



As the last example of a smallscale textile mill to survive in Scotland, Knockando Woolmill's future has been hanging by a thread. Now a plan to transform its rickety buildings into full working order is set to breathe life back into a whole community

WORDS CLAIRE BLACK PICTURES JOHN PAUL

Where there's a mill

TUCKED down a muddy track, rutted and pockmarked with puddles, Knockando Woolmill is a place where time seems to have stood still. The burn babbles, peaty brown and slick like oil, the trees, gold and burnt brown in the autumn sun, shake off their leaves into the breeze. Everything is just as it might've been a year ago, ten years ago, 100 years ago.

The ramshackle buildings – a cottage built out of local granite, sheds made from washed-out timber, roofs warped with age and the vagaries of the Spey valley weather – lean against each other like people huddled in a bus shelter, tired at the end of a long night. Knockando Woolmill is a unique historical site in Scotland, but from the road that runs above it there's not much to see.

Down a hill and across the burn is a collection of patchy roofs. A traditional farmhouse stands alongside a small cottage. Both are empty, the windows dark, the paint on the doors and windows flaking. The mill buildings sit closer to the burn. A water wheel, which has long since stopped turning, is rusted, its buckets gone. Opposite, a doorless privy is occupied by a cracked toilet that sits at a skewed angle, its pipes broken and ragged, leading nowhere.

A cursory glance might suggest neglect, but that couldn't be further from the real story of Knockando Woolmill. Nor is its aura of timelessness as straightforward as it seems. The mill has been living on borrowed time for the past three decades. The last working example of the type of

smallscale mill that used to dot communities all over Scotland, it has been producing textiles – rugs, blankets, wool for knitting, estate tweeds – continuously for more than 200 years.

Hugh Jones, the mill's most recent owner and the sole weaver at Knockando since 1976, arrived when he was 23 years old. He was on holiday, not really planning to buy a wool mill, but that's how it worked out. Now nearly 58, Jones has single-handedly kept the mill alive for 30 years. But the question has inevitably arisen as to what might happen to the mill when he is no longer running it. And how would his skills be passed on? It's a familiar tale across Scotland, where mills have closed and the skills built up over generations have been lost.

For Knockando, it has taken nine years – including an unsuccessful appearance on the BBC's *Restoration* programme in 2004 – to find the answer. "Until six months ago, no-one knew whether we were going to manage to do this or not," says Jones, referring to the ambitious redevelopment plans for the mill that have recently become a reality rather than a pipe dream.

In coming weeks, it's hoped the last cheques will be signed and the final donations made to take the Knockando Woolmill Trust, which was set up in 2000 to secure the future of the mill and has owned the site since April of this year, to its targeted total of £3.3 million. With that money, over the next three years Knockando Woolmill

will be transformed from a crumbling shell of historically significant but rickety buildings into a fully working mill, employing as many as ten people and restoring it to its rightful place at the heart of the community.

Just outside the door to the mill, in a small glass case, a copy of a black and white photograph is held in place by drawing pins. It was taken in 1915 and shows five mill hands standing awkwardly for the camera. There are no smiles. The four men and a woman are posing in front of two large windows made up of small square panes. Take one step back and you can look at the photograph and the very same windows. They are still there, still in place, hardly changed. The only impact that 94 years has had is in warping the wooden frames, leaving gaps here and there. Apart from that, though, they are just the same.

Behind the door, it's not hard to imagine that those same workers might be feeding raw wool into the hulking machines, watching as cylinders driven by cogs and belts smooth and separate it. Or they might be tending the spinning mule as it twists and turns and teases the wool into yarn.

Inside, though, there is no-one. The unmistakable smell of wool and lubricating oil is topped off with a whiff of damp. The light is dim, seeping through square windows and smeared skylights, the sound of the burn burbling through the gaps in the walls. There are holes in the floor, and patched spots in the roof. Huge black lumps of



A GREAT YARN Hugh Jones bought Knockando Woolmill in 1976 and has single-handedly kept it running ever since. Now renovation plans for the mill will benefit the local community and ensure that Jones's weaving skills are handed down

terms of conservation they are pristine examples of original mill buildings, improved in an ad hoc way, as they were over the centuries by weavers and farmers who had little in the way of capital to invest but plenty of ingenuity to use whatever was at hand to patch and repair. Door locks are reused, panels of wood are pilfered from other parts of the building and repurposed. Piles of cogs and chains, leather straps and screws lie around in tattered cardboard boxes. Nothing is thrown away.

