



This is mainland Britain's last local industrial woolmill, yet its traditions were almost lost after decades of decline and under-investment.

Named after the fast-flowing burn beside it, Knockando was originally listed as the Waulk Mill in local parish records from 1784. This compact croft was home to three multigenerational families, and its home-spun manufacturing wouldn't have seemed unusual in an era of cottage industries.

Local mills abounded in rural communities during the 19th century, many of which would have been flour mills. The flocks of sheep populating this hilly countryside northwest of the Cairngorms were often sheared out of necessity, with the wool being carded, spun and woven into blankets. Knockando's output would have kept generations of local residents warm during bitterly cold Highland winters.

Mass production techniques in the 20th century threatened to spell the end for district mills like Knockando. In 1974, the mill was sold to a young Londoner, who singlehandedly maintained time-honoured craft skills of weaving tweeds and tartans. However, the buildings grew ramshackle and the machinery slowly decayed.

In 2000, the entire complex was given to the Knockando Woolmill Trust for just £1. Yet despite this generosity, it would be a further decade before this registered charity could restore Knockando's semi-derelict buildings to past glories.

As chairman of the newly-created Knockando Woolmill Trust, Nicola Irwin remembers the buildings as "overflowing with discarded machinery.

"Entering the Old Mill was a perilous business, with holes in the floor and rain dripping through the roof," she recalls.

It took extensive fundraising and the tireless work of supporters to re-establish Knockando as a leading producer of bespoke tartans and tweeds. This task was

aided by the presence of retained Victorian equipment, like the 1870 carding machine, eventually restored by the collaborative efforts of volunteers and experts.

The period spinning mule was restored to full working order by the only man in Britain with the skills required to fine-tune its 120 spindles. More modern machinery was also introduced to Knockando, helping to, as Nicola puts it, "retain the lessons and skills of the past".

The Mill's cluster of whitewashed buildings have also been lovingly refurbished for visitors, whose support remains vital for Knockando to continue as a working mill. The old cattle byre is now a small café, and the carefully restored cottage has become a visitor centre. Display panels explain the site's history and restoration, while a film demonstrates the carding, spinning and weaving skills of Hugh Jones, who worked the mill single-handedly for 30 years. Though the 1870s outdoor waterwheel is no longer able to power the looms, this restored landmark continues to clink and splash. Even the garden has been transformed, following a redevelopment by the BBC's Beechgrove Garden team.

Today, work continues on restoring Knockando's antique equipment. A rare 1899 Dobcross loom is currently being refurbished, and is due for completion by spring 2019. Having already received a European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage (Europe's highest heritage honour), the Knockando Woolmill is set to continue producing fine fabrics for future generations to cherish.

*Get there: Get the Caledonian Sleeper to Aviemore, cycle for 30 miles to Knockando. From Inverness, take the Scotrail service to Elgin, then the 366 bus to Elgin, disembarking at Cardhu.*