



## [History of Harris Tweed]

The inhabitants of the Western Isles of Scotland like those in many parts of the country manufactured cloth, entirely by hand, for domestic and local use, long before the industrial revolution reached Scotland.

'Clò-Mòr', later called 'Harris Tweed' was one of the fabrics manufactured by hand, by the Islanders, from their own wool, in their cottages during the long winter evenings.

### **Harris Tweed**

It is generally accepted that Clò-Mòr was first referred to as Harris Tweed when the Countess of Dunmore, whose family were the proprietors of the North Harris Estate, took an interest in the cloth about 1840. Harris Tweed would probably never have come to the notice of the general public, was it not for the philanthropic work of a number of persons and agencies, mainly before, but also after the end of the 19th century.

Prominent among these were Lord and Lady Dunmore, Mrs Thomas, Mrs Mary Stewart Mackenzie of Seaforth, Lady Gorash Cathcart, Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, Mrs Platt of Eishken, Scottish Home Industries Association, Highland Home Industries, the Crofters Agency and others.

The activities of these and other people on behalf of the cottage industry were motivated by considerations other than personal profit. It is obvious that the main consideration was social and economic, the welfare of the ordinary people of the Outer Hebrides. It was an industry of the people, for the people, and in this respect was unique.

### **Cottage industry**

Thus we see that the Harris Tweed Industry was originally a cottage industry, producing an article made entirely by hand.

### **Early marketing**

The product was marketed as a result of the activities of the individuals and agencies mentioned above and this was done from the middle of the 19th century, and by the turn of the century Harris Tweed had gained for itself a very good reputation. The cloth was attracting attention for its characteristics and good quality, and therefore it was able to create its own market on its own merits.

### **Original reputation**

It was during this early period the fabric earned for itself the good reputation and name that established Harris Tweed as a cloth of quality and distinction. Commercial interests were not slow to appreciate the potential value of the good will and the name 'Harris Tweed'.

### **Early imitation**

Power woven imitation Harris Tweed began to appear in the British market by the end of the 19th century and the practise eventually spread to the European continent and even as far afield as Japan.

### **Orb trade mark**

The necessity for a protective Trade Mark was appreciated early in the 20th century. Eventually the Harris Tweed Association Ltd was formed in 1909 and subsequently the Orb definition Trade Mark was registered in 1910. The Orb Trade Mark was of course originally confined, by its definition, to the article made entirely by hand.

### **Mainland carding**

By this time, that is during the first decade of the 20th century, crofters sometimes sent their wool to the mainland woollen mills to be carded for them and soon the crofters wool was both carded and spun on the mainland and the resulting yarn was woven by the Islanders on their hand looms and marketed as Harris Tweed.

### **Island carding mills**

Very early in the 20th century carding mills were set up both in Lewis and in Harris. Hand carding was a tedious and time consuming work and it was felt that the setting up of carding mills would help the producers and enable them to increase their production.

### **Mill spinning**

In the case of Lewis mill carding was followed by mill spinning by the end of the first decade of the 20th century. To begin with however, these mill processes were established in order to supply the demand from crofters and small

producers for carded wool, and later for mill spun yarn for the production of Harris Tweed as well as yarn for the weaving of blankets for domestic use.

### **Mill manufacturers**

The Lewis mills soon realised they could manufacture Harris Tweed as well as spin yarn for the islanders and so the Lewis spinners began to make Harris Tweed on their own account during the second decade of the 20th century. It was however, after the First World War before the Lewis spinners produced a significant volume of cloth. The bulk of the cloth produced before 1920 was still produced by the crofters and small producers.

### **Mill buying of Harris Tweed**

During the early years of the Lewis spinners they engaged to a limited extent in the purchase of Harris Tweed from the Islanders.

### **Mainland mill spun yarn**

Mill spun yarn was first introduced into the Harris Tweed Industry from the mainland and by 1920 a large volume of mainland spun yarn was imported into the Islands. Tweed made from this yarn was marketed under various names such as 'Lewis Tweed', 'Home Spun Tweed', 'Harris Tweed' etc. Generally speaking experience showed that it was easier to sell under the name of Harris Tweed and so most of the imported mainland yarn was marketed under the name 'Harris Tweed'.

### **Historic use of the term Harris Tweed**

Historically therefore, the term 'Harris Tweed' was applied to tweed made entirely by hand in the Outer Hebrides and this article was protected by the Orb Trade Mark from 1911 onwards. The term Harris Tweed was also freely and generally applied to tweed made from mill spun yarn produced either in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland or mainland Scotland. There was one common feature to all cloth sold as Harris Tweed and that was that it was hand woven and, with the exception of Shield Harris Tweed all of it was hand woven at the islanders' own homes.

