

THE FASHION ISSUE INTERVIEW

Photographs Mark Mainz
Styling Carrie McAdam

Hey, good looking

He's a former model and political researcher blessed with beauty and charisma. Now Mark Hogarth is placing Harris tweed at the heart of international fashion, discovers Ali Howard

Mark Hogarth strides into the hotel and every female in the place turns her head. Well, perhaps not all. I, for one, am already facing the door, anticipating his arrival. There's a mix up regarding times and Hogarth is late. He needs an assistant, I tell him once he's made himself comfortable. "It's quite interesting – a few folk have offered their services," he says, flashing a brilliant smile.

I bet they have. Having been witness to his attendance at this year's Scottish Fashion Awards – at which Harris Tweed Hebrides, of which he is creative director, won Textile Designer of the Year for the second time – I am aware of Hogarth's ability to create a certain amount of swooning wherever he goes. And that was in the presence of male models such as David Gandy.

But then Hogarth, a former model himself from Ardrossan, delivered one of the most well-articulated speeches of the evening: self-assured but not cocky,

passionate but not boastful. In short, he charmed everyone in the place. In the hip-hop world, they'd say he had swagger. But really, it seems, Hogarth is one of the lucky few to be born with that classic combination of looks and charm.

What I wasn't expecting is brains. Granted, business is booming – in a big part down to Hogarth's efforts; and the company's client list is a who's who of the fashion world: Alexander McQueen, Calvin Klein and Vivienne Westwood, to name a few. But as Hogarth chats, quoting Oscar Wilde, talking politics and the economics of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China – the company's next target markets), it would seem he's got the smarts too. If I were a man, I'd want to hate him.

But then Hogarth is genuinely nice. He talks a lot, but in an engaging manner. While it would be easy to suggest he's the pretty public face of the company, Hogarth knows his facts and figures and can tell the story of Harris tweed inside out. Ask about the brand's latest collaboration with Topman and Hogarth, 35, knows the product code of the colour of tweed they are using: YC 140. Ask him to describe it and he'll say it's like a deep, dark brown – a rust colour similar to the brown ▶



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► seaweed found on the west coast of Harris. "It's exactly the same colour as that found in nature, which is quite inspiring," he says.

Although Hogarth doesn't hail from the Hebrides he has spent enough time there for it to filter into his soul. "There's a near mystical relationship between the land and the cloth," he says, "a strong element of the fabric reflecting the people, the people reflecting the land."

The island's story is now his story. "I probably bore people telling it on a daily basis. But it's not until you actually see the process from start to finish that you realise how unique it is."

He tells me how the colours are lifted from the island's rocks, lichen and wild flowers. He points to the fabric of the seats we're sitting on – which is Harris tweed, designed by Scottish design house Graven Images (Glasgow's Blythswood Hotel is virtually a homage to the fabric). "From a distance, this tweed here looks like a dark green but, up close, you realise there's specks of blue and highlights of lime and green."

His passion is obvious and today's tardiness wasn't typical. Lately, he says, it's been "manic". In August, there was the Harris Tweed Ride, a charity bike run in Glasgow, with proceeds going to the Linda Norgrove Foundation, set up in memory of the aid worker killed in Afghanistan in October 2010 ("Her being from the Hebrides, it seemed the right thing to do," he says); a show at the Belladrum Tartan Heart music festival in Beaulieu; and a reception in New York to celebrate 100 years of the Harris Tweed Authority's Orb, the trademark which certifies Harris tweed as genuine. "It's getting that crazy way where I've almost plateaued," says Hogarth.

Since Harris Tweed Hebrides took over the derelict Shawbost mill on the Isle of Lewis in 2007, the company has gone from strength to strength. Despite there being two other working mills on the island, the company now accounts for more than 90% of the island's production, with a 50%

growth on last year alone. Today, the mill is working to capacity, with demand outstripping supply. (The company has more than 50 staff and, in the run up to their August holidays, the mill was running 24 hours a day, producing upwards of 200 pieces of tweed a week to fill the autumn orders.)

"We are in a privileged position," says Hogarth, "but of course that brings its own set of problems – good problems." The weavers, who for so long have had a hard time, are being tested – but the mood is positive. Because of the fabric's protective Act of Parliament, the tweed has to be woven at the home of the weaver. It's partly Hogarth's job to help make sure demand is sustained and the future is assured.

It doesn't sound like an easy position and, as the communications arm of the business, the last few years have been so busy for Hogarth that when it came time to take a break last year, he ended up getting viral meningitis. "Looking back, it was purely because I overdid it for a couple of months," he says. "And the body just said, 'No, that's not happening.'" At times, he's not always had a good work-life balance.

In part this has been because Hogarth travels around the world singing the praises of Harris tweed. But today, it's the New York reception that Hogarth is preparing for – and he's a bit nervous. Pulling in the right attendees and clientele is key.

