

# **THE WELSH WOOLLEN TEXTILE INDUSTRY**

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The wool textile industry in Britain is concentrated in Yorkshire, Scotland and the West of England. When the location of the industry is described, the small section of it in the Welsh dales is usually omitted, but this section might well claim a considerable reputation for the quality of its traditional products. When, as has happened in one or two cases in North Wales, an enterprising manager takes over a mill, there are substantial developments, and the quality and quantity of the products grow apace.

## **HISTORY AND TRADITION**

The Welsh textile industry is as old as the other branches of the wool textile industry in Britain. When fulling became mechanised and power machinery was invented, spinners and weavers went in search of waterpower to the streams of Yorkshire and the West of England. The same movement took the Welsh craftsman from the hill-sides to the banks of the mountain streams. That is where the mills are still concentrated, mainly in Cardigan, Carmarthen and Pembrokeshire. Yet there are textile mills in all parts of Wales, as a glance at the map will show. The mills and the equipment are, as a rule, old. The buildings blend well with the countryside and do not spoil the beauty of the landscape, as is so often the case in other textile districts. There are about sixty such mills in existence at present in Wales, ranging in size from a large, modern mill with hundreds of looms, to the one-man

establishment working an ancient mule to spin knitting yarns.



Figure 1 Map of Wales showing the distribution of the woollen textile industry. Figures following the place names indicate the number of mills in the area.



PLATE 1 A woollen mill in Snowdonia



PLATE 2 A woollen mill with a disused waterwheel on the Cardiganshire coast

The industry has been shrinking over the past fifty years. Before the first World War there existed about 250 mills in Wales. They were badly hit by the depression which followed that war in the early 'twenties, and even greater havoc was

wrought by the great slump of the early 'thirties. Yet the picture is by no means one of unremitting gloom. Some owners have modernised and enlarged their buildings and equipment, and here and there a mill has re-opened, while in one or two cases even a new venture has been started. One feature should be stressed. In over ninety per cent of the Welsh mills the manager and the owner are the same person (not necessarily always a man), and the sturdiness of the struggle against heavy odds and the tenacity with which the industry holds on to its traditional product, are in part explained by this structure of ownership. There are many natural handicaps, such as remoteness from the big centres of population, not perhaps so much in miles as in difficulties of transport and communication. There is no natural training centre, and the University of Wales has as yet no courses in textiles. Fashions and modern colour trends do not greatly influence Welsh manufacturers, who rely mainly on traditional designs and make their own colour selection.

## **THE PRODUCTS**

If the foregoing description has given the impression that the Welsh textile industry is backward and hidebound, it is misleading. It is true that no worsted yarn is spun in Wales and only very rarely is worsted yarn used by the Welsh weaver, yet the range of woollen products is wide and varied. Traditionally the Welsh mills produced shirting flannel and this is still woven in quantity, mostly on narrow looms. Miners and steel workers are grateful users of flannel shirts, as this material is an excellent sweat-absorber. Some Welsh mills have departments making up flannel shirts.

Next in importance is the production of tweeds. Some of the heavier varieties easily equal the best produced anywhere, in quality, colours and durability. There are no better tweeds for stalking and fishing or other hard wear. In recent years, Wales has also produced light-weight tweeds without losing anything of the quality that has always been associated with this type of cloth.



PLATE 3 Carding in a mill in the Newcastle Emlyn area

Another big group of products includes all types of blankets. Many Welsh mills produce check blankets in pastel shades. A traditional type of blanket is the Cartheni, which the Welsh

often call a quilt. Carthenau (which is the plural) are designed to serve as bedspreads for the day, but are left on the bed during the night, when they become very warm and cosy top-blankets or quilts. In many small country hotels in Wales, the traveller will gratefully remember the Cartheni which kept him warm and comfortable during a cold winter's night. A Cartheni is a heavy blanket, weighing about four to five pounds and measuring from seventy-two inches by eighty-six inches to eighty-six inches by ninety-six inches. It has a fringe and, of course, it is pure wool. Its colours are usually a harmonious mixture of two or three bright and two or three pastel shades. An equally characteristic Welsh product is the honeycomb quilt, for which there has lately been an unprecedented demand. The mixture of bright and quiet colours is once again extremely attractive, and honeycomb quilts can lend grace to a room furnished in the most modern idiom as well as to rooms in traditional style.



