



Twine be the kingdom: the Begg HQ is a hotbed of sophistication and secrecy.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GERARDO JACONELLI FOR TEXTILES SCOTLAND

BEGG TO DIFFER

One of the unsung purveyors of luxury menswear, Begg & Co. weaves the finest yarns into premium scarves and throws. The rake encounters some masterful craftsmanship (and more than a little secrecy) at its HQ on the Ayrshire coast of western Scotland.

by **eric musgrave**

UNSTITCHED

Ayr, on the western edge of Scotland, might well be the bleakest place on earth. The mist rolls in off the Firth of Clyde, powered by cold winds that give the trees in and around this historic port a distinctly stunted appearance. The regular rainfall helps make the local world-class golf courses such as Royal Troon and Turnberry markedly lush.

Perhaps the climate was the major impetus for Alex Begg to open a factory in the town in 1902. Since 1869, he had been producing hand-woven shawls in the famous weaving town of Paisley, which lies about 35 miles (56km) eastwards on the road to Glasgow. His relocation 111 years ago has made Ayr an unlikely destination today for designers from the world's top luxury brands. The Alex Begg company has earned a reputation second to none for designing and weaving exceptional scarves, stoles, throws and blankets, using the finest cashmere, cashmere blends, silk, merino and lambswool-angora mixes.

Maybe it's because Ayr is out on a limb, a winding two-hour drive from the cashmere knitters and tweed weavers of the Borders and even further away from the celebrated woollen mills in the north of Scotland, that Begg has remained largely a hidden treasure — supplier rather than vendor. It has done most of its business as a maker for premium designer brands. It has sold directly to prestigious stores such as Fivestory in New York, and United Arrows and Barneys Japan. However, you are unlikely to have seen its name on a label outside these few insiders' stores.

From this autumn, however, this will change because the company has begun a global campaign to have its extraordinarily beautiful products recognised under its own brand, Begg & Co. For lovers of luxurious accessories, both men and women, this is very good news indeed.

"We have always had a strong reputation within the fashion business," says Sales and Marketing Director Ann Ryley, "but with the renewed interest in heritage and genuine Scottish products, we felt it was the right time to create our own brand to offer an authentic contemporary collection, made in Scotland to the highest standards. The extremely positive reaction we received during our debut appearance at Pitti Uomo in January confirmed that we are on the right course."

Ayr's reliable rainfall is an essential ingredient in several stages of the manufacturing process that makes Begg's products so soft, sensuous and seductive. The finishing techniques that help elevate their scarves and throws from being very good to being exceptional require many gallons of the soft water that flows

off the Ayrshire hills. Oddly enough, when even the best cashmere cloth is being woven, it feels coarse and rigid to the touch, but by the time the finished product is ready for despatch from Begg, it is gentle enough to be wrapped around a newborn baby.

The good folks at Begg Scotland are very generous hosts, and the guided tour of their mill is a popular attraction for professional fashion buyers and visiting tourists alike. But the canny crew are very secretive when it comes to explaining just how they do what they do. Much of the equipment in the mill is state-of-the-art, but the techniques that are employed date back to the Victorian era of their founding. There is a markedly unhurried air about the production process of weaving, washing, pressing, brushing, finishing and inspecting; things take as long as they take.

What is clear is that Begg's mastery of the weaver's art starts with its yarns. Working with specialist spinners in Scotland and Italy, Begg specifies its own qualities of rare cashmere, cashmere-silk, fine merino, purest silk and wool-angora. The range of the exclusive yarns is exceptional, producing scarves that vary from a handsome, cosy handful for a cold winter to gossamer-light qualities for a summer's evening.

The Scottish Colourists was the name given to a group of Post-Impressionist painters in Scotland in the early part of the 20th century, but that title could just as easily be bestowed on the design team at Begg because of the amazing palette of shades it employs. There are 36 solid-colour options on one cashmere scarf alone, and 24 colours in the lambswool-angora blend. Begg's blending of colours in patterns is delightful too, and the skill of the talented workforce is demonstrated in jacquard weaves and prints, as well as regular woven items.

