

# Producing and consuming ‘maker cultures’: Shetland knitting as production, process and product

by Siún Carden, University of the Highlands and Islands

---

## Abstract

Recent attention to ‘maker cultures’, beyond ‘modernist binaries of home and waged production, of artisanal pre-industrial trades against big manufacturing’ (Carr and Gibson 2016: 310) is driven by economic and environmental concern. Innovations like hackerspaces and diverse maker movements (Davies 2017) seek to develop new configurations of cultural production and consumption, amateur- and professional-ism, and private and public space. However, while the limitations of ‘modernist binaries’ (Carr and Gibson 2016: 310) may be highlighted by today’s concerns, these limitations are not new. As Adamson (2010: 2) points out, the frequently stated ‘objective of “crossing boundaries” serves only to produce boundaries that never existed in the first place’. Multiple ‘maker cultures’ with differing ideas about work and leisure, public and private, invention and reproduction, converge on Shetland textiles. Shetland’s knitwear industry sold (and on a smaller scale than its mid-20th century peak, continues to sell) to international mass markets while combining hand knitting and domestic workspaces with mechanised and factory-based techniques. In today’s age of ‘folk fashion’ (Twigger-Holroyd 2017) this model of production fuels Shetland’s appeal to an international community of leisure hand knitters, whose presence is felt online and through craft tourism. Shetland’s reputation as a fount of knitting expertise is an asset to knitwear businesses (Shetland weaving, once also a significant local industry, is comparatively little recognised). However, SMEs have difficulty securing skilled staff, from hand knitters to digital programmers, and longstanding ‘maker cultures’ that were once vital to Shetland culture as a whole are threatened if not lost. As ‘maker cultures’ themselves - as opposed to knitted objects - become objects of consumption, the fetishization of craft processes does not assuage anxiety about the loss of physical skill and communal cultural expertise, but prompts a reassessment of their value. This paper builds on recent ethnographic research with Shetland hand knitters. A scoping study on the changing value of Shetland hand knitting was initiated by a local voluntary organisation called ShetlandPeerieMakkers (which exists to provide hand knitting tuition to Shetland children) and carried out by the University of the Highlands and Islands’ Centre for Rural Creativity between September 2016 and January 2017. Combining desk research, semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this project produced an account of the contemporary cultural ecology of Shetland hand knitting, examining craft education, tourism, online social worlds and rural creative industries through the perspectives of local knitting experts. As Stalker and Burnett (2016: 196) argue, ‘remote islands...are increasingly positioned as entrepreneurial spaces that arguably offer ‘good’ sustainable models of practice for both cultural and natural heritage resource’. The Romantic vision of islands as places left behind by ‘the arc of Modernity’ (Srnicek and Williams 2016) is twinned by the notion of islands as laboratories or natural experiments (Baldacchino 2004), whose peripherality in relation to urban centres is imagined as the cutting-edge. Does ‘alternative hedonism’ (Soper 2013: 255), or the aestheticization of the ‘intimate, useful, and meaningful’ (Metcalfe 2007: 18), enable craft in the immediate shadow of the North Sea oil industry to offer more than an island escape?

---

Shetland is the northernmost county of the UK, located between mainland Scotland and Norway, with a population of about 23,000 inhabitants. Shetland knitting, especially fair isle colourwork and lace, is part of the islands' brand image (Grydehøj, 2008: 175; Promote Shetland, 2017), was a major local employment sector until the late twentieth century (Turnock, 1974: 19), and retains a more important role in local culture and social life than knitting does elsewhere in the UK (Steed, 2016: 140).

'Shetland knitting' can refer to a commodity, knitted goods produced in the Shetland Islands and sold there or around the world. It can also refer to a design repertoire of 'fair isle' colourwork and lace knitting associated with Shetland and produced and reinterpreted both there and elsewhere, or to the skills required to reproduce and reinvent these designs. In this paper, I want to consider 'Shetland knitting' as a maker culture. The phrase 'maker culture' is often used to describe the 'hacker-maker movement' (Dougherty, 2012; Toupin, 2014), with its emphasis on digital fabrication and a 'hacker ethos' (Davies, 2017) of openness and participation. However, the idea of 'maker cultures' is not limited to this milieu. Carr and Gibson (2016: 297) use the term to describe 'those who make things' without imposing familiar, often presupposed but nebulous binaries such as craft vs. manufacturing. They suggest that 'Across the commercial/non-capitalist divide, maker cultures celebrate forms of proximate sociality (being strongly network-based, and emphasizing 'community') and forge closer connections between producers and consumers' (2016: 300).

