



# Time for TWEED

Associate tweed with a twinset and pearls or a shooting rifle? It's time to reassess an iconic luxury fabric

Written by Michelle Rowley

**W**ith more tweed currently on display at the V&A's Gabrielle Chanel Fashion Manifesto exhibition than you can shake your fabric scissors at, it's the perfect time to shine a light on the iconic British textile. There's lot to explore in tweed's fascinating history, its rise in popularity and how to incorporate it into your handmade wardrobe.

### CUTTING EDGE

Whilst Coco Chanel's longstanding love affair with the wonder wool fabric is legendary and a Chanel tweed jacket remains the ultimate luxury garment, it's not the only fashion house which has recently been sending tweed clad models down the runway. Giambattista Valli's Fall 2023 Collection featured stunning oversized sequin-trimmed tweed jackets and exquisitely tailored ankle-length tweed frock coats. Balmain's tweed jackets are a house signature and its fringed tweed jackets from the Fall/Winter 23/24 retail for more than £2,000. When the fashion powerhouse collaborated with Barbie® to create a recognisable shade of fuchsia Barbie®

TWEED HAS RECENTLY BEEN EMBRACED BY CONTEMPORARY POP AND CELEBRITY FASHION ICONS

metallic tweed skirt, luxury store Harrod's sold out of the midi skirt despite the eye-watering price tag.

### POP ROYALTY

With tweed's links to high-end designers and prices we might think of the luxurious fabric as only being worn by royalty and wealthy older women. We would be wrong. The fabric has recently been embraced by contemporary fashion icons from the world of pop and celebrity, which while endorsing tweed as a luxury moves away from its perception as old fashioned. Pop icon Rihanna styled her black tweed blazer with a baseball cap and Vivienne Westwood pearls to pop to the shops in New York City. Beyonce rocked a full tweed suit for her May trip to London. Taylor Swift has been seen in numerous tweed pieces from matching crop top and shorts for a walk round Central Park, a Elisabetta Franchi tweed dress in her Lover music video and even a tweed jumpsuit with matching coat at the Sundance Film Festival. If, arguably, the top three queens in pop royalty are sporting the tweed trend, who can deny its place in the style stakes of youth.

It is the perfect time to shine a light on the iconic British textile tweed as London's V&A's Gabrielle Chanel Fashion Manifesto exhibition is running until February. (Right) Gabrielle Chanel, Suit Autumn/Winter 1964 Patrimoine de Chanel, Paris.



(Top) Marie-Hélène Arnaud in a tweed suit from Chanel's Fall-Winter 1959 collection and Chanel shoes, carrying the 2.55 Chanel handbag.



V&A Photos: Gabrielle Chanel. Fashion Manifesto at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 16 September 2023 – 25 February 2024. Presented in partnership with Palais Galliera, Fashion Museum of the City of Paris, Paris Musées. With the support of CHANEL



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Tweed can be woven in a wide range of weights and colours. Below left, weaver Kenny MacLennan. Photo by Sandie Maciver.

### SCOTTISH HERITAGE

So, what exactly is tweed and why does it come with such a hefty price tag? It's thought that the word 'tweed' came about by accident after a London merchant misread the word 'tweel' (the Scottish word for twill) on a label. The fabric itself is certainly of Scottish heritage, having started out as hardwearing fabric for shepherds and farmers on the remote Scottish islands and Outer Hebrides in the early 19th century. Traditionally made from pure new wool, whose properties are ideal for enduring the harsh Highland weather tweed, it can be woven in a wide range of weights, colour variations and patterns.

In the first half of the 19th century, when many estates in Scotland were taken over by English noblemen, it became the fashion among estate owners to commission their own 'estate tweeds' to make uniforms for the ground's staff. The fabric's link to wealth and nobility caused the durable textile to further grow in popularity. This led to advances in



tweed's production which enabled the fabric to become more affordable. Now that tweed was more accessible, it rose in popularity as a fabric favoured for fishing and hunting attire, where again its water-resistant properties were beneficial. In addition to this, the natural hues of the fibres had a camouflaging effect in the countryside.

