South Georgia’s Wooly Past

Story and Photos by Robert Burton

More than 50 years ago, Robert Wellesley Burton, an English naturalist, stepped on to the shores of South Georgia, a British Overseas Territory. Charged with an abundance of youth and curiosity, Burton eventually found himself on the path of a little known chapter in fiber history: seal wool!
On January 14, 1972, the weather was awful. It was blowing a gale and the rain and sleet were coming at us sideways. My feet were painfully cold as I slipped and tripped over rocks and splashed through puddles. I was living on Bird Island, a small island off the main island of South Georgia, a U.K. Overseas Territory (rump of empire!) deep in the South Atlantic and on the edge of Antarctica. With two companions I was catching fur seal pups and marking them with numbered cattle ear tags clipped through their flippers.

The pups found it easier to run over the rocky beaches on four flippers than I did on two feet. I was trying to grab them by the hind flippers, but their wet fur made it easy for them to slip from my grasping hands, clad in soggy, wet gloves. When I did manage to grab a pup, I swung it up and wrapped my free arm round its body, holding it tight against my side so that it could be tagged. Sometimes it would grab my rubber boots as it swung past, or it would bite me, usually where dozens of pups had already bitten me—on either the kidneys or funny bone.

Over the course of two weeks we tagged 10,000 pups and by the end we were worn out, our clothes ripped, covered in bites, and mightily relieved. This masochistic activity was part of a detailed study of the Antarctic fur seal, a relative of the familiar California sealion, the “performing seal” of zoo and circus.

When Captain James Cook visited the Isle of Georgia in 1775 and claimed it for King George III (better known for losing a larger and more significant possession on the other side of the Atlantic), he commented on the large number of “sea bears” as fur seals were then known. This attracted the attention of British and American sealers who were working their way through seal colonies around the coasts of South America. The first sealer arrived in 1786 and was followed by scores more. By 1820 the beaches had been cleared of fur seals. The slaughter had been horrendous. The seals were bludgeoned to death, their pelts stripped off, dried or salted, and loaded on board for transport to ports in England, New England, and Canton, China.

The reason for our study was to determine how well the fur seals were bouncing back. At the turn of the twentieth century one naturalist visiting South Georgia had declared them extinct. Then an occasional individual was seen, and a small breeding colony was discovered on Bird Island. It grew apace, and more colonies were popping up around the coast of the main island. From all our observations in 1972 we estimated that some 60,000 fur seal pups had been born on South Georgia. Numbers continued to explode in succeeding years and the population is now over three million. It is an amazing recovery from near extinction.

South Georgia was not the only island group in the South Seas to be visited and stripped of fur seals. In 1820 the South Shetland Islands were discovered, and a swarm of sealing vessels descended in the following year. Within two years the seals had almost disappeared. Sealers also visited Macquarie, Heard, South Orkney, Kerguelen, and other sub-Antarctic islands. In every place the fur seals were almost wiped out. And everywhere they are returning to their old haunts.

Nearly half a century after tagging all those pups I became interested in the history of the fur sealing industry and, in particular, what the pelts were used for. There are some contemporary accounts by sealers that shed light on their lives and practices on the sealing grounds, but they end when the vessel gets back to its homeport. The writers lost interest once they had been paid and wrote nothing about how the pelts were used. Their accounts were full of shipwrecks and drownings, and life in appalling conditions. So there had to be a good market to make the dangerous voyages to South Georgia and other islands in the South Seas worthwhile.

I began looking into the trade in fur seal pelts in London, which was the world center of the fur trade. My
When fur seal pelts first arrived in London there was very little call for them. They were sold to make thin leather for gloves and shoes. The fur was shorn off and sold for manure before the skin was tanned. Yet it was the fur that later became the basis of the industry.

Since the fourteenth century beaver fur had been prized for hats because it made a stiff, glossy felt. Chaucer’s Merchant wore a “laundrysh beaver hat.” However, European beavers were becoming rare by the late eighteenth century and the trade in North American beavers was only developing. Most hats were made of a base of sheep’s wool, or the fur of rabbits, hares, camels, and other animals, covered with a thin nap of beaver fur.

