



‘I COULD NOT FAIL’

Photography: Jane Hilton
Words: Victoria Gaiger

It took Allan Brown seven years to spin 14,400ft of thread to weave a dress out of nettles in memory of his late wife, Alex. But what began as a sort of therapy turned into a gift for life



Opposite page: The four-shaft table loom Allan used to weave the cloth for the dress. Previous spread, from left: Samples of Allan's nettle cloth; Allan and his dog Bonnie at home, with a small mannequin of the nettle dress on the shelf (far right)

IN AN UNASSUMING TERRACED HOUSE in Brighton, there's artistic alchemy afoot. It hangs in the air over the rudimentary loom, the threads spinning from a drop spindle in the weaver's hand, and the piles of nettles sourced from Limekiln Wood on the outskirts of the city. But, most of all, it hides in the fabric of a unique dress now shimmering in front of us and soon to be seen on a screen near you.

The Nettle Dress is a poignant, 68-minute documentary but, most importantly, it's an actual dress made of nettles woven by self-taught weaver Allan Brown whose efforts were spun into the year's most unlikely independent cinema hit by his long-standing friend and film-maker Dylan Howitt.

Brown had no training in textiles, although his late wife, Alex, was a keen sewer and maker. What he did have was a background in fine art and illustration, and a new dog to walk, Bonnie, the family's Labrador-cocker spaniel cross, whose appetite for regular exercise took Brown into Limekiln Wood.

Armed with a book on native wildflowers, Brown started off looking at edible and therapeutic plants. That got him thinking: what if the abundant stinging nettles, those common-or-garden weeds, could be spun into a cloth like silk?

'Dylan and I had known each other for years,' explains Brown. 'We bonded through environmental protest, but, eventually, the scale of what needed to be done was overwhelming, so we started thinking about the politics of public land, which led me to take on an idle allotment. I wanted to roll up my sleeves and grow my own food.'

From growing his own food, spinning his own clothes was an obvious next step. 'I'd already foraged for food in woods, and nettles had always been present in my life, from wasteland to allotment to garden, so I started thinking about nettles and cloth.'

While twisting nettle fibres into a rough string on walks through the woods, Brown noticed that beneath the outer epidermis of the plant lay incredibly fine, silky fibres and, as he puts it, 'my idle curiosity got wildly out of hand'.

Using nettles to make clothing is not new. It dates back to around 2,000 years ago, with the earliest evidence coming from a Bronze Age (2200 to 700 BCE) body discovered wrapped in nettle cloth in Voldtofte, Denmark. There is also evidence of nettle cloth being produced all over Europe and beyond, from Scandinavia, Poland, Germany and Russia to China and Japan.

The use of nettle fibres in textile-making declined from the 16th century onwards as cotton, which was easier and more convenient to harvest, became more popular. Within 200 years, cotton had

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*This page: Allan wearing a shirt he made from nettles.
Opposite page: Retted nettles ready for the fibres to be extracted*

'Spinning had become a passion for Brown and he asked Howitt to help him make a how-to video to share his nettle knowledge with the textile community. Called Nettles For Textiles, the video quickly went viral'



This page: The giant Frida Kahlo puppet made by Allan's late wife, Alex. Opposite page: Film-maker and friend Dylan Howitt (left) with Allan wear Sheep Inc. knits to keep warm in the woods

become central to the Industrial Revolution, with its trade powering Britain's rise as an imperial superpower. In Poland, however, nettles were still used in textile-making up until the 17th century, and the fibres were used as recently as the 19th century in Scotland to make what was known as Scotch cloth. There was even a brief resurgence of nettle spinning in Germany during the First World War when, due to Britain's near monopoly of the cotton trade, the stinging plants were used to make uniforms.

Beyond textiles, nettles are also woven into our wider history. The Romans are said to have brought *Urtica pilulifera* to Britain and used the plant to alleviate the pain of rheumatism and arthritis, as well as the cold (by flailing themselves with nettle bundles to stimulate blood circulation). The Anglo-Saxons valued nettles so highly that the plants were one of the nine sacred herbs they believed would cure infection. Renowned diarist Samuel Pepys supposedly enjoyed a bowl of nettle porridge, while the gardener in Sir Walter Scott's novel, *Rob Roy*, nurtured nettles for use as early spring kale.

