

# MO' BETTER BLUES

*A small Welsh town has taken on the task of reinventing itself through top-end denim*

STORY HELENE DANCER \ PHOTOGRAPHY JAKE CURTIS



On the far western edge of Wales is a small town that was once home to the biggest jeans factory in Britain, employing 400 people in a town of 4,000. It turned out 35,000 pairs a week for three decades, but in 2002, production was outsourced to Morocco, and the town of Cardigan was left bereft until a knight in selvedge denim jeans came to the rescue.

"I want to get 400 people their jobs back," says David Hieatt, the Welsh-born entrepreneur behind Hiut Denim, the company he hopes will create these very jobs. His words are accompanied by the reassuring clatter of sewing machines at Hiut Denim's modest ►



David Hieatt at the Hiut Denim factory in Cardigan, Wales





Far left: David and Clare stand by Hiut's inspirations wall; left: the all-new Mazda3 motors past St Dogmals; right: Grandmaster Claudio Berlotti

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factory on Cardigan's outskirts. The company, which is on course to double its sales this year, was launched three years ago by David and his wife Clare. Their remit is to do one thing well: make high-end jeans from the world's best Japanese selvedge and organic denim using the expertise of Cardigan's skilled workforce.

Selvedge, or raw denim, is sought after by discerning denim fans the world over. Before launching Hiut Denim, David and Clare were the brains behind the hugely successful eco-minded outdoors brand Howies, which they sold to American giant Timberland in 2006.

"It's insane the amount of knowledge of making jeans there is here in Cardigan. Claudio [Berlotti] has been cutting for 39 years. If you have a driving lesson in town, they can teach you how to drive and how to cut jeans. It's a special place and world-class at making jeans," says David, surveying the factory with a smile. Grandmaster Claudio remains bent over his table, expertly cutting patterns with long scissors from a roll of deep-indigo selvedge denim.

"Jeans are beyond any status, any class," David continues amid the soundtrack of click-clacking sewing machines. "They've become the uniform for the creative man and woman. The people who are going to change the world will be wearing jeans, not business suits. I'm happy to be there on a free ride."

He points to pictures pasted up on a large white wall of innovators who capture the spirit of Hiut Denim: Radiohead, Malcolm Gladwell, Audrey Hepburn and Adidas founder Adi Dassler, to name a few.

"Radiohead said they didn't want to be the biggest band in the world, they wanted to be the most influential. And because they were the most influential, they became one of the biggest bands in the world," says David. "Your goal has to be as creative as you can be – for us, it's to get 400 people their jobs back. We're really an ideas company that makes jeans."

David professes to be "hopelessly in love" with ideas, his dulcet Welsh tones belying the intensity of his conviction. He started his career in the advertising world as a copywriter in some of London's top agencies, working with visionaries like Paul Arden, a former creative director for Saatchi and Saatchi, who taught him to be

brilliant, and never average. Clare worked in advertising too, art directing for big brands like the Body Shop.

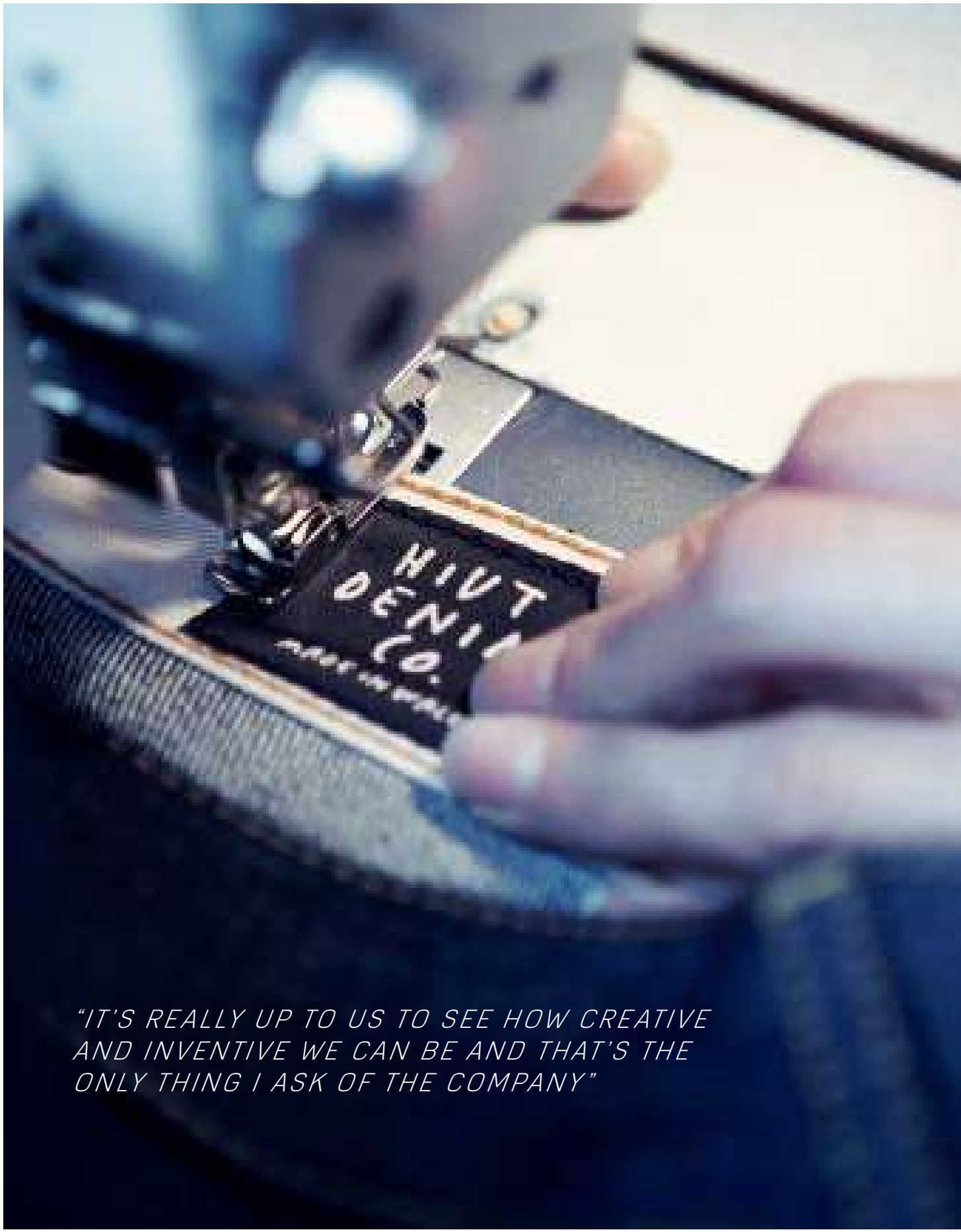
Hiut Denim sits at the helm of a new breed of small British manufacturers committed to quality, craftsmanship and innovation, and harnessing the power of the internet rather than traditional routes to market. Currently, Hiut Denim sells its jeans direct to customers through its website and all its marketing is conducted online.

