

Wales

Much like in the Dales, knitting was also economically and socially important in Wales. In the 17th and 18th centuries, sock knitting became a significant addition to household income and involved the entire family's every spare moment. Welsh stockings were usually knitted in plain stocking stitch with blue-grey yarn while the ribbed welts and toes were knitted in naturally coloured yarn. Market towns such as Bala and Tregaron were major outlets for stockings, which were bought for resale by English hosiers and often taken as souvenirs by travellers.

Knitting ensured the economic and social welfare of many families through practices such as gwlana (yarn gathering) and noson wen (knitting assembly). Providing even the poorest families with materials for knitting, gwlana took place annually. Groups of women went in search of wool, scouring



Welsh Mountain sheep

the countryside for tufts left behind from wild Welsh Mountain Sheep and calling upon area farmers for fleece surplus. Another important Welsh social gathering in the 18th and 19th centuries was Noson wen, which brought together neighbours at a family's home to knit, sing, eat and listen to stories or music.

As an evolution of Welsh traditions, Wonderwool Wales and the Midwales Mouthfull take place each spring as an annual festival of natural fibre. Begun in 2006 with an EU grant under the guidance of Powys County Council, a not-for-profit company now oversees the event. Taking place on 25-26 April at the Royal Welsh Showground in Builth Wells, this year's event includes a multitude of vendors, the annual Sheepwalk, featuring woolly fashions and products, and the Woolschool, offering various workshops and classes.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE BRITISH WOOL MARKETING BOARD



A wool stand at Wonderwool Wales

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF WONDERWOOL WALES

British alpaca

British fibre and hand knitting traditions are also taking on new dimensions with the endeavours of many British farms and mills. Now a considerable source of local, sustainable and natural fibres, the alpaca is now reared in the thousands across the UK for its luxuriously silky fibre. Aiming at 'creating a viable fibre industry', UK Alpaca in Devon create worsted knitting yarns sourced from British breeders. Toft Alpacas in Warwickshire use fibre from its herd of 200 to create natural yarns and employs British hand knitters in creating a line of knitwear. In nearby Lincolnshire, the Alpaca Wool Company process British alpaca fleeces to

produce a line of DK yarn, knitwear and craft supplies. Farm Yarns, based in Wiltshire, focus on producing organic, naturally coloured alpaca yarns, with plans to introduce an organic sheep wool line this spring.

From the outlying islands to the heart of the Dales, hand knitting and fibre production traditions continue to play a key role in the regional economies and cultures of Britain and Ireland, most traditions borrowing from one another. Many legacies are undergoing a renaissance, whereas some are experiencing innovation. Whichever the case may be, one thing is for certain: these regions are stitched together by tradition to form the Knitted Isles.

Did you know?

- Fairisle jumpers became a real fashion trend when the Prince of Wales wore one on the golf course in St Andrews in 1922.
- Queen Victoria was a patron of the Shetland knitting industry and is said to have owned a lace shawl and stockings made from the region.
- There were over 125,000 attendees at the four venues of the Knitting and Stitching Show in 2008. Nearly 40% of attendees were knitters.
- In 1571, the Cappers Act decreed that all males above the age of six and below the rank of 'gentlemen' should wear a woollen knitted cap on Sundays and holidays to promote local wool producers and cap knitters (known as 'cappers').
- One of the oldest knitted objects from Britain from the Victoria and Albert Museum's textile collection is a Renaissance apprentice's cap from the 16th century found at an excavation of Worship Street in London.
- The first knitting machine was invented by English clergyman William Lee. Modern day machines use the same basic technology Lee used.
- Another law, passed in the Channel Islands in 1608, forbade knitting during the seaweed harvest to eliminate such a potential distraction.



Wool produced by the Natural Fibre Company

FACTS COURTESY OF THE UNITED KINGDOM HANDKNITTERS ASSOCIATION, THE KNITTING GUILD ASSOCIATION, THE VICTORIAN AND ALBERT MUSEUM AND TWISTED THREAD

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