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AW Hainsworth
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AW Hainsworth has been producing fabrics in West Yorkshire for more than 230 years. So it's a little wonder its current custodian – and the great, great, great, great, great grandson of its founder – has a few stories to tell. “We had one guy who retired after serving 61 years,” explains Tom Hainsworth. “He started at 14 after my great grandfather interviewed him. The story goes that his mum worked in the mill and dragged him in for an interview. She was asked, ‘What can he do?’ and she just replied, ‘Well, he can think!’ He then got asked the most jarring questions. Of course, he gave me stick about it at Christmas parties for 20 years.”

On the surface, Tom's business is a family-owned fabric mill employing 190 people in Pudsey. But there's more to it than that. It was AW Hainsworth that dressed the British during the Battle of Waterloo; created the famous blue uniform still worn by the RAF in 2017 and supplied the cloth for Prince William and Harry's suits during the royal wedding. When the Grand Budapest Hotel won the Oscar for best costume design in 2015, it was, of course, them that provided the fabric.

“It's a privilege to have generational connections to the local community and provide them with careers,” explains Tom. “We take a long-term view because, well, you don't just pick up a craft. It takes time to develop.”

Today, the company focuses on producing an extraordinary variety of fabrics manufactured to exacting specifications. AW Hainsworth created the first inherently heat and flame-retardant fabrics in the UK now trusted by firefighters and police forces as far afield as Sydney, and provides the merino cloth that covers the finest snooker tables. They supply royal palaces around the world and the interior of first-class plane cabins. Little wonder they have a royal warrant and are the material of choice for Prada and Valentino's super-luxe couture lines.

“We have a lab where we can innovate and apply modern tech to find out, say, which exact fabrics burn or don't burn,” continues Tom. “But you need someone who knows the small nuances, too. If it's been a dry season in Australia, for instance, the fibres will be more fine and brittle. You need a craftsman who can take that into account in the manufacturing stage.”

To maintain that quality, AW Hainsworth not only sources fibres from around the world, but visits the sheep farms, auction houses and merchants in Britain, Australia and New Zealand. They have relationships that have existed for decades. Then, when that material arrives back at their Spring Valley Mills, there's a series of inspection points in their manufacturing process where faults can be corrected. Employees know just how to match the properties of each fibre to the final end use of each piece of cloth.

“As a family enterprise there's an element of why do we do it?” concludes Tom. “And it's because we try to employ local people and give them a great place to work. It would be easier for me to spend the money rather than invest it, but we have a belief that is what we should be doing.

“More than anything, we have a responsibility to the community.”

hainsworth.co.uk