

To the
SEA

17

AS GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS SURROUNDING THE PROTECTION OF OUR OCEANS GROWS, ONE MAN IS DRIVING CHANGE WITHIN THE BRITISH GARMENT INDUSTRY. HUGH FRANCIS ANDERSON MEETS TOM KAY, FOUNDER OF FINISTERRE



“Finisterre, south-westerly, six to gale eight, occasional rain, moderate or poor.” As a child, I remember listening to BBC Radio 4’s Shipping Forecast with a fascination verging on the obsessive, and so too did one Tom Kay – so much so, in fact, that he named his brand after it. “When I was younger, I’d listen to the Shipping Forecast and imagine what it would be like to be in a tiny boat, miles out to sea, in one of those huge gales,” recounts Kay. “Finisterre is an old Shipping Forecast area, meaning end of the earth, and it’s a personal reminder of my connection to the sea.” What began as a minuscule company creating rugged, environmentally friendly garments for the British surfing community has, over the past 15 years, grown into a globally recognised brand.

“It all started with a waterproof fleece and a three-page website from my bedroom in St. Agnes [Cornwall] back in 2003,” Kay tells me. “Finisterre was really borne out of my love of the sea and, at the same time, from a need to make better products.” The latter secured him the attention and eventual backing of Prince Charles with a loan from the Prince’s Trust. Since that day, Finisterre has had one simple ethos: Product, Environment, People. “I always wanted us to have a purpose wider than just making good products. This ethos has been a guiding

star since then in everything that we do; 15 years later, we live and breathe these aims every day.” As a testament to this, Finisterre was awarded the highly sought-after B Corporation status, given to profit-making companies that voluntarily adhere to strict social and environmental performance, accountability and sustainability standards. “It’s a big thing for us,” says Kay. “We have joined a growing global movement of companies that are using business as a force for good.” Indeed, there are now more than 2,500 companies in 60 countries registered as B Corp, signifying the growing consciousness surrounding sustainability. I ask Kay how he thinks industries can best approach a more sustainable way of operating. “Innovation will play a key role in solving some of the major environmental problems out there,” he explains. “Being honest and transparent with your customers is very important.” And it’s true that, at a time when consumers are becoming increasingly conscious of what they purchase, the need for companies to evolve is at an all-time high.

The way in which Finisterre shows its transparency to its customers is through its fully traceable fabrics and manufacturing processes. Its 100 per cent Merino wool, for example, can be traced back to the farm it came from, where farmers must comply to the Five Freedoms



animal welfare act, ensuring the sheep lead healthy and happy lives. In this way, Finisterre is a pioneer. “Our process always starts with what the garment is intended to do, and what the best fabric is to do the job,” says Kay. “We then work closely with suppliers to make sure that the fabric is as good as possible. Our products are built to last.” All of Finisterre’s waterproof products are free from fluorocarbons and only organic cottons are used. The company has even partnered with other innovators to spread the message. One such partner is Econyl, which recycles nylon fishing nets and turns them into high-performance swimwear. Finisterre also takes the notion of recycling one step further through its Wetsuits from Wetsuits Programme, which intends to create the world’s first fully recyclable wetsuit. “We look to use recycled, recyclable, organic or natural fabrics wherever possible, made through an honest and open supply chain,” says Kay.

So where does Kay’s unwavering dedication to environmentalism and sustainability come from? “My home is on the coast of North Norfolk, where

my parents gave my sister and me a love of the sea. This is where my connection began,” he tells me. “In my teens, I discovered surfing and it became something I really identified with. The sea sustains me and I, through Finisterre, aim to sustain it.” This connection to the sea is central to keeping the Finisterre brand alive and has seen it partner with the RNLI, Vans, Christopher Raeburn and Arktis. It also makes films and broadcasts showcasing the allure of cold-water surfing, has a roster of athlete ambassadors, and eight stand-alone stores dotted around the country. Yet it retains the small-town surf-brand energy that it had back in 2003. Indeed, it is still headquartered in St. Agnes, on the north Cornish coast, mere paces from the water that so inspires its creators. Even with a rapidly expanding brand, Kay still manages to find time to surf. “I get in the sea three to four times a week,” he says. “I’m really lucky to be able to sustain this connection.” For a small surf brand launched just 15 years ago, Finisterre has blossomed into one of the most progressive emerging garment brands in Britain. Long may it continue.