



Hembury chair with Feist Forest Samara table

A new breed of material

Justin and Hannah Floyd have created an innovative way of working with wool. They tell *Anna Turns* why sustainable design is at the heart of their business, **Solidwool**.

There's a quiet rural revolution happening in Buckfastleigh, on the southern edge of Dartmoor. Hannah and Justin Floyd's home town was traditionally a wool market town, and this creative husband-and-wife team are reinvigorating industry here by celebrating its heritage and giving wool a new lease of life. Solidwool is the first business in the UK to work with wool as part of a composite material, combining it with a bioresin to produce a sustainably sourced, environmentally friendly, strong material.

Justin, a product designer, and Hannah, whose background was in marketing, always dreamt of setting up their own business. "We wanted to do our own thing while using the skills we had in a positive way," explains Justin. "As a designer, one of my philosophies is to make products that people need and have innate value. So, our furniture is designed so that it isn't throwaway. It will hopefully last forever and there is an element of craft in the making, which we hope will create a couple of jobs, too, as our business grows." So every Solidwool design has a positive output, with modern luxury at its heart.

Justin was always interested in making wool a structural material because, through his work as a product designer for equipment in the marine industry, he previously worked with composites such as fibreglass. "I started playing with wool, using it instead of fibreglass and carbon fibre, and we started off with some pretty crude experiments at home in the kitchen, mixing wool and resin to see what we could come up with – it wasn't a disaster but it wasn't pretty!" But those initial prototypes "sort of worked".



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Hannah and Justin Floyd



Herdwick sheep

Then the cogs started whirring in Justin's brain, and when the couple looked into it they realised no one else had done this before.

Once they started developing their ideas more seriously, Justin and Hannah decided to make the lowest-impact product possible, so they found the most natural, healthiest resin they could: "Our bioresin is about 30% natural and doesn't pose any health risk to the people working with it, which is a big step forward from the highly toxic, petrochemical resin used in making fibreglass, for example."

In February 2015, Solidwool launched its first chair from its small workshop on the outskirts of town, and the production recently moved to a larger factory in an old woollen mill in the centre of Buckfastleigh. "We're a wool-based manufacturing business in the middle of this old woollen town," says Hannah, "and we wanted to create a stylish, modern manufacturing factory. This mill was part of the site built in 1952 by the Co-op to handle all stages of wool production right through to weaving." And today, Hannah explains, it's owned by Devonian, Britain's oldest established sheepskin tannery.

Solidwool currently sources its wool from Herdwick sheep in the Lake District. "Some UK wools from mountain breeds such as Herdwicks have a coarser and rougher texture, which no one wants to use for clothing or carpets anymore," describes Justin. "Because modern man-made fibres are so soft now, Herdwick became one of the lowest-value wools in the UK. The texture of Herdwick wool actually makes it easier for us to work with than fine wool, and it's stronger."

The applications of Solidwool are endless, and because this business gives a new purpose to this bi-product of hill farming in the Lake District, it is way more sustainable than other natural materials such as flax and hemp, which are specifically farmed from scratch. "Ultimately, if we can somehow increase the value of this wool, it supports the hill farmers, so there's a social benefit to that too," says Justin. Provenance is a big part of the story, 95% of Herdwick sheep are farmed within 14 miles of Coniston, Cumbria, and Justin will soon be working with white wool from a different breed of sheep on Dartmoor. "Being able to educate people about where the product comes from and the benefits of using that material is very important."

Justin starts his day at 7.30am, and each piece takes about an hour to mould then six hours to set, and by the end of the day, he spends time finishing the pieces. "Other people had attempted to make a wool composite material before but they'd tried to make the strongest, most lightweight material they could – it wasn't stacking up well, it was hard to process, so why bother," says Justin, who came at this design problem from a very different angle. "We wanted to create products in this town from natural materials, which has beauty on many

PHOTO: JIMMY ANDERSON

levels – visually, in terms of the story behind it and the good it is doing. We weren't hung up on strength to start with, so that didn't hold us back, and it allowed us to solve the other problems first." As a result, they have actually ended up with a first-generation material that is fairly strong and comparable to fibreglass.

The finished composite material is far from monotone – each piece is unique, and the blue, silver-grey fibres create a individual, marble-effect texture. Justin adds value through design and he currently makes chairs, sidetables and flat sheets of Solidwool, which they supply to interior designers to make work benches and table tops from. Later this year, Justin hopes to produce a new design of chair, and they have also collaborated with companies that share their ethics, such as north Cornwall-based Finisterre, with whom they designed Solidwool surf wax combs. As well as reinvigorating the lost perceived value of wool, the story of the material and its innate beauty are such important components of Solidwool. **M**

The Solidwool Hembury range is stocked by
The Shops @ Dartington, TQ9 6TQ,
or visit solidwool.com



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*Inspirational designs
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The advertisement features a photograph of a modern, two-story house at dusk. The house has a light-colored facade with large windows and a stone-textured section. The interior lights are on, and the exterior is illuminated by warm, low-level lighting. The sky is a deep blue, and the overall mood is serene and sophisticated.