CLOSE-KNIT: EXPLORING HOW KNITTING HAS SHAPED THE HISTORICAL AND ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS OF THE SHETLAND ARCHIPELAGO

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Abstract: By considering the archipelago as a dynamic form, this study examines historical and contemporary examples of island-to-island ways of being, knowing and doing. Shetland hand knitting offers a contextual backdrop to explore the shaping of historical and enduring relationships between the Shetland Islands. In positioning the Shetland Islands as mutually constituted and interrelated, the study offers an examination of the Shetland archipelago in its own right, rather than as told in relation to the metropolitan centres of Great Britain. Such a perspective affords a more nuanced understanding of some of the smaller islands that constitute the British Isles.

Keywords: Knitting, Shetland, Archipelago, Island, Barter, Wool Week.

Introduction

Made up of over 100 islands, 16 of which are inhabited, and a total population of just under 23,000, the Shetland archipelago is part of Scotland and lies almost equidistant between the UK and Norway, 294 km north of Aberdeen and 308 km west of Bergen. These islands are at the centre of the trading routes between Germany, the UK and Scandinavia (Marttila 2016). The largest island is known as The Mainland (as opposed to The Scottish Mainland), which is where Shetland's capital, Lerwick, is located. To the north of The Mainland are the North Isles of Yell (population of around 1,000), Fetlar (population of around 60) and Unst (population of around 650 and the UK's most northerly island). To the south is the island of Fair Isle (population of around 60), with the islands of Whalsay (population around 1,000), Foula and Out Skerries (both with a population of around 30) situated respectively to the west and east of The Mainland.

The Shetland archipelago is often characterised as remote, particularly when described in relation to the UK mainland (see e.g. Macaulay 2016; Gazey et al. 2006). Such a perspective reinforces a notion of isolation and marginalisation that overlooks the histories and narratives

between the islands that form the archipelago (Suarez 2018). Archipelagos are rhizomatic in that they have no unique centre and are an interrelated network of islands (Wiedorn 2021). Island-to-island ways of being, knowing and doing have received relatively limited research attention when compared with studies of land and sea, and island and mainland (Stratford et al. 2011; Baldacchino 2006). The study of islands has thus placed heavy emphasis on the borders comprised by land and sea (Pugh 2013), which is in contrast to the notion of the sea as a form of connection rather than isolation in the context of the spatial configuration of an archipelago (Smith 2013). In consequence, researching archipelagos as interrelated, mutually constituted, and co-constructed requires further exploration (Stratford et al. 2011).

Pugh (2013: 10) frames the archipelago as a dynamic form and makes a compelling argument for thinking *with* the archipelago by arguing how such islands ‘adapt, transfigure and transform their inheritances into original form’. One example of how an archipelago adapts, transfigures and transforms is hand knitting in the Shetland Islands. Historically a predominantly female activity, early complete examples of Shetland hand knitting have been dated from the 17th century. Traditionally knitting was used as a third source of income alongside the primarily male economic activities of crofting and fishing (Fryer 1992). Income from fishing was used to pay rent, crofting provided food, and items were knitted to clothe the family and traded for money and goods (Fryer 1995). Proceeds from knitting offered survival in a bad fishing season or a poor harvest, and were thus vital (Arnold 2010). Examining how the Shetland archipelago was, and continues to be, shaped by knitting provides an island-to-island context to examine themes of archipelagic connection, exchange and mutuality; important topics that are currently under-researched (Stratford et al. 2011; Stratford 2013). In examining Shetland’s relationship with knitting, this study positions the archipelago as more than a collection of islands, and instead as mutually constituted and inter-related. Three fieldwork visits were made to the archipelago in 2019, 2022 and 2023 to consider the question of *how has knitting shaped the historical and enduring relationships of the Shetland Islands?*

The paper begins by setting out the origins of Shetland hand knitting prior to discussing Shetland knitting as a form of economic activity. Next, the backdrop of the historical bartering system used on the archipelago is introduced and consideration is given to how bartering fostered connection, exchange, and mutuality within the system of hand knitting. The paper then examines the relationships that have endured through knitting by examining Shetland Wool Week; a week-long event, established in 2010, celebrating Shetland’s textile industry and

attracting visitors from across the world. Finally, the paper reflects on the research question posed to discuss how knitting has shaped relationships in the Shetland archipelago.

