

TEXT + IMAGES VERSION

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE GENDER DYNAMIC IN FAIR ISLE (SHETLAND) KNITWEAR

The Shetland Islands are located in the middle of the North Sea between Scotland, Norway and the Faroe Islands and are the most northerly part of the UK. This paper analyses the gender dynamic of Shetland handknitwear, offering a specific analysis of the gender dynamics involved in the Fair Isle jumper from the early 20th century, focussing on the 1920s and 1970s as key points when Fair Isle enjoyed high fashionable status. The research process revealed that gender issues in less fragmented non-metropolitan environments, such as the Shetland Islands, are less easy to assess as isolated issues without taking into consideration aspects of location and local identity. The research considers the export industry and to some extent local consumption. Visual thinking in the design and making process is highlighted and contrasted with graph paper recordings of pattern and the later printed knitting instructions using linear recipes of abbreviated words. The role of design in subsistence craft production is addressed and identified as a contentious issue. Shawls and fishermen's ganseys, gender specific garment types, are discussed in the rise of the gender-neutral jumper. Many myths surround Shetland handknitwear and many stories are still repeated today. This work negotiated this dynamic. The myth-making is an integral part of the remembrance of handknitting culture and its ability to continue to support commercial activity and personal livelihoods.

The assessment of gender and design issues was addressed by publications such as Pat Kirkham's collection *The Gendered Object*, (1996) which offered analysis of multifarious gender issues in the late 20th century, often framed within the context of urban culture, e.g. sports footwear. Judith Butler's resonant publications, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, (1993) and *Gender Trouble* (1999) gave academics an understanding of gender performativity. The key text written by Linda Fryer, *Knitting by the Fireside and on the Hillside: A History of the Shetland Handknitting Industry c.1600-1950*, was published in 1995 (with a short postscript covering 1950-1990). This was written by an exemplary social and economic historian but the approach does not focus on design issues. No

analysis of design aesthetics is offered, however notions of good and bad quality work are discussed, i.e. quality of execution and finishing. The gender considerations are concerned with the division of labour. Alice Stanmore's book, one of a huge number of books aimed at knitting practitioners, *The Fair Isle Knitting Handbook*, (1988) offered down to earth and yet inspired visual thinking and analysis that convincingly laid to rest many romantic myths, particularly a much retold story about a Spanish ship wreck in the development of the origins of Fair Isle patterns (one of the romantic myths perpetuated by many Shetland based companies)

The research for this paper was conducted through informal interviews with handknitters, consultation of Shetland archive and museum collections, especially the visual material offered by distribution catalogues produced on the Islands as part of the export trade. The general arrangement of business was that merchants collected the handknitted goods for export from the spread-out population, often accessible only by boat. This was done initially through barter and later by cash transactions. The export/mail-order catalogues reveal the gendering process for handknitted goods and interestingly the lack of single gender designation for 'allover' Fair Isle knitwear, that is, garments with a patterned front, back and sleeves, during most of the 20th century. I was also able to observe snatches of the contemporary handknitwear market in Lerwick via the retail outlet the Spider's Web which opens during the tourist season. This enabled me to see, still in operation in summer 2003, the looseness of attitudes to gender by the producers and wearers of Fair Isle within the context of the Shetland Islands.

Prior to any analysis of the specificity of the gender coding of Fair Isle knitwear it is necessary to understand attendant processes and the cultural context. To study Fair Isle knitwear it is necessary to develop an 'eye' for pattern. It took me some time to be able to read a Fair Isle repeat pattern jumper and not to feel as one does listening to an impenetrable heavy accent or foreign language. Learning to read and analyse patterns by a visual process rather than by a printed set of symbols in a knitting instruction pattern, gave a unique insight into how Shetland knitters thought about pattern i.e. visually. Shetland handknitters over sixty years of age in 2003 seem to have been taught to knit by maternal osmosis or by imitating their female

relatives. They never used knitting patterns consisting of coded abbreviations. The Shetland process begs questions about how patterns developed and how new ideas were assimilated. There was a visual passing on of design by copying actual knitted garments and later graph paper and dots were used as visual memory aids. I interviewed one very bright 90 year old handknitter (of the competition winning standard) who had knitted from such a young age she could not remember being taught how to knit or the vocabulary of repeat pattern. I suggest she and many of her generation (many of whom now knit for the Spider's Web shop) may have learnt intuitively from parents as one learns one's first language. (See image 1)



Image 1 Unknown child knitting, approx. date 1939-49
(photograph Jack Peterson, Shetland Museum)

She recalled being placed on the deep window ledge so that the needles would not harm her younger siblings (handknitters knit in the round on several needles that point out at angles, thus the resulting textured knitted garment has no uncomfortable seams and great flexibility). This woman had made her living by this all her life and she added to her repertoire by copying patterns or shapes from, for example, knitted garments she saw in a shop window, by remembering the pattern visually and counting the rows. 'Allover' Fair Isle jumpers were and are deemed appropriate for men and women whereas most other handknitted garments were gender specific, reflecting general western cultural norms in clothing. Shetland handknitted export catalogues clearly depict gender specific handknitted 'hosiery' coded by image and text specifically for either women or men. (See images 2-4)