This paper builds on recent research on the contemporary cultural ecology of Shetland hand knitting, including craft education, tourism, online social worlds and rural creative industries, through the perspectives of local knitting experts. This was initiated by a voluntary organisation called the ShetlandPeerieMakkers (which exists to provide hand knitting tuition to Shetland children), who approached the University of the Highlands and Islands' Centre for Rural Creativity to discuss the possibility of research into the value and meaning of Shetland hand knitting. During a resulting scoping study, carried out between September 2016 and January 2017, participants' concern about hand knitting as communal cultural expertise and embodied skill was thoroughly enmeshed with concern about knitting by both hand and machine as a local manufacturing industry. The way in which these elements are intertwined in practice and in participants' life stories suggests that it may be useful to think about Shetland knitting as a maker culture that operates across such categories.

### **Making beyond 'modernist binaries'**

The idea that we should pay attention to making practices beyond professional and institutional boundaries has come to the fore in recent years. Initiatives such as hackerspaces, FABLABs, MAKE magazine and the so-called 'Maker Movement' (Dougherty, 2012) have become the subject of excited discourse about democratising innovation and revitalising manufacturing in the face of challenges such as automation and climate change (Davies, 2017). Authors like David Gauntlett (2011) and Susan Luckman (2012) have pointed out the parallels and overlaps between this vogue for hacking/making communities and the rise of online communities of practice around textile crafts.

Geographers Carr and Gibson (2016) argue that our current global predicament calls for analysis of economic geographies of making that transcend 'modernist binaries' like amateur/professional and craft/manufacturing (Carr and Gibson, 2016: 310). They suggest this both as a way to challenge the dominant 'make-sell-dispose' culture, and as an accurate reflection of a contemporary world where, in spite of economic rhetoric that makes it sound as if the objects around us are beamed down from on high, many real people around the world are right now engaged in making them. The inadequacies of binary categories like craft and mass manufacture are of course not new. As Glenn Adamson (2010: 2) has pointed out, the frequently stated 'objective of "crossing boundaries" serves only to produce boundaries that never existed in the first place'.



Figure 1: Shetland sheep. Photo by Jaele Rollins McColgan.

### **A pervasive maker culture: 'Everybody was knitting'**

Shetland is a place where such boundaries have certainly never been a good representation of making practices. Shetland's knitwear production sector was sustained throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by a pervasive maker culture. Shetland's knitwear industry sold (and continues to sell, on a smaller scale) to international markets while combining hand knitting and domestic workspaces with mechanised and factory-based techniques. From wool production and processing to garment finishing, the making of knitted textiles was a significant element of the islands' economy until the late twentieth century, when economic and social changes were accelerated by the arrival of the North Sea oil industry<sup>i</sup> in the late 1970s-early 1980s (Byron and McFarlane, 1980). The combination of hand and machine knitting in popular styles of twentieth century Shetland knitwear extended the practice of hand knitting as a manufacturing technique. Bennett (1981: ix) argues that Shetland presents a 'special case', where in spite of and alongside mechanisation, hand knitting 'as an industry has maintained a continuous existence from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the present day'. Interviewees in their sixties recall knitting as a widespread source of supplementary income in their youth, when 'everybody was knitting', by hand and with home-based machines.

This made it possible for designers to build longstanding businesses on outwork models. Talking about the 1970s-1980s, one local knitwear designer said: 'at that time there were so many knitters. You could just put an advert in the paper and get knitters...they were amazing, could just knit whatever. I'd give them a bag of colour and a swatch.'