"The internet changes the economics for the maker and now anyone can look like a million-dollar company for just nine dollars. The small players can fight quite tough now," he says. His company's online presence is impressive; the beautifully designed and thoughtfully worded website often extends to consistently personable and inspirational conversations on social networks.

"There is a desire for great quality and authenticity," David continues. "If you look at the beer market, there's such a reaction to mediocre lagers because they try to make it for everyone and that's why we end up with bland products. Once you've tasted a beer of exceptional quality, it's hard to go back."

Hiut Denim is quickly gaining respect for its innovation and David is particularly proud of the History Tag on the company's website, which stems from looking at a pair of 140-year-old jeans, when Levis first began producing them, and wondering what their story was. "It felt like such a shame that they couldn't tell their story, but they ►





*"IT'S REALLY UP TO US TO SEE HOW CREATIVE AND INVENTIVE WE CAN BE AND THAT'S THE ONLY THING I ASK OF THE COMPANY"*



Left: hard at work in the Hiut Denim factory; right: exploring the picturesque outskirts of Cardigan in the all-new Mazda3



were born in a pre-internet age, and the internet is good at telling stories and that was the insight," he says.

The idea, then, is to assign each pair of jeans a unique number, which you then register on the History Tag website and upload photos of your life with your jeans so they can tell their story.

Another of Hiut Denim's ideas is the Denim Breakers Club, where people pay a deposit for a pair of selvedge jeans, which should not be washed for six months in order not to compromise the fabric and colour. They then break the jeans in for six months with the promise of not washing them, and return the pair to Hiut and get their deposit back. When the jeans are sold to a customer who wants a worn-in look and feel, the breaker gets 20 per cent of the price.

Outside of Hiut Denim, David continues to innovate. His penchant for good beer led him into an investment in the 25 Mile gastropub, also in Cardigan, which only serves produce garnered from within a 25-mile radius – but his commitment to the town extends yet further.

"We're currently remodelling our farm to turn it into a start-up school," says Clare, explaining their plans to create a space for young entrepreneurs to learn from more seasoned visionaries.

David and Clare are also behind the highly successful Do Lectures, where ideas people like Trevor Bayliss and Tim Berners-Lee share their inspirations. The lectures take place at the Hieatts' farm and in California and Melbourne, as well as being broadcast online.

Clare wanders through the factory with Sonny the dog in tow, checks in with Jane Parry, who's ironing the finished jeans, and has a laugh with Robert Davies, who's stamping Hiut Denim's customary red rivets into back pockets. It feels like a family business on the cusp of something big.

"It's really up to us to see how creative and inventive we can be and that's the only thing I ask of the company. You never know how big you can get, but you can know how good you can get," says David. "Everybody here has been given a second chance. The town has been given a second chance. Let's get our heads down and get on with it. Can we get this town making jeans again?" The set of his jaw suggests the affirmative. [hiutdenim.co.uk](http://hiutdenim.co.uk) ●

#### MADE IN BRITAIN

Hiut Denim is one of a new breed of small innovators putting British craftsmanship back on the map. Here are some other Zoom-Zoom favourites

##### Montezuma's

Dedicated to fine, British-made chocolate, Montezuma's is committed to bringing innovation to the market. The owners were originally lawyers who quit their jobs to run what is now a 70-strong factory in West Sussex. [montezumas.co.uk](http://montezumas.co.uk)

##### Sipsmith

This tiny distillery in London's Hammersmith prides itself on making the very best gin, combining traditional recipes and modern technology. It only makes a few hundred bottles at a time. [sipsmith.com](http://sipsmith.com)

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