PLATE 4 A honeycomb quilt in Merionethshire

Wales produces large quantities of knitting yarn of excellent quality and in very attractive colours. The fact that it is frequently made in thicknesses which do not correspond with those of knitting yarns produced elsewhere is regarded as an attraction rather than a drawback by really skilled knitting enthusiasts, but those inexperienced in the use of Welsh yarns should watch for this kind of variation and make allowances for it when knitting ordinary patterns.

There are other local specialities to be found in the small Welsh textile mills. Double cloth of great beauty and supreme quality is woven. Some traditional patterns in black and white have an attraction of their own. There are also some mills which make

up socks on small knitting machines from their own knitting yarns. A development of recent years has been the production of furnishing materials in Wales. These are of excellent quality, and a London House has been instrumental in feeding ideas on designs to this branch of the Welsh textile industry which is now producing some of the latest styles and patterns.

The raw material used by the Welsh mills is by no means only from Welsh sheep. In fact the bulk of the wool used to-day is the New Zealand crossbred type. Like other manufacturers, Welshmen have learnt the advantages of blending a great variety of Dominion and home-produced wools.



PLATE 5 Knotting a warp in a woollen mill in the Dovey Valley



PLATE 6 This textile worker, at a loom in a mill in Snowdonia, is repairing a broken thread in a honeycomb quilt

## **OUTSIDE HELP**

From this brief and incomplete recital of the products of the Welsh textile industry, it can easily be gathered that there are possibilities of new development hidden in the small mills in the dales of Cardigan and Carmarthen (Newcastle Emlyn is sometimes, with some exaggeration, called the Welsh Bradford), and elsewhere in Wales. This development has been the task of the Rural Industries Bureau and its staff in Wales and London. The Bureau is a Government grant-aided but independent organisation, which acts as a technical advisory body to a wide variety of small country businesses in England and Wales, including the Welsh textile industry. It is greatly helped in this work by the Rural Industries Organisers who are, as a rule, employed by Rural Community Councils, of which there is one in most counties in England and Wales. Even before the last war, the Bureau employed a textile designer for the Welsh Industry. In addition to this post, there is also a Technical Officer, stationed in Wales, who can give advice on machinery and manufacturing processes.

A small number of mills have thus been enabled to modernise their equipment. When the farmers of Merionethshire banded together in a co-operative venture and founded a new model mill, shortly after the recent war, advice was sought from and given by the Bureau. The Welsh textile industry is also eligible for assistance from the Rural Industries Loan Fund Ltd., through which equipment can be bought or workshops built or rebuilt, repayments for this being made on favourable terms. The assistance of these various bodies (which are all financed either wholly or in part by the Treasury through H.M. Development Commission) is, however, not confined to

technical advice and financial aid. Rural Community Councils and the Rural Industries Bureau. industry. Yet it should also have become clear from the brief description of the products of these small mills that there exists something eminently worth preserving and developing. It is a matter of astonishment to experts that the small Welsh manufacturer produces such excellent products from frequently obsolescent equipment. Here is the true craftsmanship which, in spite of every handicap, will go on producing quality goods, and ever strive for improvement.

With better training, better equipment, and improved information and marketing arrangements, a valuable, albeit small addition to Britain's output of quality goods could be obtained. Now that it is no longer impossible to get textile machinery, modernisation becomes practicable. A small fund, administered by the University of Wales, has made it possible to arrange courses for the staff of Welsh textile mills at the Scottish Woollen Technical College in Galashiels. The Rural Industries Bureau was instrumental in arranging these courses and had the wholehearted and interested co-operation of the authorities at Galashiels.

The market for Welsh textiles is largely confined to Wales, and many of the manufacturers also own retail shops. It should be possible to keep this Welsh market, but at the same time to find other outlets in England and possibly abroad. A small beginning has been made in the case of furnishing materials through a London textile house.

Thus the Welsh textile industry represents an interesting example of an old established industry with rich traditions, but

also inherent handicaps, attempting to adjust itself to modern conditions. Outside aid for this is necessary. Such adjustment is a difficult economic problem, but it could and should be attempted.

The problem has historical precedents: the wool industry of East Anglia has all but disappeared, the Cornish mining-engineering industry reflects but a shadow of its enough to say that attempts to stem this sort of decline must always fail? Surely necessity dictates that British Industry should adjust itself constantly to new conditions. In its combination of craftsmanship and variety, the Welsh textile industry is a promising field for bold experiment.



