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Royal Rediscovery

THE FORGOTTEN SHEEP OF EL ESCORIAL

OPPOSITE: PETER RADFORD, FOUNDER OF ESCORIAL, WITH A FLOCK OF ESCORIAL SHEEP. PHOTO BY DUNCAN COLE COURTESY OF THE ESCORIAL COMPANY ESCORIALGROUP.COM



**A ROYAL THREAD BETWEEN
SPAIN AND NEW ZEALAND**

Luxury is rarely about the obvious. It concerns the whispered, the withheld, the half-seen thing glimpsed only by those attuned to the right codes. Anyone can recognize an Hermès bag, a Rolex, or the silken nap of cashmere. But true connoisseurship operates in another register altogether: knowledge. It is the ability to discern what others overlook, to speak an almost extinct language, and to recognize — in a weave, in a word — a secret thread of history.

THIS BRINGS US TO SHEEP.



Not just any sheep, of course, but Escorial sheep: a small, temperamental, curly-headed animal with fleece that once clothed Spanish kings. They nearly vanished from history, only to resurface improbably on hidden estates in Australia and New Zealand. The Escorial sheep's story is one of exile and survival, of cultural displacement and rediscovery, and of a lineage as delicate and enduring as a manuscript rediscovered in a monastery library.

Escorial wool is not marketed on billboards or flashed across Instagram feeds. Few have even heard its name. And yet, on Savile Row and in the ateliers of Brioni, Comme des Garçons, and

Huntsman, whispers persist: This is the rarest of all wools, softer than cashmere, springier than vicuña, crease-resistant as though nature conspired to rival Lycra. To wear Escorial is not to display wealth; it is to speak in code and belong to a secret society of taste where knowing matters more than showing.

**THE PRIZED SHEEP
OF EL ESCORIAL**

The Escorial story begins in Spain, in a century when wool was a matter of statecraft and style. The Moors had brought sheep of unusual fineness from North Africa, and by the time Philip II reigned in Madrid, their fleece had become a treasure guarded as carefully as silver from the New World. The animals were gathered on the plains surrounding Philip II's newly built monastery-palace of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, a fortress of granite that embodied the solemnity of the empire.





There, beneath the shadow of the monastery-palace's towers, the flocks grazed as royal property. They were not livestock in any ordinary sense but instruments of prestige, their fleeces reserved for garments that would never touch common shoulders. To attempt to steal or export one of these sheep was considered theft and treason.

For a time, the Escorial sheep's fleece was among the most jealously guarded luxuries in Europe. In an era when silk was associated with Asia and vicuña with the Andes, Escorial wool was Europe's contribution to the pantheon of rare fibers: softer than the finest Merino, with a natural elasticity that defied creasing.

But history is rarely static. Due to the political upheaval of the 18th century, small flocks of Escorial sheep were spirited out of Spain as gifts and contraband to Saxony and the Low Countries. The Napoleonic wars scattered the sheep that remained in Spain, and soldiers consumed them as rations.

By the 19th century, Escorial sheep in Europe had all but vanished. The regal flocks, once inviolate, had been erased.

EXILE TO THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

Escorial sheep survived thanks to an unlikely act of defiance and vision. In 1829, a Scottish emigrant, Eliza Furlong, embarked on a journey of extraordinary improbability. She set sail for Tasmania with a flock of 120 Escorial sheep. The voyage lasted some eight months, a rolling confinement of men, women, and animals across oceans that were barely mapped. That they survived the passage is a testament both to Furlong's determination and to a colonial stubbornness that refused to let go of a creature so delicate, costly, and out of place on a heaving deck.

On the other side of the world, in a colony barely carved out of the wilderness, the sheep endured, tucked into the margins of an antipodean landscape where thistles and gum trees grew in place of Castilian grass. Forgotten by Europe and unrecognized by the global wool trade dominated by Merino, the sheep lingered on small estates across Tasmania and Victoria, their wool admired but never exploited at scale.

For more than a century, Escorial sheep persisted in obscurity, as if history had placed them under a veil. The royal exiles lived anonymous lives on a distant continent.

THE RADFORD RESURRECTION

By the mid-20th century, Escorial sheep had slipped into near-anonymity. Too small to yield much meat and too few in number to influence the wool trade, they survived in pockets of Tasmania more as curiosities than as heirs to royal flocks. Families kept them, not out of commercial calculation, but as if holding on to remnants of another age.

It was in this obscurity that, in 1960, a young agricultural student named Peter Radford encountered the sheep. What caught his attention was not their size or temperamental nature, but their fleece. Unlike Merino, the fibers did not lie flat; they curled into infinitesimal helices, each one like a spring. Woven into cloth, these spirals created garments that resisted creasing, rebounded from pressure, and held warmth in airy lightness. Radford sensed immediately that this was not simply wool, but the vestige of lost luxury.

WHAT OTHERS DISMISSED AS IMPRACTICAL, HE RECOGNIZED AS RARE.

By the 1980s, Radford's conviction had matured into a plan. He saw in New Zealand's landscapes — Marlborough's long valleys, Otago's stone-studded hills, and Canterbury's fertile plains — the ideal conditions to secure the Escorial sheep's survival. In 1987, he undertook a bold experiment: transferring 120 frozen embryos from Tasmania into surrogate ewes in Canterbury. It was a gamble of science and faith. By the following year, 40 lambs stood on South Island pastures, fragile yet alive, their fleeces shimmering with promise.