Origins of Shetland Hand Knitting

Records documenting the early history of Shetland hand knitting are in short supply. From the beginning of the 18th century there is evidence of women knitters trading blankets, hosiery, caps and gloves with Dutch and German merchants for money and goods (Fryer 1992; Victoria and Albert Museum n.d.) but it is not until the middle of the 18th century that records are available to document the practice of knitting as an economic activity (BBC Radio Scotland 1993) Nevertheless, the historical context of an economy based predominantly on the fishing industry provides an important backdrop to the progression of hand knitting in the Shetland archipelago. Fishing, a chiefly male economic pursuit, impacted on family life as men were absent from the islands for long periods of time, with some never returning (Pearce 2017). In consequence, women frequently adopted a myriad of roles including surrogate fathers, bread-winners and crofters, in addition to their usual roles of mother, cook, housekeeper and supplementary wage earner during the long periods of male absence (Fryer 1995). Abrams (2005) argues that such circumstances created a society that gave women economic and cultural power; a societal dynamic that would have contrasted with the experiences of women living in mainland UK during the same period.

With many more sheep than people, Shetland knitters have access to abundant supplies of wool. Shetland sheep can survive the climatic conditions of Shetland to produce soft, lightweight fibre that can be used undyed. Traditionally women and girls plucked wool by hand from the sheep and combed it into rolls of wool that were ready for spinning into yarn for knitting. Over time women took advantage of environmental and economic opportunities to develop their skills from knitting coarse hosiery and blankets to crafting high quality items, including fine lace hose and shawls using intricate openwork patterns, from which the reputation of Shetland knitting emerged (Fryer 1995). Anecdotal evidence suggests that historically Shetland knitters had learned to knit ‘before they could remember’ (Wild 2019: 38). Knitters did not document their patterns, and so knitting patterns and techniques were derived from unwritten generational knowledge (Steed 2016). Patterns were inspired by nature (Mann 2018). Garments were knitted from memory (Cohen 2019), and hence the knowledge exists in the practice (Adamson 2013). In addition, from 1790 to 1872 the Shetland hand knitting industry expanded considerably, with knitters diversifying their output to meet fashion

demands. It would appear that different regions of the archipelago focused on knitting different items, and through this organisation of output the overall production of knitting substantially increased (Fryer 1995). For example, on The Mainland soft undergarments were knitted in Northmaven, stockings in Nesting, haps (small shawls) and socks in Walls and shawls and veils in Lerwick. Knitters on the island of Unst became known for their intricately patterned fine lace garments, Whalsay for using colour and pattern to develop allover styles and Fair Isle for stranded knitting characterised by detailed and colourful patterns using only two colours per knitting round or row (BBC Radio Scotland 1984).

Knitting as an Economic Activity

Due to the demands of the croft and the family, employment outside of the home was not historically feasible for women and so they fitted hand knitting around their daily activities (Fryer 1995). Shetland hand knitting, described as ‘da makkin’ or ‘da sock’ was taken everywhere, particularly when women went to collect the peat on their backs, thus leaving their hands free to knit (BBC Radio Scotland 1984). Girls learned from an early age that their hands should never be idle (BBC Radio Scotland 1984). Abrams (2012) notes how historians have paid limited attention to hand knitting, considering it as a handicraft superseded by mechanised textile production. ‘Representing hand knitting as a domestic hobby undertaken by wives waiting anxiously for their menfolk to return from the sea was a common fallacy circulated by those who wished to imbue Shetland hosiery with mystery and a tinge of tragedy’ (Abrams 2012: 605). In actuality, it was work that was undertaken independently of men thus offering women a degree autonomy (Abrams 2006; Arnold 2010).

