



Is there an item in your wardrobe that you turn to time and time again? One that evokes a sense of comfort, calm or nostalgia? That feeling is what **Navygrey** is built on. Kate Duggan speaks to the clothing brand's founder, Rachel Carvell-Spedding, to find out more...

Why did you start Navygrey?

I have a bit of an obsession with jumpers, particularly a navy one of my mum's that she's been wearing for 30 years. It's a really soft wool and I've always just loved the way it feels. I went on this quest for a number of years trying to find a jumper that felt as good as my mum's, but I couldn't and it was driving me mad.

So, I thought, "I've either got to shut up about this jumper, or I need to actually create one." When I started talking to people, they agreed that it was really hard to find jumpers that felt like the ones that had been handed down by their mum, dad or grandparent.

I also wanted to help bring the love for wool back and show why it's one of the best fibres in the world. It keeps you warmer than something like cashmere, and it can last longer.

We started with three styles. A relaxed jumper modelled on my mum's (this is still our best seller), a more fitted style, and a funnel neck. We made our first jumpers in Portugal with a merino wool, but we now use a variety of wools and have moved around 80% of our production to the UK.

I believe the business grew pretty quickly?

Yes. I started it from my garden office. About a month after our launch, the Head of Fashion at The Telegraph wrote an article about us. Orders just went crazy; I had to get my mum out of retirement to help me pack them.

Quite quickly, I was running out of space at home. So, we found a really lovely family business in Devon to pack all our orders. We've also got a small office space in London and a hybrid team of around 10 people working from various places. While I still have a hand in designing the products, I don't have a background in fashion, so we now have a Head of Design.

What challenges have you faced as a business owner?

Cash flow is one of our biggest challenges, because we're making premium products and have to pay for them before we sell them. Being self-funded hasn't been easy. There's no giant trust fund that's gone into this business, just dogged belief.

I kept my job for the first three years, so I was juggling two jobs and two children during lockdown, which was really, really tough. I was exhausted, but it did make starting a business less risky. I was able to test the product and put it out to market before jumping ship completely.

There are also challenges around product development. Natural, organic fibre is more erratic than synthetic fibre. It doesn't always do what you want it to. We've tried to knit with stuff that just didn't want to be knitted. You have to accept that you're not going to get everything right, learn from it and move on.

You've grown your product line quite substantially over the last few years.

Yes. We now have several styles of jumper and have also released other ranges because we need to be a year-round business; people don't tend to buy jumpers in spring and summer.

We want to provide real value to a customer's wardrobe, not just design for the sake of it, so we start by thinking, "What do we feel personally is missing from our wardrobes? What are our customers saying that they want? Where are the gaps?" Everything we've launched still comes down to



Rachel Carvell-Spedding



The Easy in Fossil Grey

the fit and the feeling; we're still built around the feeling of my mum's jumper. Whether it's a cotton or a linen or a wool, material has got to be the right quality to evoke that feeling. There's an old school nostalgia around it.

People see jumpers and plain T-shirts as wardrobe staples – a bit boring – but actually, they're hero pieces that you wear again and again. Fashions and trends change, but these are items you can wear for years. They're the fundamental building blocks of your wardrobe, so they're worth investing in. A customer said to us recently, "Navygrey is never unworn." That's what we're designing for. It's not about the pieces that just sit in your wardrobe and get worn a couple of times a year, it's about the items that live on your chair and hardly ever get folded away because you wear them so often.



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The Weekend Tee in Navy

Tell us about your new T-shirt range.

I love the ease of throwing on jeans and a jumper in autumn and winter. I wanted to create that ease with a lighter weight top for summer. We've had a lot of women say, "Why is this T-shirt so flattering? Why does this feel really easy to wear?" It's all about the ingredients and the fit. We use a European linen and have stabilised it through the neckline. It gives the T-shirt structure and sits on your collarbone, which is more flattering. We've fitted the T-shirt on real women; women have boobs, so the T-shirt is designed for boobs!

