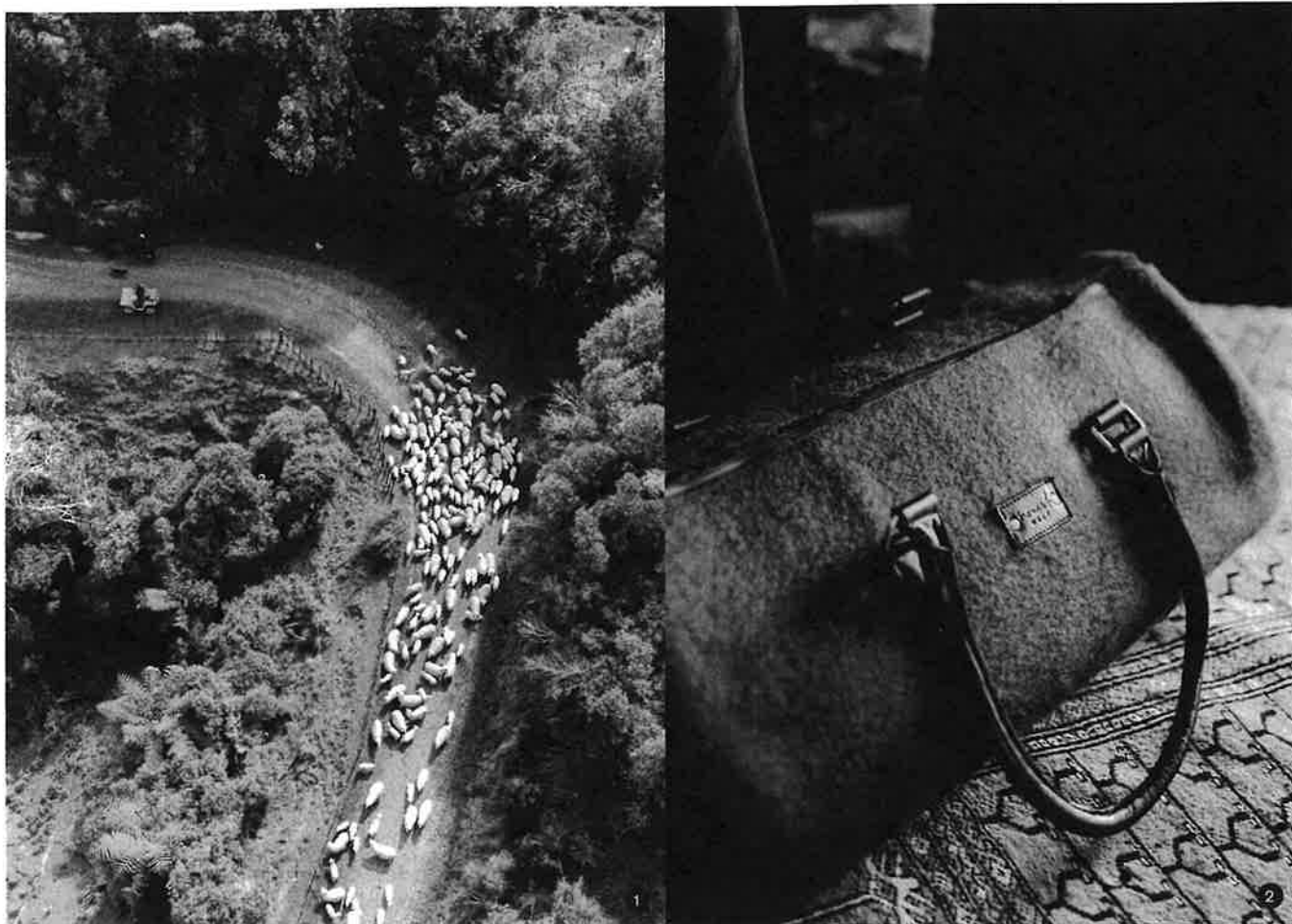


Off the sheep's back

On a remote hill station near Hunterville, one couple is putting the “cool” back into wool, one bag at a time.

STORY VANESSA TRETHEWEY



MEET THIRD GENERATION farmers Sophie and Sam Hurley: outside-the-box thinkers, and founders of Honest Wolf, a luggage and accessory range that uses traditional strong wool in fresh new ways. Launched last year – while navigating life in a global pandemic and a newborn baby – their brand crafts caps, wallets, laptop sleeves and bags from felted wool clipped from the 25,000 kelso and romney ewes they farm at Papanui Estate.

Previously farmed by Sam's grandfather and father, the 3300ha sheep and beef station is a legacy the couple are determined to protect for generations to come. But with the popularity of wool carpet taking a dive in recent years due to the rise of synthetic

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alternatives, generating income from the farm's 170 tonnes of wool annually has become an ongoing challenge. In fact, in 2020, for the first time in the farm's history, it cost more to shear the sheep than the farm could sell the clip for.