According to Jana Hutt, chairman of Knockando Woolmill Trust, and Graeme Stewart, secretary of the trust and son of the crofter and weaver who previously owned the mill and farm, Jones's efforts in keeping Knockando going have been nothing short of astonishing. He has single-handedly sustained the traditions of the UK's oldest surviving smallscale wool mill.

Stewart, who was born in the mill cottage in 1934, knows first hand what it takes to run the operation, having worked with his father as the mill's 'loon' from 1949 until 1952, before National Service took him from the Spey Valley. "I just couldn't think of the place falling to bits. It was a horrible thought. Just to get a new roof on it will be wonderful, but obviously our plan is to do much more than that," he says. "I hope we will be manufacturing and selling all over the world. It has been a hard slog, but we're nearly there."

Stewart's father and mother, Duncan and Winnie, moved into the mill cottage in 1930, paying a yearly rent of 2s 6d. It's a world away from the multi-million-pound budget raised to secure the mill's future. What would his father think? "He would be astonished at the money we're talking about," says Stewart, "absolutely astonished. He really wouldn't be able to take it in."

For Hutt, it's the history of the mill, a history long intertwined with that of the rural community it is part of, that has made the project at Knockando so worthwhile. "People still have Woolmill blankets that they were given as wedding presents in 1920," she says. "The thing was to give a pair of blankets, and some people still have them. It's wonderful."

Hutt can still remember her first visit to the mill, 20 years ago. "I think it was the smell that got me - that oil and cloth smell. And then Hugh just making this incredible stuff -

out it came from the loom. I remember that and being amazed by all these belts and bits of metal."

It's still too early to put a precise date on when the redevelopment will begin, but Hutt hopes that by the beginning of 2010, work will be starting. "There have been times that it looked like it wouldn't happen," she says. "Allied to money generally getting tighter, there has been a feeling that we might not have made it."

She pauses, then corrects herself. "No we haven't thought that. What we have thought is that we'll have to do this in a completely different way. We have always been determined to do it, but maybe not in such a comprehensive way."

Through a doorway at the end of the mill building is the lime-washed weaving room, which houses two looms, one dating from 1896 and the other from 1899. There are swatches of fabric on every surface, cones of yarn strewn around. A swathe of brightly coloured cloth is threaded on one of the looms. Jones is preparing for the forthcoming renovation and so he is using up yarns. "The Dobcross loom, the workhorse of the industrial revolution," he says, leaning on a wooden handrest worn smooth by a succession of weavers' hands. "They were a great Victorian invention. There were more of these looms made than any other kind."

His fingers float through the threads - there are 1,600 - as he explains how the shaft suspended from the ceiling above was once driven by a waterwheel but is now turned by an electric motor. The motor, installed in 1949, cost £167 and some change. It replaced a paraffin engine that worked alongside the waterwheel. Given that in the intervening 60 years, the only maintenance that has been carried out is that the bearings have been greased. It was money well spent.

Jones winds the threads tighter, getting ready to switch on the loom. It starts to whirr, then a rhythmic clack begins. When he drops the shuttle in place, the noise level ratchets up. The shuttle rockets across the threads - 90 times a minute - sounding like the clatter of a dozen crates of bottles being clanked on the ground. If both looms were running, the noise in here would be deafening.

While the renovations take place, the looms will be boxed up and left in situ. The other machines - the carding machines and the spinning mule - will be stripped down, carried into the planned new building and restored. Once the machines are recommissioned, they will be put back in the positions they have sat in since 1870, leaving an empty new building in which, Jones says, two high-speed, modern looms and some winding equipment will be instated. "We'll have some of the oldest and some of the newest working alongside each other," he says.

"We're looking at about five shop-floor jobs in all. →

machinery sit idly around the room like sleeping giants. Drive shafts and belts are strung around the sagging ceiling, dusty and dormant but in working order, just waiting for a switch to be flicked.

It could be eerie, but it's not. The machines could look foreboding, great hunks of Victorian engineering with their wheels, bolts and cogs. But they don't. The mill is quiet today, but everything here works. It doesn't feel dead, like something lost, but much more like something just waiting to be fired up.

