



Blue gold

Ian Howard has given up a life's work in traditional arable farming to become Britain's first commercial producer of natural indigo. Here he tells **Tiffany Daneff** why

Above, woad baked before crushing. Facing page, many tonnes of leaves need harvesting for a worthwhile return



UNTIL SIX YEARS AGO IAN HOWARD spent most of his working hours on a tractor. You'd be hard pushed to find a more traditional farmer, with his herd of South Devon suckler cows and fine arable land near Dereham in Norfolk on which he grew potatoes, sugar beet and wheat.

Today, his hands faintly blue despite protective gloves, Ian is the only commercial producer of natural indigo in Britain and has become fascinated with woad, the leafy, spinach-like plant from which the pigment is made. With his wife Bernadette he has set up a company, Woad-inc. In former stables and open cattle yards, the Howards have opened a shop selling their range of woad-based homewares, including throws, cushions and knitwear, and the soaps and hand creams made from the oil derived from woad seed. This is rich in Omega 3, 6 and 9 and is a great moisturiser. They also run workshops where Ian explains the intricate process of producing indigo and takes visitors around his Heath Robinsonesque series of buckets, pipes and tanks rippling with deep blue liquid.

"Woad was used by the Ancient Britons probably as antiseptic," he says, "not just as war paint" and famously it's what makes blue jeans blue. But real indigo is a palaver to produce, which is why woad-growing went out of fashion. It takes a tonne of leaves, says Ian, to produce just two kilos of dye at a cost of £400 a kilo compared with only £2.75 for the synthetic version. After the RAF and police stopped using the real thing in the Thirties for their uniforms, the last woad mill in Britain closed. So why did Ian get involved?

The short answer is that he was fed up with modern farming and together with other farmers – and with government support – he took part in trials looking for alternative crops. They trialled 28 – from tarragon, parsley, all the mints and chamomile, to more unusual plants such as valerian and echium. But it was woad that gripped his imagination. If only, he reasoned, he could find the means to produce commercial



As the business grew, Ian could no longer dye everything himself and he now employs local outworkers

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quantities. With experts from Reading University he worked on producing a natural pigment for inkjet printers and took part in EU-wide trials.

After that Ian was determined to pursue his research into commercial production. "There was nothing in books," he says, but after much experimentation he hit the jackpot. Like Coca-Cola, he will not reveal his secret formula but it means other companies come to him for supplies and advice. He sells more products than he can dye himself, which leaves him time to pursue his real interest – developing other uses for woad.

Business is ticking over, interest is rising, but, for Ian, the real goal and one he doubts will be achieved in his lifetime, will be to determine the further uses of the oil. Already research is being done at Bologna University into the health benefits of glucobrassicin, a compound released when the leaves are broken. "The man who follows me," Ian says, "will be a multimillionaire." ■

Woad-inc is based at Woad Barn, Rawhall Lane, Beetley, Dereham, Norfolk, 01362 860218; www.woad-inc.co.uk



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The woad leaves are steeped, baked and ground by Ian to release indigo dye. Below left, his wife Bernadette in the farm shop with a range of dyed products