Image 2 Front cover, Miss E. B. Harcus mail order catalogue, Shetland, from the period 1922-1925 (Shetland Museum)



Image 3 Top left garment described as 'Fair isle jumper ladies or gents', (front buttoning necklines were marketed as ladies' garments.) Miss E. B. Harcus mail order catalogue, p.4 1922-1925. (Shetland Museum)



Image 4 'Fair Isle cardigan sleeveless and with sleeves ladies or gents' available in, 'natural and bright dyed colours', Miss E. B. Marcus mail order catalogue, p.7 1922-1925 (Shetland Museum)

Fair Isle 'alovers' have been gender-neutral or lightly coded throughout the 20th century, excepting perhaps the most highly gendered period of UK clothing in the 20th century, the post World War II period. There are examples of Shetland handknitwear showing a stronger gendering of male and female knitwear earlier i.e. during 1939-45. Fair Isle v-necked jumpers, with or without sleeves, were and still are considered to be gender-neutral garments. The times when they have been subjected to a gendering process were usually with a very light touch. Considered in the context of western male clothing, Fair Isle knitwear offers an unusually highly decorative form of clothing to be clearly defined as appropriate mainstream menswear, which makes it an interesting case study. The geometric patterns are neutral and have never had specific motifs for male or female, unlike other garments such as jeans and t-shirts, that have travelled from the male wardrobe to the female wardrobe under the auspices of freedom exercised by youth, or via a self-conscious designer unisex fashion. Unisex in this sense means male clothing

regendered for the female wardrobe and not a reciprocal movement. This reading of early 20th century Shetland knitwear may lack a contemporary eye at times; as a fully tuned eye in 1922 would have been able to recognise regional accents in the choice of colour, some slight regional difference in production or even be able to identify the particular work of prize winning knitters. Such nuances are lost to a haphazardly recorded history. During the 20th century, Fair Isle patterning appeared in various areas of upper body garments, 'allovers', cuffs, yokes and as gloves, hats and socks. If Fair Isle knitwear is feminised at all it is frequently by the shape of the neckline. Fair Isle knitwear entered high fashion at two key points in its history; firstly as professionally handknitted Shetland jumpers for wealthy men and women during the inter-war period; and secondly in the 1970s, by which point knitting machines throughout the UK could produce a more democratic, highly affordable, convincing facsimile, albeit a rather flat and lifeless version. Male and female UK skinheads in the early 1970s wore machine mass-produced garish acrylic watered-down versions of such 'slip-ons' (tank tops) on top of Ben Sherman checked shirts. Less radical teenagers bought cheap and fashionable, acrylic, cream/brown Fair Isle twin-sets comprising of a 'slip-on' and matching cardigan from retail chains such as C&A.

There are two basic forms of knitting produced in the Shetland Islands. Lace is produced in several weights, from the delicate cobweb most suitable for evening wear, to an everyday 'hap' weight for more robust daytime shawls (see images 5 and 6). Plain knitted garments in undyed sheep fleece colours (cream, fawn, reddish brown, grey and Shetland black (a very dark brown) were the staple handknitted product.



Image 5 Shetland lace, 2003 (photograph Christine Arnold)



Image 6 Shetland lace shawl, 2003 (photograph Christine Arnold)

Fair Isle, specifically 'alovers' (whether worked in dyed or undyed wool) took a long time to make. A retired female maths teacher described how they were passed down through families across gender lines either way in the 1960s, oil wealth and its attendant consumption and waste not arriving in the Shetland Islands until the 1970s. Fair Isle jumpers were not originally everyday working garments in the inter-war years. A Fair Isle jumper was more likely to be knitted for export by a subsistence crofter, and such a garment was initially for the wealthier classes, although by the mid century there are photographs that indicate Fair Isle jumpers were worn for everyday activities within the Shetland Islands. Some garments in the museum were worn and darned, perhaps being worn as working garments later in their long life-span. More wealthy members of the Shetland population frequently wore them during the 1920s for indoor sports, such as badminton, which could be played all year round in community halls (as the Shetland Islands have an extreme climate).

Lace and Fair Isle handknitting was produced almost exclusively by female knitters and fitted in with croft work, the long dark winters in the Shetland Islands offering time for intensive production. Roles were prescribed along gender lines. The men went to sea either fishing or whaling, and worked the crofts on a subsistence farming level, based on crops and animals (mainly sheep). Almost all women knitted on top of croft chores. Handknitting was a huge cottage industry for island-based individuals, whose economic input into the family's economy was vital, offering survival in bad fishing season or poor harvests.