Until the late 1800s, Shetland fishing operated under a system of fishing tenure, whereby Shetland fishermen were obligated to fish for their landlords as a proxy for rent and to offset loans taken out to buy, and keep, fishing boats and equipment (Abrams 2012). This system was known as ‘truck’ or ‘barter-truck’ (from the French *troc* meaning barter (Jevons 1875)), and is defined as ‘payment in kind and not in the current coin of the realm’ (Fryer 1995: xii). The truck system was not particular to Shetland and had been in operation across the UK since the 15th century (Hilton 1957). After a series of Parliamentary Truck Acts, by 1890 the practice of paying workers in anything other than money was largely abolished in England and Wales (Frank 2020; Hilton 1957).

In Shetland, poor harvests at sea and on land resulted in fisherman-tenants falling heavily into

their landlord’s debt (Smith 1977). Shetland hand knitters, who were exclusively female, also laboured under the truck system, bartering knitting for goods with exclusively male merchants located on the archipelago (BBC Radio Scotland 1993). Today, the remains of 19th century merchant stores can be seen on the archipelago. Examples include Greenwell’s Böd at Uyesound in Unst and the renovated Da Muckle Store in Hillswick on The Mainland. In Shetland, truck was so ingrained that a specific inquiry for Shetland entitled *British Parliamentary Papers, C (1st series) 555 I: Commission to Inquire into the Truck System, Second Report (Shetland Evidence), 1872* (and hereafter referred to as: Truck Inquiry 1872) was conducted by the Glasgow Sheriff William Guthrie. The Truck Inquiry (1872) was generally concerned with examining the effect of truck on the fishing and hand knitting industries. It began on 1st January 1872 and 17,070 questions were posed to inhabitants from across the archipelago. The inquiry included interviews with Shetland knitters. ‘Evidence was taken respecting the hosiery or knitting trade, in which a very large proportion of the women of the country are engaged’ (Truck Inquiry 1872: 1). William Guthrie recorded their responses verbatim; the record of which, documented as the Truck Inquiry, provides insight into the lives of Shetland knitters in the 19th century (Chapman 2015). The interviews from the inquiry, some of which are detailed as part of this study, provide a wealth of information and first-hand accounts of life under truck where ‘it is the custom and understanding of the country from Unst to Dunrossness, that payment shall be made in goods’ (Truck Inquiry 1872: 45).

Apart from a very small number of women who were deemed to knit garments of exceptionally high quality, under truck it was very difficult for Shetland knitters to get paid in money. For the majority of knitters, the payment from the merchants was in goods, which meant that the merchant made a profit in two ways; firstly, on the goods exchanged and secondly, on the profit on the woollen goods that he later sold (BBC Radio Scotland 1984) Knitters asked for money in return for their knitting and were quizzed as part of the Truck Inquiry as to why this was preferable to goods. As knitter Adrina Simpson explains:

> *Question 317: Did you want it all [the price of the knitting] in money?*
> *Answer: I would have liked it all in money.*
> *Question 318: Why? What would you have done with the money if you had had it?*
> *Answer: There is many a thing that can be done with money.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

Knitters were refused money by the merchants as demonstrated in this interview with Margaret

Williamson:

> *Question 8314: Do you always get goods for your knitting?*
> *Answer: Yes, I get goods because I can get nothing else.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

As it was generally only goods that the merchants were prepared to exchange for knitted items, it was often the case that a woman bringing in many items, or a particularly high value item such as a fine shawl, did not want to receive the whole value of the goods at that time. As the merchant did not want to give cash to make up any shortfall, he was obliged to open a line of credit for that knitter. It is documented that:

> *[Merchants] ascribe the practice [of credit] to their solicitude for the convenience of the knitters. The merchants of course have the benefit of getting their hosiery, to some extent, on credit. They have the use of the money without interest so long as it remains in their hands; and when they pay, they pay in goods on which they have a large profit.* (Truck Inquiry 1872: 46)

It is worth noting that this line of credit only extended in one direction, and knitters were not permitted to take a larger amount in goods than was owing to them for knitting.