I believe sustainability is important to the brand?

From the beginning, it was a given that we do things in the right way and we've been B Corp certified for over two years now.

We work with some of the best makers in the world and some of the best fibres in the world. Whether it's flax fields in the Netherlands, France or Belgium, or sheep farmers here in Britain, the companies in our supply chain are so important and fundamental to our existence.

We're working with people who are masters in what they do and creating something of real value that can be worn again and again and again.

And you don't need to wash woollen jumpers, which saves water and energy. So, sustainability is embedded right through each piece, from the raw materials to the usage.

You mentioned that most of your products are made in the UK?

Yes. Britain is very good at knitwear and wovens. We work with five different knitting teams spread throughout the British Isles. They're some of the best knitters in the world and also knit for the likes of Chanel.

Our merino jumpers are knitted by Vanya and her team. Our rugby shirts are knitted with cotton by Roy and Helen, who actually live in Rugby, funnily enough! They've been making rugby shirts for 30 years.

Andrea makes our buttons. She saved some of the last remaining button machines in the UK. Claire, who's up in the Highlands of Scotland, is weaving checks and plaids and tartan for us. She's converted these old looms, which are centuries old.

Several of our Scottish knitters are men who used to play professional rugby. You would never think to put knitting and rugby together, but farming and wool and rugby are quite intertwined.

We've also partnered with a brilliant designer who lives on Fair Isle in Shetland, to create an authentic Fair Isle pattern for us.

Sometimes, the drive behind our designs is when we find makers who are doing something really interesting and we think, "How can we bring their skill into our brand to create something that our customers could love?"

You're definitely a British brand, through and through...

There's a lot of 'heritage washing' going on in fashion, where brands talk about being British and about British style, but they don't make any of their clothes here.

We're really proud of being a British brand and supporting British industries. For example, we're working with real Shetland wool. You can buy 'Shetland wool' from Australia, but we're working with genuine Shetlanders and their wiry, fearsome Shetland sheep.

Heritage wool isn't as smooth as something like merino. It can be a bit feistier, so we sometimes blend it with other British wool to create something really luxurious.

Can you tell us about your collaboration with the Cornish designer Francli Craftwear?

Customers were telling us that they wanted a bag, so we started thinking, "If Navygrey had a bag, what would it be?" We've loved working with Francli. It's been a meeting of minds and they've created a blooming good bag.

We used British Pasture Leather in the bag. The cattle are helping to regenerate the land they graze on.

It must be a challenge charging higher prices in the current climate?

We cannot compete on price with brands that don't have the same integrity. We're not making cheap products; we're working with the best fabrics and the best makers in Britain, which comes at a price. It's a lot more expensive than making something from plastic in China. The European linen that we're working with, for instance, is one of the best linens in the world.

I always say it's worth investing in the pieces that you'll wear on repeat. A dress you might wear a handful of times can end up having a much higher cost per wear than a jumper you wear numerous times, year after year.

What are your plans for Navygrey?

We're going to do more pop-up stores, as there's huge value in meeting people face-to-face. Being able to say, "Andrea cut that button; Vanya knitted that; this is why we've cut the neckline in this way," and so on, is really impactful. We'll have a store in Notting Hill for a couple of months from September, and then we're moving to Marylebone until around January. We'll then be travelling the length and breadth of the British Isles, including Bath and Wiltshire.



The Breton in Ink and Ecu

We're also planning to trial a men's range next year. It will be a very small range - basically an experiment to see how it sells. There are lots of other things that we'd love to do. We want to experiment with different wools, dyeing processes and so on. Research & development is expensive and time-intensive, so we're looking to secure investment to help us reach the next stage.

There are times that I think, "I just want a normal job," but it is exciting... 🙌

navygrey

BUSINESS BIO: NAVYGREY

Founded: 2019

Founder: Rachel Carvell-Spedding

Based: London

Staff: 10

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Do you run your own business? Email kate.venture@afwm.co.uk and you could be in the next issue of *Venture!*