

The Art of Fashion Fashion

Venerable cloth weaver Fox Brothers keeps the looms spinning

The storied British brand was in danger of closure — until it decided to stay upmarket

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The sample order book at Fox Brothers & Co is still handwritten. Lying on a wooden table in the Victorian warehouse at Tonedale Mill in Wellington, Somerset, opposite racks holding hundreds of rolls of cloth, its most recent pages are jotted with biro-ed requests for various lengths of tweeds and Prince of Wales checks from some of the most salubrious names in tailoring and luxury. Edward Sexton, Richard James, Huntsman, Hermès, Husbands Paris and Ralph Lauren are just a few.

This year, the company celebrates 250 years in business, although its origins can be traced back even further to Elizabethan times. “We’re older than America,” says managing director Douglas Cordeaux. In the archive room is the mill’s first pattern book from 1773, filled with tiny scraps of the fabric that a jaunty fellow back in the reign of George III might have worn.

Winston Churchill favoured Fox’s chalk-stripe suits. Fred Astaire danced in Fox flannel because he liked the stretch. Cary Grant was a Fox fan and Gregory Peck’s 1956 *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was wearing a Fox Brothers suit made by Huntsman, which has used Fox flannel since opening in 1849. “You can see it all through our ledger books from then until now,” says Campbell Carey, the tailor’s creative director. Huntsman is remaking the suit as part of Fox’s anniversary celebrations.

In the late 1970s, the designer Margaret Howell stumbled across Fox Brothers at the British Woollen Mills trade show in London. “I saw an elderly gentleman

sitting alone at a stand,” she says. “He turned out to be Mr David Fox and seemed surprised that a young woman was interested in their products. But I knew right away from his own pinstripe suit, as well as the fabric swatches, that his company was exactly what I was looking for.” Tailored pieces in specially commissioned anniversary pinstripe feature in Margaret Howell’s autumn/winter 2022 collections.

The company employs just 26 people in Somerset and in Wakefield, Yorkshire, but during the Industrial Revolution Fox Brothers was a giant. In an aerial drawing, Tonedale Mill in its prime resembles a small city. Part of the original site has now been demolished, but the existing dilapidated buildings continue to tower over the countryside.



Tailored jackets in the making © Nicholas J R White



Cloth swatches and rolls at Tonedale Mill © Nicholas J R White

That Fox still exists today is no small miracle. There were approximately 10,000 British mills during the mid-19th century; today, the Campaign for Wool estimates approximately 50 are actively spinning and weaving wool for apparel and interiors. The business has largely migrated to cheaper labour markets, mainly in Asia.

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Fox was close to bankruptcy 12 years ago when Cordeaux, a former design director of Pepe Jeans, and his friend Deborah Meaden, the investor and regular on *Dragons' Den*, rescued the company. Cordeaux, like Meaden, hails from

Somerset, but he'd never heard of Fox. "I went to lunch with Jeremy Hackett and he told me about it," says Cordeaux. "His last words were, 'Whatever you do, don't buy the mill.'"

When Cordeaux entered the building and saw the looms at work that warning was forgotten. "I had an epiphany," he says. "It was the sound of England making things."

At that point, he says, Fox had lost sight of its strengths. "It was trying to work with everybody but we're not everybody's cloth. We are expensive because we use the very finest raw materials." But then Ciro Paone, the founder of Neapolitan luxury brand Kiton, described Fox as "the Rolls-Royce of mills". After that, says Cordeaux, "I realised we had to push it as the very best. Now we work with most of the Parisian fashion houses." He lists Céline, Christian Dior and a large number of Japanese clients.



Merchant Fox tag, the retail arm of Fox Brothers & Co © Nicholas J R White



Finished waistcoat and jacket © Nicholas J R White

Without these brands, Cordeaux says, Fox would again have been in trouble during

the pandemic, when the clothing and retail industry went into freefall. “All of the Parisian houses didn’t cancel. They said, ‘Ship when you’re ready, we’ll pay.’ You can be cynical about these big brands but at a time like that, when we are very small and vulnerable, to have bigger people looking after you matters. And it helps you to grow the business because you have continuity.”

Brexit also presented challenges. “We had a lot of very worried customers in Europe and overseas, but we’ve made sure we feel the pain more than they do,” says Cordeaux. “For them, fingers crossed, it’s business as usual. Whereas we’re crying and screaming internally!” Fox has had to take on additional carriage charges and more staff to handle the new customs procedures for trade with the EU. Meaden says that despite the uncertainties of recent years, turnover has doubled since 2016 and profits have seen an even higher increase.



Fox Design Lab at Tonedale Mill, where new designs are developed © Nicholas J R White

Through a door beyond the racks of finished cloth at Tonedale Mill is “Fox Labs”, where new designs of cloth are developed and woven into samples. Like a fashion house, the mill produces and presents collections of cloth every season, often inspired by pieces from the archive.

In the next room are the looms, one in rapid noisy action, another holding metres of classic black-and-white Prince of Wales check. “Not much has changed in the process of making wool flannel cloth since we started,” says Cordeaux. Weaving wool is still all about the weft and weave and the process is painstaking and less automated than might be imagined. Yarn wound on cones is transferred on to the warp that can consist of up to 5,000 ends. Alison, an employee, has pulled 3,276

threads by hand through the eyes of 3,276 heddles. Then again the warp is threaded through a fine comb called a reed and the warp is “set”. This takes Alison one day. Then the weaving begins, the yarn of the weft travelling across the length of the warp in a set pattern. The woven cloth is sent to Yorkshire for finishing.



© Nicholas J R White

It's in the hands of the tailors then. Bespoke Fox garments can also be made on site at the mill by in-house tailor, Brian Smith. Cordeaux, who is an exemplary model of the well-dressed man and has almost 70,000 tailoring fans following him on Instagram, shows me an immaculate white flannel suit he's just had made for the summer. "Cricket players would play in our white flannels. It was called Tonedale Sporting Flannel then. Now our white flannel is seen as the quintessential luxury cloth."

Despite, or perhaps because of the pandemic's blow to tailoring and formal wear,

Cordeaux is sensing a renewed interest in suiting. “Maybe people don’t have to wear a suit any more but they want to. A lot of the tailors we work with are doing really well at the moment,” he says. “There’s a big urge to dress up because we’ve had no need to for so long. People want to get out there and express themselves with their clothing. And if they’re thinking about how those things are made, well, we stand up.”

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