The Truck Inquiry is replete with examples of knitters declaring their preference for payment in cash. For many, money was required to pay rent and to purchase food and other provisions. Cotton goods, tea and shoes were the main goods for which they could exchange their knitted items (Truck Inquiry 1872). Consequently, Shetland families became excessively well-dressed due to the bartered cotton that was sewn by women into fine clothes. However, though people were finely dressed, they were also starving as they could not get money to buy food (BBC Radio Scotland 1993). As part of the Truck Inquiry a medical doctor, Dr Robert Lowie from Lerwick, was interviewed as follows:

> *Question 14,698: With regard to hosiery, has it come within your own knowledge that knitters are paid in goods to an extent that is unwholesome for themselves and for the community?*
> *Answer: Yes, in drapery goods.*
> *Question 14,699: In what way has that been forced upon your attention?*

> *Answer: Sometimes in the discharge of my professional duties, I have observed that there was an utter disproportion between the clothing and the food of these knitters. I am no judge as to the value or quality of the goods, but many of them are clothed in a very gaudy, showy manner, and in a way quite inconsistent with their position in life. I have reason to know at the same time that their food is utterly insufficient. I have known knitting girls, one might almost say, starving or very near starving, when they were at same time very well dressed or dressed in a very showy manner.*
> *Question 14,704: Do you refer to the difficulty in which they have in getting money for their work?*
> *Answer: Yes; and to the fact that they get goods, chiefly drapery goods, for it.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

Despite the number of questions asked of Shetlanders as part of the Truck Inquiry, no legislation followed its presentation to Parliament. Smith (1977: 211) notes how 'it [truck] seemed as immovable in 1872 as it had been a century before'. For the fisherman, emancipation from truck came in the form of both the herring boom of the 1880s wherein the availability of fish soared and released them from their debt to their landlords, and the Crofters Act of 1886 which freed Shetlanders from their tenured obligations (Smith 1977). For the Shetland hand knitters, the truck system continued well into the 1900s. A further Truck Inquiry was carried out in Shetland in 1908 and resulted in '…a few token prosecutions with some half dozen merchants being fined derisory sums, but in reality it was business as usual, and it really did seem as if the Shetland hand knitting industry would never rid itself of truck' (Fryer 1995: 61). It was the First World War that that began to eradicate truck, with knitters receiving cash for hosiery sold to servicemen, and the disruption to the supply of cheap imported underwear from Europe leading to an increase in demand for Shetland knitted hosiery and an increase in prices (Fryer 1995). Post-war, many knitters were forced once again to operate under the truck system. Following the Second World War, and the associated increase in demand for knitted hosiery, the knitters were emboldened to set up a co-operative; the Shetland Hand Knitters Association. The Association was one of the main factors that eradicated truck for hand knitters as set prices were established, knitters were paid in money and quality criteria were established (UK Parliament 1952). The truck system in Shetland thus endured for many more years than for England, Wales, and mainland Scotland.

Influence of the Truck System on Shetland Knitters: Connection, Exchange, and

Mutuality

From an industry perspective, the organisation of Shetland hand knitting during truck has been described as 'casual to the point of disorganisation' (Fryer 1995: 23). Yet there is evidence to suggest that knitters were organised in terms of their labour. For example, under the cashless truck system knitters had to develop exchange relationships, usually with other women, which spanned the archipelago. Those who wished to knit with their own wool either used their own sheep, received wool in payment for work or obtained wool through barter from the islands of Yell and Unst; islands whereby wool was more readily available (Abrams 2006). Another option was to exchange their lines of credit in exchange for wool. This practice was more common among knitters who were particularly poor and had no other means of living apart from knitting (Truck Inquiry 1872). Rather than using their own wool, knitters had the option of being employed by the merchants on a knit-to-order basis; wool was provided in advance to knit the garments, the cost of which was deducted from the amount subsequently paid by the merchant (Abrams 2006). No formal contracts were afforded to these knitters and employment was on a piece work basis with prices being set by the merchant (Fryer 1995). Obtaining wool for knitting was, therefore, a rather complicated endeavour that required connection, exchange, and mutuality between women across the Shetland Islands. For those that were unable to knit-to-order, these mutually constituted relationships were vital to obtaining wool to produce garments that could be exchanged and were thus crucial to many for survival.

