

INTRODUCTION

The story of textiles in Shetland is bound with the people and the place. The landscape, which has been home to the sheep and inspired craftspeople for centuries, is as central to the making of the isles' cloth and garments as the materials, tools and techniques themselves. Textiles have been key to the shaping of Shetland's society, economy and culture. By looking closely at these objects of utility and beauty, we can get an insight into the lives of individuals and communities.

Shetland is a group of islands roughly half way between Scotland and Norway. The North Sea lies to the east, the Atlantic Ocean to the west. With 200 miles of ocean between the isles and the nearest landmass, daily life until modern times relied on making the most of the materials at hand. Wool provided warmth and clothing; fishing and crofting provided food. In 'Shetland Sheep and Wool' Carol Christiansen investigates the origins and development of the native breed. Elizabeth Johnston introduces us to some of the oldest cloth, tools and techniques in 'Early Textiles'. Brian Smith highlights how, for centuries, wool was fashioned into cloth and used as currency in 'Wadmal'.

Shetland's far flung location is misleading to present day map readers. In the past, when people travelled long distances by boat, the islands were an important point on many busy shipping routes. In this light, textiles can be understood as an item of trade. Brian Smith's chapter 'Stockings and Mittens, 1580 to 1851' illuminates this topic, while his chapter on 'The Truck System' explores the intricacies of the barter system used to trade knitwear in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 'The Gunnister Man' by Carol Christiansen, Lena Hammarlund and Martin Cizuk discusses an important archaeological find which reveals evidence of international trade links in the early-seventeenth century.

Throughout history, makers of Shetland textiles have combined local materials with cultural and economic influences. This has led to the making of practical items of exceptional beauty. Elizabeth Johnston highlights the raw materials used in 'Spinning and Dyeing'. Carol Christiansen investigates 'Taait Rugs', which are unique and fascinating both collectively and as individual pieces. The isles' most famous styles are explored by Sarah Laurenson in 'Fair Isle Knitting' and by Roslyn Chapman in 'Shetland Lace'. Sarah Dearlove brings 'Shetland Tweed in the Twentieth Century' to our attention as another important style.

The predominance of women in the culture and history of Shetland's textile tradition is explored by Lynn Abrams in 'Gender, Work and Textiles in the Shetland Household'. Her research is crafted from oral histories of the women who worked and made, giving us an unmediated insight into their daily lives. Sarah Laurenson brings us up to date in 'Shetland Textiles Today', which focuses on contemporary designers and artists, and the organisations that drive, inspire and support them. The designers and artists featured reflect, in their own voices, on their work, influences and ambitions.

Running throughout this book are the voices of the people who have been, or continue to be, a link in the passing on of knowledge and skills. Their experiences and stories speak of binds between people, place and product. It is in these snippets of folk's lives that we can best grasp how Shetland's long history of textiles has become inseparable from the islands and its people.

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