The in-house design expertise has been augmented for the new collections by the creative input of Man Drake, the design consultancy run by Michael Drake — himself a celebrated veteran designer of beautiful accessories for men. The women's collection — much of which, I maintain, would easily enhance the most masculine neck — has been designed by Angela Bell of Queen and Belle, a cashmere specialist based in Hawick, Scotland's cashmere capital.

These new alliances have brought a fresh, contemporary aesthetic to the already highly desirable Begg repertoire. "We are thrilled to be working with Angela Bell because of her passion for working with traditional Scottish mills," says Ann Ryley. "She has a keen eye for colour and the rare ability to give classic luxury



Handwork is essential to the Begg production process. Here, blankets of newly woven cloth, yet to be cut into scarves or throws and finished, are carefully examined and mended by hand if necessary.

items a new, relevant, modern twist. We wanted to work with Michael through his new Man Drake consultancy because of his renowned sensitivity for colour and finishes, and his mania for getting the detail right. He spent quite some time in the archives of the Robert Noble tweed mill in Peebles, a sister company of ours, getting the inspiration for the checks and stripes he's designed for us."

The autumn '13 debut collection from Begg & Co. is full of intriguing delights, such as the washed finish that transforms the company's highly popular formal worsted-cashmere scarf into a relaxed adjunct to a casual outfit. With a respectful nod to Alex Begg's roots, there are a number of sumptuous paisley designs. A modern take on tartans, with an almost distressed vintage look, appears in the brand's super-lightweight 'Wispy' quality. Here, once again, Begg's technical virtuosity is given full rein — the superfine single yarn in one 'Wispy' scarf is an astounding 120km long. Always conscious that an accessory has to work as a complement to an outfit, Begg & Co. has produced a selection in cashmere-silk designed specifically to be worn with denim.

Begg has even redeveloped its exclusive 'Nuance' range of products, in which the colours change seamlessly several times from fringe to fringe. Although the effect looks like the scarf or throw was dip-dyed, it is actually achieved using a very clever dyeing technique at the yarn stage, followed by an incredible display of bravura weaving. The 'Nuance' is one of Begg & Co.'s signature pieces.

The inaugural autumn/winter 2013-'14 range has already caught the attention of discerning retailers like Mats Klingberg, who owns the influential store Trunk Clothiers in London's Marylebone district. "Provenance, timeless style and excellent quality are things I look for in a brand, and Begg & Co. ticks all

these boxes," he says. "It's getting more and more difficult to find brands where you know for sure where they manufacture, where you can even identify the person that has been involved in the manufacturing. Scarves from Begg & Co., therefore, are something I can really proudly offer to my customers. They'll keep them looking great, and their necks warm, for years to come."

Almost one-third of Begg's production time is consumed by skilled handwork from the passionate workers in Ayr, who are proud to be making some of Scotland's most admired products. Its finest cashmere scarves and throws are enhanced by a wavy finish on the surface that is created by brushing the cloth with teasels. These spiky, dried flower heads are grown specifically for Begg in Italy, and how the distinctive but subtle pattern is achieved is kept secret. The spikes, or bracts, of the teasels are also used at the final inspection stage when the nap, or surface, of the scarves is brushed by hand, just to make them perfect.

Alex Begg — like Robert Noble and Replin, a producer of cloth for train and aircraft seats that shares the Peebles mill with Noble — belongs to a Swedish group called Lindéngruppen. It is best known for its ownership of artists' materials suppliers like Windsor & Newton, Letraset, and Lefranc & Bourgeois, so it is easy to understand why the creative approaches of the three textile firms would appeal to the company. And yet, despite its laudably innovative methods and products, the Begg factory, located in an unremarkable residential area of Ayr, is as anonymous as its products are sumptuous. The company has been, in so many ways, a hidden gem; but this year, operating under its new brand name, its reputation will at last be given the prominence it deserves. On the label with 'Begg & Co.' will appear the proud statement, 'Made in Scotland' — three words that will always delight aficionados of fine woven accessories. 