Once a garment was knitted it required finishing, also known as dressing. Women acted as dressers, which comprised washing the item, stretching it so that the stitches, particularly the lace patterns, were visible, and conducting repairs as necessary (Truck Inquiry 1872). The merchants would not purchase items that were not dressed and so the dresser played an integral part in the transaction as they not only finished the garment, but they also acted as the intermediary between the knitter and the merchant (Truck Inquiry 1872). In an interview with a dresser named Ann Arcus as part of the Truck Inquiry she explained:

> *Question 1750: In what way is it that you are sometimes asked to sell articles for the knitters?*
> *Answer: Because I cannot always have them [the garment] dressed and ready for them [knitter] to sell after the time they come in with the goods and before they go away again. These women come from the country, and I cannot have their things ready before they want to go home again; and therefore I sell them before they come back.* (Truck Inquiry

1872)

In the course of the interview, it transpires that Ann is perceived as being able to get a good price, and sometimes money, in return for the knitted items, which may be another reason that knitters ask her to act as an intermediary:

> *Question 1779: Do not the girls employ you to sell their shawls because they think you may get some money from the merchants, when they would not?*
> *Answer: It is just because they think I can get a better price; at least that is what I think is the reason. They don't bid me to get money.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

Knitters travelled great distances by boat around the archipelago to sell their garments, via dressers, to merchants in Lerwick, but only made the journey occasionally (Fryer 1995). The practice of employing a dresser was one that operated on trust from the knitter as items were left for dressing and the knitter returned to their home. The knitter had to have confidence that the dresser would subsequently exchange their knitting for a fair price. An example of this is Catherine Petrie who travelled from the island of Fetlar to Lerwick, nearly 100 km, to sell her knitting in Lerwick as there were no merchants in Fetlar:

> *Question 1432: Do you sell it [knitting] to merchants in Fetlar?*
> *Answer: No. There are no merchants in Fetlar who take it. I come down to Lerwick with it once a year…when I come down I employ a person to dress the shawls, and then that person sells them for me in the shop, and I get back a note from her, stating the amount in goods that I am to get for them.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

This co-operative relationship appeared to work well, with dressers advancing credit to knitters for their services; a debt that was settled once the item was sold.

Knitters bartered the goods received from the merchants with neighbours for potatoes or meal. Tea was a particularly popular form of currency and was used by knitters to obtain a wide range of provisions and wool to knit with. Cotton, drapery goods, paraffin, and sugar were also sold or exchanged by knitters for provisions or wool, and sometimes at a considerable loss as discussed in an interview with knitter Mary Coutts as part of the Truck Inquiry:

> *Question 11,604: Did you get the full price for your tea from the farmers?*
> *Answer: I suppose we did sometimes, but I could not say. They did not weigh out the meal and potatoes which they gave in exchange; they merely gave a little for the tea which my aunt gave them. I have known her to go as far as Papa Stour, twenty-four miles away, to make these exchanges. That was where most of her friends were.*
> *Question 11,605: Have you ever had to barter your goods for less than they were worth?*
> *Answer: Sometimes, if there had been 2½ yards of cotton lying and a peck of meal came in, we would give it for the meal. The cotton would be worth 6d. a yard, or 15d; and the meal would be worth 1s. I remember doing that about three years ago; but we frequently sold the goods for less than they had cost us in Lerwick.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

The network of knitters operated across the archipelago, bartering with merchants under the truck system for cotton, drapery goods, tea, and sugar, and with neighbours and islanders for foodstuffs and wool. With knitters working as and when they could to complete items and orders, it was customary for groups of knitters to work together to help a knitter that had a deadline to meet. The favour would be returned (BBC Radio Scotland 1984).

Reciprocity between knitters in Shetland appeared essential to survival under a pernicious economic system that, due to its exploitative practices, was made illegal in the UK in 1831 (Frank 2020) yet endured in Shetland until well into the 20th century. The practice of knitting in Shetland as a form of economic activity under the truck system demonstrates connection, exchange, and mutuality between knitters in all regions of the archipelago. Whilst it has been stated that the history of hand knitting in Shetland is a history dominated by men because it was the male merchants that were responsible for marketing the knitted items (BBC Radio Scotland 1993), arguably it is also a history of women developing connections and mutually beneficial relationships that enabled them to use knitting to provide vital income. For example, different regions of the archipelago developing their own knitting styles to increase sales demonstrates how the knitters were thinking archipelagically, using the sea as a means of transportation and connection, across a polycentric network. Similar examples of knitters exchanging goods for wool in order to knit for income show exchange and mutuality as essential cultural characteristics.

