

## Impact case study (REF3b)

<b>Institution:</b> <b>University of Glasgow</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: D30 – History</b>
<b>Title of case study: Knitted Textiles in the Culture and Economy of Scotland</b>
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>

The production of hand-knitting is of key economic and cultural importance in Scotland. University of Glasgow research on the history of hand-knitting has: helped to enhance a significant textiles collection at Shetland Museum and Archives (~88,000 visitors each year) and contributed to the growth of public interest in and understanding of this craft activity and its history. Glasgow research has also informed the work of contemporary knitwear designers who have found inspiration in the traditional designs and colour ways and has engaged the wider public, promoting greater appreciation of the cultural significance of hand-knitting and its role in the rural economy of the past and present.

<b>2. Underpinning research</b>
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Lynn Abrams (Professor of Modern History 2013-, Professor of Gender History 2005-13, UoG staff since 1995) has researched the history of women and gender in Britain and Europe from c.1750 to the present. From 1999-2004 Abrams conducted a study of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century gender relations in Shetland, published in a series of articles and a monograph, *Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World: Shetland 1800-2000* (2005). This research highlighted the significance of hand-knitting to the distinctive female economy and culture of the Shetland Islands, both past and present, and helped to restore the image and reputation of a traditional skill, rescuing hand-knit from a history of exploitation of women's work. Although Shetland is known worldwide for its distinctive hand-knitting, especially for Fair Isle patterning and the techniques and designs known as 'Shetland lace', Abrams highlighted the economic and cultural significance of hand-knitting within the islands and, more especially, demonstrated its significance as a vector for female economic and cultural networks.

Abrams' work identifies the unique position of women in Shetland; both in a non-industrial society, and in a very female environment. She notes that in 1861 there were 143 women to every 100 men on the islands, creating a very different social dynamic even to other similarly coastal areas in Scotland, where the gender ratio peaked at 118:100. As a result there were many female-headed or female-only households, with a corresponding need for independent means of supporting themselves. The women of Shetland developed a cottage industry supplying the south with Shetland knits. But, in addition, they used their products in the barter system which prevailed throughout the islands. The majority of women knitted for barter or for sale. Knitting could supplement a family's income and it provided female households with an income independent of fishing or agriculture, the main forms of labour for men on the islands. Moreover, knitting in the islands was never industrialised, enabling women to retain control of all aspects of production right up to sale to a merchant or customer, and women carried out their own sales or employed other women to barter for them, giving them far more public interaction with merchants than was common for women elsewhere.

Abrams notes that this identity as economic producers means that Shetland women cannot be judged by the separate spheres ideology commonly used to interpret women's roles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the significance of knitting to the economy of the Shetland islands has been underestimated because contemporary census reports failed to measure the work carried out by women. This craft of hand-knitting by women was a key, if hitherto underestimated, part of the economy of the islands throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Abrams' AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award for a project on the history of fine hand-knitted Shetland lace offered the opportunity to investigate this form of textile production drawing upon the comprehensive collection of knitted lace garments at the Shetland Museum. The project uncovered previously unknown information about the practitioners of lace-knitting, techniques and patterning and the vectors of trade in Shetland lace in the 19th and 20th centuries, demonstrating that this unique form of textile production was integrated into UK and international production and

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consumption networks and was responsive to fashion, celebrity endorsement and retail trends. These findings have relevance for the place of hand-knit in the Shetland economy and culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Knit is at the heart of Shetland's public image, as well as occupying a significant place in the economy via Shetland wool brokers, retailers, knitwear companies and tourism.



