



I've been to a fair number of organic farms, but this – this is a fantastic place to be based,' says the Soil Association's Lee Holdstock, fresh from a trip to the remote south west corner of the Isle of Mull in the Inner Hebrides. Hebridean sheep and Kylee cows wander down to the beach to munch on seaweed and natural grasslands at their leisure, grazing habits acknowledged to enhance and protect wildlife and the landscape. It's not just good animal husbandry and environmental protection that marks out the Ardalans farm; it is one of the first to embrace organic textiles. The Ardalansh Isle of Mull Weavers have beaten the odds stacked against them: with a moribund UK textile market, wool prices as low as they have ever been and using sheep breeds that are

not considered commercial, they still manage to make high-quality, distinctive organic tweeds.

Clothing, for most of us, is something created in China, Bangladesh, or less frequently, Europe. Once the mainstay of the UK's textile industry, wool has been in decline for many decades. Last year, 70 per cent of the 35 million kilograms of raw wool produced in the UK became carpeting, while some innovative producers have created a market for wool-based insulation.

The economics simply don't stack up: two loopholes aside – if the wool is for export or personal use – sheep farmers are required to sell their produce to the Wool Marketing Board (WMB). On average they receive 70p per kilogram of wool (auction price), minus 30p per kilo for the WMB's operating costs. The problem is that it costs farmers the best part of £1 per kilo to clip a sheep and to transport its wool. Thus, according to the WMB's appraiser, Steven Spencer, many farmers consider wool 'a waste product, an afterthought, or even probably more of a nuisance – a shame, because it is a fantastic fibre.'

Where one once donned chunky and relatively coarse woollens, today's consumer demands soft and superfine Merino – but it's all in the type of breed farmers use. One of

the most popular breeds in the UK is the Scottish Blackface, as well as the Welsh Mountain and the Beulah Speckled-Face.

Organic farmers, however, are more imaginative in the sheep they breed, opting for breeds such as Hebridean, Shetland or Lley. These are less common breeds that thrive in lowlands and produce a finer wool fibre, which is more useful than coarse wool for spinners and weavers.

At last count, the number of organically reared sheep on UK farms was 691,000, which would yield thousands of kilograms of premium organic wool fabric if processed in an organic supply chain. The WMB does grade organic wool separately – buying 300,000 kilos in the last year – and yet don't pay farmers a higher price for it, simply because the WMB doesn't get a higher price when it sells it on. 'We are thinking ahead to the point when it will be a premium project,' says Steven Spencer.

Enter the Isle of Mull Weavers. In the past few years, they have created a market for wool that was once worthless. Isle of Mull Weavers currently pay £1.25 per kilogram for their wool. 'Fair trade begins at home,' says Aeneas Mackey, who has run Ardalansh farm with his wife, Minty, for 22 years. Their pioneering initiative gives the wool from rarer

Facing page: Malin Flounce coat using shades of grey Hebridean wool.

This page from left to right: Aeneas Mackey; Minty trousers in Ardalansh black salt & pepper organic tweed; Hedgehog jacket in organic Hebridean twill; Fly skirt in Hebridean houndstooth tweed

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