One of the key attractions of using nettles in textile-making lies in their abundance. As every gardener knows, they grow everywhere and, needless to say, they are perennials, which means you can harvest them every year. In addition to their ubiquity, they have a superpower, as Brown discovered: they produce high-quality fibres – strong, versatile and a good length for spinning.

Brown began to teach himself the art of spinning and weaving, courtesy of YouTube, and to work with the abundant harvest he brought home from his regular walks by laying the bundles of nettles to 'ret' (rot) in the dew. 'I originally looked to the Nepalese, who have a long history of working with Himalayan nettles, and their method of boiling the outer woody bast in wood ash and then drying the fibres in clay,' says Brown. 'But that didn't work, so I looked at how flax and hemp are processed and that's why I ended up retting the nettles.'

Retting creates conditions that enable microorganisms in the soil, air and water to break down the plant by dissolving the pectin and gums that hold the outer bast to its inner woody core. The result is that you can extract ribbons of nettle fibre by hand.

Soon Brown was spinning, practising using wool plucked from barbed-wire fences and bramble patches. 'I was mainly using a drop spindle, as I loved its simplicity and portability,' he says. 'I spun whenever I could, turning all the little gaps in daily life into yarn. It soon felt so natural that it was almost as if my fingers had been genetically trained to do it, and I felt like my internal life was somehow being drawn out of me and recorded in the thread.'

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Brown's life, though, soon fell apart. In 2016, his father died: 'I sat by his bed and spun nettles on my drop spindle.' Then, two years later, his wife Alex died of cancer. 'Spinning primarily soaked up the pain,' he says. 'I know it helped.'

Brown showed me Alex's room. A giant Frida Kahlo puppet that she made for a children's carnival, a beautiful portrait of her by American photographer Alec Soth, and some exquisite clothes she had knitted for their children. 'Alex was incredibly talented,' he says. 'When she was ill, she slept and I spun. All the grief I was dealing with went into that cloth – just as weavers of the past would have spun their stories, grief and love into a fabric.'

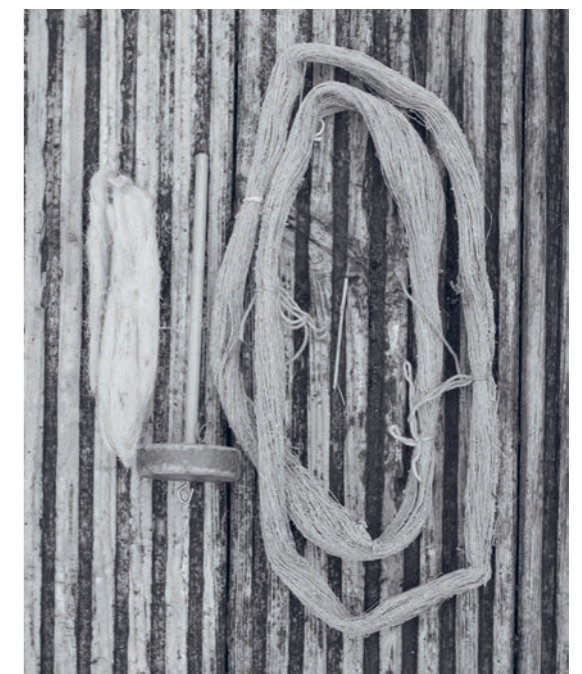
As much a distraction as therapy, spinning had become a passion for Brown so he asked Howitt to help him make a how-to video for YouTube to share his nettle knowledge with the textile community. Called *Nettles For Textiles*, the video quickly went viral and spawned a Facebook group that now has more than 28,000 members. After Alex died, Howitt suggested making a longer film with the nettle dress, worn by one of Brown's daughters, as the star. The novice weaver was both touched and inspired. 'I couldn't give up. I could not fail,' says Brown. But, first, he had to spin enough thread to weave the dress.

If spinning yarn was both therapy for his grief and a testament to his late wife, Brown's inspiration was *The Wild Swans* by Hans Christian Anderson. In the fairy tale, the heroine must collect nettles from a graveyard, spin them in silence and weave nettle shirts for her 11 brothers to wear to undo an evil spell that has turned them into swans. It is a tale that creates an association between nettles, death, suffering and, ultimately, joy, as the following passage reveals: 'With her soft hands, she took hold of the dreadful nettles that seared like fire. Great blisters rose on her hands and arms, but she endured it gladly in the hope that she could free her beloved brothers. She crushed each nettle with her bare feet and spun the green flax.'

