



## [More Notes on the Harris Tweed Industry]

**Valtos:** The big stamper Roddy Macrae used to tell me how a large number of women were employed in Valtos, Lochs, spinning on the wheel continually. My recollection is that, that was done by the father of the last Mr Mackay we all knew at Valtos, Balallan. I estimate that that would be in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> and perhaps early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Is there anyone left who might throw more light on that?

**Domestic Requirements:** Earlier on the people made use of their own wool for domestic requirements and in due course for marketing after value added by spinning, dyeing and weaving it. By then one of the few **home made** or **hand articles** that was not submerged by the industrial revolution fetched a premium, hence the survival of the Harris Tweed Industry. It is a survivor.

**Domestic Blanketing:** Returning to the domestic, they made blanketing and that aspect of the industry survived to the 1930s. Our own family had a beart mhor, and that loom was very suitable for blanketing. The Hattersley was not (you see, you banged in the weft by giving it two or more bangs on the reed, 'beart mheadhon). Of course it was a single width cloth and one seamed it along the centre to double the width. There was a decoration along the edge. Eventually they sold blanketing in the south.

**Underwear:** I recall quite clearly the making and the wearing of drawers, of tweed un-dyed blanketing. I never wore them but my brother Murdo did. He was a few years older than me. They were not unlike an under trouser - wide in the legs. They were fishermen and they needed warm clothing.

**Developing:** One can easily trace a process of development in all departments of the product or processes of the product.

**Washing of the wool:** Originally that was done at a stream or loch - eventually on a large scale in the mill by a washing machine.

**Dyeing:** Was carried out in a pot outside the house near a stream or near a loch. The Congested District Board provided bigger pots or boilers. The Board was only founded in 1897 to 1912. It did a lot for the industry.

**Colours:** Were achieved with vegetable dyes and there was a wide variety of vegetables used. In the 1940s the crofters began to acquire and use the artificial or mineral dyes and I personally used these at Calbost. The mills were using mineral dyes long before.

**Drying the wool:** Was done on stone dykes.

**Carding the wool:** With hand cards

**Spinning** the wool with a distaff 'congall' and the spindle 'dealgan' with the whorl stone 'clach marrach nathrach'. In 1941, when the Stornoway Airport was being built a burial chamber was uncovered well below the surface of the ground and pottery was uncovered. It is felt that it was the grave of a woman and the tools she was using were buried with her. I think they felt that the grave was about 2,000 years old. That is a good place to begin your piece in order to place the Hebridean Tweed Industry in its context. Who was the woman? Were they self sufficient? etc, etc. More information on that from the Stornoway Museum staff. Then came the wheel (spinning wheel) a massive stride ahead.

Soon the work of carding with a hand set of cards and a spinning wheel became tedious and in 1900 a carding mill was established in Tarbert, Harris followed by one in Stornoway in 1903.

**Impatient man** was not happy for long. If machinery could be used to card the wool it was an easy step to have it spun by the mill machinery (on the mainland to begin with). Another short step and the mainland mill would supply the finished yarn to whatever colour one wanted without bothering about wool. Viewed from where we stand at present, these were pioneering times. Who pioneered the modern industry but the crofter entrepreneurs, the merchants and the locals with initiative? The first two mills were **carding only** to service the crofters of Harris and Lewis by speeding up the production of cloth and taking out of it the tediousness. Then came spinning machinery to the Islands - followed by greed.

**Weaving development:** Continuing the development of weaving you began with the bone comb at the airport, the 'beart bheag', the 'beart mhor', the 'Hattersley', the 'double width' and along the way you will notice mans greediness by tinkering with 'power weaving' double width cloth in the 1960s etc - at a time when that was quite unnecessary because the manufacturers of Harris Tweed 'Orb' could not supply the demand (nearly 8,000,000 yards in 1966). That folly was followed by these rich spinners carting their machinery to the dump in the 1970s.

**Marketing:** Harris Tweed is a high class product - a cottage industry product partly hand made. People pay for that kind of product because of the image and even the quality 100% virgin wool. It is madness therefore to channel that product to the cheap end of the trade. It is quite elementary that the high class expensive end of the trade would drop the article when it was devalued by selling it cheap indirect to the mass markers up. Harris Tweed by its very nature cannot compete with mass produced cloth. Once again, it was some of the big spinner manufacturers that cultivated the mass garment producers when the demand was high and those steps unnecessary.

**Harris Tweed Association - 'Orb' Stamp:** Did the H.T.A. Ltd., do all they should have done in the way they should have done it - (I am a prejudiced person) but I think they failed the industry. Their very existence and the existence of the 'Orb' was a magnificent thing and their very existence did a lot for Harris Tweed. All public bodies are only as good as the people who serve on them and usually such bodies are dragged down by one or more member's but perhaps that is far too controversial for this short piece.