Picture 1. Fair Isle patterned sweater  
(Image courtesy of Shetland Museum & Archives)

<b>3. References to the research</b> (indicative maximum of six references)
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Publications

- Lynn Abrams, *Myth and Materiality in a Woman's Word: Shetland 1800-2000* (Manchester University Press, 2005). ISBN 9780719065927. (Available from HEI)
- Lynn Abrams, 'Knitting, Autonomy and Identity: the role of hand-knitting in the construction of women's sense of self in an island community, Shetland c.1850 to 2000', *Textile History* 17:2 (2006). pp. 149-65. (doi:[10.1179/004049606x132078](https://doi.org/10.1179/004049606x132078)).
- Lynn Abrams, 'The "Unseamed Picture": Conflicting Narratives of Women in the Modern European Past', *Gender & History* 20:3 (2008), pp. 628-643. ISSN 0953-5233. (doi:[10.1111/j.1468-0424.2008.00540.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2008.00540.x))
- Lynn Abrams, "'There is many a thing that can be done with money": Women, barter and autonomy in a Scottish Fishing Community', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37:3 (2012), pp.602-9. (doi:[10.1086/662700](https://doi.org/10.1086/662700)).

Awards

- Pasold Workshop Grant (2008): funding for a one-day workshop on 'Interdisciplinary approaches to the history, production and representation of knitted textiles in Scotland' at Scottish National Galleries (£1,035).
- AHRC CDA (2010): 'The History of lace knitting in Shetland' in collaboration with Shetland Amenity Trust (£55,000).
- Royal Society of Edinburgh Workshop Award (2012): 'Hand-knitted Textiles and the Economies of Craft in Scotland' (£8,985).

<b>4. Details of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 750 words)
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The fashion and textiles industry is worth £350 million per annum to the Scottish economy, and the industry is firmly linked to tourism: 30% of craft makers in Scotland believe that their business relies on tourism compared to just 18% in England. Hand-knitting produces high-quality workmanship based on a traditional artisan skill and is used by small craft-makers and international textiles companies to create globally recognised brands. However, its history as 'women's work' and increased employment options for islanders have led to fewer people learning hand-knitting, creating a potential skills gap.

Between 2008 and 2013, Abrams worked with a series of collaborators to reposition hand-knitting in its economic and historic context. The researchers held a series of events aimed at the general public and particularly at creative industry professionals, most notably the Scottish textiles industry. The research has influenced Shetland Museum to enhance the permanent textiles exhibition. Furthermore, it has attracted significant public and media interest and benefits the museum's ~88,000 annual visitors. It has also been used as inspiration by contemporary knitwear designers who have been stimulated by the history of Shetland hand-knitted textiles and have woven stories from the past into their own, new designs.

**Contribution to the enhancement of a significant textiles collection at Shetland Museum and Archives** – In 2010 Abrams was awarded an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award with Shetland Amenity Trust (Shetland Museum and Archives) for a joint project on the history of Shetland lace

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knitting to be co-supervised with the Curator and Community Museums Officer. The Museum moved to brand new purpose-built premises in 2007 which enabled it to display more artefacts and present those artefacts within a more sophisticated interpretive context. The textile exhibit, informed by this research, presents a model of modern curatorial techniques, permitting visitors to view a large collection of fragile hand-knitted items including Shetland lace alongside interpretive and hands-on visitor engagement tools. The collection of knitted lace garments at the Shetland Museum is the most comprehensive and unique in the UK, comprising more than 100 large (2m<sup>2</sup>) shawls, stoles, stockings, and christening garments. Many items in the Shetland collection date to the first decades of the craft, but the ability to set these important items in their interpretive context has been limited owing to the current lack of serious academic research.

The project was undertaken by Roslyn Chapman (PhD Student, University of Glasgow, 2010-present) and has uncovered previously unknown archival material and knitted artefacts in Shetland and across the UK. It has significantly enhanced the textile exhibit at Shetland Museum by improving the information made available to visitors. It has attracted widespread public interest in Shetland and was featured on BBC Radio Shetland on 18 June 2013.



*Picture 2. Shetland lace shawl  
(Image courtesy of Roslyn Chapman)*

### **Public engagement activities and raising the profile of hand-knitting**

– In 2008 a Pasold Foundation funded workshop on ‘The History, Production and Representation of Handknitted Textiles in Scotland’ was held at the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh. It was organised by Abrams in collaboration with the Head of Education for the National Galleries of Scotland and attracted around 50 knitters, curators and historians from across the UK.

