



June and John Parnell (Glenroy Estate) and Debra and Darren Solly (Yednalue Station) host Hong Kong students on their Australian visit.

Paddock to garment

There are few similarities between outback South Australia and Hong Kong, but a group of woolgrowers has found a common thread by sharing the journey from the sheep's back to the clothes rack.

STORY GRETEL SNEATH

When drought baked the Flinders Ranges dirt an even deeper shade of red during the late 1990s, neighbouring farmers in the Carrieton district, 400 kilometres north of Adelaide, decided education was the best way to dig themselves out of a rut. After comparing properties to develop their own best practice guidelines, they took lessons in evaluating wool clips before the focus switched much further along the supply chain, all the way to Australia's largest wool customer – China.

It was hardly your average field trip when the small group of South Australian farmers calling themselves Flinders Merino found themselves

in one of the global headquarters of garment design – the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Institute of Textiles and Clothing (ITC). As the gateway for southern and eastern Chinese wool processors and manufacturers, Hong Kong is an international hub for sourcing wool garments, particularly for the major US and European brands. John Parnell, from Glenroy Estate, says the visit, organised by Australian Wool Innovation Limited (AWI), was “an absolute eye-opener”.

“I was astounded that the final-year fashion-design students had made all of these garments and there was nothing there made from wool; there was bamboo, there was foam and even wire –

heaps of other stuff, but no wool,” he says.

Flinders Merino offered to sponsor one of the ITC's annual fashion shows in the hope of encouraging such an influential market to take on their product. “Wool is not a necessity in the world – it's a niche product – and when you consider that they are surrounded by a plethora of fabric and textile choices, you need to come up with a way to make sure that wool is a valued and desirable choice for them moving forward in their fashion careers,” says group member Julia Clarke, from Pamatta Station.

The Flinders Merino Australian Tour Scholarship Award gives winning design students an opportunity to travel



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from Hong Kong to the Flinders Ranges to experience the life of a woolgrower in a journey beyond the bale. It's a Crocodile Dundee-type tale triggered by drought: transport a group of city slickers to the bush, and watch them fall in love with the landscape by spinning the ultimate yarn.

"When we were over there, we recognised that one way we could make wool very desirable to use in fashion design was to tell the story of where it's from," Julia says. "By bringing them here, we can give them the whole story – the family, the sheep, big skies, big pastures. It's a good story to tell."

"What always amazes me is that they are so overawed by it all. They all love a lamb, but it's also the first time many of them have been in a rural area and we will often find them sitting close together – they're so used to being in a city environment, and it takes a long time for them to understand that sense of space that Australia offers."

As part of the visit, AWI also facilitates tours to wool-auction houses, retailers and manufacturers. "While the aim is to educate the young designers about Australian wool and inspire them to use more of the fibre in their designs, the woolgrowers and companies that the designers visit are also able to learn about the key market of Hong Kong and the thoughts of its young fashion designers," AWI chief executive officer Stuart McCullough says.

The 2014 scholarship winner, Sunny Chow, says her Australian visit was the major impetus for using more Merino wool in her designs.

"We had time to visit the farms, the shearing rooms and wool auction ... these activities helped us to better understand sheep and wool production, and the advantages of Merino wool," she says. "This knowledge and experience was very useful to us as designers. It is not an easy job to grow thousands of sheep on a farm ... my fellows and I were impressed by their effort and appreciate

the way they grow the sheep in order to provide high-quality Merino wool to the worldwide market."

John Parnell and his wife, June, host the Hong Kong guests in their shearers' quarters, and smile as they recount their visitors' first impressions of a foreign land. "They are frightened of the night because there's no noise and the stars are so bright, so we have had to sleep in a room next door to make them feel safe – it's just so different for them," he says.

Mind you, it's equally unnerving when members of the Flinders Merino mob find themselves back in Hong Kong each year crowning the latest scholarship winner. A front row seat at a fashion show is hardly the ticket for a bloke from the bush. "We're sitting in this huge auditorium with a couple of thousand people, with these international models modelling all of these amazing garments and I'm thinking to myself, 'What on earth am I doing here? I should be out checking my troughs!'" John says.

Julia has also made the annual journey to Hong Kong to present the award and says the designs are extraordinary. "It's lovely to see wool being used by students at the cutting edge of design – they really push the boundaries with their creations, with elements that can be translated into great retail products," she says.

The collective Flinders Merino wool clip will never be able to keep up with customer demand, but members say their eye has always been focused on a much bigger picture.

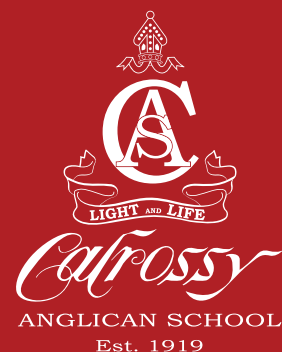
"We recognise that the Flinders Merino supply is not of the scale that we can be sure that our product is always being used, but really, I think the most important thing to us is that wool is still being considered as a useable product in fashion design," Julia says. "We're just a small part of the Australian wool story."

For more information about Flinders Merino phone 0427 861 306 or go to www.flindersmerino.com.au.



A model shows off wool garments in Hong Kong as part of the Flinders Merino Award.

Father and son Darren and Reuben Solly share the finer points of shearing with Gallery Tam from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.



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