In 1795 Thomas Chapman, a London trunk maker, found a consignment of 500 fur seal pelts lying unsold in a warehouse and bought them very cheaply for three half-pence (0.1 pounds) each. In those days trunks were waterproofed with a covering of leather or the skins of large animals—usually horses or seals—still with the hair. Chapman very observantly noticed that the underfur on these fur seal pelts was finer than the beaver fur on his new hat and the thought struck him that cheap fur seal fur would make a good substitute for expensive beaver.

Chapman plied his trade in Southwark, in those days a village outside London on the south bank of the River Thames, opposite the Tower of London. It was the center for leather trades, and Leathermarket and Tanner Streets still serve as reminders. He knew nothing about hat making so he sought advice from a friend in the business who told him that the guard hairs, the natural grease, and the salt used as a preservative had to be completely removed. Others had already tried to prepare fur seal underfur for felting but had failed, so Chapman spent a year experimenting.

Eventually he perfected a procedure that started with the blubber being scraped off and the pelt thoroughly washed in scalding, soapy water in which pearl ash (potassium carbonate—an alkali) had been dissolved. The fat-free pelt was then thoroughly dried in the sun or in a heated room. Next, the pelt was “beamed,” or laid on a wooden beam and the coarse guard hairs scraped out with a two-handed blunt knife. After another soaking for twelve hours in warm, soapy water in which barilla (sodium carbonate—another alkali) had been dissolved, the clean, degreased underfur was cut off and thoroughly dried.

The final stage was the skilled operation of “bowing.” The dried fur was spread on a table with slots in the surface in a draft-free room and the workman passed a hatter’s bow, like an outside violin bow, over while plucking the catgut. The vibrations agitated the fur so that it mixed evenly, and any impurities fell through the slots. It was now called seal wool or seal down and “assumed a most beautiful gloss.”

Chapman was sufficiently convinced of the commercial potential of his seal wool that he bought an additional consignment of 6,000 fur seal pelts also lying unsold in a warehouse. He traveled the country trying to persuade hat makers to buy the new raw material, with little success at first, but as sales picked up he looked for more pelts. He managed to persuade a merchant to send the Joseph, a 130-ton whaling ship, to go sealing near South Georgia by promising to pay the high price of up to six shillings (.30 pounds) per pelt. The Joseph returned to London fifteen months later on June 4, 1799, with 21,000 pelts.

Chapman now suffered the first of his setbacks. Established furriers and hatters regarded him as an interloper and Bolle-
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rich aristocrats—Earl Fitzwilliam and Lord Yarborough (see below left). The letters refer to a pamphlet written by Chapman and a copy is included with the Sheffield sample. It is an absolute boon to the historian because Chapman sets out the whole sad story of his invention and his financial troubles. It ends with a request for a donation to ease his penury.

He had sent these samples and copies of the pamphlet to a number of wealthy men, especially those like Earl Fitzwilliam who were known philanthropists. He also appealed to the public in newspaper advertisements. His begging had some success. Sir Joseph Banks gave forty-five pounds, the president of the Board of Trade fifty pounds, the bishop of Durham thirty-three pounds, and William Huskisson two pounds. (Huskisson is better known as the first man to be reported as killed by a railway locomotive. He was run over and fatally wounded by George Stephenson’s Rocket.)

I have also searched newspaper archives and found numerous advertisements for shawls made of “patent seal wool.” Claims were made that they rivaled the best cashmere and silk shawls imported from India but were much cheaper, warmer, and more durable, and that they were worn by royalty and the nobility:

An entire new article has been introduced by our most fashionable Ladies, in shawls made from the fur of the seal of the South Seas: they are ornamented with gold cord, India or Grecian borders and tassels, and have a very elegant and novel effect, as well as defending the fair wearer from the cold, being warmer, softer, and equally light as the India shawl. Pelisses and dress-shirts made of the Georgian cloth, in its natural colour, which is very beautiful, will also be much worn in the first circles.

A NEW MANUFACTURE – The PATENT GEORGIAN SATIN CLOTH, made from the Fur of the Seal or Sea Bear of the South Seas, calculated for Shawls, Pelisses, Dress-shirts, Habits, Spencers*, &c. softer and more delicate than the India Shawl. The Nobility and Ladies of Fashion are respectfully informed, that an entire new article made from the Fur of the Ursine [Bear i.e. Fur] Seal, is submitted to their inspection and approbation. It has already been patronised and approved by Ladies of the first rank and fashion in this country, being lighter and warmer than the India Shawl. It is manufactured of various thicknesses, and all widths, to suit every purpose of dress; the natural colour (without being dyed) is beautiful. – Shawls of all sizes made of the Georgian Cloth, ornamented with gold, India borders, &c. from three guineas to ten. To be had in London only of Beaman and Abbott, No 61, New Bond-street; and of the principal Drapers in Bath, Edinburgh, &c.

