



Whaling station, South Georgia. Photo courtesy of Shutterstock.



After the end of the seal-tagging program my clothes are filthy and my boots have been ripped by the pups' teeth as I carried them.

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!



The author is carrying a fur seal pup by its hind flippers to a companion for tagging.

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

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.

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



Entering a fur seal breeding beach. The bamboo poles are for fending off aggressive bulls.

main source of information has been the British Newspaper Archive. I had no need to actually visit the archive and spend days sitting in a reading room turning the musty pages of old newspapers because the pages have been scanned and are available online.

Newspapers were only beginning to appear at the end of the eighteenth century, which was just too late to catch the start of the fur seal trade. But I was able to find notices a few years later for the sale of cargoes of fur seal pelts and advertisements for fur seal products. I had to be careful because seals from the North Atlantic, like the harbor seal, were often used for shoes, hats, and other garments. So I assumed that "seal" referred to these animals and I concentrated instead on unequivocal references to "fur seal" or "seal of the South Seas."

The result is an imperfect account of two branches of the clothing industry that have never before been chronicled.

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 "flaundryssh bever 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 (.01 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 outsize 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 Borra-



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.



Top: Traditional beaver fur top hat.
Below: Seal skin covered chest.

daile's (Beaver Merchants, Furriers, and Hat Makers) conspired to have the pelts impounded by customs on the pretext that the *Joseph* had avoided paying duty. They also offered the owner and the captain of the *Joseph* an extra 1,000 pounds for the cargo. Chapman took his problem to Sir Joseph Banks, the very influential botanist who had accompanied Captain Cook on his first voyage of exploration and was interested in promoting sealing as a means of improving the economy of the new colony of New South Wales. He immediately arranged for the pelts to be released to Chapman.

One result of this shipment and the high price paid by Chapman was that other skin merchants and furriers started to send ships to the South Seas in search of fur seal pelts. The value of pelts rose from two shillings and six pence (.125 pounds) to thirty-two shillings (1.6 pounds) each, a thirteen-fold increase. Because they had ready capital while Chapman had to borrow money, the large companies were able to squeeze him out by buying cargoes as soon as they arrived at the docks. They also enticed Chapman's workmen who had knowledge of the fur preparation process.

It was now too late to protect the original process with a patent, so Chapman modified it and patented the new process. (At that time taking out a patent was very expensive and involved visiting seven different offices and obtaining two signatures of the reigning monarch.) Originally



Fur seal section.

the fur had been cut from the skin. In the new process the underfur hairs were stripped out with their roots intact. This had two advantages. The skin was not damaged, so it could be tanned for leather, and each hair was a little longer, so the yield of seal wool

was greater. The disadvantage was that the blunt bulb at the root of the hair prevented felting, so the seal wool was no use to the hatters but, as we shall see, it was better for spinning.

Chapman persevered with manufacturing and selling seal wool, but he was feeling the pinch. To try to revitalize his fortunes, he applied to Parliament for compensation. Sir Joseph Banks came to his rescue again and arranged for a committee of members of Parliament to hear evidence of Chapman's claim that he was the first person to prepare fur seal fur to be usable for felting and had created an industry that gave employment to many people yet had not benefited from it. The committee decided in favor of Chapman, but it had to report its findings to the House of Commons, which would take a vote on it. Unfortunately, for various reasons, this never happened. Chapman did not get a government payout and in 1811, his financial situation so deteriorated that he was thrown into prison for debt, where he languished for eleven months before being freed.

I have found it impossible to gauge the impact of seal fur on the hatting industry. Hat making was an important industry in England and millions of felt hats were exported every year. To protect the industry, the Colonial Hat Act of 1732 prevented American hatters from exporting their wares to Britain. This created understandable resentment to add to that of taxation without representation and it might have led to a Boston Hat Party! Yet historians who have studied the felt-making and hat industries in England have told me that they were not even aware of the use of fur seal fur in hats. I have not found any advertisements in newspapers for hats made of seal wool. This is perhaps not surprising as it was a second-class material compared with beaver. In any case, by the last years of the eighteenth century, hats were increasingly being finished with more durable, cheaper, and even more glossy silk, and fur—of beaver, fur seal, and other animals—was going out of favor.