**Excerpts from**  
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**Department of Education and Training, International**  
**Wool Secretariat, circa 1959**

**Chapter 6 THE WELSH WOOLLEN INDUSTRY**  
**TO-DAY**

**DISTRIBUTION OF THE INDUSTRY**

The industry has suffered a number of setbacks during the present century. In 1900 there were about three hundred mills in Wales. The depression which followed the First World War was quickly succeeded by the slump of the early 'thirties and by 1939 there were less than eighty mills in Wales. To-day there are 35 mills in production, employing about four hundred people. However, recent figures can be somewhat misleading, for individual manufacturers state that their output per employee has increased considerably since the end of the Second World War, and that although there are fewer mills than formerly, the decline has been offset by a considerable increase in total production.

There is considerable variation in the size and character of the mills to-day. Except for the obvious concentration in the valleys of the Teifi and Gwili, mills are scattered throughout many parts of the country.

Hardly any of them are situated in industrial towns. They blend happily with the landscape and continue to preserve the

association with the countryside which has always been part of their history. Furthermore, they help to maintain employment in rural areas where agriculture is the only other industry.

The mills to-day may be divided into two groups: those which are very small and cater principally for local needs and tourists, and those which are larger concerns possessing modern machinery and producing goods intended for a wider market.

In the first group are the concerns which employ only a small number of people. Eighteen mills about half of the total number in the country, employ less than seven people each. The majority of these mills are concentrated in the region of the Teifi and Gwili valleys, though there are a few in Pembrokeshire and a small number scattered in other parts of the country. About half of them carry out all the processes of production from scouring to cropping. Their products are most attractive and some of them are in traditional designs. Most of these mills are found near the streams and rivers which supplied them with power many years ago, though few use their water wheels to-day. The majority are powered by electricity or diesel engines. All of these mills are constantly in production.

The seventeen Welsh mills which employ more than seven people each are the backbone of the industry. Half of them are situated in south-west Wales, and the remainder are scattered throughout the country. A number of these mills have been able to expand their plant within the last few years.

A marked feature of the industry to-day is the diversity of the markets for which it caters. Some mills sell most of their

products at their own shops. Others are primarily concerned with the tourist trade and sell their goods at the mills. The larger firms tend to confine themselves to wholesale orders. Welsh woollens are now starting to find their way into the export markets. Tapestry quilts have been sent to Australia, velours to New Zealand, stoles and scarves to Canada, tweeds to the United States and flannel to Malta. This diversity in methods of marketing enables the industry to withstand minor recessions in trade.

The industry receives financial assistance from the Welsh Industries Fund of the University of Wales. Support is also given by the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas, which provides Loan Funds, Work Study, Advisory, Accountancy and Marketing Services. C.O.S.I.R.A. has also arranged a permanent exhibition of Welsh Textiles in one of the rooms at Plas Machynlleth in Machynlleth, Montgomeryshire.

## **PRODUCTS OF THE INDUSTRY**

Many of the present-day products of the Welsh mills follow traditional designs and colours. Yet the industry has kept pace with recent trends by introducing brighter shades into its fabrics. At present, over seven hundred designs are used in the manufacture of tweeds, blankets and furnishing materials. There are no areas of specialization in Wales. Nearly every mill makes various types of blankets and many of them also make fashion tweeds and modernly styled woollen dress flannels.

The Welsh blanket or quilt is the most popular product of the industry to-day. It has been used in Wales for many years as a covering which looks attractive by day and provides warmth at night. Since about 1951 there has been a considerable demand

in Britain for such blankets. There are four types which are characteristic of Wales: the tapestry blanket, the honeycomb blanket, the checked blanket and the Carthenni blanket.

The Carthenni blanket or quilt, is a heavy covering weighing from 4 to 5 lbs. It is usually about 7 feet long and 8 feet wide. It is most frequently made in a check pattern created by a number of dominant colours on a pastel background. It is finished with a fringe. The checked blanket is similar to the Carthenni blanket but the 'yarn' has no fringes. The selvages are whipped.

The tapestry quilt is a double cloth designed with a different pattern on each side. Until recently, it had always been used simply as a bedspread. However, because it is such a hard-wearing article it has been found that it also makes a most attractive reversible rug. It is made in a wide range of colours. The honeycomb quilt has a mixture of bright and soft colours similar to those of the Carthenni blanket. As its name implies, the surface, woven to produce deep square hollows, gives it the appearance of a honeycomb. This type of weave combines warmth with lightness.

