

The SOSE Spotlight podcast

Series 3, Episode 5 transcription – Teviot Knitwear

Host – Sarah Lunney

Hello and welcome to Series 3 of The SOSE Spotlight Podcast.

Wherever you are, in Dumfries and Galloway, the Scottish Borders or beyond. If you're a business, entrepreneur, community enterprise or aspiring to be one, this is for you.

We're South of Scotland Enterprise and we're all about helping people in the South of Scotland to thrive, grow and fulfil your best potential.

This series is all about putting the spotlight on the inspiring businesses we have supported and highlighting our hidden heroes.

I'm Sarah, the Net Zero Modern Apprentice and with me today is Allan Godfrey, the managing director of Teviot Knitwear Hawick, a small artisan manufacturer. The company has experienced rapid growth since its inception in 2020, successfully overcoming the early challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic.

Hi, Allan. Thank you very much for joining us at The SOSE Spotlight.

Guest – Allan Godfrey

No problem at all. Pleased to be here.

Host

Brilliant, so we will get started. If you'd like to just start with telling us about how the business was formed and where the inspiration came from.

Guest

No problem. Yeah, so, as you said in your introduction there 2020 was when it all began.

Before then I'd basically worked for Pringle for 35 years, so basically for my whole working career. COVID obviously had just came on the scene and Pringle was looking to restructure. (My) Father had become ill at that point as well. A lot of travelling involved. Obviously, been travelling for the last 8 to 10 years all over the world. So everything sort of says to me that you know, now was the time maybe to look in a different direction and that's basically when I came up with the idea of starting up a small manufacturing business and that's basically when Teviot Knitwear started.

Host

Brilliant, and starting in 2020, during COVID, that must have been really challenging. What kind of challenges did you face? How did you overcome them?

Guest

Yeah, I mean there was many challenges that you know, a lot of people that you spoke to says, you know, I think...I don't think it's the right time, but I actually thought it was the perfect time.

However, you know, during that period as we all know, due to social distancing and everything obviously attributed with COVID then it was difficult. I mean, even from setting up a bank account, which sounds, you know extremely, you know, straightforward, a business bank account, of course, you know, it was actually so difficult because the banks were extremely stringent at that point and trying to get to speak to someone, well obviously face to face wasn't happening. So, it actually, you know, took us about six months before we even got up and running with a business bank account.

You know, that was difficult, obviously social distancing, meant that you know, it was myself and my business partner, Kevin Barrie, who basically started everything up and we had another girl helping us. And so, we basically worked it between us, so that we were in the knitting shed at different times. Kevin was able to do some work from home; the linker was doing some work from home. Umm. So yeah. I mean it was it...it was tricky in that respect, but at the same time, I felt there was a definite opportunity. When everything was done and dusted for want of a better word that when we came out the other side there was going to be a perfect opportunity and that's basically how it fanned out.

Host

Even though it was such a challenging time, I suppose you face bigger challenges at the start of your business and it will help with the business growth, which is what we'll go on to next. We know that you've had quite rapid growth with your business.

Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Guest

Yeah. I mean, obviously, you know, I had a few contacts from my previous life and you don't work for Pringle for 35 years and not obviously build up some contacts. So, you know, for that respect, we had, you know, some nice big brands there. Pringle of course was one of them. So, we carried on working with them and other brands such as Margaret Howell which are obviously well established companies.

And then there was some new exciting opportunities, you know, on brands like And Daughter and Navy Grey, and indeed And Daughter is now our biggest customer. So, you know that has helped us obviously to grow the business basically from where we were.

We also took over a family run business called Gilbert Wilson, three years ago because of the owner then, Colin Gilchrist, he was he was retiring and that basically meant that we added the accessory side to the business because up until then obviously we had constituted more on the artisan, you know, hand Intarsia, hand knitting type pieces. So

that then brought accessories in which opened up a whole new avenue and also a whole load of new customers and probably most importantly also gave us another few members of staff. So that was basically us then, sort of, well on the way to moving things on.

We received obviously help from, you know, the town as well. Barrie Knitwear, you know, we must mention were, you know, they helped us immensely with some new machinery. New to us obviously, they were looking to offload because they were investing in, further new kit, but obviously for us it was a new type of machinery and, you know, at a very good price so, you know, that that helped us.

