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History, Sustainability and Communities of Practice

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In 2014 the ‘Fleece to Fashion’ research team at the University of Glasgow recruited the community of hobby knitters amongst staff and students to knit all the flags of the Commonwealth to mark the holding of the Commonwealth Games in our city.¹ Compiled into a festive bunting, the flags were moved around the city during the Games, from decorating a bandstand that hosted cultural programming to festooning the University gates where spectators gathered to cheer on cyclists competing in the road race as they passed by numerous times on their circuit of the city. We also posted on social media images of the knitted flags of each day’s gold medal winners’ home nations. In producing these national emblems with the knitted stitch, rather than the more familiar printing, piecing, or sewing of flags, the volunteers—almost all women—offered a uniquely Scottish welcome: one that spoke to the long-standing cultural and economic heritage of knitting in this nation.

Knitting has sometimes been dismissed as a woman’s domestic pastime or as a craft requiring little skill, a mistaken characterisation that ignores its economic and cultural value. Historically, knitting, in contrast to some other craft practices, was dominated by women working at home, in small workshops and factories and this has continued to be the case in the present day. The production of garments by hand and on manually-operated knitting machines was women’s work. In periods of peak production, knitwear companies located factories according to the availability of female labour. The largest knitwear firms such as Peter Scott in Hawick and Twomax in Glasgow had predominantly female workforces.² In the twenty-first century, despite the increasing use of automated knitting machines, high quality production at all levels relies upon hand skills which, traditionally, have been possessed by women. In addition to these making skills, much of the design language that has come to be associated with Scottish knitting began with the remarkable “mental maths” of women who knit intricate motifs—whether in multiple colours or in textures of knits, purls, and yarn overs—prior to the circulation of printed knitting patterns. And the growth of small and medium sized knitting businesses in recent years, producing yarn, pattern designs, and garments, has been spearheaded by women. Yet, in spite of this, women’s skills and knowledge in this sphere have tended to be underplayed in scholarly work, whether the focus is on knitting as a craft or as industrial manufacture.

However, over the past decade, the all-female Fleece to Fashion team has sought to address this gap. At the core of our research into the economies and cultures of knitting in modern Scotland since c.1750 are the skills and knowledge traditionally regarded as the purview of women. We are also seeking to bridge divides between the study of different aspects of the

¹ www.fleecetofashion.gla.ac.uk. The knitted Commonwealth flags can be viewed at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/124212030@N06/albums/72157645273951310>
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/124212030@N06/albums/72157645628820940>

² For a brief history of the Twomax company see the articles by Isabella Wagner: www.fleecetofashion.gla.ac.uk

craft: designing and making, hand and machine knitting, and materials and end products. We sought a new approach not only to historical research but the very design of how to craft a research project; we wanted not only to ask new questions, but to formulate questions in new ways, in partnership with the communities who were passionate—and knowledgeable—about our subject. Whilst the ‘impact agenda’ within UK academic scholarship is a relatively recent phenomenon, driven by external injunctions to demonstrate the wider benefit of publicly funded research, historians have long practiced ‘public history’, which broadly seeks to apply historical skills and practice to realms outwith academia, a form of social engagement and sometimes activism with benefits for both parties. Our approach, however, sometimes known as ‘participatory action research’, was to begin with co-creation of the project objectives from the start.³ Via a series of from the ground up conversations with a wide range of interest groups, from sheep specialists to wool sorters, artists, makers and curators, the three project themes of authenticity, sustainability and creativity emerged as those most critical to those practicing in the field. These three themes therefore shaped a major research project under the banner ‘Fleece to Fashion’.⁴ With the knit community on board from the very start we had a ready-made public willing to maintain a dialogue.

