

The mills are alive

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Cushendale is the only surviving woollen mill in Kilkenny city and county. Sean Keane spoke to "custodian" of the mills, Philip Cushen about his passion for his craft which is under pressure from cheap and poor quality imports which have driven so many of his colleagues out of business

WHEN Philip Cushen was just 19 years old his father Patrick passed away, leaving the young man to manage one of the most important and iconic craft industries in the county.

The sixth generation of his family to run Cushendale Woollen Mills, Graignamanagh, Philip has managed to safeguard the future by investing in new ideas and new concepts while remaining true to the way in which the clothes, garments and other wool, lambswool and mohair items are produced.

It is the last mill of its type in the city and county to have survived and many people in the city will remember Greenvale and Ormonde, long since extinct. That makes Cushendale unique.

The plain exterior of the building does not prepare you for the richness and diversity of what is inside.

The old mill once powered by the mill stream outside diverted from the Duiske River is full of character. All the machines still work perfectly; some are now used by other manufacturers who have long since dispensed with theirs only to find they still needed them.

This is a special place to be guarded and cherished.

Not for the first time in this series of articles on the arts and crafts in Kilkenny, we come to meet a person who is putting quality before quantity and battling against cheap imports from China. Many of his fellow weavers have given up and are "out-sourcing". It may be a good short term idea but in the long term it will mean that certain skills and ways of doing things, passed down through generations, will be lost because the next generation will have lost the skill of doing it.

"They will never produce anything again, that's it," he said with authority and a hint of sadness,

Philip Cushen has got soul, real soul. He is passionate about yarns, wool, mohair and keeping alive a way of life, a craft-art form which has been going on around the town of Graignamanagh since the 13th century. The building where the mill stands on the Old Road, backing on to the Duiske river provides the town with a sense of identity which is almost as important as Duiske Abbey.

He can trace his ancestry all the way back to the Flemish weavers who fled mainland Europe in the mid-1600s and came to the South East of Ireland. Indeed some of the Flemish words brought over all those centuries ago are still used by Philip like "stok" - a piece of cloth and "skerrin" - the frame on which material is placed to weave it..

He is a lover of language and "dabbles" in many of the European ones and is interested especially in the Celtic tongues.

His energy is palpable and it transmits to those who work with him and have the same fire for the business that he has. You also sense that he has a healthy disregard for accountants and other professionals who say there is no future for the textile industry in Ireland. He rubbishes that idea and says working with wool, weaving and doing other things to the fabrics involved has an artistic side though the need to create the colours and designs while dyeing the wool to give the rich colours associated with Cushendale is a matter of chemistry. Thirdly, the manner of making the actual fabric is a mechanical process. He asks where else would you find such diversity of challenges in the one job. He wants to find new ways of working with fabric to create new lines and breathe new life into the textiles industry to ensure its survival.

When his grandfather was in business, he produced blankets for the local market and was able to make a living. "My grandfather Philip depended on the people of Graignamanagh for his livelihood. My father had to expand and depended on the markets in Cork, Dublin and especially Waterford for business, while I have to go global, selling to buyers in Japan, the US, France, Germany and Japan.

Philip was supposed to go to a textile college in the south of Scotland but his father's premature death put an end to that. It cost him and he feels that he wasted over 10 years figuring out things for himself, things he could have learned in college. He is philosophical about it and the fact that he had to graft so hard to learn and keep up with the rest of those in the industry, has stood to him and given him an independence that he might not have otherwise have got and which now gives him an edge over competitors.

However, he did receive a boost with the establishment of the Kilkenny Design Workshops in the late 1960s, set up to help the craft industry locally and nationally.

He recalls Kerryman, Mortimer O'Shea being in charge of the textile part of the workshops. "Working there with those professionals gave me an insight into design and products which I would not have otherwise got," Philip explained.

Luckily for Philip it also stimulated an awareness of old designs which have been revitalised and Cushendale was and is able to capitalise on that.

Not surprisingly, Philip is great with his hands and has no choice because many of the machines are complex and require an intuitive knowledge of mechanics to repair. Not surprisingly, two of his sons are mechanical engineers. Patrick works on pharmaceutical product lines for a company based in Sligo while Philip, who lives in Belgium, works with Toyota. The youngest member of the family Michael is in Cork doing environmental studies.

He and Mary also have four daughters. Anna Maria is a pharmacist in St Luke's hospital while Ellen is also a pharmacist based in Dublin. Breda is a doctor in the capital while Miriam is a human resources manager with Bord na Mona. She is showing an interest in the business and although he does not dare say it, you can see that he would be proud if any of them showed a willingness to follow him into what is a perilous business.

At present the Cushendale Woollen Mills range includes blankets - throws for lounge and bedrooms - travel rugs and other fabrics used in homes and hotel interiors. Its home furnishings come in a range of fibres, colours and sizes - Mohair (brushed and bouclé) - 100% Irish wool - lambswool and cotton Chenille. There are scarves, hats, ruanas (capotes), pocket stoles and other fashion items.

The part played by the Duiske River in providing a clean water source is highlighted by Philip who explains that unlike over 55% of water supplies in Kilkenny which come through limestone making the water "hard", water in the Duiske comes through or down from, Brandon Hill which is the only granite mountain between Wicklow and the south of the country giving it a pureness of quality and a softness important in the milling industry.

Philip Cushen has a great respect for the past and for those who went before him. He has noticed that as time goes on he is selling more and more to France and the US and that it is becoming a more specialist market with people who have the money willing to pay for the quality of something that will last and that looks different, distinctive and made in Graignamanagh by hand.

Philip Cushen has a fire that burns bright to produce things of beauty and excellence. "you are always trying to make something better than the last product, to set a higher standard. "You must be fired up enough to always try to create something different, unique, something of which you are proud," he adds.

Noble words from a man who is keeping a tradition alive which has an important place in our history and hopefully a place in our future.