

**WIN!**  
**GREAT KNIT**  
**GIVEAWAYS**  
see page 19

**KNITTING**

FALL 2016

# New Season NEW LOOK

## **ROSE, CORAL, SKY & DENIM**

The Most  
Wearable Shades  
for Right Now

## **FALL FOR HIM** Guy Essentials

## **SHETLAND MAKERS**

Hazel Tindall  
Gudrun Johnston

Mary Jane  
Mucklestone

## **NORTH ATLANTIC KNITTING**

SHETLAND  
ISLAND  
TRADITIONS

WOOL &  
THE VIKING  
HERITAGE

# MODERN FAIR ISLE

GET CREATIVE WITH COLOR

U.S. \$7.99 CAN. \$8.99\*  
\*Recommended Price  
Display until 11/8/16

# Shetland Knitting: Then and Now



We are makers. We knit to create something unique, something that carries the mark of our hands, something that reflects who we are and tells our story.

Mass-produced garments made anywhere and everywhere by machines are impersonal and disposable; they hold no special meaning. This “fast” fashion is often made by laborers working long hours in unsafe conditions for poor wages; the environmental cost is high as well because of the way most raw materials are produced and shipped. As a result, a growing number of us are becoming more interested in the provenance of the materials we work with; increasingly, we want reassurances that the clothes we wear leave a gentler footprint on the planet and are ethically produced. We knitters want the yarn that flows through our fingers, and the things we make with it, to express our values. We want this knowledge to be part of our practice so we can send our work out into the world with pride, and have it received with appreciation for the thought that went into making it.

This “slow” movement, this growing understand-

JUNE HEMMONS HIATT, author of *The Principles of Knitting*, extols the virtues of the knitting belt and much more at [www.principlesofknitting.com](http://www.principlesofknitting.com).

ing that old ways have value, is part of what makes Shetland and Fair Isle knitting so appealing. These spectacularly beautiful islands are a place where knitting traditions—the sheep, the wool, the people—stretch back in an unbroken line for hundreds of years, a compelling history that still resonates today.

Shetland, the place, seems almost impossibly remote, even to those familiar with its history and knitting culture. A glance at a map shows a tiny cluster of even tinier islands bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the North Sea to the east. Shetland is the northernmost point of the United Kingdom, almost as far from mainland Scotland as it is from Norway, and it has deep historic ties to both places.

Yet Shetlanders, some 22,000 of them today, have never been isolated. Sea routes and trade have connected them to the outside world for as long as sailors have taken to boats (despite what you may have heard, the Vikings were not the first to arrive). The town of Lerwick on Shetland Mainland has been an active port for centuries, with ships from Scottish ports, Scandinavia, Europe and the Baltic countries docking there annually. Shetlanders boarded these

boats as sailors, traders and passengers and brought merchandise and new ideas home with them.

For hundreds of years, Shetland traded local resources for imported goods. The economy was organized around fishing and crofting, a form of subsistence farming on small parcels of land, usually leased from a landlord, with rent paid in goods such as fish and woven cloth. Families had no choice but to be self-sufficient, depending on their animals, a few essential crops of grains and root vegetables, wild forage and small game to sustain them.

Men were gone for long months during the fishing season, or signed up to work on ships for several years at a time; many were lost at sea or to war. As a result, it was all too common for a household to be made up of a woman and her young children, her mother and an unmarried aunt or sister for part or all of the year.

Given this harsh reality, Shetland women have always been remarkably strong and resourceful, capable of managing all the work on the croft and feeding and clothing their families. For many, the burden of debt and the threat of hunger were ever-present, and one of the few ways they had to put a little extra food on the table, or acquire necessities they could not grow or make, was by knitting goods for trade or sale.