Radford's purpose went beyond agriculture. He understood that to preserve these sheep was to restore a cultural heritage — an authentic luxury at risk of vanishing. With his family and a small group of growers, Radford began breeding the sheep with extraordinary care, safeguarding bloodlines and refining the fiber as one might tend a rediscovered manuscript. What emerged was not a revival for scale but for significance: a noble fiber given new life on a faraway continent.



**FARMING AT THE EDGE
OF THE WORLD**

To farm Escorial sheep in New Zealand is to take part in a tradition where patience and stewardship carry more weight than yield. The sheep are not hardy in the commercial sense. Their small frames yield little meat. They are temperamental (“stropy,” as the locals say), quick to bolt, and less tolerant of illness. They reproduce sparingly, so every lamb is a kind of victory.

And yet, it is precisely this fragility that contributes to their aura. They are noble creatures, still retaining something of their regal exile, and their rarity depends on constant vigilance. Farmers tend them with quiet reverence, for the flocks are not merely animals but the custodians of enduring elegance.

The landscapes in which the sheep graze are part of their story. In Marlborough, they wander beneath hills lined with vineyards, the Pacific winds brushing their fleeces clean. In Otago, they graze beside orchards and the turquoise waters

of the Clutha River. In North Canterbury, their paddocks lie open beneath the snowy ridges of the Southern Alps. These pastures are backdrops that imprint their clarity and purity upon the sheep’s wool.

Here, farming is less about productivity than about authenticity. Each fleece is harvested with meticulous care, sheared cleanly to avoid contamination, and combed more than ordinary wool to preserve purity. The Radfords and their circle of growers form a community of guardians, bound by the knowledge that they are cultivating not simply a commodity but a legacy.

THE SHEEP’S WOOL

To look at an Escorial sheep is to see modesty. They are small and curly-headed, with a frame more delicate than that of the Merino. But hidden within their fleece lies the defining secret — the helical crimp. Each fiber coils upon itself in a natural spring, conferring resilience and lightness to the wool.



This singular architecture creates fabrics of remarkable qualities. The air trapped within the spirals makes garments warm yet weightless. The elasticity means the cloth drapes with poise, resists wrinkles, and returns to form after wear. Tailors prize it for its responsiveness, and wearers for its comfort. Compared with Merino, Escorial wool feels alive — tactile, supple, and almost as if it breathes with the body.

Escorial cloth is luminous rather than shiny, and fluid rather than stiff. A suit cut from it maintains its elegance through years of wear, never collapsing into fatigue. Scarves and stoles fashioned from it seem impossibly soft yet retain structure. The wool speaks not of artifice but of nature's own refinement. It is a luxurious fiber wrought not by industry but by centuries of survival.

THE FIBER

Processing Escorial wool requires techniques as rarefied as the fiber itself. Its springing curls resist the standard machinery designed for flatter fibers. Washing, spinning, and weaving must all proceed at a slower, more deliberate pace. After cleansing, the fibers reform their helices, tightening into dense air pockets that yield warmth, resilience, and luminosity in the finished fabric.

In Yorkshire, England, mills such as Joshua Ellis and Luxury Fabrics coax these fibers into suiting and coatings of remarkable durability. On Savile Row, Huntsman has cut Escorial wool into quietly



commanding grey suits, while Sid Mashburn has cut it into jackets that embody elevated casual elegance. At each stage, the fiber is treated with reverence, as if it were less a raw material than a lineage to be honored.

This is not mass production. It is a chain of custody that extends from New Zealand pastures to European ateliers. Each link — shepherd, spinner, and tailor — exists not to extract value but to preserve authenticity, purity, and rarity.

A LEGACY PRESERVED

The Radford family remains central to this narrative of preservation. The Escorial Company, founded in 1990, is not so much a commercial enterprise as a custodian of heritage. It governs breeding programs, ensures sustainability, and works with a select circle of spinners and tailors to maintain standards that no marketing contrivance could ever invent.

Today, just 24 growers across four countries — predominantly in New Zealand — contribute to the survival of the Escorial line. Their commitment is bound not by contracts but by pride: a shared responsibility to sustain authenticity and guard a rare, noble fiber that must be protected by scarcity.

Escorial is now a registered trademark, with its name safeguarded by the Escorial Council, a body of growers across hemispheres who serve as stewards. For clients and tailors, that mark is the guarantee of provenance, purity, and truth. To wear Escorial is to wear authenticity woven into the cloth and into the pastoral landscapes and family traditions that give it life.

THE FEEL OF RARITY

In a world dominated by speed and volume, Escorial offers something radically different: patience, survival, and authenticity. Its rarity is not a marketing device but a lived truth, born of fragile sheep, demanding landscapes, and generations of stewardship.

Those who encounter Escorial wool speak of its softness with reverence, its tailoring qualities with admiration, and its resilience with surprise. A jacket brushed every few months can endure for decades, retaining its luster. Luxury is not ornamental, but enduring: Garments perform beautifully across time, embodying nature's architecture and human care.



On a Canterbury morning, with flocks grazing against the luminous expanse of the Southern Alps, the arc of the Escorial story becomes clear. From the guarded pastures of Philip II to the orchards and vineyards of New Zealand, the sheep have traveled a path of exile, survival, and return.

To wear Escorial is to participate in that continuum and embrace authenticity, purity, and a noble fiber whose very survival is the rarest luxury of all.

THE ESCORIAL COMPANY

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