As historians of knitting and knitted textiles ‘in the round’, encompassing all elements from fleece to fashion, we see ourselves as working alongside a community of practice.⁵ This community, encompassing designers, makers, spinners and dyers as well as curators and entrepreneurs, has proven to be a deep reservoir of knowledge, skill and generosity, sharing its understanding of a craft practice often consigned to the realm of the hobbyist or pigeonholed as a domestic craft undertaken by women for the family or ‘pin money’. In taking the craft seriously, acknowledging that academics are only experts in being academics, and opening our ears to the deep insights and rich experiences of participants in our projects, our understanding and interpretation has been immeasurably enriched. In addition to the importance of participation, this emphasis on craft processes as well as artefacts has mirrored the inclusion of practice theory in material culture studies, again bridging the approaches of makers, researchers, and those with economic interests in the sector.⁶ Without the knowledge, skill and willingness to engage in academic research of our volunteers, our project on the history, culture and economy of knitted textiles in Scotland would have lacked the insights that can only be gained from practice – in this case the designing and deciphering of patterns and the making of knitted samples and garments. We have learned the history of Scottish knitting together, as the subjects of, partners in, and audience for our shared research have been one and same.

While the 2014 Commonwealth Games project was pivotal in developing an interest base for the overall research project and affording us as historians the practice of organizing groups of

³ See for example Dirk Schubotz, *Participatory Action Research* (London: SAGE, 2020) and Jacques Chevalier and Daniel Buckles, *Participatory Action Research: Theories and Methods for Engaged Research* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

⁴ These activities were funded initially by Royal Society of Edinburgh Workshop and Network Awards and a Scottish Business History grant. The resulting major research project is funded by the AHRC AH/S011528/1.

⁵ We are not alone in this. See <https://stitchingtogether.net/> a project which fosters critical dialogue around participatory textile making.

⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) (originally published in French in 1980); Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013).

volunteers, we sought to bring our community of practice further into our research process in what is sometimes known as a ‘citizen science’ project. Two years later we recruited 140 knitters from around the world to produce samples of knitted lace using patterns from nineteenth-century books without illustrations, in order to inform research on claims to authenticity in Shetland lace knitting.⁷ The aim of this project was to understand what was meant by ‘Shetland’ in these books: were these patterns that actually derived from Shetland knitting traditions, or had the writers and publishers simply deployed this term to conjure up a particular association in commercial vogue at the time. Were these printed knitting patterns even viable to follow? (In some cases not!) The only way to ‘see’ how nineteenth-century designers, and consumers, understood ‘Shetland design’, and how notions of authenticity to place and practice were used at the time, was to try to knit these patterns, so the community of practice was absolutely crucial to this research project. Our most recent engagement with the knitting community was a project in which we recruited more than 100 knitters to ‘Knit a Margaret Klein’.⁸ The knitwear designer Margaret Klein had a central business and creative role in the well-known textile and design company headed by her husband Bernat Klein, yet hitherto her contribution has been largely passed over. This second ‘citizen science’ project, designed to assist research into her ready-to-wear hand-knitted garment business and our understanding of the home or outwork sector of the knitwear industry, generated knitted samples of 29 garments as well as valuable commentary on the experience of knitting from home.⁹ Here we were interested both in the samples themselves, but also on the knitters’ reflections of the degree of skill required to knit these patterns, giving us insight into the proficiency that the original knitters of these garments would have held.

These projects relied primarily on the eager community of knitting practitioners, and drew together knitters from around the globe to become partners in historical research. The research team has also engaged with varied participants from the knitting industry—quite literally ‘From Fleece to Fashion’. In 2018 we produced University of Glasgow Cochno knitting yarn, sourced from the fleece of the sheep flock on the University’s veterinary farm. For the production of this yarn, we worked with the Natural Fibre Company, a spinning mill based in Cornwall, from whom we learned so much about the different steps needed to transform fleeces into viable knitting yarn.¹⁰ To accompany this yarn, we also commissioned Scottish knitwear designers to create original designs for hand-knitted garments inspired by the built environment of the University. The knitting pattern book *Glasgow University Knits* offers an example of how academic research can engage productively with creative practice and vice versa.¹¹ The project originated with our appointment of a knitter-in-residence at the University who created a series of original designs for knitting inspired by the university architecture.¹² We then collaborated with the University Archives and Special Collections

⁷ See ‘Authenticity in Lace Knitting’:

<https://www.shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk/education/museum-store/research-projects/authenticity-in-shetland-lace-knitting>

⁸ See www.fleecetofashion.gla.ac.uk/events

⁹ Lynn Abrams and Roslyn Chapman, ‘Margaret Klein: Designing and Making Knitwear’, in Mary Schoeser and Alison Harley (eds), *Bernat Klein* (Glasgow: Bernat Klein Foundation, 2022), pp.70-81.