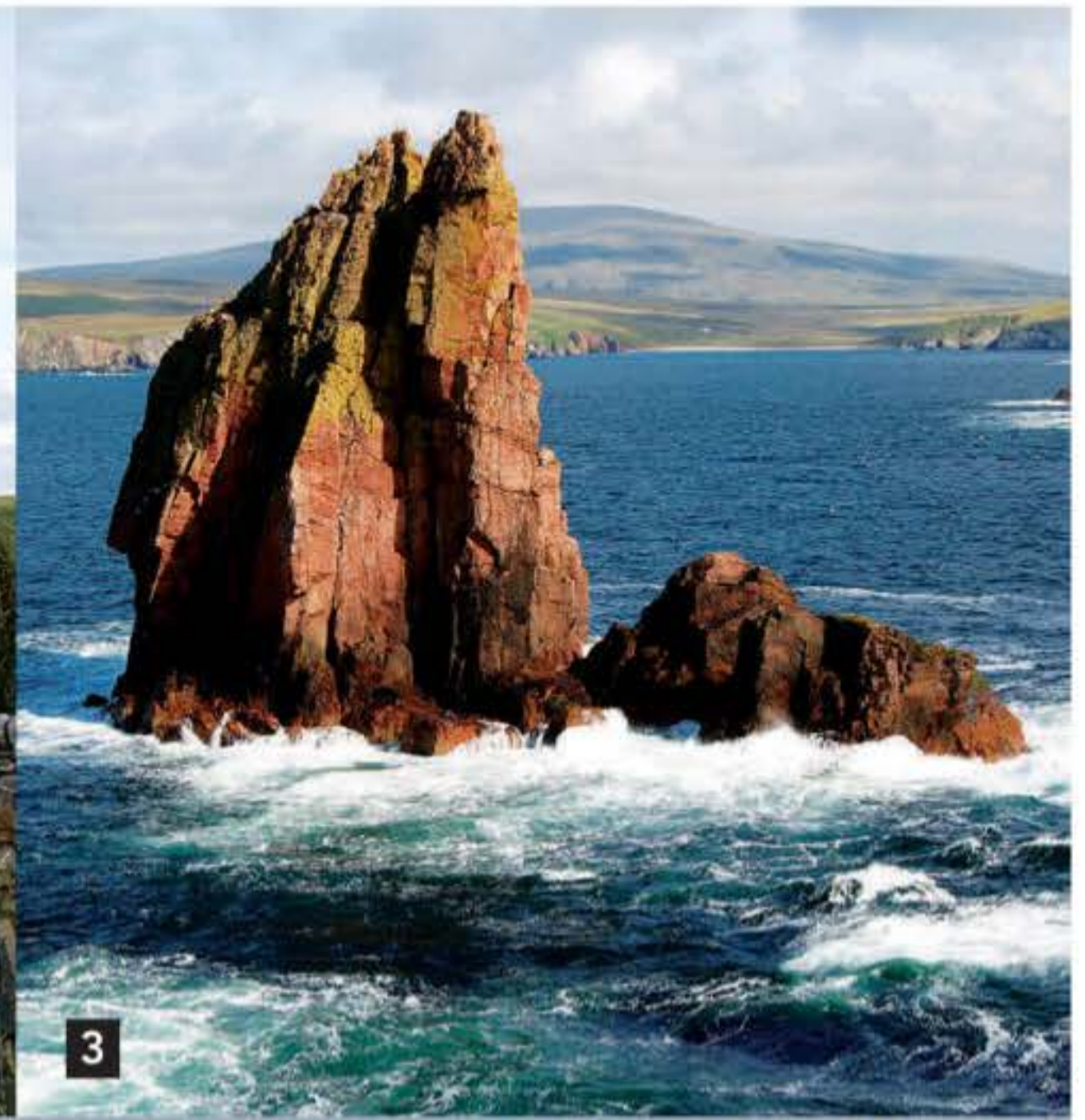
Between the 15th and early 20th centuries, hand-knitted stockings, gloves and hats were traded widely throughout Europe; professional knitters, primarily men, were organized into guilds for training in the craft and control of the markets. This trade declined in the centuries following the introduction of the knitting machine, in the late 1600s, but most people continued to wear hand-knitted clothing until early in the 20th century.

The production of hand knits gradually became a cottage industry, left to women working at home in rural communities. Shetland knitters, for whom this trade remained a vital source of income, produced astonishing numbers of items for export throughout this period. Knitting was an essential component of the work most women did to sustain their families. They learned to knit at a very young age and knit well into old age, when most other work on the croft was no longer physically possible.

