

- RETAIL -

A S C O T T I S H Y A R N

TRAVELLING TO THE SOURCE OF CHANEL'S ICONIC TWO-TONE CARDIGANS,
JANE CORNWELL FINDS AN ART WORTH PRESERVING.

Coco Chanel used to fish in the waters near Hawick, the largest of the small towns in the Scottish Borders, that scenic region south of Edinburgh with the River Tweed running through it. The French fashion icon loved Scotland, going about in Fair Isle knits and tweed, taking inspiration from the rolling hills, rugged coastline and soft evening light. That was in the 1920s, when Chanel was becoming one of the world's most covetable brands, and the old textile mills of Hawick were refocusing on knitwear – womenswear, mainly – after a stint producing socks and long johns for soldiers during World War I. And at the heart of Hawick (the locals call it “Hoik”) was the mill that nine decades later would be saved and revived by none other than Chanel itself: Barrie Knitwear.

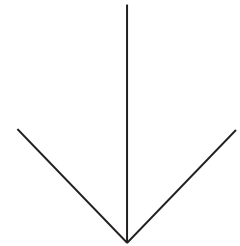
“Barrie Knitwear was founded in 1903 and renowned for excellence and know-how from the start,” says sales director Clive Brown, sitting in an upstairs office overlooking a quiet road and fields, its walls hung with photos of the company's latest collections and triumphs. Hip young models wear cashmere shorts, asymmetric cashmere maxi dresses and cashmere jumpers with 3D motifs of thistles, the Scottish national flower (the logo for Barrie Knitwear is two thistles back-to-back). There, Keira Knightley on the cover of French *Elle* in a striped cashmere sweater; there, Cara Delevingne modelling a black cashmere turtleneck on the front of French *Vogue*.

“We’ve supplied couture cashmere garments to many prestigious fashion houses over the years, including Chanel from the late 1980s” – notably, those famed two-tone cardigans – “but we never knew much about brands and branding,” continues the Edinburgh-born Brown, who joined the mill as a school-leaver 35 years ago. “Now, with the power of Chanel behind us, we’re experts.”

For a while it seemed as if the age-old knowledge of knitwear born in the Borders would fall victim to modern times. Several mills had gone into receivership and Barrie was on the brink of closure when, in 2012, the luxury French fashion house stepped in, paying an undisclosed sum to become the new owners. About £1 million was invested in high-tech



Scottish artisanal company Barrie Knitwear made cashmere jumpers for the Chanel Cruise 2018 collection.



FROM TOP: Chanel's ownership is helping preserve the traditional textile skills of the Borders; the handcrafted buttons change with every collection; it takes 40 people to make a Barrie sweater.



production equipment, and a training school established for up to 20 young people. Applications for places keep coming, says Brown, even if learning to cut the perfect neckline can take an entire year.

"Through this acquisition we reaffirm our commitment to traditional expertise and craftsmanship and our wish to safeguard their future and support their development," says Bruno Pavlovsky, Chanel's president.

Barrie Knitwear has continued supplying other major luxury brands with Chanel's blessing, and in 2014 the mill produced its own 12-piece Barrie collection, showcasing its now trademark blend of artisanal virtuosity and creative edge. Whatever can be done in cashmere, Barrie does, from capes and sweatbands to kilts and elbow-length mittens; the mill still makes 90,000 cashmere sweaters annually.

The latest ready-to-wear autumn-winter collection – drawstring jumpsuits, "Barrie"-emblazoned scarves, soft pink twinsets with Chanel-logo buttons – is distributed through about 100 approved retailers worldwide; a marketing drive in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region is forthcoming.

The factory is finding it tricky to keep up with demand, and no wonder. Various poetic, folksy, poppy and futuristic, with classic codes, unusual prints (a Dutch Delft pattern, a Japanese landscape) and handcrafted buttons that change with every collection, this is couture product at reasonable prices, designed in fashion-forward Paris and realised in historic Hawick by a 230-strong team.

"Business is growing weekly; we are having to turn business down," says Brown, leading the way onto the factory floor for a step-by-step demonstration of what it takes to make a single Barrie garment – among other things, 40 people for a sweater. Quality, and hand knitting, takes time.

"Barrie is probably the only fashion knitwear brand out there; creating a total look has meant thinking like dressmakers and becoming fully fashioned," Brown continues, referencing the process by which panels for, say, a safari jacket are knitted to size and shape without prior cutting operations.

It all starts with the yarn, of course. Or rather, it all starts thousands of kilometres away, on the plateaus of Inner Mongolia, with the goats. Healthy, hairy goats, white, red and brown, tended by properly paid shepherds who, come spring, manually comb the short, furry down from their charges' bellies to collect a rare and valuable animal fibre (four goats equals one sweater) that is weather resistant and warmer than sheep's wool, despite being 10 times lighter. Forget your cut-price cashmere, which quickly reveals itself by bobbling and pilling (the effect of hundreds of short-fibre ends coming to the surface); the animal fibre chosen by Barrie is fine, long, soft and supple and, eventually, tightly knitted.

"Our ends are locked in so that our garments last a lifetime," says Brown. "I had one customer send in a sweater they bought more than 15 years ago, stating the elbows were a bit worn, so we put leather patches on them and sent it back.

"This is not disposable fashion," he says. "We want people to invest in us."

In front of us, yarns are spooled on cones, dyed and tinted using techniques developed exclusively for the company. There are rows and rows of them, a palette of 150 colours: the hot pink, sky blue and lemon yellow of Barrie's best-selling Aran Pop sweater range; signature dark "Barrie" green; and big-selling black, navy and white. We amble past focused, largely female workers cutting, stitching and sewing collars, pockets and cuffs; meet hand-knitters, a pattern-cutter who

previously worked for Vivienne Westwood, and women who scour every garment for faults. Even half a stitch out means reworking; there are no seconds. Perfection is what counts.

We stop at a large automatic machine – its digital design system translates sophisticated patterns after up to a week's worth of programming ("The yarn goes in one end and a sweater pops out the other") – and move on to the ever reliable Bentley Cotton knitting looms, some of them up to 70 years old, still producing monochrome items with enduring precision and no small amount of noise.

Noisier still are the mill's four great washing machines, inside of which knitted items are washed in pure water from the nearby River Teviot, an essential process that softens fibres and demands specific skills. Two minutes too long and the garments are ruined.

Decades ago, these machines were Brown's jurisdiction: "Traditionally, you can tell if a sweater is ready to remove by the way the hair is lying, though most people go by time now," he says. "Unlike many manufacturers, we don't need to use artificial softener, which makes cashmere feel like cotton wool. We treat our cashmere naturally, like a rose. You water it, look after it and it just gets better and better."

Coco Chanel would no doubt have approved. "I think she'd be over the moon," says Brown. "She was a big fan of Scotland's textiles, and of Scotland itself. More than anyone, she would have known that traditional hand skills are valuable, that detail is everything, and quality is what counts."

Quality cashmere, worn with panache. You might not want to wear it while fishing, but once you've tried it on, or held it against your skin, trust me: you will want to wear it. ☒

The writer was a guest of Chanel.