

LAXTONS LOOKING TO THE NEXT 100 YEARS

Laxtons, which produces a range of high quality yarns for upholstery and apparel and is based in Ilkely, West Yorkshire, is this year celebrating its 100th anniversary. Managing director James Laxton, who represents the fourth generation of the family told the Wool Record that “for a century we have managed to procure new business due to our consistent high quality standards, continual improvements and the use of new and often unusual fibres. Although the UK textile industry now has only a fraction of the numbers it employed in previous years, and is seen as less important in global terms, we have managed to maintain our position in the world as producers of the very best quality fancy yarns.”

In 2001, Laxtons made changes to the business which James Laxton said brought “a new life for the business, though with the new life there came sadness as well as relief.” The firm has continued its tradition of specialising in the manufacture of fancy yarns and heavy count worsted spun yarns used in hand or machine knitting and weaving. “We pride ourselves on working closely with our customers and having both the technical expertise and imagination to engineer a yarn to meet the customer’s demands,” James Laxton said. “We now have access to all the latest technologies and specialised machinery and therefore have the ability to make



ABOVE: Laxtons staff photo taken in the late 1940s. The company's founder George Laxton is sat directly behind the white table in the black suit, with his wife Mary sat to his right.

almost any type of yarn, whether fancy or conventionally spun.”

Laxtons continues to supply yarn to many well-known high street brands and design houses across the world for woven and knitted fabric and also hand-knitted products. “The UK’s reputation for quality and style is second to none, and our customers continue to thrive as a result of their international standards of quality and style” James Laxton said.

Alan Thornber, formerly of British Mohair Spinners, recently joined the Laxtons team, bringing with him vast

experience covering raw material selection, through to manufacture/design, and sales. James Laxton said that “this appointment will strengthen an already close-knit team of skilled and experienced employees.”

Over recent years, Laxtons has seen a significant shift to predominantly noble fibre based yarns for both hand knitting and upholstery. James Laxton added that the company’s apparel customers are seeing surface effect to be of greater importance than blend. “Going forward,” he added, “it is our intention to continue to be design-driven yarn manufacturers and to move towards fulfilling areas of the market that are becoming quite challenging in terms of supply for our customers, such as heavy count worsted spinning and technical textiles. To compete in the industry today you have to understand and enjoy the benefits that the advancement of technology brings, to adapt and develop products quickly, and always look to the ever-changing environment for those new products. I know my great grandfather would not recognise the business today.”

In 1907 George H Laxton and Gordon Holmes formed a worsted spinning firm by



LEFT: Laxtons directors, all from the 2nd & 3rd generations, during a visit in 1979 by the Mayor of Bradford to the new factory in Silsden. (Left to right) John Laxton, Ian Crawford, Reg Atkinson (director of Development Services at Bradford Council), George Laxton (son of the founder George Laxton), and Arthur Trigg, Lord Mayor of Bradford.

the name of Holmes Laxton & Co based at Vale Mills in Oakworth. Combining George Laxton's technical know-how and Gordon Holmes' financial expertise, they travelled the country together selling their yarns. Just prior to the First World War, together with local Bradford weavers, they developed a new technology, spinning single mohair thread then buying in cotton thread and twisting the two together. This yarn was then sold to weavers. "Fabric made with the two elements was rather substantial but the mohair had too fine a thread to be woven itself," James Laxton said. "Then along came the carbonising process, which dissolved the cotton, leaving the weavers with the first light weight mohair suiting in the world."

During the depression of the 1930's Holmes Laxton & Co were forced onto a one-week-on, one-week-off arrangement, sharing the available work. This went on for around three years. It was during this time that the company's yarn began to be exported to Germany for the manufacture of upholstery fabrics. Business began to improve but the company was once again affected by the Second World War. George Laxton's son, also called George, who had joined the company in the 1930's, signed up in Bingley, near Bradford, as a volunteer in the Royal Air Force. The company found itself with a decimated work force as the town's men clamoured to sign up. However, the firm continued to operate and throughout the war women took over the work traditionally carried out by the men.

After the war, George Laxton was the first UK yarn salesman to go back to Germany to visit his old customers. Only

BELOW: Laxtons managing director James Laxton.



ABOVE:
A selection of Laxtons yarns: 1. 2/7 Nm, 50/50 Hercosett wool/silk for socks. 2. 1 Nm 92/8 wool/nylon for contract upholstery. 3. 3/7 Nm 100% organic wool herb dyed, for hand knit products and woven scarves and throws. 4. 3.6 Nm 57/23/20 wool/metallic/polyester for woven ladies apparel. 5. 0.6 Nm 92/8 wool/nylon for hand knit scarves and throws. 6. 3.5 Nm metric loop for woven scarves and ladies apparel. 7. 1.3 Nm 60/40 wool/polyester for upholstery and ladies apparel. 8. 3/4.2 Nm 100% Bluefaced Leicester for hand knit products. 9. 9.4 Nm 82/18 wool/nylon for woven ladies skirtings and upholstery. 10. 2 Nm 39/39/13/9 mohair/viscose/wool/nylon for woven apparel, blankets and travel rugs.

one company remained of the 35 that had been there prior to the war, the rest having been destroyed in the bombing raids, and the business sector was slow to recover as the Germans rebuilt, though in time an improvement became apparent. By this time, however, Holmes Laxton's machinery was becoming old and obsolete, and George Laxton felt that change was needed. Investing in new machinery, he set up in Prospect Mill at Ingrow in Keighley, sharing premises with John Haggas plc but maintaining the space at Vale Mill. Then in 1956, when George Laxton senior died, all business was transferred to Ingrow by Gordon Holmes and George Laxton's son. Gordon Holmes emigrated to Canada in 1966, after his retirement at the grand age of 79. "Perhaps he thought he had better move as far away as possible" James Laxton reflected, "as he had spent 40 years with the company and had often walked to work from Ilkley – a 12-mile round trip!"

In 1959, John Laxton, George Laxton junior's son, joined the company, and following Gordon Holmes's retirement Ian Crawford also joined the firm. The company was changed to a partnership, releasing family funds and continued to be run in this way for almost a decade. The mohair yarns that had been supplied to upholstery manufacturers were adapted to be suitable for ladies outerwear, and were supplied to weavers in Huddersfield, Scotland and a variety of overseas markets.

In 1974 George Laxton & Co. purchased a mohair fancy twisting plant in Scotland

and began producing hand knitting yarns, made mainly from mohair. However, the very latest fancy twisting machinery was too big for the Ingrow facility, so a new factory was built in Silsden. In 1978, the company's name changed to Laxton Crawford Ltd. The new site in Silsden quickly grew into one of the most modern, successful plants in the UK and Europe, manufacturing mohair fancy yarns and blends, selling both in the UK and to over 80 countries worldwide on a predominantly made-to-order basis. In addition, in 1985, the firm bought a dye house. In 2001 both John Laxton and Ian Crawford retired from the business, leaving James Laxton, the fourth generation, to take the company forward to where it is today. This involved another move, this time to its current facility in Ilkley. www.laxtons.com