### **Period 1914 / 1934**

During the period of approximately 20 years prior to the amending of the definition of the Orb Trade Mark in 1934, almost all the Harris Tweed manufactured was made from mill spun yarn and a very large proportion was made from mainland spun yarn. It is felt that a reasonable estimate of the mill spun yarn used at this time may be 50%. Almost, if not all, the producers of Harris Tweed that came into prominence after the amending of the Orb definition in 1934 had used mainland yarn; indeed I think it is only one spinner/manufacturer that did not to a large extent build his original Harris Tweed manufacturing business on mainland spun yarn.

### **The 1934 'Orb' amendment**

By the early 1930s the Hebridean spinners had grown into a powerful force and they were no longer content with the use of the term Harris Tweed, they now felt they should have the use of the Orb Trade Mark as well and so they commenced an agitation to have the Orb definition changed to allow the use of the Hebridean mill spun yarn. A fierce controversy followed because a large number of small producers and crofters resisted the moves to change the Orb definition in favour of the Hebridean spinners. There were bitter complaints about the restrictive practices of the Hebridean spinners when it came to supplying yarn to their competitors. It was strongly felt that an amendment of the Orb definition in favour of Hebridean mill spun yarn would prejudice the use of mainland mill spun yarn because cloth made from such yarn would not be eligible for the Orb Trade Mark. The small producers and crofters would be at the mercy of the Hebridean spinners and few of them doubted the ultimate result of such dependence on commission spinners who were also their competitors in the marketing of cloth.

The Hebridean spinners were able to put forward a powerful lobby and a united front, whereas the non-spinner producers were divided in their approach and lacked unity and leadership.

In 1934 the Board of Trade granted an amendment to the definition attached to the Orb Trade Mark, allowing the application of the Trade Mark to cloth made from Hebridean mill spun yarn.

In reality, mainland mill spun yarn had an equal, if not better claim to qualify for the Orb Trade Mark.

Furthermore the 1934 Orb amendment created a situation of privilege and a perfect opportunity for the practice of unfair restrictions by the Hebridean spinners against those producers of Harris Tweed who depended on them for their supply of yarn at a price that would enable them to compete with the spinner/manufacturers in world markets. The 1934 Orb amendment was not realistic because it did not take account of the plain facts of the situation and I maintain the consequences of the amendment were detrimental to the industry and to the best interests of the community in the long run.

The Hebridean spinners did practice unfair restrictions against their yarn customers as can be ascertained from the testimony of many small producers. Also the best interests of the buying public were not served by the commercially restrictive conditions created by the amendment which gave a few spinners a monopoly in the essential raw material necessary for the production of Harris Tweed that would qualify for the protective Trade Mark originally granted to the crofters and small producers.

### **Claim of mainland to the 'Orb'**

The natural growth of the Harris Tweed Industry after 1934 was stifled because the historical claim of mainland yarn to recognition and inclusion within the amended definition of the Orb in 1934 was not recognised.

The admission of mainland yarn to qualify for the Orb would not have created any threat to the continuity of the industry in the Scottish Hebrides exclusively, and it would not have created any difficulty in the administration of the Orb Trade Mark.

It would be just as easy for the H.T.A. to control the wool content of Orb Harris yarn spun on the mainland as it was for yarn spun in the Hebrides.

No one would go to the trouble to bring yarn from the mainland if yarn of similar quality and price could be bought on the Islands. Therefore the local spinners would have the incentive to supply the demand for yarn. I maintain they had the capacity to produce, at all times, far in excess of their production at any given point in time.

No manufacturer from the mainland could embark on the production of Harris Tweed without first taking his yarn to the Islands where the hand weaving process had to be carried out at the Islanders homes. In that way the essential processes in the manufacture of Harris Tweed had to be carried out in the Islands and more employment created for the weavers.

The small producer element in the industry would have been free from the unfair restrictions of the Hebridean spinners.

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the growth of the industry would have been faster and greater, and that the industry would have provided a much higher degree of employment over the years.

It is an undisputed fact that the demand for Harris Tweed was far in excess of the supply in both home and export markets during a large part of the time following the 1934 Orb amendment.

As proof of this fact, one can point to the large volume of Harris Tweed supplied to the market by the shield growth of manufacturers on the mainland of Scotland.

No damage was done to the Harris Tweed industry by the activities of the mainland Shield growth. On the contrary the Shield growth made a valuable contribution to the economy of the Hebrides by providing work for weavers at a time when the weaving force was grossly under employed.

Had mainland yarn been available under the 1934 Orb amended definition, it is reasonable to assume that many of the small producers who were already in business on a fairly large scale would have prospered. Also it is reasonable to assume that small producers from other parts of the Hebrides might well have engaged in the manufacture of Harris Tweed on a larger scale, thus creating work for the grossly under-employed weaving force, many of whom were forced to leave the Islands in search of work. In the early 1930s it was estimated that the existing Hebridean mills, spinning to full capacity would have a yarn output, probably sufficient to produce about 600,000 yards of tweed a year.

