



# Skye Weavers



**T**HE ISLE OF SKYE is part of the Inner Hebrides, connected to the mainland by a bridge. Andrea and Roger Holden moved here and set up their weaving business, *Skye Weavers*, four years ago. They are working on a double width rapier handloom, which was developed by Griffith Textile Machines in the 1990s. Their slogan is 'powered by pedals'. The technique is quite ingenious, effective and no electric power is required. The Griffith loom is also used by most Harris Tweed weavers, who had formerly worked on single width Hattersley looms. Roger and Andrea managed to buy a second hand loom on the Outer Isles and are now weaving their own *Skye Weavers Tweed*.

No shuttles are used. The little rapier grabs the ends of yarn off the cones standing on the floor, so there is no bobbin winding involved. The weft is inserted into the shed and the rapier returns empty, making it possible to weave just one pick in any one shade. Leno threading binds the edges, which means the selvages are not "true" selvages. When they are weaving scarves they have 5 at a time running side by side with extra leno ends on each side of each scarf.

Once the warp is finished, the ends are left hanging behind the heddles. The warp beam is removed and taken to the warping shed, where a new warp is wound on. The beam is brought back again and the new warp is tied to the old, if the threading and slewing are the same as for the previous weave. This is not always the case: with the warp that was about to be set up on the loom, the warp sett was different and the slewing needed redoing. Should there be a different number of ends to the previous warp, they work it out.

– That's how we do things. Sometimes setting up takes a bit of time, but then we have plenty of variation in our product range and huge flexibility.

Skye Weavers weave their very own tweed and have developed designs and qualities unique to them.

– We most definitely do not want to copy Harris Tweed. They

do their thing and do it really well, so why do something that is already around?

THE YARNS THEY USE come from various mills based in Scotland and the north of England. They are thinking, though, about how to make use of wool from their locality.

– I come from a farming family and take a long-term view of the ways we use what there is around us. Our aim for the future is to buy local fleece and send it off for spinning, then use it for weaving. It would be great if we can eventually source a big part of the wool we are using locally. It's always a bit of a battle between production and creativity, though. What we sell runs out and we need to keep up production whilst still managing to create new products, says Roger.

The weaving apparatus is in a little house, or weaving shed as they call it. In the old stone byre next to it is a huge warping mill, constructed from derelict farm machinery, parts of a bike, and sewing machine and even bits of a broken dishwasher.

It was put together before they moved here, at the farm and weaving mill where they met, *Ardalanish Isle of Mull Weavers and Organic farm*, on the Isle of Mull.

The Holdens were assisted by Bob Ryan, who had also helped Ardanish to get going at the beginning of 2003. Andrea and Roger worked there for a good 8 years, Roger on the farm and Andrea sewing the collections designed by designer Anja Hynynen.

The guiding ideas at Ardanish involved utilizing local resources. They had sheep and farmed: the fleece and other locally sourced fleece was spun into yarn and woven into cloth.

When the owners, Aeneas and Minty MacKay, decided to sell Ardanish, Roger and Andrea also changed direction in life. They had an idea.

– We told the others we were going to be weavers! Madeleine Östling, who did the weaving and now is busy with Uist Wool and the others just looked at us:

– But you can't weave?

– And that was indeed the case. But we had a lot of determination and simply set to. We advertised for a second-hand Griffith Rapier Hand Loom and were lucky enough to be able to buy one from Lewis.

The warping mill, integral to the production was built by >

above p. 20 / Retail takes place in the shop behind the shed.

above p. 21 / Roger and Andrea share the weaving, which is done with pedals and no electricity. They can do roughly 4 metres/hour.

centre left / Warped up and ready to wind onto the warp beam.

centre right / Andrea Holden warping up. There can be as many as 112 threads to a section/repeat.

below left / The warp beam is taken over to the loomshed.

below right / A new warp is tied to the previous one.



Bob and Roger in the course of a few cold winter months at Ardalanish. When Roger and Andrea moved to the Isle of Skye, they dismantled the warping mill and took it along. Roger's family had a holiday house on Skye, where Roger had spent every summer as a child. Four years on, weaving full time, they are well established. They are selling their products at thecroft house or through their online shop. Things are going very well, said Roger, as we sat at their kitchen table looking at weaves and sketches for production.

– We are still surprised at how well everything has worked out for us on Skye!

WHEN WE VISITED, Roger and Andrea were working on a special tweed for *Skypeskyns*, another island business. The yarn being used for warping up was a woollen yarn from England in natural shades. It comes from Shepley Yarns, near Manchester. The stripes of colour were dyed naturally by a wonderful little enterprise on Skye, *Shilasdair Yarns*. Once the cloth has been given a traditional tweed finish at Schofield Dyers & Finishers in the Scottish Border *Skypeskyns* will make it up into cushions with sheep skin on one side and the tweed on the other. The cushions will be available from *Skypeskyns*. Being a small business, Roger and Andrea both do a bit of everything, but on the whole it is Roger who is looking after the machinery and doing most of the weaving, while Andrea designs, creates the fabric qualities and warps up. So how do they see themselves now, several years on, as professional weavers?

Andrea:

– Back home in Germany, when I was young, I never dreamed of being a weaver. You could say that I landed up here through a set of many fortunate circumstances. The creative process makes me see the landscape and plant life around in a completely different way. Walking on the moors, taking photos, enlarging details, finding yarns and the right technique, warping up and then seeing tens of metres emerging as cloth. It is deeply satisfying work.

Roger:

– I came to Ardalanish to work with Minty and Aeneas on the organic farm. While I was there, they set up the weaving mill to use the fleeces of their Hebridean sheep. I felt very inspired by their vision of making most of what they had, for example the wool. I was fascinated by the weaving and excited about how a local resource could be turned into a product on the farm. Nobody else here on Skye does the same kind of weaving as us, so there was a space for it. I like people visiting us, seeing how we produce what we do and getting a little taste of it. And they can buy what we make, right next to where it's been made. A

top / Inspiration for the tweeds below.

left / Sphagnum for Brushed Tweed.

right / Deer grass for Moss Check Tweed: the white blades inspired the light over-check.

middle / Herringbone tweed with indigo dyed yarn from *Shilasdair Yarns* and an "over-check" in white.

below / Collaboration with *Shilasdair Yarns* and *Skypeskyns*.

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