In 2012 Abrams and Dr Marina Moskowitz (Reader in History, University of Glasgow) were awarded a Royal Society of Edinburgh workshop grant to fund a series of three workshops and a public study day exploring the economy and culture of hand-knitted textiles in Scotland. These events brought together knitters, designers, wool brokers, business and the creative industries to investigate: how hand-knitting has been successfully re-branded for the modern consumer in the context of the present day knitting revival; and, how it contributes to Scotland’s local and international heritage, as traditional design motifs (such as Fair Isle patterns or Shetland lace) are adopted, adapted, and disseminated through contemporary craft networks and by modern designers and makers. The events also looked at how international brands such as Johnstons of Elgin and Pringle build upon the history of knitted textiles. External collaborators included representatives from Shetland Museum and Archives; Moray Firth Partnership, Gansey Project; Jamieson & Smith, Shetland wool brokers; Rowan Yarns; Shetland Mirrie Dancers Project; and independent knitwear designers, producers and artists. Many of the talks were recorded and are available on iTunesU, with 1,597 users accessing the content between December 2012 and July 2013.

The public study day was held at the Lighthouse in Glasgow on 18 October 2012 to coincide with UK Wool Week (run by the Campaign for Wool) and attracting over 100 members of the public. The event was featured on STV (Scottish Television) evening news on 18 October 2012 and on BBC Radio Scotland’s *Good Morning Scotland* and *Newsdrive* programmes. It was also covered by *Vogue Knitting* (winter 2012) and in *Yarnwise*.

Feedback received from participants welcomed the event and the opportunity for amateur and leisure knitters to learn more about the history of knit. When asked what they got out of attending, participants replied: ‘new ideas and information, encouragement – knitting has a future as well as a

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past'; 'a chance to hear from people schooled in preserving and conserving our knitted heritage'; and, 'the knowledge that there is a lot more to learn'. One of the outcomes of this project was a commissioned case study of a local knitting tradition in the Scottish Borders town of Sanquhar. The University of Glasgow asked MakeWorks, a design-led small enterprise that connects design with local craft industries, to document the history and current state of the Sanquhar knit tradition and to create a digital archive of patterns, artefacts and related information.

**Informing the work of contemporary knitwear designers** – The history of the hand-knitting sector has recently been identified as a key marketing feature by the major yarn producers and pattern designers who understand that the value of their product is enhanced by the singularity of local design and production. In Shetland, Jamieson and Smith wool brokers (based in Shetland since the 1830s) have recently produced a brand of heritage yarn, designs, pattern books and publications, extolling the value of Shetland's wool production and hand-knitting heritage as a means of highlighting the importance of provenance, heritage and specialness, all of which are key selling points in the modern textiles market.

Contemporary knitwear designers have also been inspired by the history of Shetland hand-knitted textiles and have woven stories from the past into their designs. Kate Davies Designs, of Edinburgh, has explicitly drawn upon the story of Shetland knitter Betty Mouat, whose story features in Abrams, *Myth and Materiality*, to inspire her designs for the 'Betty Mouat Sweater' and the 'Betty Mouat Cowl'.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)
**Contribution to the enhancement of collection at Shetland Museum**

- Curator and Community Museums Officer, Shetland Museum and Archives [statement available from HEI]

**Informing contemporary knitwear designers**

- Independent Knitwear Designer [contact details available from HEI]
- MakeWorks [contact details available from HEI]
- Wool broker (previously of Jamieson and Smith Wool Brokers) [statement available from HEI]

**Engaging the public and raising profile and appreciation of hand-knitting**

- S Nenadic 'Conference report on "The History, Production and Representation of Knitted Textiles in Scotland"', Pasold Workshop Held at the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, 14 March 2008', *Textile History* 39:2 (2008), pp. 255-6). [available from HEI]
- iTunes-U, Download Report for December 2012-Jul- 2013 [available from HEI]
- Feedback from Public Study Day (18 October 2012, Glasgow) [available from HEI]
- Selected media coverage: (BBC News, 18 October 2012) '[Knitting event explores history](#)'; (Irvine Herald, 18 October 2012) '[Study day examines knitting history](#)'; (Glasgow Evening Times, 18 October 2012) '[Group are to get knack of knitting craft](#)'.