“We'd been brainstorming ideas to add value to the current business and, while we were on our honeymoon, we had a lightbulb moment,” says Sophie. “It was around the time plastic bags were getting phased out, and we realised wool would be a great product to make reusable shopping bags from because it's good for the environment and has the ability to keep products cold or warm.”

The concept had legs. Not only was it an

innovative way to use their wool, but it would utilise Sophie's marketing and sales skills and give her the opportunity to reconnect with her career.

After gaining a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Otago, working in sales and marketing in Auckland and living in London, **Papanui Estate was quite a change.** "I'd only been there once, at night, for a ball. I'd never even seen the place in daylight. **Moving to the farm with Sam six years ago was a huge step, because even though I'd grown up on a farm, I was quite career driven, and living somewhere so remote made it difficult to continue my career.**"

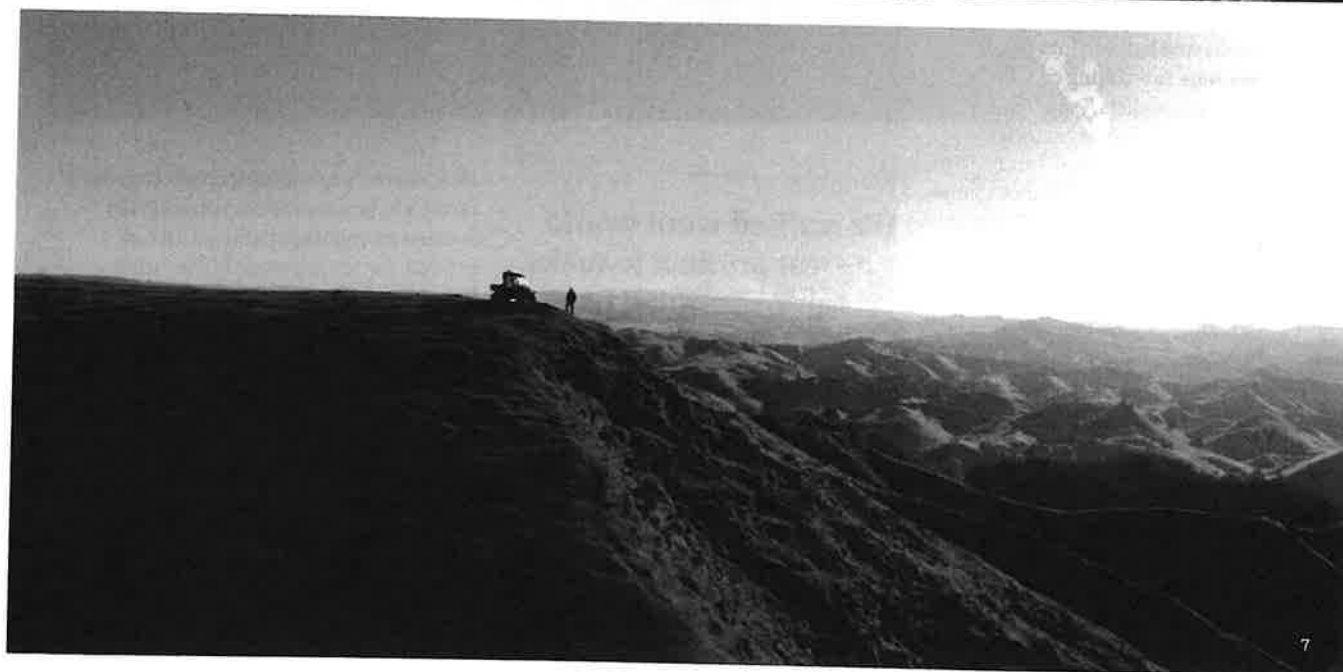
Living on a property accessed via a shingle road "that seemed to stretch on forever", and with the nearest place to buy milk a 45-minute drive away, Sophie couldn't have been further from the career opportunities offered in the big smoke. She landed a job with a local paper in Feilding, but the 90-minute commute each way gave her plenty of time to ruminate. "I love business and marketing, and I knew I wanted to do my own thing, so I quit work and Sam and I started up Honest Wolf."