And basically, we had to then go from starting off in a, in a small knitting shed to obviously look for new premises to obviously take the business, you know further forward. So we heard that there was some premises becoming available up in Liddesdale, a unit up there, so we moved up there and we know that with the new machinery and the new people then we could start to plan and obviously increase the capacity of the factory, which obviously we've done.

You need a little bit of luck along the way as well, you know, I think it's fair to say that. We were lucky enough on the PR side of things to do some collaborations with people like Cat Deeley and then obviously, you know Tilda Swinton. So, all that on the PR side helped us obviously grow that side of the business.

But I think most importantly, what we must say is that, you know, having good people without the shadow of a doubt. Someone once told me at the start of my career that a manager is only as good as the players in the park. And I think that's absolutely right. So, like any good business, you need good people behind you, and I think, you know, we've definitely got that.

Host

Brilliant. And you mentioned the town, so that might be a great opportunity to start talking a little bit about that.

Being in Hawick, it must be quite beneficial because obviously the textile industry, it's still very important in Hawick, it's still very much something that's talked about. Do you want to talk a little bit about...has it been beneficial for you?

Guest

Oh, for sure. I mean I mentioned obviously that little part there about, you know, for example Barrie Knitwear, but, you know, even other, you know, other companies in Hawick, you know, Johnstons of Elgin, William Lockie, I know obviously the people very well.

In my previous life before obviously starting the business, I basically was in a sourcing role for Pringle because they had shut down the manufacturing plants. So basically, we were, you know, having other manufacturers within the town knit for Pringle. So, I built

up a good relationship with all the companies and anytime we've needed any help or anything, they've been there, you know, so you know that's been really important.

But you know, Hawick is synonymous for knitwear. The reason for that is obviously you know the 'made in Scotland' is still ultra important. Wherever you go in the world particularly, you know, be it in the Far East or be it the US market, it still is a huge appetite for, you know, for 'made in Scotland'.

And obviously, you know the other thing that I always say to people is, you know, well what makes it special? Well, the experience of people, of course, you know, we've got 200 years' experience and skill set, we can't forget that and we can't ever lose it. So that's obviously really important.

And the water is...you know, round about the area is very soft. So that obviously helps us within the finishing, you know to get the nice handle on the wool and on the Cashmere and so yeah, I mean you know Hawick has...Hawick, has now found very much its niche. We went through a difficult period you know in the last sort of 15-20 years, as did any manufacturing business, I think, but certainly now I feel that you know Hawick has found a level, you know, where it can sustain and hopefully even increase a little bit.

One of the major challenges for us is people, you know, like in any manufacturing industry. Trying to encourage young people into the business can be quite difficult. But you know, if you can obviously bring them in and show them what's all involved, you know all the market side, the PR side, the technical side, the IT side, you know or indeed you know the actual hands on, there's some great opportunities, for youngsters and we need to keep that going. We all need to work very hard and be it obviously the companies, the Scottish Government, SOSE, everybody. We all need to be involved in that to make sure that we can sustain the workforce because without shadow of a doubt that is, that is one of our major challenges going forward.

Host

Yeah, definitely. I can understand that.

And everyone's thinking about sustainability just now, all businesses, it's kind of one of their main focuses because we know it's going to be something. That's coming up quite a lot. In your business, what are you looking at, at the moment?

Guest

Yeah. I mean sustainability, like, all over the world and in all walks of life is important. It's as important in our manufacturing industry as it is anywhere else, and we're obviously looking at various things.

The first part being the actual raw material, the wool and the Cashmere, you know, there is now on offer a recycled yarn where basically between 90% and 95% of the yarn has actually been, you know, used before and it is regurgitated, for want a better word, and then can be, you know, could be used again so...

But sustainability, it's a whole way for us and the industry in terms of for example, wool and Cashmere, you know, which obviously are both animal hairs. They're clipped and they're combed, so that's sustainable. You know it's, you know, they can be clipped as often as we need basically. So, you know it's not a problem for that point of view.

We're looking at the chemicals that we use in the washing process, how we can make them more user friendly, we can use...we're using some of the plant dyes in some of the colours of the yarn, so that obviously you know that's...that's better.

Even the little cut offs you know we have little bits of waste coming off the garments we sell that to a supplier actually, down in England and they, you know, they use it for various different things from, you know, stuffing soft toys and things like that to, you know, to other things. So that's good.

The bags that we use for putting the garments in are 30% recyclable.

Machinery is now, all the new machinery uses single phase power, which is obviously better, so we're not using as much power.

