

From Circus Seamstress to Flax Farmer: A Grow-Your-Own-Clothes Adventure

Rosie Bristow



Rosie spinning at COP26
Photo: Mahala Le May



First weaving sample from the 2021 harvest
Photo: Nick Evans

At the start of 2020 I had never touched a spinning wheel. They were objects shrouded in folklore, encountered in fairy tales treadled by witches casting sleeping spells or imps spinning straw into gold. I could never have predicted that in 2022 I would be preparing to write my Masters' dissertation on flax and hemp processing equipment, or that I'd spend a significant part of the last two years on a farm growing, harvesting, processing, spinning and weaving flax into linen!

A trip to the haberdashery was always a highlight of my job as a circus seamstress. I would catch the metro from Newcastle out to the warehouse in Palmersville industrial estate and linger in the aisles, imagining acrobats in glittering lycra, velvet jackets for hand-made puppets and dip dyed silk suits. Where the fabrics actually came from was a mystery to me, and it wasn't until I read the book *Fibershed* by Rebecca Burgess that I fully reckoned with the huge and devastating impact the industrial fashion supply chain has on the environment and the communities that

serve it. In her eye-opening book Burgess exposes the harmful practices involved in creating and dyeing our clothes, and instead sets out to only wear natural fibres grown, processed, dyed, spun, woven, knitted and sewn within a 150 mile radius of her Californian home.

Finding myself suddenly unemployed whilst the live entertainment industry ground to a halt (no one commissions bespoke clown suits in a pandemic), I had the luxury of time to invest in learning slow moving skills such as handspinning flax. I'd decided to spend lockdown volunteering at a vegetable farm, and after experiencing the wholesome power of growing my own food (I grew an aubergine from a seed!) I became obsessed with the idea of growing my own clothes. I set about contacting anyone and everyone who might help me on this quest, from hemp farmers to sustainable fashion designers. I was blown away by the enthusiastic and generous responses I received, and it seemed it wasn't just me, but a whole host of people

realising that there must be a better way to create fabrics than the extractive and exploitative fashion supply chain. Regenerative farmer George Young offered to grow a hectare of flax in 2021 if I provided the seeds and hands for harvest. Over 35 amazing volunteers who I'd never met before turned up to pull the flax in August that summer. I was also lucky to attend a flax processing workshop at Flaxland in 2020, and Riitta Sinkkonen Davies' flax spinning and weaving master class at the AGWSD Summer School 2021.

Seeing the dark gold flax straw transform into shining hair-like fibres for the first time seemed like a magic trick, and is still my favourite part of the process! It brought all the language of old stories to life: flax-haired heroines, Rumpelstiltskin spinning with straw, or a young maid set the impossible task of making shirts from nettles (which are processed just like flax) suddenly became tangible. I learned so much from Simon and Ann at Flaxland and Riitta at Summer School that I'm now confident I could rise to the fairytale occasion and spin and weave seven shirts to turn my seven siblings from swans into humans again. Curse reversals aside, I am very excited to finally be making yarn and weaving some small samples from the 2021 harvest, and hope to have actual items of clothing finished later this year!

Throughout this journey I have come across the same obstacle again and again, which is that there are no industrial flax processing options available in the UK. Despite enthusiastic farmers and fashion designers at both ends of the supply chain being willing to grow flax and desperate to use UK-grown fabrics there is a 'missing middle', a lack of fibre mills which can transform the raw plant into yarn for weaving. This means that whilst flax spinning can be a wonderful hobby there is no chance of it impacting the fashion industry, or significantly changing the way we make clothes. Luckily this is the part which fascinates me, and what I am currently investigating for my fashion and textile MSc dissertation. So far I have made a roller breaker and a rotor heckler with the immense help of Fibershed, Flaxland and the craftspeople at Phantassie Farm, and a spinning machine is currently being developed in collaboration with Studio HILO and First Principles fashion design. My dream is to develop open-source hardware plans for small-to-medium scale flax fibre processing mills, and empower farmers, spinners, weavers and fashion designers to seize the means of fabric production and create local regenerative fibre supply networks throughout the UK.

www.instagram.com/straw_into_gold

Further reading:

Burgess, Rebecca: (2019) *Fibershed: Growing a Movement...* Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.

Websites:

<https://fibershed.org>
<http://farminggeorge.blogspot.com>
<https://www.flaxland.co.uk>
<https://riittaweaving.wordpress.com/courses>
<https://www.studiohilo.com>
<https://www.fromfirstprincipals.com>



Harvested flax
Photo: Nick Evans



Rotor heckler designed by Simon at Flaxland
Photo: Nick Evans