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# Twist

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## British classic

How Alfred Brown  
is taking on  
the world –  
and winning

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# Beautiful game

With a commitment to UK production and strategic investment in machinery, Yorkshire mill Alfred Brown is enjoying increased demand from both the domestic market and overseas, while courting media attention from every angle. **Tara Hounslea reports.**

Despite what can undoubtedly be described as tough trading conditions globally, Yorkshire-based mill Alfred Brown is experiencing increasing interest from the UK and export markets for its cloth, and the mill is benefiting in particular from the growing demand for British fabrics – Alfred Brown’s ranges are distinguished by their distinctly British feel and look, and perhaps most importantly, are woven in England. The Leeds-based weaver is investing £750,000 in new state-of-the-art looms to meet the increasing demand.

Fabric production at the mill has grown from 800,000 metres in 2009 to a forecast of over 1 million metres for this year. The 12 new looms delivered in August are the latest generation G6500 rapier looms by Sulzer Textile, part of the Itama Group. The looms run at 600 picks per minute, representing an increase in speed of 15% on the older G6200 looms.

Ian Brown, joint managing director of Alfred Brown, says: “We invest heavily in the very latest, most appropriate weaving technology. Our independent status and size allows us to be uniquely flexible, so we can adapt quickly and successfully to market changes.”

The company was delighted earlier this year to be asked to supply the fabric for the official World Cup suit for the

England football squad, with an essential part of the selection process being the fact that all Alfred Brown’s fabric is woven in England.

The fabric, a 320 g, 19.5 micron pure new wool black and white birdseye weave, was made into suits for UK retailer Marks & Spencer. The suits were worn by the England World Cup squad and an impressive total of 5,000 replica suits were sold at 90 M&S stores across the UK.

Joint managing director and design director Nigel Brown says: “As ever in design, the challenge is to come up with something new and fresh. We are constantly doing research and looking at the trends both here and abroad for inspiration. We have been delighted with all the images of David Beckham, Fabio Capello and the team in a full three-piece suit made using Alfred Brown fabric. The association of the Alfred Brown name with such high-profile stars while simultaneously reaching such an international audience was a great marketing opportunity for us.”

The collaboration with Marks & Spencer generated media interest from national and local newspapers, as well as local radio stations, and the company promoted the story on its website, helping raise the profile of the Alfred Brown name.

Sales director Roger McArdle adds: “Sales of the World Cup fabric have been excellent, which indicates the huge public interest it created. We would love to do similar ventures in the future given the opportunity. We supply the suit fabric for football teams such as Manchester United and the black fabric for the cloaks in the world-famous *Harry Potter* films, but to supply suiting fabric for something like the upcoming [London 2012] Olympics would be a fantastic honour for us.”

Currently running 24 hours a day, five days a week, the mill is operating on full overtime to produce worsted cloth on a scale demanded by large retailers. The company sells to UK high street names including M&S and Next, as



Ian Brown, joint managing director of Alfred Brown, alongside looms at the mill.

well as top-end retailers Austin Reed and Gieves & Hawkes, Savile Row tailors, and designer labels such as Paul Smith. Overseas, the company's cloth can be found in department stores and tailors across Europe and Japan.

Since becoming a regular exhibitor at IdeaBiella in Milan three years ago, Alfred Brown has seen exports increase by 15%. The exhibition has given the Leeds-based weaver an opportunity to open the door to new markets, as well as increasing sales to Japan.

McCardle points to the extensive stock service as one of the reasons behind the company's success. He says: "A wide range of 175 fabrics are supported, meaning customers can buy in small quantities from stock."

The company's push on exports has also resulted in the development and sales of finer, more luxurious fabrics using fibres such as mohair and cashmere. There is also a growing appetite for these luxury fabrics in the domestic market, as demonstrated by increased sales to the likes of Gieves & Hawkes.

The mill prides itself as being one of the few UK weavers capable of producing competitively-priced worsted cloth in bulk, due in part to investment in machinery and careful cost management.

## 'Sales of the World Cup fabric have been excellent, which indicates the huge public interest it created'

Nigel Brown says: "It is a misconception that a suit made from British fabric must necessarily be very expensive, or that Italians lead the way in terms of sophistication. We are adamant that maintaining the manufacturing base here in the UK is fundamental to the future of the textile industry because, if lost, the skills would be lost forever. By offering quick response in design, lead times and quality of fabric, Alfred Brown offers a service that retailers should value."

He notes that there has been a recent surge in requests for the Woven in England label from UK retailers, backed up with marketing, with many wanting to promote the fact the fabric comes from a Yorkshire mill.

McArdle says: "Perhaps people are becoming more patriotic and realise the need to support the UK economy by buying British. The UK has a great tradition of manufacturing and the British label is recognised as a mark of quality, thereby adding value. Interest in this has also come from Japanese, American, Italian and Spanish markets. We have also noticed an increasing demand for UK garment manufacturing, which appears to be in short supply."

The current fourth-generation management team remains completely committed to maintaining the manufacturing heritage established by Herbert Brown, who created the original company Brown & Sons back in 1915. The company was renamed Alfred Brown in 1950 and its reputation as weavers of classic English suiting was born.

Ian Brown says: "No one person makes this possible - all our people do. Highly trained in their day-to-day roles, everyone at Alfred Brown is completely dedicated to producing high-quality fabric. In fact, we often have different generations of the same family working at the mill doing similar jobs to their ancestors but using today's latest technology." ●



Left: David Beckham in the England football squad's official World Cup suit, produced for Marks & Spencer using Alfred Brown cloth. Photograph from Press Association.  
Below: Alfred Brown fabrics are distinctly British in both appearance and handle.



# Alfred Brown

WORSTED MILLS Est. 1915

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