Economic, social and educational changes since the mid-twentieth century have transformed the make-up of the Shetland knitting community. The number of people engaged in knitting in Shetland has declined, and the reasons for their knitting have evolved in the context of wider economic and social changes. While many older Shetland knitters have no memory of not being able to knit, having learned by 'maternal osmosis' (Arnold, 2010: 87), a recurring phrase today is 'missing generation'. As another owner of a longstanding Shetland knitwear design business explained,

*we have a missing generation, if not two. Life got busy. There was work for women outside the home and they were still working inside the home as well. There just wasn't time to be knitting for sale or as a hobby. Now people are looking at it differently.*

### **Knitting 2.0: 'Super-connected amateurs'**

One reason people are 'looking at it differently' now is that the design history and model of production that drove Shetland's knitwear industry through its heights in the nineteenth and twentieth cents now fuels Shetland's appeal to an international community of leisure hand knitters, whose presence is felt online and through craft tourism, as well as to contemporary designer-makers within Shetland and beyond. External perceptions and global influences have always played a role in the knitting done in Shetland, whether through visiting agents and buyers, or local designers and businesses conducting trade visits and attending trade shows abroad. Some local businesses still have strong international sales links, particularly with Japan. However, the rise of the internet, its transmission of a participatory "making and doing" culture' (Gauntlett, 2011: 11) and a resurgence in what Twigger Holroyd (2018) calls 'Folk Fashion' has changed the profile of Shetland knitting in significant ways. Due to 'the existence of a new super-connected amateur' (Hackney, 2013:171), craft and design skills that fuelled local manufacturing industry in previous generations are finding new forms of value. While Shetland's trade in knitted objects has always been an international one, the process of knitting itself has never before been the focus of such public attention and interaction.

Craft tourism makes this visible within Shetland. Shetland Wool Week is the biggest craft tourism event in the islands, while there is an increasing range of others on a smaller scale. Shetland Wool Week was started in 2010, in the wake of a national Wool Week as part of the Campaign for Wool. With the involvement of Promote Shetland (at the time, under the auspices of the Shetland Amenity Trust)<sup>ii</sup> it grew into a much larger event. In 2017 it had around 600 participants, which is almost full capacity given the limited accommodation available. A 2017 report from Highland Business Research says that 2016's 'Shetland Wool Week pumped more than £500,000 into the economy – a 70 per cent increase on last year'<sup>iii</sup>. As one of the ShetlandPeerieMakkers tutors put it, 'Wool Week has just exploded.' The craft tourism route to Shetland is by no means one-way. Some Shetland knitting experts travel as designer-teachers, in a role analogous to the type of folk musician who both writes their own music and reinterprets traditional tunes.



## **Necessity and pleasure: 'Playing with knitting'**

What Maines (2009) calls the 'hedonization' of knitting that is firmly established across Europe and North America has a much shorter history within Shetland. Awareness of knitting as a past necessity, even drudgery at times, is important to some Shetland knitters today, who talk about their 'luck' in being able to engage in it so freely. Of course, however, this history is what puts some non-knitters off. Local phrases associated with knitting include 'tak dy sock' (take your knitting) and 'don't sit hand idle', which are used and remembered fondly, but hint at the idea of knitting as never-ending labour. The history of the Shetland barter-truck system (Abrams, 2005: 64) includes elements of exploitation, and Shetland knitters in more recent generations have had a wide range of different experiences with the knitwear industry, both positive and negative.

In this context knitting has often been seen as an economic recourse, something you might one day be obliged to do: an interviewee says, 'You hear an awful lot of folk saying my mam always told me never start knitting or you'll have to knit for a living'. Another remarks that 'for that generation, education is for going away and staying away, or getting a job with a pension', not for 'playing with knitting'.

The relationship between knitting and education became a matter of debate in Shetland around 2010, when it was announced that publically funded knitting tutors were being withdrawn from Shetland schools. Discussions ensued on how hand knitting might or should be valued given the diminution of its role in Shetland's economy. The notion of knitting as an occupation of last resort still resonated within this debate. As an example, a local councillor was quoted in the Shetland Times defending the council's decision with the words 'We are turning folk out that can read and write. We are not turning knitters out of school'<sup>iv</sup>.