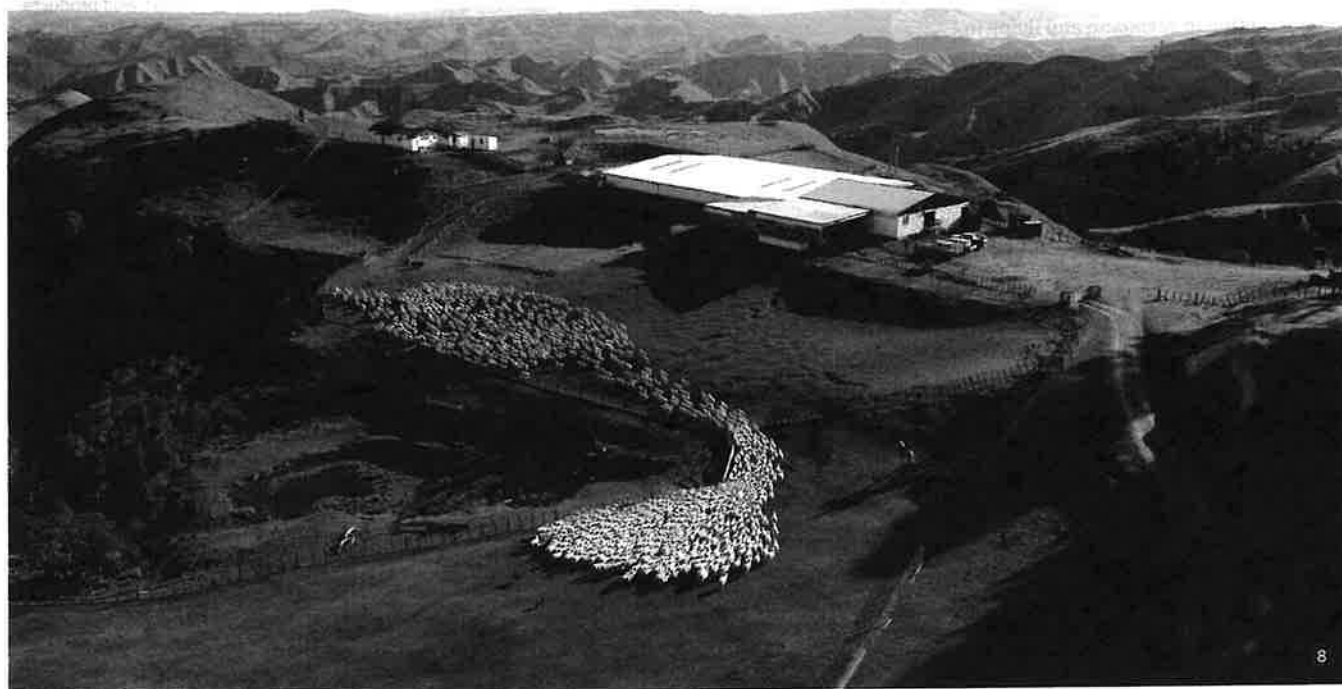
Why the name? "Honest because we use honest materials and wolf because we want to be the leader of the pack in utilising wool in an innovative way. Plus, we wanted something fashionable to describe what we were doing."

The first cab off the Honest Wolf rank was the casual shopper bag. "Sam and I had no experience in product design – our first few designs were horrific. It was very difficult to find a manufacturer in New Zealand, or the



1. Papanui Estate.
2. The wool and leather Weekender bag. 3. Sam and Sophie Hurley.
4. The casual shopper bag. 5, 6. Kelso and romney wool is used in Honest Wolf products.
7. The 3330ha property has been in the Hurley family for the past three generations.





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machinery we needed, so we ended up outsourcing the manufacturing to India.”

After a few false starts – “one of the samples arrived back from India and the bag was smaller than my hand because we’d accidentally left a few zeros off our measurements” – Honest Wolf hit its straps. “Once we nailed the casual shopper, we realised this could be the saviour of our wool, and we started looking into other ideas for the range and adding cool little features like bottle pockets,” says Sophie.

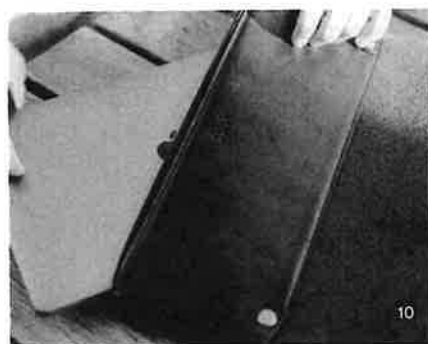
Now, Honest Wolf offers accessories (hats, wallets, even a wool comb) and several models of bag. Crafted from Papanui Estate wool and chrome-free New Zealand leather, bags are lined with a topographic map of the farm, featuring everything right down to the name of each paddock. “Wherever the bag goes, it connects back to the land where the wool was grown.”

Currently about 30 percent of the estate’s wool goes into Honest Wolf, though they hope that’ll edge closer to 100 percent in the near future. They are also hoping to expand the product range, decrease their carbon footprint, and launch the brand internationally. “We’ve been focusing on New Zealand and Australia because we want to make sure we get things right here first before going international – we don’t want the



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8. The Hurleys want to spread the word about New Zealand wool. 9, 10. Two stylish environmentally friendly products in the range.



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wool story and the family story to get lost.

“The rural industry was quick to support us because the wool sector is facing issues that are biting so many of us. Now we’re trying to tap into new markets by sharing facts about wool people may not know and encouraging them not just to buy our products, but to support the environment and the wool industry in general.”

honestwolf.co.nz ☎

