



Include-Us
young people mean business
iomairt nan òg



Comhairle nan Eilean Siar



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Youth revolution for Harris Tweed weaving

By Katie Macleod

History is being made in a small stone shed in the West Side village of Bru, where the distinctive smell of unfinished tweed hits you as you duck through the doorway. It is here that one of the world's youngest Harris Tweed weavers, 19-year-old John MacLeod, is hard at work.

While the average age of weavers is slowly decreasing, John still misses the mean by a few decades. In 2008, the average age of weavers was 62; it has since fallen to 50 – leaving John part of a small handful of young weavers eager to learn the Harris Tweed trade.

John officially began weaving at the start of the year, having successfully submitted a test piece of tweed to the Shawbost Mill in December. His journey to weaving has been aided by the financial and organisational support of both Include-Us and the Harris Tweed Authority.

At just 18 years old, it was John who took the initiative and approached Include-Us. Funded by the European Social Fund and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Include-Us is an organisation that offers support and advice to the young people of the Western Isles in everything ranging from business start-ups to education, employment and training.

"John walked into our office in November 2012, and said he wanted to be a weaver," remembers Include-Us Support Officer Donald MacSween. "The big problem was the loom, so that was where Include-Us came in."

With the cost of buying a loom stretching to £15,000 plus VAT, purchasing the equipment was not a viable option. Instead, Include-Us helped John with the rental costs of a 1993 Griffith double-width Loom – a piece of machinery older than John himself.

As the loom was in need of extensive repair work and new parts, Include-Us aided with its restoration, as well as organising one-to-one mentoring with an experienced weaver. John's tweed training began in April 2013, with local West Side weaver Cailean Angus MacDonald.

"He was brilliant with regards to training us up," says John, who trained with Cailean Angus four days a week, from 7am until 2pm, while also working part-time at the Welcome Inn Filling Station in Barvas. "I think having one-on-one [training] is a lot better, especially since he is in the same village, he's going to be there if I need any help."

With Include-Us support continuing at present and the prospect of John extending the lease on the loom until May 2015, John is on the right track, combining his weaving with part-time work.



John MacLeod in his Loom shed

"There's no doubt that we'll keep an eye on the ones [weavers] coming up," says Lorna MacAulay, CEO of the Harris Tweed Authority, explaining that it is "perfectly the norm to have a secondary income." Lorna adds that "John's geography is bang on, given where the mills are."

While the weaving workspace can be draughty as a result of the winds blowing in from the Atlantic, the temperature inside is set to rise thanks to the Harris Tweed Educational Trust. The Trust, which encourages and supports new weavers to get involved in the industry, awarded John a small grant to help with the refurbishment of the shed, and the difference after the first installation of insulation is already starting to show.

This is the same shed in which an uncle of John's once pedalled another loom, although it wasn't family history that jolted John into considering the world of weaving, but the recent regeneration of the Harris Tweed industry.

"There was good word going around about being a weaver," John says of his decision to look

into acquiring a loom. "The idea appealed to me to be independent, working from home, reaping the benefits from your own hard work."

In little more than a year, John has become a qualified, working weaver, and is already taking urgent orders of tweeds from the mill. He speaks the language of the loom fluently, his fingers and feet confidently familiar with the technique as he explains warps and wefts; the importance of the pattern block; and the differences involved in weaving a herringbone or a tartan. "There are so many moving parts; everything has to be the right tension to get the right weave."

"We all had to put in the effort to get it going," John says, referring to the cooperation between himself, Include-Us, and the Harris Tweed Authority. "I wouldn't have thought for a second I'd have been standing here, with a loom, the youngest weaver in the world, in the Hebrides. I'm quite happy with how I've got on."

"John had to pull his own weight – he was doing as much work as anybody else," notes Donald.

"He had to show there was a genuine desire there to be a weaver, and he has shown himself to be a very capable weaver."

Include-Us is all about working with young people – people, like John, who have a desire to do something different. "We're happy to speak to any young people about any ideas. There are loads of other opportunities for young people out there," says Donald.

It was certainly a step in the right direction for John, who, standing with a smile next to his loom, is enthusiastic in his praise for Donald and the Include-Us team. "I'd recommend it for any young people wanting to start up a business, or wanting to explore a business idea – go in and have a speak with them, and see if there's a way forward."

For the world's youngest weaver, there was a way forward, and his story is only just starting.



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