The plans developed by the trust include reinstating the mill buildings, reconditioning and restoring the original machinery, transforming the dilapidated farmhouse into an administrative centre for the mill and the cottage into an education centre. There will also be a shop and a café. What there will not be is a museum. "It's use it or lose it," says Jones. "I've known that right from the start. Way back in the 1970s, I was always scheming, trying to work out how to improve the mill. The problem is that everything in this place leans on everything else, so once you start you've got to keep going. I've just kept it wind and watertight as far as possible, and made sure that it hasn't fallen down."

Jones has done much more than that. He has made his living weaving traditionally, making throws and rugs, tweed for the local estates. He has kept the machines in working order. The buildings may look unkempt but in

'Textiles as a global industry is a massive business. There really is a need for it. And "Made in Scotland" still means a lot'

→ Two old looms wouldn't sustain that, so you've got to have more production."

The mill will play its part in the community in a range of ways - it will create jobs, around ten in all, including an educational post. But it will also help farmers more directly. "Tenant farmers up here used to cover their rent by selling their wools," says Jones. "Now they're not making anything from it. There's no money. We would like to take in farmers' wool, make products out of it, then the farmers can have it back to sell. They can take rugs or throws to farmers' markets." Once costs are covered, the profits will belong to the farmer.

In a sense it's like a return to the old ways of crofting, the methods Stewart's father might have used - trading goods and services rather than money. "I think this is going to be really quite an important part of what the mill does," Hutt says. "We hadn't really anticipated it, but there is a lot of interest. And not just from local farmers, but from farmers all over Scotland, particularly if they've got a special breed of sheep."

The mill is, of course, part of a much larger story. Jones used to buy yarn from a range of spinners in Scotland, but now there are only two left. In recent years, he has sourced most of the yarn he uses from Yorkshire. It's the same at the other end of the process, when the cloth woven at the mill is washed and raised, starting to resemble the final product. "There's one commercial finisher left now, down in Galashiels," says Jones. "When I started, in Galashiels alone there were five. If we lose that, we won't get any finishing in Scotland."

The difficulty is that spinners rely on weavers to buy their yarn, and finishers rely on weavers to send them their cloth. As mills have closed steadily in Scotland, everyone has felt the pressure. "It's like a house of cards," says Jones. "Everybody leans on everybody else."

As he winds yarn on to a spool and fingers through a stack of estate tweeds in checks of purple and green, Jones



WARP AND WEFT Jones currently sources much of his yarn from Yorkshire, but it's hoped that local farmers will provide it in the future. Two original looms, built in the 1890s, will continue to work at the mill

says he expects the next year or two to be difficult for Scotland's textile industry. But still, he says, he remains optimistic. "If I was running a company that had 200 people employed, I would probably be very worried. But smaller operations are much more likely to survive.

Textiles as a global industry is a massive business. It's a fundamental; there really is a need for it. And 'Made in Scotland' still means a lot."

For Hutt, the fact that there's a market for the products that can be made at Knockando is crucial to the mill's survival, and is what sets Knockando apart from other restoration projects. "What we need to do is develop the mill so that it's financially sustainable. Potentially, we have got a fantastic product, which people want. Not only do they want to see the place restored, they want to be able to buy what's made in this ancient mill."

Knockando Woolmill has been working on this site since the 18th century, and the trust has been waiting nearly ten years for its plans to come to life. So what does Hutt foresee for the site over the next three years? "What I hope is that people will come down that wee brae and, although it won't look very different to how it looks now, there will be a real buzz about the place. They will be able to hear the machinery going, they will be able to have a wander round, drink a nice coffee in the café and look at a really nice bit of wool they fancy knitting from, or a throw or something like that"

The feel of the place is vital; it needs to be lively and friendly, she says. "I don't want it to feel like an ancient monument. I would hate it to turn into a visitor-centre-type place. We want it to have a unique feeling."

As the heron swoops off and the sun begins to dip, it would be easy to get carried away by the romanticism of Knockando - the landscape, the history, centuries of traditional skills being saved. But that's not Jones' style.

"It's a factory," he says. "That's it. It's not a museum. It could be turned into a museum just the way it is, you could call it a working museum. But it'd never survive. It's got to survive by trade, without it this place will go." □

For more information, to donate or become a friend of Knockando Woolmill Trust, visit www.knockandowoolmill.org.uk