Sometime in the 1830s, perhaps earlier, these skilled knitters came across examples of European knitted lace and soon learned to do it well enough to offer items to merchants for sale. By the latter half of the 19th century, their beautiful shawls, veils, christening gowns and baby blankets were in great demand.



2



3



4

## SHETLAND ISLANDS SAMPLER

1. For generations, Shetland women were seldom seen without their knitting. 2. The Croft House Museum in Boddam, Dunrossness, dates from the mid-19th century. 3. The Drongs, a well-known series of stacks off the Ness of Hillswick. 4., 5. In 2011, Shetland wool produced in the Shetlands gained protected geographical status with a Protected Designation of Origin classification as "Native Shetland Wool," the first non-food product in the U.K. to receive this status. 6. Known for their intelligence, Shetland ponies have been island inhabitants since the Bronze Age.



5



6

In the mid-1800s, perhaps inspired by clothing worn by sailors, they began making gloves and caps that featured colorful stripes with figured patterns.

Shetland lace is famous for its extraordinarily fine, hand-spun wool and complex, delicate patterns. The wool for the best lace was “rooed,” plucked from the necks of young sheep, then hand-carded and spun into gossamer yarn, some of it as fine as 9,000 yards per ounce. (By comparison, contemporary Shetland 1-ply cobweb-lace yarn is about 430 yards per ounce.)

Merchants advertised and sold these goods throughout the U.K., Europe and the U.S. and promoted them at major exhibitions in London, Edinburgh and elsewhere. Exquisite knitted items were sent to Queen Victoria and her family as promotional gifts. These fashionable luxury items brought prestige to Shetland, increased demand and elevated the status of the most skilled knitters.

Unfortunately, success soon prompted imitation. Middle-class Victorian women took up knitting as a parlor activity and eagerly bought simplified knitting patterns for “Shetland lace.” Factories were soon turning out so much machine-knitted lace that prices eventually collapsed, and many of these companies went bankrupt. Though authentic Shetland lace continued to be recognized and respected, sales declined as fashions changed; by the 1920s, the market was a fraction of what it had once been.

However, another type of knitting was emerging that would soon replace lace as an export. Tiny Fair Isle, the southernmost of the inhabited islands, had no deep harbor, so visiting ships anchored offshore and the locals rowed out to trade knitted items and whatever other goods they had to offer. Sometime in the mid-1800s, perhaps inspired by clothing they saw worn by sailors, they began making gloves and caps that featured colorful stripes with figured patterns, somewhat like those that had become popular in northern Europe, Scandinavia and the Baltic countries.

The islanders spun the yarn by hand, dyed it with lichen and other native plants, and used imported madder and indigo to obtain the vibrant reds and blues often remarked on in travel accounts. Sadly, the population of Fair Isle, never more than 300 people, gradually declined in the latter half of the 19th century, the result of forced land redistribution and the tragic loss of fishermen to the sea. Their knitting innovation might have remained a local novelty, but as it happened, this was merely the first chapter in the story.

Knitters elsewhere in Shetland had long made small items with simple stranded patterns done in the natural colors of the native sheep. Perhaps they too were inspired by visitors, but they were undoubtedly quite aware of the novel knitting being done on Fair Isle; with the lace market in decline, they started exploring the possibilities inherent in these colorful patterns. In a relatively brief amount



This 1925 portrait of the Prince of Wales sparked a craze for Fair Isle garments.

of time, these experienced knitters developed the distinctive Shetland Fair Isle knitwear that was soon to be recognized the world over.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, hats, socks, gloves, jumpers and cardigans covered with these complex patterns and vivid, subtly blended colors gradually joined Shetland lace in the export trade. Then, in 1921, an enterprising merchant in Aberdeen sent a Shetland Fair Isle jumper to Edward, Prince of Wales, and, knowing it would get attention, encouraged him to wear it while playing golf at St. Andrews. Images of Edward—in particular, a reproduction of a beautiful oil portrait of him wearing a Fair Isle jumper (shown above)—appeared in the popular press and sparked a craze for Fair Isle garments.