## **Facilitating Shetland's young knitters: ShetlandPeerieMakkers**

The ShetlandPeerieMakkers emerged at a time when the withdrawal of knitting tuition from the school curriculum was fuelling concern that the 'missing generation' spelled the end of Shetland knitting as a living, forward-looking culture within the islands. Their aim is not to recreate the previous role of knitting tutors within schools. While school buildings are used for practical reasons (volunteers particularly appreciate 'the heat'), the ShetlandPeerieMakkers organisation is not part of the education system, and sees itself as belonging to the wider community.

While the content of school provision varied according to the individual tutor, the ShetlandPeerieMakkers volunteers are committed to a particular ethos. This combines skills that are connected to Shetland (fair isle colourwork and lace knitting, using local wool and making belts) with the encouragement of children's creativity by giving them as much choice as possible about how to use those skills. Longstanding, successful local knitting groups for children were used as models for this approach. The ShetlandPeerieMakkers's pilot project created volunteer-led (and voluntarily attended) knitting groups in 8 primary schools over 2 years; funded through online crowdfunding supplemented with local fundraising<sup>v</sup>. Many of the donors were from the international knitting community, as evidenced by the comments they left online<sup>vi</sup>.

ShetlandPeerieMakkers volunteers express the view that Shetland children ought to have access to local knitting knowledge, as a kind of birth right, e.g.: 'it's part of our heritage, part of our identity, and it would be an awful shame for it to be lost because there were nobody willing to help the young folk'. The heritage gaze applied to knitting and to rural island communities like Shetland has strengthened in recent decades, as research participants have experienced for themselves. Cultural activities that are seen as 'traditional' or 'authentic' carry an expectation of communal ownership and benefit: what McKerrel (2014:161) calls an 'ideological commitment to communitas and social action'. The ShetlandPeerieMakkers organisation mobilises

ideas of heritage, tradition and authenticity not through dogmatic expectations of technique or design, but by treating Shetland knitting as something 'precious' which is 'the responsibility of the community' (interviewee).

### **Commodification and inspiration: naming names**

During Shetland's long history of knitwear production, as an interviewee put it, the 'knitwear industry took knitting from people as a commodity' and under those circumstances 'it becomes anonymous'. Responses to recent Shetland Wool Week events<sup>vii</sup> show that visitors particularly appreciate the level of personal detail they can access about the designers, makers and wearers of historical and contemporary garments. This is very different from the tendency to attribute so-called 'traditional' crafts to an anonymous lineage of artisans.

Shetland's indigenous knitting culture has often been used as raw material for design professionals elsewhere. Recent high profile examples include Alexander McQueen's SS17 collection<sup>viii</sup>, which makes explicit reference to various forms of Shetland textiles, and a line of knitwear from high street retailer Oasis informed by garments from the Shetland Museum and Archives<sup>x</sup>. The degree to which Shetland sources are acknowledged in the work of other designers varies widely, and occasionally a particular use of Shetland inspiration is disputed<sup>x</sup>. Generally, however, Shetland makers are not surprised to see familiar designs in shops and on catwalks either with or without reference to their sources, as this has always happened, even if they wish that they and Shetland benefitted more from it<sup>xi</sup>.

### **Makkin 'n' Yakkin<sup>xii</sup>: knitting and 'talking about it'**

An increasing proportion of the knitting-related activity in Shetland is about interpretation and instruction, telling the 'story' of Shetland knitting rather than physically doing it. As an interviewee put it, 'the other market is...talking about it'. If we imagine a scale of 'materiality' (Abrams, 2005) with knitted objects at one end, knitting by hand and machine as a process in the middle, and the less tangible realm of narrative, image or brand at the far end, the types of economic and social value attributed to Shetland knitting are shifting away from the material object. While all three elements are still important elements of Shetland knitting's cultural ecology, the once-dominant model of combined hand and machine knitting as a mode of producing objects for sale is now declining in relation to knitting as heritage, as leisure, or as a tool for place branding.

This shift contributes to problems for the Shetland knitwear industry today. Small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) express difficulty securing and retaining skilled staff, from hand knitters and linkers to machine programmers. There is debate about how much of this is due to skills shortages and how much can be attributed to the wider context of pay and conditions across sectors in Shetland, but even designers who have explicitly set out to provide properly paid work for hand knitters in recent years have had difficulty finding workers willing to do it.

