

FAIR ISLE KNITTING

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Fair Isle knitwear is undoubtedly the most recognisable and well known of Shetland's textiles. As a craft it is expressive, creative and highly personal. As a form of dress, it is symbolic of individual and collective identities. As a product, it has been commercially successful throughout Europe and beyond since at least the mid-nineteenth century. It is this combination of distinctiveness and economic and symbolic importance that has led to Fair Isle becoming the most iconic of the isles' textiles.

This chapter explores Fair Isle knitting from its rise to fame in the mid-nineteenth century, tracing the style to the present day through objects in the collection of the Shetland Museum and Archives. Behind the garments lie the stories of makers and wearers which reveal the connections between people and knitwear and the places in which they live and work. In the picture that emerges, Fair Isle knitwear is seen as a creative outlet through which knitters, past and present, have explored ideas and influences, as a regional fashion and as a crucial part of the local economy within a wider system of European textile production.

Fishermen's *keps* are among the earliest surviving items of Fair Isle knitwear. They date from the mid- to late-nineteenth century and originate in the island of Fair Isle itself. They are immediately recognisable through a colour palette of dyed blue, red and yellow-gold yarn together with the natural undyed shades of white, moorit and Shetland Black. The darker colours are worked in horizontal stripes with lighter coloured motifs against a contrasting background. The motifs do not directly represent symbols or images of things, such as stars or flowers, but form abstract patterns.

The pendant-shaped hats are loaded with clues about the craft's history and development. While the red and

gold shades could be produced through locally grown dye plants, the blue came from imported indigo. This is the first indication that Fair Isle knitting was not, and is not, an insular island tradition. On the contrary, it has always merged local and international influences and materials to create a distinctive regional style.

Fair Isle is a form of the stranded colourwork knitting seen in coastal areas throughout Europe, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Holland, England and Scotland all have distinct regional styles of knitwear that use similar techniques. As an island in the centre of the North Sea, Fair Isle was exceptionally well connected – ships from all over the world passed by, allowing the population to encounter and share diverse influences and materials.

Early Fair Isle pieces vary in how colours and motifs are organised on individual garments, but they all follow the same fundamental principles of design: the placing of colour and pattern. This hints at the reach and success of Fair Isle knitwear, where the demand for a recognisable product allowed for sustained production of a relatively stable style. Essentially, Fair Isle knitwear became a sort of souvenir that epitomised rural Scotland. Associations with the everyday life of fishermen fed in to romantic notions of Scottishness at the time, as well as a revival of all things Nordic. On top of this, the mid- to late-nineteenth century saw a growing fashion for handmade items, partly as a reaction against industrialisation. This provided fertile ground for Fair Isle fishermen's wear as a commercial product and a welcome source of income to the local economy.

Fair Islanders traded knitwear long before the appearance of the patterned style we recognise today. Items were sold to all sorts of folk – traders, whalers, fishermen, antiquarians and tourists – on passing ships from Greenland, mainland Europe and the UK.¹ In 1774 a cargo ship on its way to the West Indies anchored off Fair Isle to take on provisions.



A. Typical early Fair Isle kepp showing horizontal bands of pattern in the palette of red, blue, gold, black and cream, c. 1850s-1890s.