

AUTUMN 2021

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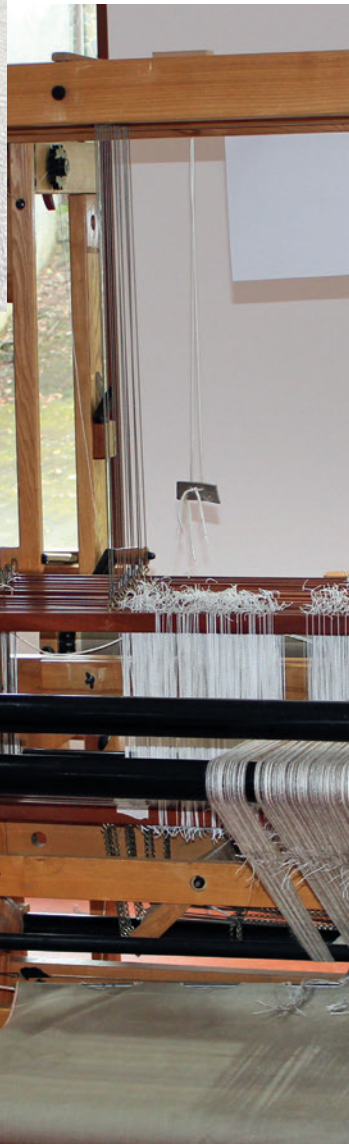


Heritage flax varieties harvested from Charlie Mallon's County Tyrone fields; *opposite*: the Kind Tee linen V-neck by Kindred of Ireland



FRUITS OF THE LOOM

*Strong, sustainable and remarkably soft, Irish linen is back in the global spotlight thanks to a determined cohort of artisans, farmers and designers. **by** *Adriaane Pielou**



Clockwise from above: Kindred of Ireland's Cadhla shirt in beetled linen; Charlie Mallon's abundant flax fields in County Tyrone; linen beetled at William Clark; a polissoir made from flax stems; a handloom at Baird McNutt, and designer Peter McNutt (below) at the company's County Donegal studio; the Baird McNutt mill along the Kells Water River in County Antrim



IN THE 19TH CENTURY, creamy-white Irish linen was known as the best in the world. Flax – from which linen is woven – grows beautifully in the damp local climate, and was cultivated on farms across the country. Belfast, home to a third of the flax mills on the planet, was nicknamed Linenopolis. But by the 1950s, the once-great industry was on its knees, felled largely by the invention of cheap polyester. So steep was the decline that at the turn of the century, 21 years ago, only a handful of linen businesses survived.

Then, a German newcomer decided to get weaving. “Everybody said, ‘Don’t do it,’” remembers ex-Berliner Marion Baur. Indeed, it’s easy to imagine the headshaking and tooth-sucking in rural County Derry in 1999 as word got around about what she was planning next. Ten years after moving there with her husband, Hermann Glaser-Baur, to restore a



disused 250-year-old flax mill – a 15-minute bike ride from the nearest shop in Dungiven – the ambitious craftswoman set her sights on renovating yet another relic of the Irish linen industry, an old loom, and starting a business weaving linen.

“Linen used to be massive around here,” explains Baur. “Every second person had a connection with the industry. Linen is environmentally friendly, long-lasting – think of Tutankhamun, mummified in linen – and it seemed wrong that it was hardly being produced any more. I trained in weaving and traditional crafts in Germany, so I had some experience. But everybody said there would be no market for it. Only one person encouraged me.”

This was Wallace Clark, linen historian and elderly owner of William Clark Mills (wmclark.co.uk), set up in 1736 by a weir that could drive a watermill – perfect flax-growing land. The company was among just a few to have weathered

the collapse of an industry once employing 40 per cent of the Irish workforce. There was also Liddell (liddell-international.com), the County Down maker which provided the linen for the *Titanic*; Baird McNutt (bairdmcnuttirisblinen.com), which once made handkerchiefs for the entire USA; and Thomas Ferguson (fergusonsirisblinen.com), linen suppliers to Buckingham Palace. Meanwhile, William Clark was – and remains – the world’s only specialist in beetling, whereby linen is hammered with wooden blocks until it gains a shimmering lustre.

Wallace Clark described the “aristocrat of fabrics” as “strong as steel, delicate as silk”, and he gave Baur all the help he could. The older generation of locals, many of whom had previously worked in the industry, also helped out with setting up the loom, once they saw she was serious. “Then I ordered yarn from France – Irish farmers stopped growing flax for yarn years ago, when the big mills shut down, but the rainy climate in northern France and Belgium is also good for growing it – and got to work.”