At the same time it was estimated that the probable weight of yarn imported into the Islands in the early 1930s was between 500,000 and 600,000 yards per year, or sufficient to produce an equal quantity of tweed to that produced from Island spun yarn.

Over the years the cost of Hebridean spun yarn was invariably higher than similar yarn imported from mainland mills and very often the quality of mainland yarn was superior.

In the 1950s and 1960s the mainland Shield competition sold their Harris Tweed 2s/- below the Orb cloth yet at that very time the small producers were being squeezed out of the Orb industry because of the high price of Orb yarn.

### **Mainland yarn used after 1934**

Mainland yarn continued to come into the Islands after 1934 in a substantial volume despite the disadvantage it was now under compared with the similar Hebridean mill spun yarn. Even as late as 1961, almost 30 years after the 1934 amendment, Mr H. A. Moisley of Glasgow University writing in his book 'Harris Tweed - A Growing Highland Industry' shows that 16% of all the Harris Tweed sold at that time (including Shield Harris Tweed) was made from mainland mill spun yarn. It is not difficult to imagine that the volume of cloth made from mainland yarn and sold as Harris Tweed would have been a great deal higher over the years had this side of the industry enjoyed the undoubted advantage of the Orb Trade mark and the encouragement of the Harris Tweed Association Ltd.

The market potential for Harris Tweed during the 30 to 40 years following the amending of the definition of the Orb Trade Mark in 1934 was never realised and that was proved by the substantial foothold gained by the mainland Shield producers in the 1950s and 60s.

It is a well known fact that Hebridean weavers were seriously under-employed during the whole of the history of the

Harris Tweed industry, and it therefore follows that the degree of control conferred on the Hebridean spinners, over the industry, by the 1934 Orb amendment was not in the best interests of the Hebridean weavers.

#### **New features of the 1934 Orb definition**

The original definition attached to the Orb Trade Mark was as follows, 'Harris Tweed' means a tweed, hand spun, hand woven, dyed and finished by hand in the Islands of Lewis, Harris, Uist, Barra and their several pertinences and all known as the Outer Hebrides.

The 1934 amended definition is as follows:

'Harris Tweed' means a 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 homes in the Islands of Lewis, Harris, Uist, Barra and their several pertinences, and all known as the Outer Hebrides.

The new features introduced into the definition were:

1. Allow Hebridean mill spun yarn.
2. Limit the industry to use pure virgin wool produced in Scotland.
3. Allow mill finishing.
4. Confine the weaving to hand weaving by the Islanders at their own homes.

#### **Restrictive features of the 1934 definition**

The two restrictive features of the new definition were the rejection of mainland spun yarn and confining the product to the use of Scottish produced wool. Although there was no dispute about the Scottish wool clause at the time, it stands to reason that there is a limit as to the weight of wool produced in Scotland and if ever that product fell far short of the demand the natural outcome would be that competition would force up the price of Scottish wool and possibly cause Harris Tweed to be less competitive than it would otherwise be if the industry had access to any suitable pure virgin wool.

#### **Protective feature of the 1934 definition**

By 1934 the practice of concentrating the Hattersley hand loom at mill premises had gone a long way. There were even power looms on mill premises but as far as is known there was no effort made to weave Harris Tweed on power looms.

However, the trend was noted and the danger that all manufacturing processes of Harris Tweed would eventually be concentrated on mill premises was recognised, and the clause 'hand woven by the Islanders in their own homes' was embodied in the new definition. The looms were dispersed from mill premises and consequently this ensured the diversion of the weaving work throughout the rural parts with consequent economic benefits of very great value to the rural communities. Without the Harris Tweed cottage weaving there would have been undoubtedly a much larger shift of population from the rural areas both to the town of Stornoway and away from the Islands altogether. The social structure and way of life in the Islands would have suffered a great loss without the cottage weaving industry.

Forty years later in the late 1960s and 1970s we find power looms coming back to the Stornoway mills and history repeating itself with an agitation for a further amending of the definition of the Orb Trade Mark and the question is, will the cottage weaving industry at the homes of the Islanders get the same protection in the event of a change in the Orb definition. It is difficult to see how the establishment of weaving factories is consistent with the protection of, or the continuity of the traditional cottage weaving which is the corner stone on which the Harris Tweed Industry was built. It is also difficult to see what is to prevent the weaving of Harris Tweed eventually drifting into the manufacturer's premises, or premises under his control, as near to him as possible if the protective clause 'at the Islanders homes' is removed or qualified in any way.

[ends]

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