Shetland Wool Week: Archipelagic Connections

Today knitting, regarded as a cultural asset, continues as an important economic activity in the

archipelago (Carden 2019; McHattie et al. 2018) and remains as one of the ways in which Shetland presents itself to the outside world (Abrams 2006). Shetland's knitwear industry is worth approximately £3 million to the local economy (Napier 2022) and focuses on high quality handmade luxury items that are sold across the world (Shetland Museum 2023). Craft tourism, which draws on the heritage of Shetland knitting, has also emerged as an important economic activity in recent decades. Knitting enthusiasts visit the archipelago independently or as part of arranged knitting tours (for example 'Shetland Wool Adventures (Shetland Wool Adventures 2024) and Spirit of Shetland Knitting Holidays (Stitchtopia 2024)'). Such tours normally include visits to local knitwear designers, textile museums, points of geographical interest and masterclasses with expert local knitters focused on, for example, Fair Isle knitting or Unst lace knitting.

One important example of craft tourism is Shetland Wool Week (SWW). Launched in 2009 in response to the then Prince of Wales's Campaign for Wool, SWW draws on the knitting heritage of the archipelago (Abrams and Gardner 2021). Taking place in September each year, a series of studio tours, talks, factory visits, workshops and exhibitions have evolved and include almost all from the archipelago that are involved in commercial knitting (Carden 2022). The organising committee of SWW stresses the importance of the events having a link with local Shetland traditions and with wool. The most recent SWW ran from Saturday 23rd September until Sunday 1st October 2023 and its theme was Mak + Do + Mend (Make and Do and Mend) (Shetland Wool Week 2023).

SWW encompasses the archipelago; some of the events are free of charge and some command a fee. Attendees are responsible for organising their transportation to the events and are advised to book their accommodation prior to arranging further travel arrangements due to limited availability. Examples of events held as part of SWW 2023 included 'A Yarn With Unst Knitters' held at the Unst Heritage Centre at a cost of £4; 'Knitting Socks on a 1920s Circular Sock Machine' costing £90 and held in Walls and 'Loops and Lunches' local knitwear display in Bigton Community Hall at no cost. In addition, there were open studios, film nights, talks, plays, music, tours (e.g. Garths Croft in Bressay and Uradale Yarns in East Voe) and masterclasses including knitting, spinning, shawl pin whittling, and jewellery making. There are 423 events listed in 2023 SWW programme (Shetland Wool Week 2023). SWW now attracts thousands of visitors from across the globe including North America, Canada, Australia, Poland, Sweden and Japan (Felting and Fibre Studio 2023); a significant increase from the

first SWW that attracted 30 attendees to the opening ceremony (The Shetland Times 2019). Shetland Amenity Trust estimates SWW to contribute £2 million to the economy of the archipelago as, in addition to the week of events, it increases year-round craft tourism (Shetland Amenity Trust 2020). The timing of SWW is important; prior to its inception the month of September was described as being very quiet in the archipelago and is now seen as the busiest time of year (McHattie et al. 2018).

