

CASE STUDY:

Johnstons of Elgin

Textile manufacturer, Elgin



A report published in July 2020 by Family Business United found Johnstons of Elgin to be one of three oldest family businesses in Scotland. The origins of Johnstons of Elgin date back to 1797 when Alexander Johnston established a textile business in Elgin, Morayshire. Initially focussed on the manufacturing of linen and grinding of oatmeal, Johnston then ventured into the spinning of wool in 1801. By 1811, all processes took place at Newmill including the spinning, weaving, dyeing and pressing - it was now a 'vertical mill'. It remains the only one in Scotland today, where the entire manufacturing process of weaving wool and cashmere from raw to the finished cloth is completed.

In 1980, the company acquired a knitwear mill in Hawick, Scottish Borders, to form its second manufacturing hub. As of 2018, the company's mills in Elgin and Hawick employed a workforce of between 900-1,000 people. In 2022, the company celebrated its 225th anniversary and remains synonymous with luxury cloth, accessories and knitwear.

In 2013, Johnstons of Elgin was declared Scotland's fifth oldest family business by Family Business United, and so record surveys are an important process in ensuring the company's heritage and documentary evidence is preserved and safeguarded. Record surveys of the company's archive have been undertaken on at least two previous occasions with the first dating back to 1971; the survey was later updated by a member of staff in 2013 documenting the existing historical records being cared for by the company. Johnstons of Elgin was then contacted in 2022 by the Ballast Trust and the Business Archives Surveying Officer for Scotland as part of a national project being carried out with support of the UK National Archives, FIELDWORK: Mapping Scotland's Business Archives.

Johnstons of Elgin has long understood and appreciated the immense value of its historic records, recognising that these archives are more than documents—they are a testament to the company's heritage, authenticity, and commitment to Scottish craftsmanship.

When approached by the Surveying Officer in 2022, the company embraced the opportunity to deepen its understanding of the collection and what was needed to ensure its continued accessibility and preservation.

Thanks to the Surveying Officer's efforts, the business took a significant step towards safeguarding the existing collection and laying the foundation for its growth by hiring an experienced Archivist and Records Manager. Now working towards a structured records management system, Johnstons of Elgin is not only protecting its past but actively shaping its future - ensuring that its rich history remains at the heart of the business for future generations.

Sarah Wilcock
Archivist & Records Manager, Johnstons of Elgin

The existing survey lists recorded the two key areas of the archive; the pattern books, and the historical business records which includes ledgers, day books, letter books, as well as administrative and financial papers. However, since around the 1990s a new key area to the archive has developed - a vast collection of final fabric headers and swatches produced by the Design Team, which is an invaluable part of the archive showing Johnstons of Elgin's recent product history.

Following the surveying visit in 2022 and recommendations report summarising archive best practice and opportunities for the company's physical archive and heritage management going forward, Johnstons of Elgin understood the benefits that archive investment would bring, and appointed an Archivist and Records Manager in early 2024. Since then, significant work has been undertaken to audit and catalogue the collection, improve storage and implement repackaging using conservation materials, as well as increase access by engaging new audiences. For example, "The Archive Experience" is an opportunity now available for members of the public to gain exclusive access to the company's archive room, to explore its 225 years of rich and unique history.

Johnstons of Elgin is an invaluable example of Scottish brand heritage, where its archive is a centralised and rich asset that is used for marketing, design inspiration and storytelling to its customers and visitors across the world.



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