But this was not the end of Thomas Chapman's fur seal process. At one point he wrote, "Shawls are manufactured from it [seal wool], nearly

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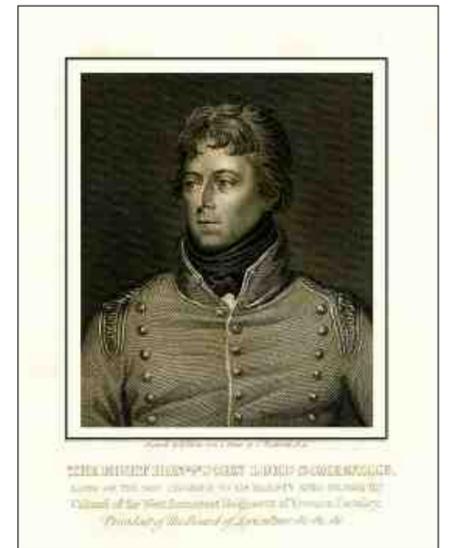
equal in value and appearance to those imported from India." And Sir Joseph Banks wrote, "At present, the makers of shawls and other fancy draperies purchase a part of the stock [of seal wool] and convert it into various elegant and expensive articles—one of which is a cloth not a little resembling drap de vigogne [vicuña] and sold almost as dear."

No one writing about fur seals had noticed these references to shawls, but a Google search for "seal shawl" led me to a five-centimeter-square piece of fur seal pelt in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the world's largest museum of decorative arts and design. The accompanying description is "seal down sample for a shawl" and "used in England by Robert and Samuel Fryer of Huddersfield for making cloth and shawls." It is wrapped in a piece of paper inscribed "Turkey down—or seal down—such the Fryers make shawls of." The date is given as 1800–1815.

The Quaker family Fryer was engaged in various branches of the wool industry. They were based in Rastrick, a village near Huddersfield in the north of England where the all-important woolen industry was centered. I found some of the Fryers' business records in the Durham County Record Office and there are references to seal wool dated 1800, some of it obtained from Thomas Chapman. The brothers Robert and Samuel Fryer must then have enlarged their business by building a "seal wool manufactory." There is a stock-take dated December 31, 1802, which includes items of seal wool, seal wool cloth, and shawls. The seal wool came from several London furriers and seal wool dealers: John Harris, Thomas Wontner and Sons, our own Thomas Chapman—and Messrs. Borradaile, his nemesis.

In 1800 the Fryers had taken out a patent for mixing seal wool with sheep or lamb's wool and other fibers. They must have taken up manufacturing seal wool cloth not long after Chapman started processing seal wool in 1796. It is a puzzle how the Fryer brothers became involved with seal wool. The only possible link I can find is that another brother, William, was based in London and in partnership with Joseph in Rastrick. He might have met Chapman and learned about seal wool.

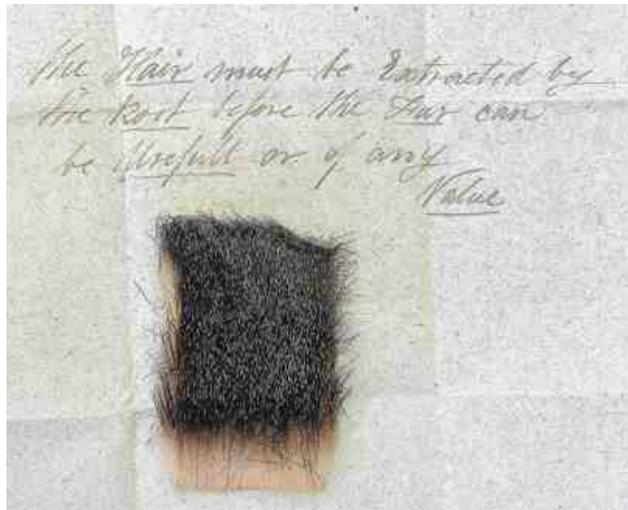
I have since found two more samples of seal wool in local archives. I could easily reach the Sheffield City Archives by train



Lord Somerville, "Lord of the Bed Chamber to his Majesty King George III"

from my home near Cambridge. I arranged a visit and the sample was brought out and laid on the table. History was coming alive in front of me! The sample consists of three items: a square of pelt with the guard hairs intact, a square with the guard hairs removed, and a hank of seal wool (see images on page 90). I didn't like to handle the wool more than necessary, but it was beautifully silky-soft and gave me the impression of the feel of ivory: smooth and cool. I could understand how it made such an impression on nineteenth century manufacturers and wearers.

The sample is wrapped in stiff paper with descriptive annotations (see page 90). The second sample is similar and both samples are accompanied by begging letters to



Seal wool samples from Sheffield City Archives.

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 dresses 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, Dresses, 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 Beamon 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 condescend 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—this was before gentlemen retreated into uniform, monochrome suits. Lord Somerville 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 Somerville 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

TO LADIES OF FASHION.
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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. *WF*

*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.



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