

Real Sheepskin Association Proposals

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www.realsheepskin.org.uk



Leather, Wool Textiles, Sheepskin Products

These Industries share an immense, interwoven heritage.

For hundreds of years they were the bedrock of the UK economy, spread throughout the UK, with traditional areas of special competence.

For instance the Midlands, was home over this 'manufacturing' era to all three Industries. Whilst Northamptonshire specialized in Leather making, giving rise to the area's dominance in footwear manufacture.

This Leather heritage needs to be explained to a new urban generation as part of the vital debates of our times on:-

- Climate Change, Sustainability, the Environment, the application of Science and Technology and the roles of Manufacturing and Farming in the 21st Century.
- And, more prosaically, what is special about Leather?

The vision is to create:

A world class showcase of UK Leather, Wool Textiles & Sheepskins; comprising:-

- A professionally 'curated' reference collection of Leather, Wool Textiles & Sheepskin examples with feeler swatches available - white gloves area.
- A reference library of key published & audio-visual reference materials telling the story of Noble Materials from earliest times into the 21st Century, which would also serve as the repository for their oral histories.
- A permanent study and exhibition centre for the unique Leather Conservation collection.
- A gallery and theatre, offering imaginative and frequently changing events, demonstrations, fashion shows, exhibitions, lectures (eg The Cordwainer's Lecture), seminars and conferences, the venue for Noble Industries Galas and Award Presentations.
- A high quality internet platform open 24/7 to global audiences.

Our prime audiences are:

- Designers (Industrial, Fashion, Textiles, Footwear, Accessories, Furniture, Furnishings, Interiors, Contemporary Arts) & College students.
- Specifiers, Retail Buyers.
- Media - in particular TV/photographic.
- Fashion and Materials Researchers and Historians.
- Education (schools)
- The General Public.

Heritage & Location

Northampton is recognized as a traditional area for leather making and footwear.

The renowned Leather College is based on Park Campus of the University of Northampton which is also currently the home of the reclusive Leather Conservation Centre.

Both institutions are adjacent to the UK Leather Federation and British Leather Centre's offices and research laboratories.

Northampton's Footwear Collection based at Guildhall Museum is a World class Collection and prepared to advise on setting up the Noble Materials Collection.

The Shoe and Allied Trade Association (SATRA) with its strong research and materials testing links to both leather and footwear Industries and handling increasingly, a broad spectrum of materials and textiles, is locally based in Kettering.

Northampton is at the heart of the UK's motorway system, has good rail and air links.

The need for a 'Knowledge Ark'

Aptly illustrated by the current state of the UK Sheep Industry.

On the one hand, commercial pressures (lamb meat production), imports, EC agri-policy and bio-scares all are driving down the diversity of sheep farming and ability of UK Sheep Farmers to weather the storm. So there is a need to display the 90+ unique British Native Sheep Breeds as a record and insurance should flocks succumb to these pressures.

On the other, UK 'Fifth Quarter' processors like the Wool and Woolskin Industries approach commercial extinction even if retaining a reasonably vigorous craft following.

It is a fact that of 13m sheepskins arising annually from the UK meat market only 70,000 are processed by the last 3 UK commercial tanneries.

It is also a fact that there are now only 8 woolskin tanners able to train the next generation in the expertise of this 2000 year old process. Only one of these is under 60 year old!

It is argued therefore there is an urgent need to collect breed woolskins along with examples of the innumerable range of sheepskin finishes to explain to Designers, Specifiers, Buyers and the Public the beauty and variety of sheepskin available to them.

The Real Sheepskin Association sponsored over many years two Sheepskin Design Awards at Graduate Fashion Week and New Designers which acted as catalysts for a revival in the UK Sheepskin Industry's fortunes.

The Industry has endeavoured to cultivate close working ties with young Designers, offering them preferential prices, mentoring and manufacturing assistance. And year on year that long term policy has encouraged them in turn to use UK Sheepskin Suppliers in their designs.

The Sheepskin Industry sees the creation of a national Noble Materials Collection as a vital marketing tool, resource centre and springboard, not only for our own Industry, but our 'Noble' colleagues working with Leather and Wool Textiles also, both of which need and would share in the promotional impetus described above for their own Industries also.

Finance thoughts

The College of Advanced Textiles in Glasgow tackle funding by offering a Digital Printing service at anything from £50 - £75 per metre. They collect textile designs and designers. Their service is used by organizers of retrospective shows etc. and the public wishing to furnish their homes in the style of a particular designer. They employ 5 people. We met them recently on their stand at the 100% Design Show, Earls Court where they were selling their service. Stand staff said they fund themselves entirely from this Digital Printing service whilst continuing to offer teaching support for the Glasgow Art School, students and the Design/Commercial Community at large. Ongoing academic research is of course an important dimension in building the Collection as are regular Gallery Shows. CAT is a model we should perhaps explore further.

In contra distinction the excellent London Cordwainers Materials Library largely funded with EC money got lost in the London College of Fashion's Barbican site (now part of the University of the Arts), was only available to students of that College 2 days a week and was not being actively curated. Their concept for display and retrieval of the extensive (A4 feeler) textiles and limited leather/sheepskin feelers is however, excellent. We believe the Library has been moved to the College's Oxford Street Campus and is languishing there.

We would see the Noble Materials Collection receiving 3 way funding to reflect the 3 beneficiaries from its existence:

- 1** Industrial 'subscription' from Companies wishing to have their materials showcased. In the case of sheepskin, Breed Societies and other non-industrial Farming interest groups could also be approached for funds.
- 2** 'Membership' payments from Companies wishing to use the archive like the Fashion Houses on yearly or longer renewal subscription. Or payment on a standard 'entry basis' depending on use, or 'pay per click' internet usage.

Nb. We suggest free to student designers on production of NSU card.

- 3** Institutional 'heritage grant funding' eg. Leathersellers/Cordwainers, Heritage Lottery Fund, local/regional Authority, etc.

We envisage many other revenue streams from Events eg. Fashion shows and other promotional activities eg. in-house catering facilities 'the Noble Coffee Café', colour/design forecasting service, film shows eg 'kinky boots'.