In the hey-day of the fabric, the US was the biggest market, accounting for around 60% of the market share. But that dipped along with the textile's popularity. Today, America stands at less than 5%; and Japan, which loves the colours and heritage of Harris tweed, is its largest market, accounting for 85% of exports. "But in the last year-and-a-half we've got some real A-list clients – real trend-setters at the vanguard of New York," says Hogarth.

These include the labels Rag And Bone and Michelle Obama favourite, J.Crew. The latter loved the Harris tweed jacket ►



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► Hogarth was wearing at their meeting last October and instantly said, "That's what we want."

Today, Hogarth pairs burgundy jeans and a white shirt with the jacket, which he sheepishly admits he bought off an internet auction site for £12 many years ago. And this, he says, was part of the problem when Harris Tweed Hebrides started. "We were trying to promote it to a younger audience but we knew they would just go out and get good-quality Harris Tweed jackets in charity shops or on eBay."

But now, with multiple high-fashion collaborations under their belt, the textile is on a "second wave of popularity". Is this down to him? "Far from it," says Hogarth modestly, putting it down to a team effort, specifically that of chairman Brian Wilson, the former Labour MP for Cunninghame North, who has been credited in the press as the man who saved Harris tweed.

Their relationship – both personal and business – came about through fate. "It's quite funny," smiles Hogarth. "We met about 10 years ago when I was modelling Harris tweed. It's really quite bizarre how it went full circle."

The moment came in 2000, when Wilson, then Scottish Office minister, organised a promotional show for Harris tweed during which Hogarth was modelling outfits for Vivienne Westwood. "We had an introduction, had a bit of a laugh; and then, with me being a politics graduate, I managed to get a job a year later as his researcher."

Hogarth had graduated from Strathclyde University with a degree in politics and geography, but when he finished his degree, he put it on the back burner and took to travelling and modelling. "I went to university imagining I'd be a geography teacher – which is ironic considering geography teachers are meant to wear tweed jackets," he says, laughing.

But it was that "moment of coincidence" that brought him to the attention of Wilson.

"Had I not got that job as his researcher, who knows? It might have been a completely different career path. But I suppose that's the essence of everybody's life. There was a lot of fate and chance involved."

Hogarth continued modelling while working for Wilson. "I would have crazy, bizarre days," he recalls. "I remember modelling in the morning, doing something for Nike, then running down to meet constituents at a protest against NHS cuts." But it worked. "Westminster was a fantastic experience – the corridors of power," says Hogarth. "You could end up in a debate with Shirley Williams or Menzies Campbell, trying to exchange a point – and that's the beauty of Westminster."

The experience clearly served him well in the art of communication and when the time came nearly 10 years later for Wilson to put a team in place at his newly purchased Harris Tweed Hebrides, Hogarth knew the industry and had the chat to carry the brand forward.

"I suppose I was the natural choice to have a look at the image of Harris tweed and see if we could upgrade it," he concedes. "Being a farmer's son, you are taught that it's rude to talk about yourself or identify what you're good at but, yeah, communication's never really been a problem."



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► One of the first things he did was look on Wikipedia, which cited Miss Marple and Professor Langdon of the Da Vinci Code as fans. "When you've got those individuals at the helm of your image, you know you've got a slight issue. I knew it was going to be a struggle," he chuckles.

But the "perfect product" was always there, he says. It was down to changing the mindset of consumers. "People would say Harris tweed is itchy and scratchy. But it's made for coats and jackets.

"And if anything is cut properly, people will wear it. Girls don't wear sexy, uncomfortable shoes for nothing. They wear them because they look sexy. I knew we could get over that image with the strength of the aesthetic," says Hogarth.

With this in mind, the company aimed straight for fashion, collaborating with young Scottish designers Judy R Clark and Deryck Walker on funky new collections. And part of the revival, Hogarth says, is down to a shift in consumer attitudes. "People are more concerned about their clothes – and designers have had to respond to that," he says. Collaborating with Topshop, he says, was a risk – but one that paid off. The brand didn't want to be accused of going downmarket but the blurring of high design with high street was a good fit. "A lot of Harris tweed had become

synonymous with aristocracy and stuffy old expensive jackets – and to have the ability to bring it to a wider, younger audience was fantastic."

According to Hogarth, it was the smallest profit margin for Topman on anything they'd ever sold because it was the most they'd paid for a fabric. But the real turning point came when the fashion houses of Paris came calling – a fortuitous development down to timing, not luck, says Hogarth. Dries Van Noten did an eclectic collection for autumn/winter 2010, "which opened the eyes of some of the other Parisian fashion houses".

At times, he says, the people who now pass through Stornoway include the great and the good of the world's fashion industry – from Tokyo-based bloggers ("It's like a hajj for them") to one of Yves Saint Laurent's team, who was sent from Paris in 2010 on a last-minute tweed run.

"Our last recollection was this guy trying to fold tweed into a taxi, shouting 'merde' repeatedly," says Hogarth. "I think the tweed was on the Paris cutting floor by 9pm the same day."