'I felt that nettles had been used in the story, as opposed to the more ubiquitous flax, because there must still have existed a folk memory of using nettles and the additional labour they require,' says Brown. 'It was the fibre by which the weaver's levels of dedication and intention could



Allan spins the nettle yarn on his drop spindle





A portrait of Alex by American photographer Alec Soth sits alongside other family photographs

be gauged. That practical wisdom, captured in a story, was very useful as I was able to see that I wasn't missing a step which would magically make processing nettles as easy as flax or hemp.

'I could see that the quality of thread I was spinning was improving,' says Brown. 'But I had no idea how fine it needed to be to create a cloth comfortable enough to wear. I was keen to start weaving some samples to learn what a nettle cloth woven using my thread would feel like.'

To do that, Brown realised that he needed to up his game. 'I had to get hold of a bigger loom to practice on,' he says. Thanks to the Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers in Brighton, he picked up a small, four-shaft table loom and began to weave his first samples. 'They were thick, rough and unusable for clothes, but the fabric felt incredibly strong. I hoped as I improved that I'd soon be spinning a thread fine enough for clothing.' Through trial and error, the quality of the cloth Brown produced got better, and he started to soften the woven cloth by pressing it with a heavy stone.

'As I knew I had to hand-sew the dress, I also signed up for a sewing class to learn some basic stitching and pattern-cutting skills, and then I practised sewing together some of my nettle samples with a homespun thread made from a ply of nettle and flax. By the time I'd spun enough nettle yarn to attempt to weave the cloth for the dress –14,400ft of thread for the warp alone – I'd been spinning for about seven years.'

Finally, the warp went onto the loom, and Brown began to weave the cloth for the nettle dress. The simple weave highlighted the different shades of yarn harvested and spun in different seasons. It was as if all the single threads were becoming more than just material for a dress. 'It was like the thoughts, feelings, birdsong, weather and conversations that had been spun into the yarn were now laying together, over and under each other, telling a fuller story as woven cloth,' Brown explains.

While Brown was working with physical threads on the loom, Howitt was weaving together the threads of a narrative. 'Without a client and a deadline for the film, we were able to talk at length which became

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part of the creation of the film,' says Howitt. 'I saw the film as a slow-motion conversation between the two of us, and as we chatted, ideas and other narratives would come up. I filmed all the various steps leading up to the finished dress, so the weaving and the documentary progressed hand in hand.'

'Cutting the cloth was terrifying,' recalls Brown, but after a few weeks the dress was hand-stitched together. 'It was as if the cloth was coming alive, taking on a human form. Occasionally, from the corner of my eye, I'd catch sight of the dressed mannequin and for a moment it felt like the girl from the fairy tale had stepped off the page into the room.'

Eventually, Brown's daughter Oonagh did step into the room and into the finished dress, which she modelled for the film's final scenes. But the story of the nettle dress doesn't end there because while Brown may have completed a seemingly impossible task, the dress gave him a valuable gift in return.

'With functional cloth, you don't need to be a master, rudimentary basics will take you a long way,' he says. 'It feels as though the nettle is steadfastly pointing the way back to an older way of doing things – folk cloth as opposed to commercial fabric. To me, it is 'the fibre of the landless', the most readily available, high-quality textile fibre that grows wild and can be easily foraged. Nettles thrive in the wasteland left by humans and their domesticated livestock, and as well as fibre they provide us with medicine and food. The relationship between humans and nettles is an ancient one.'

'Making clothing in this slow, gentle way means returning to the same places and doing the same things over and over again,' Brown explains. 'The repetitiveness of so many of the tasks involved feels like deepening our relationships with nature rather than drudgery. It's as if the cloth is being made specifically for you, by people who know and love you, from fibres found in our own landscape. This is the way clothing has been made for most of human history. We were collectively wearing the dreams, stories, joys and suffering of the people who made up our community. I feel it's imperative that we reclaim the making of our clothes – slow, gentle, beautiful clothes.' •



*This page: Dylan Howitt discusses friendship and filming *The Nettle Dress*.
Opposite page: Allan's daughter Oonagh models the finished garment*