Unexpectedly, Baur’s main customers initially turned out to be not foreign tourists but the Irish themselves. Across the country, there’s still a strong craft tradition, and there proved to be a good market for linen by the yard: the finer weights sold to dressmakers and designers, the heavier to artists, printers and embroiderers needing canvases. As orders for custom-made pieces grew, Baur prudently hunted down stocks of old Irish yarn that the owners of shuttered mills had kept. And in a major leap forward in 2016, she planted nearly three hectares of seeds, and took the first step in bringing flax-growing back to County Derry.

Flax is fully grown – around 1.2m high – within 100 days of being sown, so in August 2016, three months after planting the seeds, Baur was harvesting her first crop and embarking on the labour-intensive process of turning flax into linen. The process is complex and demands exceptional patience: first, the whole plant has to be pulled up, since the long cellulose fibres that make linen so much stronger than cotton extend right into the root. Next comes retting, with the stems laid underwater – traditionally, in a river – to rot the tough outer husk. The flax is then laid out to dry, traditionally on a field. After that, it’s still another three processes (“breaking” crushes the stems, “rippling” removes the seed pods and “scutching” removes the outer stem) before you are left with the long inner strands of flax fibre. These are then repeatedly combed,



Kindred of Ireland's Paper Bag dress, made with beetled linen

and eventually the long strands become smooth, lustrous twists of what looks like pale blond human hair, ready to be spun into yarn, then woven into linen – the weight depending on its purpose. Heavy for furnishing fabric, say; light for airy pyjamas.

Fast forward to today, and 62-year-old Baur has three handlooms, three machine looms, an assistant and a new 24-year-old American apprentice. In addition to her Derrylane Flax Mill shop, there's now a website (flaxmill.eu) offering bespoke linen and online sales. Prices aren't low, but orders have kept increasing as environmentally conscious clients fall in love with the quality and versatility of linen.

As for the future of this fledgling revival, Baur is optimistic. "I don't think Irish linen will come back on a massive scale. Most of the heavy old Mackie machines here were destroyed or shipped out, sent to Turkey, India. And Irish linen can never be cheap. It's intensive work. But certainly, I think Irish linen will thrive on a small, sustainable scale. People like that they can buy something grown here, processed here, woven here – and young people in particular like that it's vegan. Flax uses a small fraction of the water cotton needs, just rainwater. It doesn't need pesticides. Every single part of the plant is used. There's no waste at all."

So appealing is the textile to contemporary sensibilities that her neighbourhood is filling

up with artisans. Some, like a young Colombian weaver who moved the area, are spinning flax on handwheels. Others, like Charlie Mallon, a local farmer and sculptor, and his wife Helen Keys, a lecturer, have rediscovered the craft: two years ago, they switched from beef and cattle back to growing flax on their 20ha farm, and they have now launched Mallon Linen. They've also restored an old Mackie scutching turbine. "We're complete linen evangelists now," Helen says.

It all certainly embodies the zeitgeist and the new global focus on sustainability. After Wallace Clark died in 2011, his son Bruce took over Clark Mills, and as the fashion industry looks to reduce its shocking carbon footprint, the company has benefited as designers at Dior, Hermes, Chanel and the like have started exploring linen. A recent Alexander McQueen collection was based entirely on black Irish linen, beetled by Clark to an otherworldly sheen. Dunhill, too, has joined the burgeoning beetling fan club, and as the company expands its range, William Clark's creative director, Duncan Neil, has planted an acre of flax to discover the route to linen for himself.

Irish designer Paul Costelloe's Spring/Summer 2022 collection will use only Irish linen. And in Belfast, 27-year-old Amy Anderson – whose grandmother worked in the linen industry – is among the clutch of young designers launching linen-based clothing companies. This winter, her Kindred of Ireland label (kindredofireland.com) will feature a chic beetled tartan coat.

Cheap linen from China is an ongoing competitor, Baur admits, because it risks giving linen a bad reputation. "China uses fertiliser on a lot of its flax. It makes the plants grow very high but it's low quality, not durable. A linen shirt from China might last six months. But a shirt made from Irish linen? That can last a lifetime."

With that, she has to go, to resume dawn-to-dusk weaving in preparation for the annual Flax Mill Open Day and Yard Fest, this year entitled "Doing No Harm to The Planet". A Berlin brigade will come over to do the vegan catering, the Mallons will be demonstrating scutching, and over 20 artists and craftspeople – a bronze-caster, felt-maker, horn-carver, wood-turner – have booked stalls. Ireland's youngest full-time blacksmith will be making sparks fly, and musicians will be lifting the roof of the timber performance space the jolly Hermann Glaser-Baur built as darkness falls. Great fun, says Marion. But also exhausting. At the end of the day, no doubt she'll be grateful to fall into bed – between those supremely comfortable linen sheets that – heaven! – don't need ironing.