The fabric's association with high fashion is seamless. "Harris tweed's all about style, class, sophistication – it's expensive," says Hogarth. "We knew if we could secure top clients doing interesting things with the

fabric, other clients would come in – because the quality speaks for itself.

"And there's that sea change. There seems to be a shift away from bling and labels; it's not just about the logo and the designer, it's much more about the fabric, the construction of the garment and the story behind it."

Ironically, Hogarth never saw himself working in fashion. He wasn't a fashionable guy, he says. "If anything, I probably had contempt for it – if not worse than contempt." Modelling meant he lived a charmed life and went to nice places with "easy exposure to beautiful women" but it wasn't something he wanted to do for long. "For a farmer's boy from Ardrossan, it was certainly quite an eye opener but the actual modelling part of it I hated," he says. "People say it's dehumanising, but that's nonsense; it can actually be quite hard work. I'd much rather go out and shovel muck on a farm or do a shift on a tractor than stand for 12 hours having to adjust my positioning."

It was growing up on a farm that gave Hogarth a solid work ethic. "You're only ever going to get anywhere if you put in hard work and commitment. It also taught me you should try to enjoy your work. It's the most important part of what you do."

Striving for perfection is part of his way of working, although he says he's not a workaholic. He's still interested in politics – particularly global – but has no interest in being a politician "at the moment".

"Although I do think a good politician should be somebody with a bit of charisma," says Hogarth, smiling. ■

'Modelling can be hard work. I'd much rather shovel muck on a farm'



Vintage Harris tweed jacket, Marks & Spencer. Stonewash denim shirt, £59, Cos. Black denim skinny jeans, £29.99, H&M. Brown leather brogue shoes, £155, Russell and Bromley

Far right: the Harris Tweed Authority's Orb, which certifies a garment is made from genuine fabric



STOCKISTS: COS (0141 223 0020, WWW.COSSTORES.COM); HARRIS TWEED (WWW.HARRISTWEEDHEBRIDES.COM); H&M (WWW.HM.COM); HOUSE OF FRASER (0844 800 3728, WWW.HOUSEOFFRASER.CO.UK); RUSSELL & BROMLEY (0131 225 7444, 0141 248 6031, WWW.RUSSELLANDBROMLEY.CO.UK)

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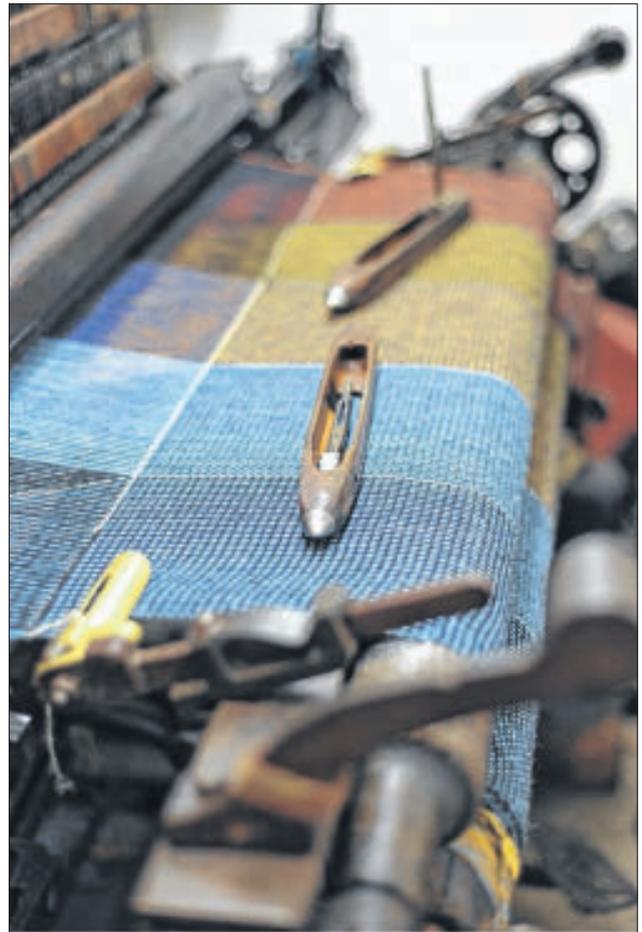


Navy and light blue
tweed bomber
jacket, £340, by
Deryck Walker for
Harris Tweed. Navy
cotton polo shirt with
pale blue trim, £70,
J Lindberg at House
Of Fraser



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Above left: designer Ken Kennedy, at Harris Tweed Hebrides' Shawbost mill, shows the variety of colours – all taken from the island's naturally occurring hues – used to create the product that has spawned working relationships with the world's top fashion houses PHOTOGRAPH: KIRSTY ANDERSON

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Gilet, £160, Hiberniate for Harris Tweed. Brown and navy cotton checked shirt, £105, Paul Smith at House Of Fraser. Camel chinos, £59, Cos

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Mark Hogarth wears vintage Harris tweed jacket, Marks & Spencer. Other clothing, Mark's own

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