Informal sportswear had recently become fashionable for both men and women, and soon these jumpers and cardigans, with their vibrant all-over patterns, were seen everywhere. Known for the warmth that stranded knitting provides, they were also worn for hiking and skiing and even for expeditions to the Antarctic.

Suddenly, Shetland knitters—almost the entire female population of the islands—could barely keep up with the demand, and eventually hundreds of thousands of Fair Isle garments were made for

export. But as with lace, these designs were soon being copied by manufacturers elsewhere, driving prices down. Shetland managed to retain a share of the market for some time because sellers and buyers knew that genuine Shetland Fair Isle garments, made by Shetland knitters with Shetland wool, were of higher quality, and they could still command a premium price in the face of competition.

But fashion is fickle, and starting in the late 1940s, the new craze was for Fair Isle patterns just on the yoke. Shetland knitters adapted once again, quickly realizing they could increase production if they made the bodices and sleeves on a knitting machine and then picked up stitches to add a Fair Isle-pattern yoke by hand. This hybrid style became so popular that families invested in knitting machines, small local businesses cropped up, and factories were built to respond to the demand. Thousands of these yoked sweaters were exported year after year.

Unfortunately, the hours were long, the work was tiring, and creativity declined in the face of requests for specific patterns and color combinations. In fact, except for one very important distinction, the Shetland knitters could be considered little different from the exploited textile workers of today.

Throughout most of their long history, and despite all the success and international acclaim, Shetland knitters had always earned very little from their labor. Well into the 1900s, the local market was structured in what was called the “truck system,” a non-cash market controlled by merchants who exported locally made knitted goods. The women had little choice but to trade their knitting for a meager return in whatever goods (tea, even cheap clothing) the merchants chose to give them. What they could not use or did not consume had to be bartered locally for other goods or scarce cash. They were locked into an economy over which they had little control.

Because the return for their labor was so poor and their needs so great, women knitted whenever and wherever they could. Historic pictures show them knitting as they walked to market or with a kishie of peat on their backs. Today we look on these pictures as quaint and charming, but they mask a harsh reality: Shetlanders knit because they had to; they knit to clothe themselves in a harsh climate and to put food on the table. Women did the hard work of the croft by day and knit late into the night by the light of an oil tilley lamp. Young girls were set to their knitting as soon as schoolwork was done, starting with mittens and socks; those who were skilled progressed to all-over Fair Isle jumpers before they were teenagers.

Efforts were made periodically to break the hold of the merchants, but the system persisted until the

## A VISIT TO SHETLAND

• While working on the first edition of *The Principles of Knitting*, I pored over old knitting books and occasionally came across pictures of beautifully carved devices called knitting “sticks” or “sheaths.” These tools are designed to be tucked into a waistband or apron strings; a needle is inserted into a bore hole drilled in one end, where it is supported in a fixed position. Without the need to hold the needle, the right hand is free to manipulate the yarn and control tension.

Apparently these devices were commonly used in the U.K. and Europe by professional knitters in the centuries before the knitting machine was introduced, but are now found mostly in museum collections. However, the method used to knit with them survived in Shetland, where people use a unique version of the device called a knitting belt, a leather pad stuffed with horsehair that is attached to a belt and fastened near the waist. One end of a double-point needle is inserted into holes in the top of the pad.

In the early 1980s, I was in Edinburgh, where I hoped to learn more about these curious devices. Our hotel directed me to a yarn store on an old cobblestone street. I was told the shop not only sold them, but there would be a class that afternoon. The stars were surely in alignment that day.

I climbed a narrow staircase to a little classroom overlooking the street and was given a belt to try. I did my best to follow the teacher’s instructions, but

to say I was all thumbs is an understatement; I felt like a beginning knitter. But as I watched the teacher demonstrate, I realized I was looking at something quite extraordinary, because the method is remarkable for its economy of motion and speed. Needless to say, I bought the belt.

With practice, this became my favorite way to knit, and I wore my belt daily while writing both the first and second editions of my book. Nevertheless, I gave the method only a brief description in the book because it was so obscure—the belts were not readily available and few teachers knew how to use them.