Welsh tweeds in a fairly heavy weight are popular because they are particularly suitable for overcoats and country wear. Recently, lightweight and thorn-proof tweeds have also been made by the Welsh mills. The sombre colourings formerly associated with Welsh tweed have now given way to gayer shades in keeping with modern taste.

Other products of the Welsh industry include hard-wearing handknitting wool and hosiery yarns. These are often made

into socks at the mills. Stockings for fishermen and seamen are a Welsh speciality and these have a well-earned reputation for durability.

An innovation has been the introduction of small figured double cloth designs specially woven and suitable for ladies' tailored garments, furnishings and upholstery.,

A small amount of flannel shirting is still woven. This is popular with the Welsh miners and steel workers on account of its excellent sweat absorbing properties. The introduction of modern designs has encouraged the sale of Welsh flannel for ladies' dress material, and it is also used for the striped red petticoats of the Welsh national costume.

Warm travelling rugs are made in a number of mills, while shawls with check designs and fringes are made in South Wales in patterns which follow traditional designs. Ties, stoles, scarves and various other small wares are additional products of many of the mills and these are particularly sought after by tourists.

Several manufacturers have established separate departments for tailoring and making up.



Excerpt from  
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Department of Education and Training, International  
Wool Secretariat, circa 1959

**Chapter 7 WOOLLEN MANUFACTURERS IN  
WALES**

**MILLS EMPLOYING MORE THAN 7**

**Breconshire**

Cambrian Factory Ltd., Llanwrtyd Wells

**Caernarvonshire**

J. Jones & Son (Brinkir) Ltd., Brinkir Woollen Mill,  
Garndolbenmaen

Thomas Williams & Son, Trefriw Woollen Mills, Trefriw

**Cardiganshire**

Dyffryn Woollen Mills Ltd., Velindre, Llandyssul

Ben Jones & Son, Alltcavan Mills, Pentrecwrt, Llandyssul

John Jones, Derw Mills, Pentrecwrt, Llandyssul

David Lewis & Sons Ltd., Cambrian Mills, Llanybyther

David Lewis & VanAalst, Rhydybont Mills, Llanybyther

D. Thomas & Son, Cwmllwchwr Mills, Ammanford

### **Denbighshire**

Avonwen Tweed Co., Caerwys, Nr. Mold Cymru Skirts,  
Caerwys, Nr. Mold

### **Flintshire**

Holywell Textile Mills Ltd., Holywell

### **Glamorganshire**

Abbey Mills, Neath

Fawcett & Lloyd, Industrial Estate, Bridgend

### **Merionethshire**

Merion Mill Ltd., Dinas Mawddwy, Nr. Machynlleth

### **Pembrokeshire**

H. Griffiths & Son, Tregwynt Factory, Letterston,  
Haverfordwest

## MILLS EMPLOYING LESS THAN 7

### Caernarvonshire

Hannah Jones & Sons, Penmachno Factory, Bettws-y-Coed

T. Edwards, Pennant Weavers, Bettws-y-Coed

### Cardiganshire

Lerry Tweed Mills, Talybont

R. Morris, Ceulan Mill, Talybont

J. Morgan, Rock Mill, Capel Dewi, Llandyssul

Mr. & Mrs. Poulson, Old Rectory, Troedryaur, Rhyd Lewis

### Carmarthenshire

David Jones & Son, Dolwion Mills, Velindre, Llandyssul *Jfc*

John Jones & Son, Elvet Factory, Conwil Elfed

T.W. Jones, Gwili Mills, Llanpumpsaint

G. & M. Thomas & Sons, Wernant Factory, Llanybyther

G. Brdlik, Glanbargoed Mill, Velindre, Llandyssul

L. Wharton, Dreifa Mills, Cwm Morgan, Newcastle Emlyn

Henry Abel & Sons, Cwmgwili Mills, Bronwydd Arms

G. Poulson, Glyntaf House, Login, Whitland

### **Pembrokeshire**

T. Griffiths & Son, Middle Mill, Solva

D.R. Redpath, Wallis Factory, Ambleston, Haverfordwest

### **Flintshire**

C. Rhodes, Dyserth Home Weavers, Dyserth (Hand Weavers) Monmouthshire

B. Brocklehurst & Son, Llanarth Court, Raglan (Hand Weavers)