The actual island of Fair Isle is certainly the source of the patterns (based on influence from Baltic and Nordic culture via sea routes, as Alice Stanmore argues).¹ Early examples of repeat pattern stranded knitting are attributed to the middle nineteenth century. For this study, the dynamic under consideration is the adoption of the style and development of new variations of the basic “cross-diamond-cross” pattern in the range of undyed sheep colours and the use of bright modern dyes by the Shetland knitters, to meet the expanding inter-war years fashion market. Many handknitters gave up lace knitting and learned Fair Isle patterns to meet the market. Shetland handknitwear prior to World War I consisted of delicate luxury knitted lace, shawls, underclothing and stockings as well as undyed under and outer garments, such as shawls, in more robust weights of wool in the natural colours produced by the indigenous sheep, i.e. a creamy white, through browns, grey and a dark brown/black. (See image 7)

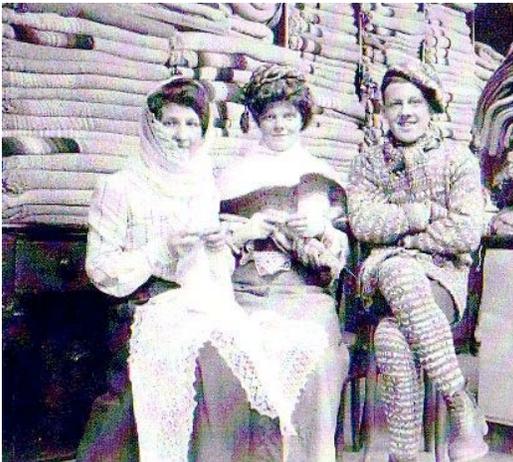


Image 7 A promotional photograph showing the range of lace and Fair Isle goods, the ‘models’ seem to be wearing many garments at the same time, c. 1900. (Shetland Museum)

The shawl was a practical female garment knitted in a hap or shawl weight wool - a working woman could wrap it round her shoulders and tie it behind at the waist. The robust elasticity of a knitted shawl allowed freedom of movement of the arms for work. Male working upper-body knitted garments were called ganseys or frokes (navy

¹ Alice Stanmore, *Fair Isle Knitting Handbook*, Taunton Press, Connecticut, 1988, pp.16-20

worsted, a strong wool not from Shetland, was used). Soft undergarments in Shetland were handknitted using natural wool colours, whereas smaller garments such as hose, gloves and hats often used Fair Isle patterns.

The development of gender-neutral jumpers through the practical male fisherman's working jumper, the gansey or froke as they were called in Shetland, was traced. The gansey was a garment of multiple influences and cross-pollination of seaport knitting traditions. Knitting in the round, a process that resulted in no side seams, was used to produce flexible comfortable male working garments which were worn close to the body (with diamond underarm gussets to allow full arm movement) so that oilskins could be worn on top in extreme weather at sea. (See image 8)



Image 8 A 'go-ashore gansey' with under arm gussets, knitted in the 1960s, (Shetland Museum)

The garments usually have a side neck fastening to allow a snug fit and the wearer to easily take them on and off, this design also allows neck ventilation when necessary. Such garments types (often navy-blue coloured) are not specific to the Shetland Islands, but are rather a generic garment specifically seen as practical male work-wear within UK fishing communities. (See image 9)



A drifter crew in Hamnavoe around 1910, wearing typical knitted frokes. Are they local? Do you know the names of the crew?

Image 9 A drifter crew in Hamnavoe wearing 'frokes' c.1910 (Shetland Museum)

Fishermen had 'on-board' and 'go-ashore' ganseys. The Lerwick-based Sinclair and Johnson & Co., Clothiers and Outfitters, offered the highly defined 'men's navy rope and cable all-wool handknit jerseys',² which was clearly a description of a fisherman's froke and a designated male garment.

An interesting case is the wearing of Fair Isle knitwear by the crew of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition of 1902-1904, prior to its role as the height of fashion enjoyed in the 1920s. This expedition was an alternative 'Scotocentric' expedition led by Dr William Bruce, (who was not chosen for Robert Falcon Scott's now more famous Royal Geographical Society Antarctic Expedition of 1901-1903). The Scottish expedition undertook serious scientific work but crew-member Gilbert Kerr also found time to play the bagpipes to nonchalant penguins in a performance of national pride. All the members of the crew were photographed during operations wearing Fair Isles jerseys, caps and mufflers, no doubt as a matter of patriotism and practicality, as the following excerpt illustrates.

Furs are so clumsy, and, as they admit of no ventilation, so unhealthy, that they are barely ever used to work in. On sledging journeys furs are, of course, required to sleep in, but on the march thick woollen clothing is worn, while for everyday work about the vicinity of the ship we wore simply warm tweed clothes, with a sufficiency of

² *The Shetland Times*, 15th January, 1921, p.5

woollen under-clothing. Fair Isle jerseys were universally worn, of which, by the generosity of Mr James Coats jun., we had a large supply on board. They are thick jerseys, handknitted in wool of every brilliant hue, red, green, and yellow side by side in endless, different, and all extraordinary and apparently meaningless designs. We also had caps and mufflers of the same material and make, and all proved of wonderful wearing quality.³

These garments were described as jerseys by the writers (a description used for fishermen's clothing) and are clearly outside of being a fashion statement in this instance. Whether the knitwear was produced specifically on Fair Isle or within the other Shetland Islands is unknown. The supplier James Coates, jun., from Paisley could have acquired his products from both locations, but most likely from Fair Isle. The degree of influence from the gansey in terms of shape, for example the inclusion of the underarm gusset, is not decipherable from photographic evidence. However, in the photographic record the crew all seem to wear garments with high necks that would have necessitated the customary shoulder fastenings of a fisherman's jersey to allow a snug fit. (See image 10)



Image 10 Crew of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition 1902-4, wearing Fair Isle patterned 'allover' knitwear on board the vessel.