After the second edition of *The Principles of Knitting* was published, in 2012, I decided to try and bring this wonderful old knitting method back to life. My son Jesse and I redesigned the knitting belt and in early 2015 began offering our modernized version for sale. As it happened, I was in London with my family that spring, and we decided it was long past time to visit Shetland. We arrived with an introduction to Hazel Tindall, the “world’s fastest knitter” and, by all accounts, a wonderful knitting teacher. We met for lunch at the Shetland Museum, presented her with one of our knitting belts, and told her about our efforts to teach knitters the world over

how to knit with one. She told me to “spread the word,” an encouragement I have taken very much to heart.

During our conversation, Hazel said she feared the knitting traditions of Shetland were in danger of being lost because the children were no longer being taught to knit in school. She told us there were plans to start an after-school knitting program, so some months later, when I saw the announcement of the PeerieMakkers program—in the Shetland dialect, “peerie” means “little” and “makkin” means “knitting”—I contacted her about making a contribution.

And then, on a wild impulse, I added a postscript: I told Hazel I would be teaching a class and giving a talk about knitting belts at the Vogue Knitting LIVE event in New York City in January [2016] and invited her to join me. To my complete astonishment, she said yes. It took a lot of scheming and planning, but Hazel and her good friend Wilma Malcolmson of Shetland Designer arrived in New York on January 12 for a one-week stay.

Later that day, we were joined by Donna Smith, patron of Shetland Wool Week 2015, for a talk about Knitting in Shetland, Past and Present. During the rest of that busy weekend, Hazel and Wilma  
(continued on page 124)

onset of World War II. As a result of their strategic location in the North Sea, and because the Lerwick port in Bressay Sound was one of the safest in the U.K., Shetland hosted a large military presence throughout the war and played a significant role in preventing air attacks on Scotland, England and the fleets in the English channel. Just as they had done during WWI, knitters turned their primary attention to the socks, mittens, scarves and hats that were desperately needed by the troops. But they also had the opportunity to sell Fair Isle jumpers and cardigans directly to soldiers and sailors based in Shetland, who wore them off duty and sent them home as gifts. In bypassing the local brokers, more knitters set their own prices and began to participate in a cash economy.

Among the newcomers to Shetland were Norwegians who had fled the Nazi occupation. Soon enough, Norwegian-influenced patterns started to appear in Fair Isle knitting, with new motifs and patterns arranged vertically instead of horizontally, as was traditional. Mind you, these did not look like Norwegian jumpers and cardigans; the new pattern ideas were absorbed and transformed into something unique to Shetland.

Unfortunately, the post-war years brought a decline in the demand for Shetland knits, even at home—people started associating “handmade” with the poverty of the war years. Tastes were changing, and people wanted new, inexpensive things. The demand for yoke sweaters remained strong through the 1960s but it too faded away, and the significant income derived from the knitting trade over several centuries largely disappeared. Changes in land ownership also meant crofting was no longer sustainable for many families, and poverty was soon widespread.

Shetland’s economy was rescued in the 1970s by the discovery of oil in the North Sea, which brought well-paying jobs and an influx of newcomers. Because women were now being given new opportunities for employment outside the home, there was little incentive for them to knit for the

market: They no longer had to do it to survive. Over the years, the number of islanders involved in the craft continued to decline, and knitting education was dropped from the school curriculum.

And yet, despite the dramatic changes brought about by the oil money—Shetland is now one of the most prosperous areas of Scotland, with almost no unemployment, high educational levels and excellent social services—Shetlanders continue to honor their traditions, and

The Shetland knitting belt Hiatt wore as she wrote *The Principles of Knitting*.



The extraordinary lace and masterful color patterns of Fair Isle are unbroken strands that stretches back hundreds of years.



Chimney fire in a Boddam, South Mainland, croft house. (Note the fish hanging from the rafters.)

a deep appreciation of the fiber arts remains a familiar and important cultural touchstone.