¹⁰ https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/archiveofnews/2018/november/headline_621897_en.html

¹¹ Lynn Abrams, Christelle Le Riguer, Marina Moskowitz, *Glasgow University Knits* (University of Glasgow, 2022).

https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/humanities/latestnews/headline_885077_en.html

¹² <http://knithistory.academicblogs.co.uk/knitter-in-residence/>

and a group of Scottish knitwear designers who were invited to produce a design for an original garment or accessory referencing the built environment. The project brought together historians and creative practitioners into a conversation about creativity, history and identity through the medium of knitting. And the book itself raised public awareness of the research being undertaken at the university and of the ways in which knitting can enhance health and wellbeing and cultural enrichment.

In addition to working with the raw fleece and architectural inspiration for design on our doorstep, we sought additional industry insights from across the nation, collaborating in numerous ways with the knitwear sector in Scotland. The industry is multifaceted and complex, incorporating sole entrepreneurs and large-scale manufacturers, designers, spinners, dyers, makers, retailers and consumers. For example, to understand how small communities with a distinctive heritage of knitwear production are seeking to sustain skills and knowledge we are working with a social enterprise in the south west of Scotland, which is seeking to reinvent Sanquhar knitwear for the modern market. The project has also focused on the robust heritage of knitting in the Scottish Borders, drawing on the expertise of both a small-scale spinning enterprise, The Border Mill (which serves the strong desire for micro-mill production in Scotland), and with firms such as the Hawick-based knitting branch of Johnston of Elgin, which maintains the historical tradition of producing high-quality knitwear in the Borders. Our conversations with the Scottish knitwear designer Di Gilpin, who is committed to sustaining Scotland's reputation for quality knitwear inspired by the environment and heritage of skill located in working communities, directs our attention to the connections between past and present making cultures. Firms such as these are also involved in advocacy for skills training and other support to ensure that the knitting sector is maintained as part of Scotland's political economy and culture.

This industry has a living heritage, international recognition and a footprint that spans the local to the global. Understanding the past and present challenges of the sector requires deep engagement with those who preserve, conserve and curate the tangible and intangible culture of knitting, the people who respect its history and who are committed to referencing the heritage of Scottish knitwear in modern ways, and the people who are endeavouring to sustain the industry today. Our partnership with Shetland Museum and Archives, the custodian of the largest knitwear collection in Scotland, has been integral to our research in respect of developing materials that aid interpretation of items in the collection. The 'Knit a Margaret Klein' project was developed in partnership with the National Museum of Scotland, Hawick Museum, Heriot Watt University and the Klein Estate and Klein Foundation, enabling mutually beneficial outcomes for us and the custodians and curators of Klein's legacy.

The Fleece to Fashion project's investment in learning from practice speaks to a larger commitment to the sustainability agenda. Knitting can be the ultimate sustainable craft. At its most basic it utilises the raw materials present in the Scottish landscape, it requires few tools and is easily learned. The practice of knitting in Scotland has survived the process of economic and cultural modernisation. We aim to identify why and how that survival has happened. These questions are, ultimately, about sustainability, or persistence without stasis—of personal handicrafts and industrial traditions, agricultural landscapes and urban factories, and communities constructed around place, occupation, gender, and age. Our objective as historians is to examine knitted textiles 'in the round', from fleece to fashion in order to identify the interconnections between different elements of the sector (hand and

mechanised production for instance, or wool/yarn production and design) and thus develop a new interpretive model for understanding the sustainability of creative economies.

Practice-based and participatory research in this field connects academic research to those in the wider community with skills and knowledge – in this case predominantly women designers and makers, both professional and hobbyist – whose experience and voices have hitherto been marginalised in the historical record. Their authoritative voice is part of a wider process involving grass-roots initiatives, academic research and industry engagement with policies on sustainability, the circular economy, education and skills, directed to ensuring the survival of the knitted textile sector in Scotland.