The shift in emphasis away from the material object prompts anxiety about the loss of physical skills, which has not been eased by the proliferation of books, websites, pattern designs, high street fashion and haute couture referencing Shetland knitwear by people outside Shetland. This is particularly the case because Shetland's knitting expertise has historically been more about fluid improvisation than following patterns, closer to an oral tradition than a written one. When people talk about 'skill' being lost, they often mean more than technical know-how. For example, an adult returning to knitting said:

*I've got to a point now where I want to pick up the stitches for the button band and...I'm just going to wait for mum to show me - because yes, I could watch a YouTube video, but I want to do it mum's way.*

## Conclusion

The 'product' of Shetland knitting is not just knitted objects but also the skilled and place-based processes that go into making them. The recent public appetite for making beyond professional boundaries in the field of textiles and beyond means that Shetland knitting as a maker culture might be seen as a product in itself, one that in Carr and Gibson's (2016: 300) terms forges 'new connections between producers and consumers'. Viewing Shetland knitting as a 'maker culture' enables discussion of practices that encompass a spectrum of domestic and industrial production and are active, porous and evolving, rather than 'traditions' that are rhetorically positioned as opposed to innovation and forever in the process of being lost. The 'maker culture' frame allows elements such as manufacturing, professional design and leisure making to be recognised, and their intersections investigated, without presenting the value of public participation as a purely instrumental, economic one. The 'maker culture' of Shetland knitting is both international, with participants and influences worldwide, and place-based, being anchored in not only the history but also the contemporary practices of Shetland.

---

<sup>i</sup> While part of the attraction of craft in rural places for visitors is a fantasy of pastoral escape, longstanding maker cultures like Shetland knitting are embedded in the same economic processes as the rest of the world. For example, it is hard to talk about Shetland knitting for long without mentioning the oil industry. When North Sea oil was discovered in the 1970s, knitwear was identified as one of the ‘traditional industries’ that were threatened by this change and singled out for support. Marketing funds were made available to knitwear designers from the compensation supplied by the oil industry as part of its Disturbance Agreement (1974). The end of funding for school knitting tuition in 2010 came at a time when government and oil funds, both important to public services in Shetland, were under pressure.

<sup>ii</sup> In June 2017, it was announced that Promote Shetland (as part of the Shetland Amenity Trust) had not won the new contract to continue its work. Shetland Islands Council did not award the contract to anyone who had tendered for it at that point. They said this was because the goal had shifted away from ‘heritage tourism’ and towards attracting people of working age to live in the islands. The future of Shetland Wool Week has been secured for the time being through sponsorship. See Shetland Times 12/06/17, available online at <http://www.shetlandtimes.co.uk/2017/06/12/council-re-tender-promote-shetland-contract-goal-posts-changed>. Accessed 27/02/18.

<sup>iii</sup> See Shetland Times 07/12/16, available online at <http://www.shetlandtimes.co.uk/2016/12/07/shetland-wool-week-boosts-economy-500000>. Accessed 27/02/18.

<sup>iv</sup> See Shetland Times 19/05/2010, available online at <http://www.shetlandtimes.co.uk/2010/05/19/trio-of-councillors-fail-in-11th-hour-bid-to-retain-knitting-lessons-in-schools>. Accessed 27/02/18.

<sup>v</sup> In 2017 the Shetland Peerie Makkers secured a mixture of LEADER funding and private sponsorship that has enabled them to employ a coordinator and start to gradually make the scheme available across Shetland.

<sup>vi</sup> See <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/peeriemakkers-shetland/comments/>

<sup>vii</sup> Such as exhibitions of local knitwear in Whalsay and knitted haps (shawls) in Ollaberry.

<sup>viii</sup> Interviewed about this collection by Susannah Frankel for AnOther magazine, Sarah Burton, head of Alexander McQueen says ‘I loved the idea of community and craft’. Available online at <http://anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/9147/citing-the-spirit-of-the-shetland-isles-at-alexander-mcqueen>. Accessed 27/02/18.