³ Pirie, J.H., Mossman, R.C., and Brown, R.N., *The Voyage of the Scotia*, William Blackwood & Sons, Edinburgh, 1906, p.102

These are not only practical male garments; there is some degree of display, especially team spirit, as they were 'universally worn'.⁴ In purely practical terms, traditional ganseys, single coloured and equally high quality wool jumpers, would have served the practical purpose fully. This may, of course, have been an advertising opportunity seized upon by the supplier James Coates, jun., Paisley. The description of green wool means that these garments are most likely to be especially commissioned pieces. Examples from this period are usually red (madder), blue (indigo), yellow (onion skins) and undyed cream fleece. The green colour required double dyeing techniques, and as such they are to be regarded as untypical. The reason for the selection of Fair Isle jumpers was not purely aesthetic, survival was paramount. The Shetland sheep used by wool growers in the early 20th century was a pure bred animal. It was petite and almost goat-like in appearance. Its fleece produced all the grades of wool from fine neck hairs used for high performance expedition wear and what we would now refer to as luxury lingerie, to coarse guard hairs used for rugs. The fibres were originally hand-plucked and graded. The sheep grew thick coats to survive the extremely long and dark winters. The Shetland Islanders have a proud tradition of providing warm luxurious garments for royalty and for expeditions to locations with extremely cold climates. Pure-bred Shetland sheep throats produced a soft delicate luxury fibre that may have had high thermal qualities but was not extremely hard wearing. Today's yarn just does not compare and comes from a distant cousin, which is immediately obvious to any one privileged enough to handle early 20th century examples of handknitting made from undyed hand-spun yarn.

The enormous variations in the types of handknitted goods, body shapes, neck line shapes and combinations of Fair Isle used as trimmings at the foot and cuff makes the following tracing of the rise of the jumper seem too simplistic, but it serves to indicate key points in the development of a new non-gendered fashion garment. In its January 1920 annual retrospective review of the post-war period 1919-1920, *The Shetland Times* discussed 'Shetland Hosiery' (a general term for the handknitting industry), for example, men's frokes and women's lace shawls which were both commonly produced

⁴ *Ibid*

highly gendered export items. However, the year 1920 saw adverts for handknitters to produce a garment called a 'jumper'. They were not designated for either gender. In July 1920 the London-based Abel Harry started to advertise in the wanted columns of *The Shetland Times* for the following:

Notice to Shetland Knitters Wanted Smart
SPORTSCOATS AND JUMPERS, in Light colours, BABY
HAPS and OVERALLS...(sic)⁵

At the same time the Shetland based T. M. Adie & Son in Voe, continued to advertise for handknitters to supply them with the usual lines of white spencers (vests) and shawls. In the following year's annual review in *The Shetland Times* the jumper was once again mentioned in an editorial piece.

...A new feature in Shetland hosiery – 'the jumper' - became quite fashionable, and was in eager demand...⁶

The 24th Shetland Show of August 1921 included a knitting competition with the new category 'jumper', that had so many entries that the judges were overwhelmed. A report in *The Shetland Times*⁷ in the same month indicates the rise of popularity of the jumper as a garment (plain, fancy, Fair Isle) and indicates the changes and developments in 'traditional' patterns at this point. The following year two Fair Isle jumpers were included in a wedding gift box for Princess Mary. The gifts also included a hand-spun, handknitted cobweb lace shawl from the parish of Unst weighing only one and a half ounces, that reportedly could be drawn through a lady's finger ring. The *Shetland News* reported in detail who had spun and knitted each garment and where appropriate any design input. The patterns interestingly were designed by a watchmaker (David Sutherland) 'widely known' for such talent, which could elevate a handknitted garment from being 'well executed' to what *The Shetland News* referred to as 'a work of art'. 'Designer' was not a professional category at this time and practitioners of what I identify as 'design

⁵ *The Shetland Times*, 3rd July, 1920, p.1

⁶ *The Shetland Times*, 1st January, 1921, p.4

⁷ *The Shetland Times*, 20th August, 1921, p.5

thinking' were also to be found in the trades of hairdresser, photographer and watchmaker, as well as handknitters - all vocations that require an 'eye' i.e. visual ability and attention to detail applied in a business context. Included in the hand-painted box were many other examples of the best of Shetland work; for example:

[a] ...fine white jumper'...[and a]...finely made moorit skirt and jumper [an undyed mid-brown fleece colour]...and a beautiful Fair Isle jumper in shades of blue (the Princess's favourite colour) and browns, outermixed (*sic*) with yellow and white, made by Mrs Jessie H. Stout, South Busta, Fair Isle. A cap, scarf and gloves to match have also been made in Fair Isle, but owing to delay in the mail service did not reach Lerwick in time to be despatched with the other articles.⁸

The above may verify the appropriateness of a jumper as a garment for a princess. It also tells us that when 'the best' and perhaps 'traditional items' were needed; lace was sourced from Unst spinners and knitters. Fair Isle knitwear was sourced from the actual island. Fair Isle is 24 miles southwest of the most southern point of the main collection of Shetland Islands.

In the UK in general, the inter-war years saw wealthy young men and women effectively adopting a garment similar to working men's practical work-wear, a knitted upper-body garment as sport and leisure wear, because it offered warmth and flexibility. Fair Isle garments with their great display and high thermal qualities were perfect for showing off on the golf course or for riding 'on' the car. Such garments may have evolved from practical work-wear garments but had the added dynamic of display and status, and were dislocated from notions of work-wear by an extreme show of jewel colours, to become associated with wealthy leisure/sportswear worn by both sexes. (See image11)

⁸ *The Shetland News*, 23rd February, 1922, p.4



Image 11 Golfing cardigans, the Shetland Islands, 1920s

A Fair Isle jumper is without doubt a loud 'look at me' luxury statement, as the portrait of HRH the Prince of Wales c.1925 by John St. Helier Lander shows. The very beautiful Miss Roberta Farquharson was also portrayed elegantly poised in the latest casual fashion in Stanley Curister's 'The Fair Isle Jumper' of 1923.

As a result of the demands by a fashion-led market, many lace knitters in the early 1920s had to change their work from lace to Fair Isle knitting. The need for patterns to copy possibly explains the request for old Fair Isle scarves: 'long with dark ground and good pattern'⁹ in *The Shetland Times* wanted column. As patterns were not written down they were learned by copying other pieces. A knitter could either memorise the patterns or use the scarf as a memory aid. Bobby Williamson (who owned a Lerwick photographers shop) also sold examples of these patterns recorded as dots on graph paper. The rise in fashionable status of Fair Isle jumpers in the 1920s and the availability of commercially produced wool dyes with greater colour ranges also saw the need for the development of original design and colour combinations, rather than copies of old patterns. Bright coloured rayon yarns also opened up further design possibilities, though there appears to have been little in terms of design education offered to handknitters to negotiate the new colour ranges. This resulted in a one-off letter to *The Shetland News* on 19th

⁹ *The Shetland Times*, 21st February, 1920, p.1

October 1922, outlining the content of a proposed syllabus for evening classes aimed at knitters, merchants etc and providing design education for the development of 'our' staple industry as the writer RUSTICUS called it.

- In view of the present demand for oriental design in Shetland hosiery...I wish to explain that I have not looked upon the production of rainbow-hued hosiery as the one and only aim of the class...ordinary free-hand drawing must receive due attention. At the same time, coloured design is the main object in view... Geometry occupies quite a considerable proportion, of course, but that is inevitable where design is a main consideration.¹⁰

Rusticus even went so far as to list a full course bibliography and publishers.

Standard books on the subject are Day's "Ornamental Design," Jackson's "Design" and Meyer's "Handbook on Ornament." The practical teacher will find much useful material in "Geometrical Drawing for Art Students" by Morris...¹¹

Rusticus also highlighted another problematic issue for Fair Isle handknitters, that of the effect of artificial light on colours. The long artificially lit evenings of Shetland winters were a time traditionally set aside for high level production of handknitwear. Rusticus indicates that:

...Pupils must be warned of this and advised to repeat all colour-blending or colour-matching experiments at home by daylight. By artificial light certain greens seem blue and purple seems black...¹²

The course was designed to take students through exercises in geometry, freehand, colour and design, (for example, pattern, order,

¹⁰ *The Shetland News*, 19th October, 1922, p.4

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

symmetry, repetition etc), introducing knowledge of international ornament types, colour mixing and combination, contrast and harmony. The final line showed the underlying intention of 'development of original design'.¹³

It is difficult to place RUSTICUS, whose motivation seems explicit in the letter i.e. '...protection and development of our staple industry...'. There was no response printed...highly valid though the course would have been in terms of design reform and development. The clarion call was perhaps rather too much of a leap from the current belief in the proven natural design talents of the watchmaker to the citation of aggressive art and design school culture. Perhaps the course seemed unnecessary to a making culture that believed in the individual maker having natural creative abilities. There may have been class dynamics. However a 90 year old who was interviewed in 2003, who had knitted for her living all her life from age three (1916 to date), and who had represented the Shetland Islands internationally, knitting in a department store in Paris, did say how she felt that the design side of things was 'underdeveloped'. She said that she, a competition winner and judge, would personally have liked to have had the opportunity to learn more about design to enable her to come up with more original things to knit. Transport to Lerwick-based education would have been impossible for handknitters living in the many outlying parishes (so remote that school children lodged with other families to attend schools). Handknitters sometimes accepted private commissions by post or from visitors but they were often under instructions about what colour things should be. There was always the consideration of work having to be saleable for someone knitting for a living with no alternative form of employment. For this interviewee new additions to her repertoire were always achieved by seeing other knitting to copy.