We use LED lighting in the factory.

So, we are trying to do our bit and you know we do understand. Customers obviously now also are looking for information obviously on sustainability, so we can give them certification on where the all the fibre comes from right down to basically, you know, the farm where the goats, you know, are in their herd. So, you know I think we're doing our bit.

Host

It sounds like it's really important to the business, which I think everyone will always say, it's great to hear because that's always what you want to hear with a business that they're looking into the future to be not only sustainable for the planet, but also sustainable for the business so that it can continue on without any issues.

And you mentioned about the new machinery being more sustainable. We know that you got a little bit of support recently, for some new machinery, how is that going to benefit the business, and what's the kind of project that's going on with that at the moment?

Guest

Yeah, that indeed. So obviously the, you know our latest part of the plan was obviously to look at bringing some new machinery in that could help us move the business forward. And you know, SOSE obviously has given us some grant funding to help with that.

Basically, it's two different types of machines that we're looking at and the 1st machine is basically what's called Whole Garment Technology. Basically, that allows us to knit a sweater in one piece as it falls off the machine, so it's seamless, there's no or not as much finishing required, so you know that obviously means that we can knit more

quickly, we can knit a new concept. So, we're offering the seamless knitwear to companies, so that opens up a new base for us.

It also can help us in bridging this labour gap that I was on about it, you know, far from looking to or being able to reduce the labour, that's not what it's about. It's about being able to supplement a potential shortage in labour with new machinery where we can use that to help us sustain and hopefully even increase production going forward.

It can also allow us to react probably quicker to the customer if they're looking for, you know, replenishment in goods rather than waiting, you know, three or four months. You know we can reduce that somewhat.

So that's whole garment and then another machine that we're looking at basically gives us enhanced Intarcia or parting capability. So again, that allows us to move into a field that we've not been able to crack until now.

So, you know, we're very hopeful with these latest 2 bits of kit that that will, you know, allow us to move on again to the next phase.

Host

Brilliant.

It sounds really good and it sounds like there's a lot coming (up) for you. Still a lot that's going to, kind of build the business even more.

It's a really inspiring story and I'm really grateful that you're sharing it with us today. For anyone that's listening, that might be kind of aspiring entrepreneurs. Do you have any advice for them that might inspire them to take that leap and start up their own business?

Guest

Absolutely. I mean, you know, I think, follow your dreams. You know that might sound about a cliché, but I really, I do believe that.

At the same time, obviously you've got to make sure that you're doing your market research and identify your, you know, your potential customer, your sales. Cash flow is paramount and obviously funding.

Speak to SOSE, of course, you know, that's how, that's what we've done at the at the initial point. I think that's really, really helpful. It's not all just about funding. It's about actually having a support network there as well, you know, I mean and there's a lot of support out there, so that's important.

Don't be dejected when things maybe don't go your way, because that will happen. You just, you know, it's almost like it's...for me it's like people building a brick wall in front of you sometimes and you just need to keep pushing it down with your feet and you go again.

You need some luck. I've mentioned that before and you know, sometimes you need a rub of the green.

The most important thing is, is being able to work with good people because, as I say, you know, you can probably think you're the best or you know you're, you know, hopefully good at what you do. But you still need a lot of good people round about you. You know what I mean? And that's what we are. You know, we're a team of people and that's important.

And you know, I think more importantly now with where we are in the world, social media marketing and of course the Internet, these are all huge things and are becoming very, you know, paramount in any business. And certainly, for us looking now at the next two to three years in the business, speaking obviously out with Lorna at SOSE as well, that's where we are looking to emphasise, basically, you know, for the next the next chapter.

Host

That's brilliant advice. I'm inspired; I'm sure people listening are also inspired.

Just thank you so much for coming in and sharing the story of Teviot Knitwear and we're really excited to see you grow in the next coming months and years and continuing on. Maybe we'll hear from you again when you're a little bit further down the line.

Guest

Absolutely. Yeah, hopefully retirement soon.

Host

And if you are looking for support with a business idea or community project, 1-2-1 coaching, practical learning, or you're interested in networking events across the South of Scotland, then please get in touch, and come and meet us.

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We'd love your feedback, and please subscribe so you don't miss our next episode.

Next week we'll be joined by another business ready to share their inspiring story with you all.

I'm Sarah Lunney. Thanks for listening to The SOSE Spotlight and do join us again next week for more inspiring business stories from around the South of Scotland.