**Orb:** I would, however, refer to the protection afforded by the Orb and remember in that conclusion to mention the giant Rev. Murdo Macrae. My information is that he mainly argued for the principle of retaining the weaving - as it was always was - at the homes of the Islanders. That therefore was one of the base points in the Orb definition of 1933 when the definition was amended. After all it was a crofter cottage industry. The original Orb Trade Mark was initiated not by spinners but by members of the crofting community - merchants, small producer's and local buyers of Tweed who were in touch with the southern market who bought the cloth because it was a crofter home made cloth - not made to pattern but in the colours and designs that occurred to the housewives etc. Did you know that it was really after the last war that the Harris Tweed Industry began in earnest to design and sell by 'bunch' through their agents at home and abroad? Weavers were then taken on to do pattern work. So much of it was done in the 1930s. Before the war small producers and even the mills produced the tweed first and then approached buyers. The housewife was the same and indeed is still the same in Harris.

**Local Buyers:** Local merchants and entrepreneurial people with initiative and a little education played a major part in the development of Harris Tweed. My early recollections are that Donald Maciver, Bayhead, Donald Macaulay, Cromwell Street, Muintear a Cheannaich in Balallan and Jessie Platt in Eishken were prominent buyers of crofter's webs of tweed. Later on perhaps there were a lot more dealers.

Do not overlook education. Older folk were not all equipped with sufficient education to conduct business with London and Locals House, the two main textile centres in Britain.

**Voluntary Organisations:** These were the early pioneers, the Dunmores, The Platts, or at least her good self (note it was always the women), The Highland Home Industries Ltd., the Crofters Agency Ltd., Mrs Seaforth and particularly Mrs Thomas, wife of Captain Thomas first in Edinburgh and later in London.

In 1984 Mrs Winifred Shand wrote a book 'The Isles Are My Delight'. She was the last buyer of the Highland Home Industries in the Uists. A nice quaint old lady from Edinburgh. She was with us on the original tourist organisation from about 1958. The book is an amusing ramble; the point is that the Highland Home Industries has a presence in the Islands until long after the Second World War.

**Depot at Balallan:** Try as I may I cannot find any reference to a Harris Tweed Depot at Balallan, but I feel that there was a depot at Balallan, probably near the Highland Home Industries and I am inclined to think that it was Alexander Lamont who was an instructor appointed with Congested District Board funds paying his salary. His duties were to instruct and improve all aspects of manufacture.

**Warping:** Originally, and even when I remember, warping was done with very few yarn ends in ones hand. In due course it came to the decimal and then the dozen 12. On a bank which takes 48 and even at times 72. I remember when my brother started to use a bank of 24 ends and my father was not very pleased. Later on my brother would up to 48 - he was very progressive.

**Tying in** was not done when I was at school. The loom was cleared and the weaver had to send back the 'Fuighacht' meaning the last 18 inches of the web. I still remember in the mid 1920s when my brother did the first tied in tweed and my father thought he was reckless with silly new ideas.

**Alexander Lamont** taught the local weavers better methods of warping and quite possibly tying in, new designs and various other improvements. Mr Lamont was working in Kenneth Mackenzie Ltd., Lewis, on a power double width loom doing blankets in the very early 1930s. Newall's had one as well. His daughter lived on Lewis Street, just opposite the pub on the corner of Francis Street and Lewis Street. They were Skye people, I think.

At that time, that is in the late 20s and early 30s, both mills in Stornoway, Kenneth Mackenzie & Newall's had a

large shed or rooms in each of their mills with Hattersley Looms and even James Macdonald had a large shed in Habost, Lochs full of Hattersley Looms. I mention this because it is pertinent to what is taking place at present. The terms of the 1933 definition of the Orb mark ensured that these mill looms were put out and the weaving restored to the 'Islanders own homes'. Probably Rev. Macrae was mainly responsible for that as far as I could find out. It was providential because the weaving would have been taken over by the mills at that time otherwise, and to the detriment of the people of Lewis.

**'Orb' Definition:** The original definition of the Orb mark was as follows:-'Harris Tweed is a tweed handwoven, hand spun and finished by hand in the Outer Hebrides', with made in Harris, made in Lewis, made in Uist or Barra etc. added as appropriate. Originally the Harris Tweed Association was a representative body built in 1929 the system of nomination was abolished and vacancies occurring thereafter were filled by co-opting the serving members. The 1933 amended definition reads as follows: 'Harris Tweed means tweed made from pure virgin wool produced in Scotland, spun, dyed and finished in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland and handwoven by the Islanders at their own homes'. Recently the terms 'wool produced in Scotland' was taken out because it was restrictive and tended to be more expensive.

**Mrs Platt:** I personally did see a note book in Eishken lodge giving details of purchases of local crofter cloth for which Mrs Platt paid 3s/6d a yd in 1889. That was a very high price at that time.

**Luadh:** Don't forget the 'luadh' waulking and its work songs. Mill finishing was first introduced to Lewis by James Macdonald, the Habost man, in the early 1930s. He was the chief advocate for the 1933 amendment

**Stamping:** Stamping was done by hand and I think you will find that there is a photo of Calum Macdonald, the Balallan man, in the process of stamping with the hot iron.

Latterly the small producers were selling in markets all over the world on bunch. I was selling in Japan even. You establish an agent, you design your patterns.

[ends]

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Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: Rambling Notes on 'Clo-Mor'

Location in physical archive: Series D, Files 15-22, Section 16

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/4/17

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