There are several things about this story that I find truly remarkable. For one, knitted items—once a necessity of life for a small population living in a remote location with a harsh climate—were now considered highly desirable high-fashion clothing. Indeed, “Made in Shetland” became one of the most respected and easily recognizable brands in the world, and beautiful Fair Isle and lace garments were exported to the U.S., Australia, Europe and Japan. But the thing I find most astonishing and admirable about the story of Shetland knitting is the way that the islands’ women, living a life of scarcity and adversity in humble crofts, were able to create such extraordinary beauty. In earlier centuries they knit for the market out of need and were woefully underpaid; however, unlike similarly hard-pressed laborers today, they were in their own homes, their creativity was fully engaged, the patterns they chose showed constant innovation, they adapted successfully to market forces, and they took great pride in what they made. This knitting was authentically theirs—their sheep and wool, their hands, their sense of color and design. The garments were as individual as the women who made them, uniquely combining color and pattern, yet somehow they all worked in harmony and became recognizable as Shetland Fair Isle knitting.

While their knitted goods were primarily made for export, some of it stayed at home. It’s difficult to find a picture taken in Shetland during the past hundred years that doesn’t show a woman wearing a lace shawl or warm hap (a thicker shawl for daily life), or someone in a Fair Isle jumper. Those made for children were passed down to younger siblings until the sweaters were thread-bare; those made for special occasions were worn

for farmwork when they showed signs of age. Even after machine knitting became the norm, hand knits continued to be made for family.

Although the number of knitters has dwindled over the years, we can be grateful that those who continue in the craft have kept the skills alive and are now leading a renaissance in Shetland knitting, once again bringing the past into the future. Among many others, there is Elizabeth Johnston, who spins and dyes her own wool and hand-knits traditional garment styles. Hazel Tindall, the “world’s fastest knitter,” teaches traditional methods to an international audience. [See her Orbister pillow on page 72.] She is also a patron of a popular new program called Shetland PeerieMakkers (Little Makers), established to teach young people to knit so the islands’ traditional skills can be passed on to a younger generation.

Wilma Malcolmson makes use of these skills with a knitting machine and sells her beautifully designed jumpers and cardigans to a world market. Gudrun Johnston [see her cowl on page 74] draws on a rich family history in Shetland knitting for her pattern books, and young designers including Ella Gordon and Donna Smith are adapting traditional styles to modern tastes.

There is still a strong craft tradition on tiny Fair Isle, and knitting is alive and well in the workshops of Kathy Coull and seen in the designs of Mati Ventrillon and Elizabeth Riddiford. Anne Sinclair, whose family dates back to the 1700s on Shetland, is steeped in Fair Isle history and culture, and she and four generations of her family are involved in traditional crafts.

Designers in Scotland are well aware of the treasures to the north, and knitters including the prolific and talented Kate Davies have written and designed patterns inspired by Shetland and contributed to books illuminating its history. Susan Crawford was recently welcomed into the Shetland Museum archives to study historical garments and create new patterns based on them. Among several Americans who have a strong interest in Shetland, Mary Jane Mucklestone has contributed to our knowledge of Fair Isle patterns and colors with several books on the subject, among them *Fair Isle Style* and *200 Fair Isle Motifs*. [Her hat is shown on page 70.]

Shetland is now connected to the world as much by the Internet as by the sea and air. Interest in knitting in the U.K., the U.S. and elsewhere has brought renewal once again. Patterns and books about Shetland lace and Fair Isle designs are extremely popular, classes on how to work the patterns are always sold out, and hundreds flock to the popular annual Shetland Wool Week for full immersion in this rich knitting tradition. While

## PEOPLE, PLACES AND THINGS

KATE DAVIES:

[www.katedaviesdesigns.com](http://www.katedaviesdesigns.com)

JAMIESON'S OF SHETLAND:

[www.jamiesonsofshetland.co.uk](http://www.jamiesonsofshetland.co.uk)

JAMIESON & SMITH:

[www.shetlandwoolbrokers.co.uk](http://www.shetlandwoolbrokers.co.uk)

ELIZABETH JOHNSTON:

[www.shetlandhandspun.com](http://www.shetlandhandspun.com)

GUDRUN JOHNSTON:

[www.theshetlandtrader.com](http://www.theshetlandtrader.com)

WILMA MALCOLMSON:

