

Profile
ALISON
O'NEILL

FABRIC *of* the FELLOWS

Sedbergh shepherdess Alison O'Neill's Herdwick tweed bags and women's clothes have been royally received and she hopes to expand the range so more of us can 'wear the Lake District'

WORDS MICHAELA ROBINSON-TATE PHOTOGRAPHY PHIL RIGBY



Alison O'Neill and Shadow
photographed near Cautley
Spout in the Howgills

When Alison O'Neill met Prince Charles at the Rheged Centre near Penrith earlier this year, she was astonished to find that the Prince not only knew who she was but had heard of her tweed clothing business.

The royal visitor admired Alison's bags and she presented him with a Herdwick tweed Bait Bag which everyone guessed would be passed to the Duchess of Cornwall.

"He said he knew who I was and he was aware of my work," says Alison. "His first question was 'how was lambing going?' and his parting question was 'how are you going to promote this?'"

Equally surprising has been the reaction of customers who have since snapped up Alison's stock of what they call 'the Camilla bag'. "Everybody's asked for that one - it's got a bit of a regal thing with it," she says.

Demand for her Herdwick tweed clothes has also taken her aback as she hadn't been sure that the hardy, rough-looking tweed would appeal to women. But by lining jackets with silk and adding velvet to the collars, Alison has ensured the wool doesn't touch the skin while the 100 per cent Herdwick tweed remains authentic.

"I feel it's really important we keep all the things that make Herdwick, Herdwick," she says. "They're wearing the Lake District really - they've got it on their backs."

Although huntsman John Peel of the famous song and the author Beatrix Potter both wore Herdwick tweed, it fell out of fashion and Alison is one of only a small number of makers producing the cloth. She believes that demand for Cumbrian tweed can only increase, however, as customers are now looking for the same authenticity in their clothes as they do in their food.

"People are desiring provenance now - not just in their food but everything," says Alison. "They want to know the people that have produced the wool, the story behind that wool and how it gets from that sheep that's roaming around the fell top to something like this."

Her flock number, 107682, is now being etched on the signature red deer horn tip whistle which she attaches to each bag, immediately supplying that provenance.

Alison's business, Shepherdess, which she founded under that name in 2012, is based at the textile arts centre Farfield Mill at Sedbergh, where the Herdwick tweed is woven. Farfield is a few minutes' drive from the farm where she lives with her daughter Scarlett, 16.

Although she has a few Herdwicks on the farm, Alison's main flock is Rough Fell sheep and she's in the process of developing what she believes could be the first Rough Fell tweed in conjunction with Farfield Mill. Eventually, she would like to add a Swaledale tweed to the collection, so all of Cumbria's native sheep would have their own tweed.

The clothes and bags not only provide an income stream for her farm but also add value to fleeces



The collection includes the Bait Bag Alison gave to Prince Charles; left: Old Farfield Mill order books provide inspiration; below: Harris tweed is used for some of the bags



'I feel it's really important we keep all the things that make Herdwick, Herdwick. They're wearing the Lake District really - they've got it on their backs'

which might only make 20 pence for a farmer, a figure far outstripped by the £1.20 cost of clipping the sheep.

Alison grew up on a farm in Sedbergh and went away to travel. When she came back to her home town in 1999 she found a farm to rent and started work as a walking guide to help boost her finances.

Alison's walks, which can incorporate a barefoot stretch or wild swim, took off and her penchant for wearing tweed skirts and jackets gave her a distinctive look both on the fells and in many of the media appearances that followed. At the time, she was wearing a second-hand jacket, a tweed skirt she'd made and a tweed bag of her design.

"People started to pass comment, they liked what I was wearing," she says. "It became a trademark on the fells - when I turned up I was a shepherd who wore tweed and would take them for a walk in Cumbria."

"I started noticing there were more inquiries from ladies wanting to buy the skirt I was wearing, the socks I had on, the jacket and the bag I had carried."

Women in the audience at Alison's talks reacted the same way and so she began to design a range of clothing which she had made in Harris Tweed. She still uses the fabric and loves its bright colours but she also felt that as a Cumbrian sheep farmer, she ought to be wearing and selling Cumbrian tweed.

