

MADE ON EXMOOR



Exmoor tweed: Landweaving

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PHOTOS by S.G. Haywood Photography

A couple of years back, I interviewed Exmoor sheep farmer, shopkeeper, designer and maker Annabelle Gregory at her beautiful emporium 'Handmade Exmoor' in the heart of Porlock. The enchanting little bazaar is crammed with useful and lovely items, predominantly made by Annabelle who has a particular passion for finding unending ways to utilise the heritage wool from her flock of Jacob sheep. When we last met, Annabelle was in the very early stages of a secretive creative project to make the first ever 'Exmoor Tweed' from her then 25-strong flock. Almost three years on, now with 55 ewes and lambs grazing at Horner and on the vertiginous hills above Porlock, Annabelle's anticipated 'Exmoor Tweed' has finally rolled off the loom.

Annabelle had the idea for an Exmoor tweed some time before our first meeting and kept it keenly guarded, giving no hint of the plan even as we discussed spinning and weaving – she had helped me get to grips with a slightly troublesome handmade spinning wheel I had acquired and asked me some questions about weaving on shaft looms because I'm an occasional weaver and this was one of the few crafts she had not tried herself. Annabelle is one of the most prolifically creative people I've met and has experimented with a giddy variety of hand crafts, as a wander around Handmade Exmoor confirms.

As a wool-worker and producer greatly inspired by the 'vast palette' the Exmoor landscape provides, it seemed a logical progression for Annabelle to branch into designing tweed cloth. Tweed is one of the most utilitarian, earthy and versatile of natural fabrics; warming and cooling, genteel yet robust, water-resistant and inextricably bound with the land which inspires its colourways and where its raw materials are nourished.

Tweed was traditionally tightly woven from yarns 'dyed in the wool' using lichen and vegetable dyes, and durable, tweed-like cloths must have been produced for thousands of years. The name 'tweed', however, was first applied to certain hand-woven woollen peasant cloths of Scotland in the mid-nineteenth century, after which they were adopted by the landed gentry. Legend has it that the name tweed originally evolved from a clerk's misrepresentation of 'tweel' – the Scottish term for 'twill'. Twill is an ancient, closely set weave formation which can be used to produce a hardy cloth with a good drape. The most well-known and sought-after tweeds are the Harris tweed – produced traditionally and exclusively by islanders on the Outer Hebrides – and Donegal tweeds from Ireland – but there are many other regional tweeds.

Although Annabelle is fascinated by weaving and very keen to bring it into her already substantial aggregation of craft skills, she is not yet well-practised on a loom, so in order to entify Exmoor Tweed, she enlisted the skills of Watchet-based weaver Sarah Dewfall, who hand-weaves the fabric on a LeClerc floor loom. Annabelle sketched out her visualisation for Exmoor Tweed using watercolour pencils to give Sarah a starting point. Using Annabelle's painting, the two worked together to design a cloth recalling tumbling heath greens and the slate-purple of heather and cliff, veined with the ghostly white and cobalt-violet of ramson and bluebell woods. There are currently three shades of Exmoor Tweed, a green-dominated, a heather-dominated and a winter design. "I have had such pleasure working with Annabelle and her fabulous yarns," Sarah tells me. "I look forward to next year's colours, wool is a fabulous natural fibre. It's 100%

biodegradable and so sustainable and easy to use. Its properties and uses are increasing and show a fabulous alternative to man-made non-degradable textiles."

Annabelle has been producing Exmoor Tweed handbags and bags, purses, cushions and various other rootsy trinkets and whatnots. Exmoor Tweed items come with distinctive wooden or leather tags bearing the Exmoor Tweed logo, also designed by Annabelle. Are there more terra-formed shades and patterns of Exmoor Tweeds waiting to be born, I wonder? And Annabelle simply exclaims "Ooh yess!" when I ask if there are plans to widen the range of tweed designs and/or colours in the near future.

For the next batch of Exmoor Tweed, Annabelle will be dyeing her own weft yarns – the horizontal threads of a woven fabric – in large pots over an old Rayburn. Currently her fleeces are being sent to the Natural Fibre Company in Cornwall for processing and dyeing. Tweed yarn is characterised by its variegation, containing two or more colours or shades of the same colour. Traditionally this was achieved by spinning different 'dyed-in-the-wool' colours or shades into one yarn, but variegated base yarns, such as the shimmery grey created by spinning the varying tones of a Jacob fleece, can be dyed post-spinning to create organic and subtle tweed yarns.

"I want to make wool popular," Annabelle says, "and encourage other farmers not just to give to wool boards but show that we can put better value into the wool, using the whole animal and not treating this lovely fleece as a waste product." Her landlords at Horner, the National Trust, recently recognised the authentic industry and quality of Annabelle's efforts and awarded her a Fine Farm Produce Award for her heritage wool yarn in 2018 and 2019. Annabelle takes a great pride in the quality of her fleece and recently began learning about preparing fleeces for show, and she entered some into the country show at Dunster.

As the first 'Exmoor Tweed' to be produced and so named, the cloth is already a uniquely indigenous textile – but must score extra highly for local provenance as Annabelle sees through all stages, from sheep rearing and shearing to dyeing and processing, weaving, then creatively transforming and purveying. It doesn't get more 'straight up from the ground' than this. Exmoor's first tweed is a truly regional fabric, borne of soil, a dusky-hued homage to the hills.

FIND OUT MORE

You can visit Annabelle's shop, Handmade Exmoor, in Porlock High Street. It is open 10am-5pm, Mon-Sat or call Annabelle on 07929 600412. Find her page by searching 'Handmade Exmoor' on Facebook or see exmoortweed.co.uk.



See our diary pages (page 99) for details of the Exmoor Christmas Fair on 23 and 24 November, where Annabelle will have her tweed products on sale.

