



Sheep grazing in the orchard of Fernhill Farm, Mendip Hills, Somerset

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Design development and sample knitting with Amelia Brown

A bioregional journey into wool, design and regenerative farming

Future Fashion Landscapes

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As we drive back from moving sheep to fresh pasture, with muddy but happy-looking dogs on the back seats and a quad bike in the trailer, Andy tells me: "Farming, shearing, shepherding – it's not all just warm jumpers. It's not all lambs jumping around in spring looking playful. There is life and death, there is a lot of realism in it. You get miserable weather for months on end, the sheep look unhappy as it's raining, you see people rushing by in their cars while you're out there in the middle of the field. So, you do question at times whether you are doing the right thing. But then you have these (young) keen people who want to design clothes or fabrics from that very yarn that you've shorn off that sheep. This really puts pride into being a shepherd."

Andy and his partner Jen run the certified regenerative Fernhill Farm, where their flock of nearly 3,000 sheep is carefully

managed to produce high-quality meat alongside beautiful fine fibre that combines the qualities of several native British breeds. Wool, unlike plant fibre, is still produced in the UK in abundance. However, despite the rich history of sheep farming and Britain's 60+ native and rare sheep breeds, wool's potential for textiles and fashion is not sufficiently appreciated. This means that local wool is sold for lower-value purposes such as mattress stuffing or carpets or even discarded.

In response, two of the UK affiliates of the global Fibreshed movement – the South East England Fibreshed led by Deborah Barker, and the South West England Fibreshed coordinated by Emma Hague – ran an extensive consultation with stakeholders in their respective bioregions. What they found was that one of the key barriers for British wool is the lack

of connections, common language and mutual understanding of requirements and production cycles between farmers, designers and processors.

To help rebuild these broken links, the two Fibresheds joined forces and in early 2024 launched a beautifully produced guide, *Farming Fashion: Wool* (with the kind support of Farming the Future, UK). The guide is full of practical prompts, designed to help farmers, designers and processors ask the right questions, build trust and work together over time.

The timing of its launch was perfect for a research partnership with Centre for Sustainable Fashion, University of the Arts London. Following many previous discussions on our shared interest in nurturing bioregional textile ecosystems, the Future Fashion Landscapes¹ project was set up to help pilot the guide's practical application.

It also presented an opportunity to advance the understanding of properties and biodiversity benefits of bioregional native and rare breed wool.

When native and rare breed sheep flocks are managed with landscape conservation and/or restoration in mind, the infamous reputation of sheep farming for depleting large areas of land through overgrazing can be dramatically reversed. Deborah Barker from SEE Fibreshed explains: “This kind of grazing aims to restore landscapes the way they will have traditionally been managed – naturally moving sheep through the landscape rather than set stocking (keeping them in one field). Lower stocking densities are a start, but you also have to mimic those older ways of farming. When you get the right animal for the right landscape, you get a beautiful expression of both the animal’s nature and the nature of the landscape. It is really poetic.”

Throughout the 12 months of Future Fashion Landscapes, the guide became a conversation starter. We organized multiple in-person gatherings and workshops for farmers and designers, as well as webinars for designers with little or no understanding of native and rare breed wool. Drawing on Deborah’s method of “walking the land”, to help future generations of designers gain first-hand experience of designing in tune with the farming year, we took two groups of London College of Fashion’s MA students to the biodynamic Plaw Hatch Farm. In

Amelia Brown Knitwear x Fernhill Farm, Somerset



their “Wearing the Landscape” brief that followed, the students were asked to design – through objects or storytelling – examples of how we might rebalance the power between our wardrobes and our (local) landscapes.

Our aim was to offer tangible examples of new designer–farmer collaborations in each of the two regions, including experimental design prototypes that can open conversations and lead to future development that can benefit farmers, designers and their bioregional communities.

In the South West, knitwear designer Ria Burns worked with Ellen Simon and her daughter Leila from Tamarisk Farm, which stretches along the beautiful Jurassic Coast in Dorset. Amelia Brown worked with Jennifer Hunter and Andy Wear from Fernhill Farm at the top of the Mendip Hills National Landscape, Somerset. In the South East we had a three-way collaboration between designers Phoebe English and Fabienne Gassmann, working with Gala Bailey Barker from the women-led Plaw Hatch Farm in the scenic Ashdown Forest, East Sussex. Deanne Wallace of Elwin worked with Diana Bird and her partner, Duncan Parker, who has spent all his life at his family’s Chilton Grounds Farm in Aylesbury Vale, Oxfordshire.

These four collaborations have now been turned into beautifully illustrated case studies that can serve as inspiration,



Wensleydales having an afternoon rest, Chilton Grounds Farm, Aylesbury Vale, Oxfordshire

encouragement, and ultimately proof of concept for designers, farmers and processors who wish to work within their bioregional wool ecosystems.

As we’re driving back to Fernhill Farm, down the bumpy track that repeatedly flooded over the last few months, Andy tells me that when the times get tough, it is working with others that can bring a whole new vitality back in again. “Seeing people use your wool gives a purpose to getting on, getting out there, working with the sheep, trying to keep the job right.”

The collaborations enabled through Future Fashion Landscapes are hopeful proofs that we can support each other in doing what feels right, even if the paths are sometimes bumpy. When we join our forces and skills, we can shift from exploiting our landscapes to satisfy the whims of fashion, to a way of working and living where our bioregions can (once again) inform and inspire what we design and wear. Examples are now out there for others to follow.

For more information on the project, including the four illustrated case studies, see www.sustainable-fashion.com. To keep in touch with CSF and SEE and SWE Fibresheds, including updates on future developments of this work, follow @sustfash, @southwest-englandfibreshed and @southeastenglandfibreshed. For more information on the upcoming Future Fashion Landscapes exhibition, see <https://british-textilebiennial.co.uk>.



Phoebe English and Fabienne Gassmann x Plaw Hatch Farm, East Sussex



Ria Burns’s natural dye samples from Tamarisk Farm, Dorset



Elwin x Chilton Grounds Farm, Oxfordshire



Design development and sample knitting with Elwin



Ria Burns Knitwear x Tamarisk Farm, Dorset