill spun yarn by the 'Orb' stamp. The mainland mill spun yarn was excluded but not until after the Orb spinners gave an undertaking that they would supply all the needs for mill spun yarn.

Ironically only 12 years later in 1945 the same James Macdonald withdrew from the 'Orb' Harris Tweed Industry and set up a new woollen mill in Oban producing an identical product and having it woven in the Uists on domestic Hattersley Looms. That led to the Lord Hunter Court Case in 1964. The small producers complained consistently from 1933 until the Lord Hunter court case of 1964 that they were denied a fair share of island spun 'Orb' yarn. The effect of the Lord Hunter judgement was to create conditions in the industry that resulted in a short space of time in the elimination of the small producers from the industry. There were several small producers in Calbost.

Two of the main small producers in the industry, Ms Kenneth Macleod & Co Ltd Shawbost and Stephen Burns & Co., Stornoway set up spinning plants of their own. The decline of the industry was not brought about by a shortage of 'Orb' spinning capacity in the islands but by a surfeit of spinning capacity chasing too few orders. More 'Orb' spinning capacity would have hastened or brought the 1970 crisis forward sooner seeing there wasn't the necessary harmony in the industry to enable the whole industry to regulate itself.

[ends]

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