Alison can pinpoint two encounters that helped her on her way. One took place when she was in the Hebrides on a tweed-buying trip and she won the backing of Donald John Mackay, one of the best known designers and weavers of Harris Tweed. Donald John told Alison that with the number of sheep in Cumbria and with Farfield Mill on her doorstep, she should press ahead with her plans.

Amanda Carson, the secretary of the Herdwick Sheep Breeders' Association, also helped encourage



Alison by giving her a piece of old Herdwick tweed and telling her to turn it into something beautiful. Amanda has since become the first customer to order Alison's Herdwick tweed Mountain Shepherd jacket, which was launched this year.

The Mountain Shepherd is one of three styles of jacket designed by Alison, which like all her clothes and bags can be made in Herdwick or Harris Tweed. The Shepherdess is a short-fitting everyday jacket which Alison says can be worn on the fells, in town or dressed up for an occasion.

Alison designed The Hacking jacket for customers who want a longer length which they can wear for riding or walking the dogs, while The Mountain Shepherd is a hard-wearing, warm jacket with large pockets which is ideal on the fells.

Skirts come in four designs, there are two waist-coats, a dress and five styles of bag.

Alison freely admits it's taken her a long time to get the business to this stage. Designs have had to be turned into patterns and there have been numerous prototypes: "It's taken me years and years because I'm just a hill farmer and every penny for the past 10 years of my life has gone into developing the tweed and the business."

Having a showroom at Farfield Mill means that customers can meet her there, be measured for a jacket, look at the bags and also see where the tweed

is woven. If they wish, they can join Alison on a guided walk and see the sheep used to produce the tweed.

Alison is using the mill's decades-old order books, which contain swatches of coloured tweed, as inspiration for a range of Cumbrian tweed in heritage colours.

She received a boost earlier this year when Shepherdess was shortlisted in the My Country Business Awards, organised by Country Homes and Interiors magazine. Alison's business was a finalist in the category for emerging talent using British wool. Stockists of her bags include No 6 Finkle Street in Sedbergh and The Lakes Distillery at Bassenthwaite.

She is ambitious for Shepherdess and would like to launch a range of men's jackets, open a farm showroom and show her clothes on a London catwalk. Most of all she wants to supply an authentic product: "They're made in the UK, it's Herdwick tweed, it's going to last forever, it's got provenance. If you buy one of the Herdwick tweed jackets you could hand it down to your daughter. It's not fashion, it's style."

www.shepherdess.co.uk; www.farfieldmill.org
 Thanks to farmer George Stephenson for providing his Herdwicks for our photoshoot at Cautley near Sedbergh

'It's taken me years and years because I'm just a hill farmer and every penny for the past 10 years of my life has gone into developing the tweed and the business'



Alison's clothing and bags should add value to Herdwick fleeces

Shepherdess tweed – authentically Cumbrian



Master weaver David McDowell producing Herdwick cloth at Farfield Mill

Alison's Herdwick tweed clothes and bag production begins with Cumbrian fleeces which are taken to a mill in Huddersfield to be washed, carded, dyed and spun - the only part of the process to take place outside the county.

Weaving was also previously done at Huddersfield but now the wool is being brought back to Cumbria for weaving at Farfield Mill. At the time of Cumbria Life's visit, master weaver David McDowell was about to make his first batch of Alison's Rough Fell tweed, followed by a run of Herdwick.

The clothes are made to order by the designer Ele Horsley who runs Horsley Couture and Lakeland Skirts design and manufacturing business at Kendal.

The bags are made by Chapman Bags at Carlisle, the leather work is by Todds the Saddlers of Kendal and the red deer horn tip whistles, one of which is attached to each bag, are supplied by Abbeyhorn at Holme near Milnthorpe.

For Alison, being able to use Cumbrian businesses is important: "People always talk about food miles - for me it's all about wool miles."



The bags, which are crafted in Carlisle, feature leatherwork by Todds of Kendal