### HUMAN POWER

Today, the most renowned tweed across the world is Harris Tweed®. Still woven on treadle-powered looms, Harris Tweed® is the only cloth in the world that, by law, has to be woven using human power and no electricity. Across the islands of the Outer Hebrides weavers continue to create beautiful tweed in their homes. All the wool is still dyed, blended, carded, spun, warped and woven on the islands. Stemming back to the mid 1800s, when crofters wove the

Harris Tweed Authority image, above. Mangersta threads by Lewis Mackenzie, above left.

hard-wearing cloth for practicality, the cloth became recognised not only for its quality but also its beauty.

The stunning wools, while appearing to be one colour from a distance, are woven from secret recipes of many separately dyed colours. The cloth has graced the catwalks of world-famous designers and fashion houses while still being crafted with skills passed down from generation to generation. Late designer, Vivienne Westwood was an iconic lover of Harris Tweed® whose use of the fabric played a key role in shaping her distinctive aesthetic. Her 'Love Heart' suit, crafted from the famous fabric, sold at Kerry Taylor Auctions in June 2023 for £1,600.

### HOUND'S TOOTH TWEED

Proud of his Scottish ancestry, Alexander McQueen is another late iconic British designer who utilised tweed in many of his collections, often favouring the distinctive hound's tooth variety. An Alexander McQueen jacket, skirt and bag, fashioned from hound's tooth tweed, fetched £3,600 as part of a McQueen ensemble at the same Kerry Taylor auction. This popular tweed weave is a larger scale version of dogtooth which is mainly used for estate tweeds and more traditional uses of the fabric. When the scale is even smaller, to the point that the chequerboard effect is barely noticeable, it's known as puppytooth!

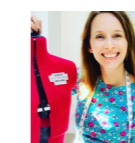
### ONE FOR EVERYONE

With a wealth of tweed varieties to choose from such as windowpane, herringbone and check, in addition to the numerous colourful blends, there's likely to be a tweed for all tastes for sewing a stylish garment this winter. Thanks to the modern availability of



Alexander McQueen often favours the houndstooth tweed - a larger scale version of dogtooth - for his designs. This combo sold for £3,600 at Kerry Taylor Auctions earlier this year.

synthetic fibre based or blended textiles, there's also a tweed style fabric to suit all budgets. Traditional 100% wool tweed isn't (and shouldn't) be a cheap fabric to work with, due to the labour and time required to create a fabric from a natural source and the labour intensity of the weaving process. You're investing your time and money into sewing a sustainable statement piece that will stand the test of time in both its durability and style stakes.



Michelle Rowley (she/her) is a dressmaking tutor and writer with a love of fashion history. She lives in the Northwest with her family. See more @stitchywhitney.

## TWEED TIPS

Follow these top tips to help you create a flawless garment

### PREPARATION

- 1 Follow the "with nap" layout on your pattern.
- 2 Cut seams ¼" wider than the stated seam allowance to enable seams to be pressed flatter (if you're not sewing flat-felled seams).
- 3 Due to tweed's loose weave, stabilise small pattern pieces with iron-on/fusible interfacing.

### STITCHING

- 1 Make sure your machine needle is sharp to avoid snags. We recommend you use a 80/12 H needle.
- 2 Select a 2.5mm stitch length so that the stitches are neat and strong.
- 3 Cut through darts and press flat to reduce bulk.



## GIVING TWEED A CONTEMPORARY EDGE

Here's our suggestions on how to level up your tweed for 2024 with a few different sewing techniques

- 1 Embellish your tweed garments with trim a la Chanel & Giambattista Valli.
- 2 Add a playful twist with feathers or jewels (a la the heavily adorned Chanel tweed dress Penelope Cruz wore for her the Fall/Winter 2023-24 Paris Fashion Week).
- 3 Choose a pattern with cut-out styles to create gorgeous garments like the Parisian brand Maje.
- 4 Combine tweed with denim a la Alexander McQueen.
- 5 Add fringe detail by making small cuts in the edge of the fabric every two to three inches, then use a pin to slice down in small sections to separate.
- 6 Colour block different shades of tweed for a modern twist that's sure to stand out as a bespoke piece.