<sup>ix</sup> See Shetland Times 14/11/17, available online at <http://www.shetlandtimes.co.uk/2017/11/14/archives-collection-inspires-fashion-chains-fair-isle-knitwear>. Accessed 27/02/18.

<sup>x</sup> eg the case of Mati Ventrillon and Chanel. See The Guardian, 13/12/15. Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/dec/13/fair-isle-knitwear-chanel-triumph>. Accessed 27/02/18.

<sup>xi</sup> There have been attempts to protect or distinguish ‘genuine’ Shetland knitwear from that produced elsewhere, such as the ‘Shetland Lady’ trademark developed by the Shetland Knitwear Trades Association (defunct).

<sup>xii</sup> ‘Makkin ‘n’ Yakkin’ is the Shetland version of the Stitch ‘n’ Bitch (popularised by Debbie Stoller), or its primmer cousin the Knit ‘n’ Natter.

## References

Abrams, Lynn (2005) Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World: Shetland 1800-2000, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Adamson, Glenn (2007) Thinking Through Craft, Oxford; New York: Berg Publishers.

Alfoldy, Sandra (2007) NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts, Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

Arnold, Christine (2010) 'An Assessment of the Gender Dynamic in Fair Isle (Shetland) Knitwear', Textile History 41(1): 86–98.

Bennett, H. M. (1981) 'The Origins and Development of the Scottish Hand-Knitting Industry.' PhD thesis. Available online at <https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/6842>. Accessed 27/02/18.

Blaikie, Andrew (2001) 'Photographs in the Cultural Account: Contested Narratives and Collective Memory in the Scottish Islands', The Sociological Review 49(3): 345–67.

Byron, Reginald, and Graham McFarlane (1980). Social Change in Dunrossness: A Shetland Study, London: Social Science Research Council.

Carr, Chantel, and Chris Gibson (2016) 'Geographies of Making: Rethinking Materials and Skills for Volatile Futures', Progress in Human Geography 40(3): 297–315.

Craft Industry Alliance (2017) 'Ravelry at 10: How the knitting social network has inspired and impacted yarntrepreneurs', available online at <https://craftindustryalliance.org/raverly-at-10-how-the-knitting-social-network-has-inspired-and-impacted-yarntrepreneurs/>. Accessed 27/02/18.

Davies, Sarah R (2017) Hackerspaces: Making the Maker Movement, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Dougherty, Dale (2012) 'The Maker Movement.' Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization 7(3): 11–14.

Gauntlett, David (2011) Making Is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity, from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0, Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Grydehøj, Adam (2008) 'Branding from above: Generic Cultural Branding in Shetland and Other Islands', Island Studies Journal 3(2): 175–98.

Hackney, Fiona (2013) 'Quiet Activism and the New Amateur: The Power of Home and Hobby Crafts', Design and Culture 5(2): 169–93.

Harling Stalker, Lynda, and Kathryn A. Burnett (2016) 'Good Work? Scottish Cultural Workers' Narratives About Working and Living on Islands', Island Studies Journal 11(1): 193–208.

Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger (1991) Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Luckman, Susan (2012) Locating Cultural Work, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Maines, Rachel (2009) Hedonizing Technologies: Paths to Pleasure in Hobbies and Leisure, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

McKerrell, Simon (2014) 'Traditional Arts and the State: The Scottish Case', Cultural Trends 23(3): 159–68.

Promote Shetland (2017) 'Creative Crafts', Available online at <https://www.shetland.org/live/creative-community>. Accessed 27/02/18.

Steed, Josephine (2016) 'Hand Knitting in a Digital Era', In Nithikul Nimkulrat, Faith Kane, and Kerry Walton (eds.) Crafting Textiles in the Digital Age, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, pp. 139-152.

Toupin, Sophie (2014) 'Feminist Hackerspaces: The Synthesis of Feminist and Hacker Cultures', Journal of Peer Production, Issue 5. Available online at <http://peerproduction.net> Accessed 27/02/18.

Turnock, David (1974) Scotland's Highlands and Islands, London: Oxford University Press.

Twigger Holroyd, Amy (2017) Folk Fashion: Understanding Homemade Clothes, London: I.B.Tauris.