The origin of the fashion demand for Fair Isle jumpers is attributed to James A. Smith, one of the biggest wool and hosiery dealers in the Shetland Islands, who gifted a jumper to the Prince of Wales, Edward VIII. The Prince wore it and was photographed on the Royal and Ancient Golf Course in St Andrews in circa 1922. Royal and society paintings of the time often depict Fair Isle jumpers worn by males and

¹³ *ibid*

females. The Prince of Wales could wear clothes well and had the confidence to carry a Fair Isle pattern. In the 1990s, a 'copy' of his jumper was produced, based on black and white photographic imagery and living memory of the original one. This design is produced for sale in the Spider's Web, the main outlet for Fair Isle knitwear in Lerwick. The garment is handsome irrespective of its debated original colour combinations and certainly has a balanced, slightly restrained visual presence that many other busy combinations of colour lack. (See image 12)



Image 12 'Prince of Wales jumper', the Spider's Web, summer, 2003.

The Shetland Islands as a site of handknitted production have thus responded to fashion changes but most of the production left the Islands as export goods. In fact many examples in the Shetland museum are garments that have come home to the point of production. Crofters may have knitted loose v-necked Fair Isle garments for the fashion market but would not have worn them for croft work, practicality demanding undyed plain garments. A Fair Isle 'allover' patterned garment would, if owned, be for 'best' and passed down through the children of a family. However, wealthier middle-class women were in a position to purchase or knit without the need to work to deadlines for sales in a subsistence position. An interesting example is Ethel Brown. She was married to an artist, took holidays in London and ran a successful hairdressing salon in the main harbour town of Lerwick. Her ability as a designer is explicit in the garments she left to the Shetland museum. She is important to this paper because she actually wore her garments and was

photographed wearing fashionable clothing in the Shetland Islands.
(See image 13)



Image 13 Ethel Brown, (back row right-hand-side of the photograph)
Thule badminton club, 1920s (Shetland museum)

Hazel Hughson's 2002 research discusses garments Ethel made for herself and some clients, though her hairdressing and beauty salon were her main business. She was without doubt glamorous and later introduced make-up for her middle-class clientele. Her ability with colour and pattern make her work in the museum and private collections stand out as that of a natural design talent who was clearly aware of fashion. Ethel and her husband both seem to fit the category 'natural talents' and research to date does not indicate either had formal art and design school training. Transactions with a local chemist suggest a serious commitment to experimenting in dyeing sophisticated colours.¹⁴ She researched historical examples and brought to her work her own colour combinations, sensitivity to visual weight, proportions, geometry and a sense of contemporary fashion. (See image 14)

¹⁴ Hazel Hughson, 'Ethel Brown: A Shetland Hairdresser and Designer Knitter', in *The New Shetlander*, 2002, No. 221, pp. 37-40



Image 14 Ethel Brown, Fair Isle garment c.1940, based on the study of pre - World War I examples combined with a fashionable zip fastener. (Shetland Museum)

Born in 1905-1977 (retiring in 1967), childless, she married late and was active during the 1920s to the 1950s. A Shetland lace slip-on made by her was included in an international touring exhibition of knitwear in 1956. Ethel Brown's work is considered to be part of the middle-class sophisticated, albeit small art and crafts circle in Lerwick, experimenting with spinning, and revisiting/reinventing 'traditional' designs.¹⁵ She was however a genuinely creative designer, who innovated, for example, the use of zips with fine lace work. She did however own a knitting machine and experimented as many commercial knitters did with the sensible combination of handknitted Fair Isle yokes and self-coloured machine knitted main body and sleeves. She brought something new, of a high visual quality, to traditional styles of handknitting. Her surviving work shows examples of hand and hand-frame knitwear including Fair Isle sweaters which experiment with alternatives to the v-necks. This designer's response to fashionable clothing provides a more gendered version of contemporary styles. (See images 15 and 16)

¹⁵ *ibid*



Image 15 Ethel Brown, Fair Isle yoke cardigan, 1950s (Shetland Museum)



Image 16 Ethel Brown, Fair Isle yoke cardigan, detail, 1950s (Shetland Museum)

An understanding of the general lightness of touch of the gendering process, the luxury and the high quality of Fair Isle knitwear can be gleaned from discussions with owners of garments (no longer worn but kept as a special garment) and by handling and inspecting work produced even as recently as the 1970s. A garment from this period was made available for research purposes. It has the physical presence of a tapestry but is flexible. It is of course made from clipped cross-bred wool and not hand-plucked or 'rooed' pure bred wool. It would have been mechanically spun and so treated to some extent. Putting aside the product's lack of softness due to industrial processes and the resulting scratchy feel to the wool, it is an impressive garment with very balanced repeat patterns, subtle use of blue-grey wool and an almost pink-grey wool. (See images 17 and 18)