Another advertisement proclaimed that seal wool shawls were “patronised by Her Majesty and the Princesses” but it must be remembered that there were no checks on advertising in those days. Advertisers could say what they liked, and it is possible, even likely, that Her Majesty and her daughters would never have continued to wear a shawl inferior to the best India shawls of cashmere or silk.

Seal wool cloth, recorded separately from shawls and used for dresses and other clothes, was advertised as “superfine” and was woven as a satin (a smooth, lustrous fabric that may be less lustrous on the reverse side). I have found only a single description of seal wool clothes and these were worn by a man. The Morning Post for January 19, 1804, described a coach parade on the occasion of Queen Charlotte’s birthday (marred by heavy rain). The account ends with a description of the individual costumes worn by the ladies and gentlemen who had taken part. The gentlemen retreated into uniform, monochrome suits. Lord Somervile wore “a beautiful snuff-coloured Georgian satin cloth coat and breeches, manufactured from the fur of the seal, with elegant stone buttons, and rich embroidered satin waistcoat” which was “of the most delicate texture imaginable, being far softer and pleasant to the touch than the finest velvet.” Lord Somervile was no idle aristocrat. He was a busy agricultural reformer who owned one of the first flocks of merino sheep in England. So it is no surprise that he should be interested in the new wool-based fabric that was offering so much in appearance and feel at an affordable price. Perhaps his clothes were made from a mixture of seal wool and merino. However, it seems that the new textile did not catch on in the fashionable world.

There is one other mention of a man owning fur seal garments. In 1807 the Emperor Napoleon received “six real seal-wool shawls of English manufacture” from his brother the emperor of Morocco. What on earth did a man do with six shawls except give them to lady friends? And wasn’t giving the emperor of France garments manufactured in “perfidious Albion” less than tactful? Perhaps it was his brother’s little joke.

Despite seal wool shawls being advertised in glowing terms, I have found only one reference to them in two contemporary fashion magazines: Ackermann’s Repository of Arts and La Belle Assemblée. Every month these magazines described the latest fashions for women and men. The single reference described the “Roxburgh mantle,” which could be of seal wool or merino. The failure to feature seal wool garments was likely because they were not at the forefront of fashion, compared with silks and cashmeres.

The records of the Fryers’ business in the Durham archives show that they were still working with seal wool until at least 1853 and seal wool shawls were advertised until at least 1861, but increasingly they were making much cheaper imitation seal shawls. Thomas
Fryer had obtained a patent in 1802 for manufacturing imitation seal cloth from cotton, mohair, silk, or other fibers. Imitation seal was a pile fabric in which the warp threads were woven into cut or uncut loops, as in velvet or plush, to give the appearance of natural fur. It has nothing to do with fur seals.

Historians of the sealing industry record that fur seal fur was felted and used for making hats, but I am the first one to investigate the process by which the underfur was prepared for felting and its role in the hatting business. It was frustrating that I could find so little about the extent of the trade. I can also claim to be the first historian to investigate the combination of seal wool and sheep's wool for spinning and weaving into cloth. I have had more luck with uncovering the marketing of shawls and other garments. As with hats, it appears that the use of fur seal in woven textiles was insignificant. And as with hats, the textile historians I have contacted have been unaware of it.

My hope, no doubt forlorn, is to find a genuine seal wool hat or shawl. But how can it be identified if there is no documentation except by very long and expensive microscopic examination of the fabric of the nineteenth century hats and shawls that survive in museums?

When I was braving the elements to catch fur seal pups on the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia, I would have been astounded to think that it would lead me, over forty years later, to take an interest in Regency gentlemen’s hats and ladies' fashions.

*Georgian cloth was a lightweight broadcloth fashionable in the first decade of the nineteenth century. A pelisse was a long jacket and a spencer was a short jacket worn by Regency women.*