Carden (2019: 365) notes how 'while the 'place' of place-based textile practices is often imagined as a static, romanticised repository of 'tradition', where change amounts to loss, textile-making in places like Shetland is part of the everyday, inventive, and always changing practice through which 'place' is constituted.' SWW is an example of how change appears to offer gains, rather than losses, to the archipelago in the form of a new income stream, increasing awareness of Shetland wool and woollen products, promoting the area as a tourist attraction, and celebrating traditions to ensure their longevity. Initially, SWW was considered an event for tourists and there was limited engagement from locals (Mingei 2022). This perception has changed and is attributed to relationships that have developed across the archipelago around SWW. For example, the organising committee has developed strong relationships with experienced knitters who now teach the masterclasses, and younger knitters are being trained to follow in their teaching footsteps. The committee also works with farmers and crofters to arrange tours that offer the opportunity to showcase Shetland farming and its relationship with wool production (Mingei 2022). Each year, in advance of SWW, the patron releases a free hat knitting pattern (examples include the 'Buggiflooer Beanie' in 2023 designed by Alison Rendall (Ravelry 2023) and the 'Bonnie Isle Hat' in 2022 designed by Linda Shearer (Ravelry 2022). Using their preferred colours, local and international attendees often knit the hat and wear it to SWW, creating a sense of identity and connectedness. In advance of SWW 2023, local newspaper articles called for volunteers to become involved in the event, particularly those who would like to become knitting masterclass tutors (The Shetland Times 2023). In its fourteenth year, SWW is firmly established as part of the archipelago's annual calendar of events and provides a contemporary example of how knitting continues to shape the relationships of the Shetland Islands.

How Knitting has Shaped the Historical and Enduring Relationships of the Shetland Islands

Considering the Shetland archipelago as remote and peripheral, particularly in terms of its proximity to the metropolitan centres of Great Britain, tends to overlook the interconnectedness of its islands. Examining the system of Shetland hand knitting provides examples of how knitting has acted as a vehicle for thinking archipelagically, with the sea forming connections, rather than barriers, between the Shetland Islands.

The practice of knitting as an economic activity under the truck system required the fostering of archipelagic mutual exchange relationships; these relationships were between the knitters, between the knitters and the merchants, and between the knitters and fellow islanders with whom they could barter. Demonstrating connection, exchange, and mutuality, such relationships had most relevance across the archipelago; forging such relationships with centres in Great Britain would have been of limited value as inhabitants of these areas were not labouring under the truck system and therefore had limited understanding and connection with the day-to-day experiences of Shetlanders. Thus, in this instance, considering the Shetland archipelago as remote from the metropolitan centres of Great Britain appears to be less associated with geography and more related to a remoteness from the economic systems in place across the Shetlands Islands. From the late 1800s until the mid-20th century, this lack of alignment between trading practices in Shetland with the centres of Great Britain renders considerations of remoteness largely irrelevant, and thus not a helpful comparator. Instead, a focus on the Shetland archipelago as inter-related, mutually constituted, and co-constructed (Stratford et al. 2011) permits a focus on understanding relationships across the archipelago, rather than on comparing relationships between the archipelago and other areas of Great Britain. Such a focus highlights networks of knowledge and reciprocity that were essential to survival.

Today, Shetland Wool Week not only provides a contemporary example of archipelagic thinking, it also shows how the islands have been able to 'adapt, transfigure and transform their inheritances into original form' (Pugh 2013: 10). Rather than framing change in terms of a loss of connection to tradition and heritage (Carden 2019), SWW has adapted, transfigured, and transformed its knitting heritage into a new form of craft tourism. Not only does SWW showcase Shetland traditions through the lens of wool, it has also engendered an archipelagic culture supporting the longevity of knitting through the training of knitting teachers, the transference of knitting knowledge, and a celebration of connectedness through knitting. That the SWW hat pattern is downloaded tens of thousands of times each year is testament to the

connectedness with the archipelago that is sought out by knitters, whether they attend SWW or not. That these new forms are rooted in place positions the archipelago as more than a collection of islands. It is the archipelagic connections that have enabled the Shetland Islands to adapt their inheritances into this original form.

The historical and contemporary examples presented in this study enhance our understanding of island-to-island ways of being, knowing, and doing (Stratford et al. 2011; Baldacchino 2006). They show how knitting, with its archipelagic focus, has shaped the historical and enduring relationships of the Shetland Islands. In these examples, the spatial configuration of the archipelago does not appear to hinder the forming of island-to-island mutual exchange relationships; the sea integrates rather than isolates. Thus, the context of hand knitting has afforded a re-thinking of an archipelago in its own right, rather than as peripheral to a larger land mass. The study therefore offers a different perspective on the Shetland Islands as told in relation to the metropolitan centres of Great Britain, and it is this plurality of perspectives that affords a more nuanced understanding of some of the smaller islands that constitute the British Isles.

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