Image 17 Fair Isle 'allover', c.1977, owned by Bruce Cheyne, unidentified Shetland mainland knitter, the Shetland Islands, (photograph Christine Arnold summer 2003)



Image 18 Fair Isle 'allover' sleeve detail, c.1977, owned by Bruce Cheyne, unidentified Shetland mainland knitter, the Shetland Islands, (photograph Christine Arnold summer 2003)

I was able to sit and study it for much longer than any museum visit allows, turn it inside out and try it on to see how the patterns sat on the body. Itchiness aside I felt like I was wearing a rich all over upper-body tattoo. (See image 19)



Image 19 Bruce Cheyne's Fair Isle 'allover', c.1977, unidentified Shetland mainland knitter, the Shetland Islands, worn by Christine Arnold, summer 2003

Such a jumper is typical of handknitted garments produced in the

1970s. A photograph of the Shetland Interclub Regatta in Lerwick in the early 1970s shows the arm of a man wearing a jumper comprising of very similar motifs in similar bands. (See image 20)



Image 20 The Shetland Interclub Regatta, early 1970s, (Copyright photographer)

It is a very interesting example of a highly decorative form of clothing deemed mainstream menswear. The motifs include circular based geometric shapes, which seem almost floral. Similar shapes based on circular divisions can frequently be seen on the wallpaper, linoleum, and printed cottons of women's dresses and domestic aprons in photographs of Shetland domestic interiors in this period. This connection has never been explicitly acknowledged, unlike the Norwegian star motif which was adopted during World War II when it was brought to Shetland on work produced by Norwegian refugees and immediately assimilated into Shetland designs. Bruce Cheyne's 1970s jumper is highly decorative, uses floral motifs and yet is considered ungendered by the Shetlanders. The development of the jumper and the rise in importance of the Fair Isle jumper as an ungendered fashion item does seem to have left an interesting legacy - a highly decorative archetype that is a genuinely gender-neutral garment. This is comparable to that other garment originally from the male wardrobe, the ubiquitous t-shirt, which with the single or small group of motifs found frequently on the front of the garment, says something about who you are. A Fair Isle 'allover' worn or stored away in a cupboard by a Shetlander has great symbolic meaning. However, such garments are attributed to have almost magical powers, by the children and grandchildren of Shetland migrants to USA and Canada, thought to empower the wearer with a sense of historical identity and 'belonging'. In discussions about handknitting with Shetland men lucky enough to have a talented handknitter for a

wife, I became aware that 'alovers' are considered be an expression of family love and a uniform for competitions, e.g. interclub boating regattas, as competitors can identify where a team is from or which boat they own by the jumpers. Further research is necessary to unravel this visual coding. 'Allovers' are ultimately an expression of complex local and national identity for many contemporary Shetland Island people.

In general discussions with experienced handknitters about gender and Fair Isle knitwear, some said they may have added a few extra stitches for the upper arm if they knew a jumper was for a man with strong arms and a few said that perhaps a lighter shade background colour would be used for a woman. This very subtle shading is reiterated in a Fair Isle printed knitting pattern (aimed at the general public) with an illustrated for a gender-neutral 'slip-on' produced in 1981 for the Golden Jubilee of The National Trust for Scotland (who have owned Fair Isle since 1954). The front and back cover images depict a man and woman carrying her shoes on the rocks with a lobster creel (pot). (See Image 21)



Image 21 Fair Isle knitting pattern front and back covers, 1981, (NTS)

Close visual scrutiny of the bands of repeat patterns (see image 22) and the written instructions (see image 23) reveals that they are exactly the same, but the colours suggested are explicitly gendered within the 34"-46" size range:

when making the man's colour way substitute natural for white and Shetland black for grey. Moorit [a mid-tone warm brown] remains the same for both colour ways.¹⁶



Image 22 Fair Isle knitting pattern illustration for 'slip-on', 1981 (NTS)



Image 23 Fair Isle knitting pattern colour key and dot diagrams, 1981 (NTS)

The difference in colour is so subtle that it could easily be missed. When researching and writing about gender and objects one can easily miss the subtle cast, for example the way a golfing cardigan fastens, as Pat Kirkham pointed out in 1996 much of normative gender reinforcement is:

...so accepted as 'normal' as to become 'invisible'. Thus we sometimes fail to appreciate the effects that particular notions of femininity and masculinity have on the conception, design, advertising, purchase, giving and uses of objects, as well as their critical and popular

¹⁶ *Traditional Fair Isle Knitting Pattern*, National Trust For Scotland Golden Jubilee 1931-1981, 1981, pp.1-8

reception.¹⁷

In 2003 the Spider's Web is the main retail outlet in Lerwick for handknitted Fair Isle garments. The customers are mainly island visitors from huge cruise ships. The Spider's Web is able to accommodate customers' wishes and it takes bespoke orders. The proprietress discussed the initial confusion consumers often expressed at the gender-neutral nature of the goods on sale, as anything can be knitted in any size to order (many customers entering the shop often ask "which are the things for men?" or "which is the female side of the shop?") See image 24



Image 24 The Spider's Web interior, Lerwick, summer 2003.