[www.shetlanddesigner.co.uk/Home.aspx](http://www.shetlanddesigner.co.uk/Home.aspx)

MARY JANE MUCKLESTONE:

[www.maryjanemucklestone.com](http://www.maryjanemucklestone.com)

SHETLAND AMENITY TRUST:

[www.shetlandamenity.org](http://www.shetlandamenity.org)

SHETLAND ARTS AND CRAFTS ASSOCIATION:

[shetlandartsandcrafts.co.uk](http://shetlandartsandcrafts.co.uk)

SHETLAND MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES:

[www.shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk](http://www.shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk)

SHETLAND PEERIEMAKKERS

at Brough Lodge, Fetlar:

[www.broughlodge.org/hand-knitting](http://www.broughlodge.org/hand-knitting)

SHETLAND TEXTILE MUSEUM:

[www.shetlandtextilemuseum.com](http://www.shetlandtextilemuseum.com)

SHETLAND WOOL WEEK:

[www.shetlandwoolweek.com/wp-content/themes/ShetlandWoolWeek/events\\_search.php](http://www.shetlandwoolweek.com/wp-content/themes/ShetlandWoolWeek/events_search.php)

SUSAN CRAWFORD VINTAGE:

[www.susancrawfordvintage.com](http://www.susancrawfordvintage.com)

HAZEL TINDALL:

[www.hazeltindall.com](http://www.hazeltindall.com)

UNST HERITAGE CENTRE:

[www.unstheritage.com/web/unst-heritage-centre](http://www.unstheritage.com/web/unst-heritage-centre)

there, they visit the wonderful displays at the two modern museums, take tours to see the Shetland sheep, and pay visits to the wool merchants Jamieson & Smith in Lerwick to watch Oliver Henry sort wool, and to the Jamieson’s spinning mill, where yarns is available in more than 300 colors in several basic yarn types. Most who visit return home with suitcases filled with yarn, hand-knit jumpers, cardigans, hats and gloves, new skills and inspiration, and stories to share. (continued on page 124)

## Shetland Knitting

(continued from page 44)

And, finally, we must acknowledge the islands themselves: austere, windswept, remote, beautiful. Nearly treeless, the soft contours of the land meet the wild and forbidding North Sea with gentle curved bays and beaches nestled between rugged cliffs. The surrounding water casts a special light that softens all the colors of rock and vegetation, making obvious what inspires the yarn palette Shetland knitters favor. Yet a strong part of the appeal of Shetland is intangible. This is a living, breathing, vibrant culture, creative enough to maintain originality in its designs while responding to the demands of a fickle market, and resilient enough to weather periodic economic change. The cultural traditions are not a matter of nostalgia, frozen in time and seen only in a museum. Shetland knitting, from the earliest socks and hats to the extraordinary lace and the masterful color patterns of Fair Isle, is an unbroken strand that stretches back hundreds of years.

The land looks much as it did in centuries past, largely because Shetlanders have a deep love of their home, its landscape with its special colors, its flowers and wildlife, and the wild sea that rings its cliffs and coves. The sheep are still on the land, and every Shetlander knows from lived experience the time and effort needed to turn wool into yarn and knit a beautiful garment by hand. Contemporary knitters who visit from elsewhere quickly recognize that it doesn't get much more authentic than this. These roots are deep. ■

## A VISIT TO SHETLAND

(continued from page 43)

joined Jesse and me in our booth outside the market. Hundreds of people stopped by, curious about knitting belts and about life in Shetland. Hazel and Wilma calmly knitted away, graciously answering all questions and amazing everyone with their skill and speed. The event proved to be a wonderful opportunity to introduce more knitters to Shetland and its knitting traditions, and to knitting belts. Glorious Shetland lace, as well as those beautiful and intricate Fair Isle patterns, are all done quickly and efficiently with a knitting belt firmly in place at the waist.

If you are interested in learning more about Shetland knitting belts, please visit our website, [www.principlesofknitting.com](http://www.principlesofknitting.com), where you will find background material and instructions for how to knit with one. Our new knitting belt, which is available in several colors, can be purchased there, along with hard-to-find 12" double-pointed needles traditionally used for this knitting method. ■