She also has to negotiate the norms of the many different cultures represented by her summer international customer base. An example of a gendered object within the hat range is a conservative mid 1980s style female Fair Isle pillbox hat, which is, she explained, very popular with European men! Customers requesting which is the male and which the female side of the shop is an example of western metropolitan retail norms for clothing.

¹⁷ Kirkham, Pat, (ed.), *The Gendered Object*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996, p.1(Introduction)

Conclusion

A v-necked Fair Isle jumper is highly decorative yet gender-neutral. Is this because it first became part of fashion during the 1920s, a period of the masculinisation of female clothing. It developed and expanded aesthetically during a period when fashionable men and women dressed for sport and leisure more similarly. The garments were gender-neutral prior to entering the high fashion market, despite of, or because they were the product of a fishing and crofting society, which had and still has emphatic gender roles. (Large sea-going fishing boats with hydraulic net winching equipment controlled by buttons not requiring physical masculine strength still do not employ any women even for traditionally domestic roles like food preparation or laundry.) Perhaps emphatic gender coding of the jumpers was not considered necessary because of the highly defined gender roles within that society, i.e. there was no 'threat element'.

Shetland culture is not part of a Celtic, clan and tartan kilt inheritance. It looks far further afield because it is in the middle of north, west, east and south sea routes. Fair Isle knitwear did and does allow men a certain amount of the sartorial display enjoyed by Scottish men. It is a design type that has been given greater currency than the tartan kilt and which has entered mainstream fashion at various times throughout the 20th century and in autumn/winter 2003 was enjoying a reinvention as a new fashion by the casual clothing company GAP. The Scottish male national costume champions male decorative display. This is considered masculine and encouraged by all the generations. It is part of conservative mainstream culture, unlike English male dandyism which enjoyed the excesses of the 1965-1975 youth counter-culture and pop culture, to the outrage of the establishment. 'Allover' v-necked Fair Isle jumpers are an unusual case, highly decorative, yet played out in both high fashion and conservative culture. I hope, as yet another outsider, to have shone light on an unusual gender dynamic within these beautifully made if rather over-decorated garments, seen through the eyes of contemporary fashionable taste. The market for Fair Isle goods, especially 'alovers', is ultimately fuelled by tourism and nostalgia and not one that seems to be led today by high fashion changes.

I am not sure that having an art and design school background was

such an advantage at times during this research as it was necessary to assess design that was not always informed by art and design school processes. I found the lack of recognisable design processes frustrating at times and saw many lost opportunities. I was initially surprised that no imagery of Shetland animals (e.g. Shetland ponies) or the very beautifully shaped leaves and flowers were developed into the patterns, as those living crofting lives in the early 20th century would have had very strong relationships with the natural world. However, when it was necessary to develop Fair Isle patterns for the expanding fashion market in the 1920s the handknitters did not use what I may term the art and design school method of developmental drawing from nature as inspiration for design. I understood Rusticus's feelings about the need for design education. However, this research challenged my perception of the primacy of such approaches, particularly as I considered the high regard the watchmaker was held in as a lace knitting 'designer'. Perhaps self-conscious design intervention would have destroyed the inheritance of a gender-neutral Fair Isle jumper in the same way that Ethel Brown's original and fashionable designs were at times more feminised. However, there are now many practitioners who have undergone art and design school courses, who demonstrate original design thinking and a sensitivity to colour, texture and shape in their limited edition or one-off pieces, made to commission as new traditions are developed, for example, Mary T Designs. Retail outlets such as Fibres, Lerwick, who keenly regard the locals as part of the customer base, eschew Fair Isle patterns, offering textured knitwear and one particular range of jumpers (2003) with single large Celtic-inspired motifs in all size ranges for both men and women. This conscious decision on the part of the owner of the shop can be contrasted with metropolitan large store norms, which explicitly separate male and female clothing into different spheres.

Christine Arnold 2004
Gray's School of Art,
The Robert Gordon University

This project was made possible by the generous help of all the staff at Shetland Archives, Shetland Museum, Shetland Library, Shetland College and all the Shetland entrepreneurs, handknitters and wearers, who agreed to be interviewed. I would like to thank Penny Linemann,

University of Aberdeen, for her clarity of insight during facilitation. Many thanks also to Karl Kaufmann and John Welsh for emergency IT rescue services.

All visual material remains the copyright of the photographers or in some instances the source archive. The author has in good faith sought permission to publish all the images. No visuals from this publication may be reproduced without permission of the author, photographer, or appropriate archive director.