

Shetland: The Good Life in the Far North [C1]

Questo arcipelago scozzese composto da circa 100 isole poco abitate è il punto più a nord del Regno Unito. Fino alla metà del XV secolo apparteneva alla Norvegia, un'eredità che continua a vivere nelle sue tradizioni.

On the Shetland Islands, an archipelago in the far north of Scotland, Shetland sheep have been [roaming](#) the hills for thousands of years. These sheep have a type of wool that is ideal for creating quality textiles, now internationally renowned. Every year, people come from all over the world for Shetland Wool Week, a celebration of sheep, wool and the local textile industry.

SHEEP, AND MORE

Shetland Wool Week began in 2010. It takes place [throughout](#) the Shetland Islands, which [comprises](#) around one hundred islands, sixteen of which are inhabited. It includes a variety of exhibitions, classes, and events on things like [weaving](#), [spinning](#), [dyeing](#) and the famous Fair Isle [knitting](#) technique which originated there. It offers visitors an opportunity to experience this remote and [rugged](#) region [through](#) an industry that has evolved there over hundreds of years.

NORDIC ORIGINS

To find out more, Speak Up spoke to Carol Christiansen, the curator and community museums officer at Shetland Museum and Archives. Christiansen has been involved in organising Shetland Wool Week every year since it began. We began by asking her about the Shetland Islands. **Carol Christiansen (American accent):** The Shetland Islands are an archipelago of about one hundred islands, and we're at the very far north of Scotland. So we're beyond the [mainland](#) of Britain. And between us and the [mainland](#) of Britain are the [Orkney Islands](#), another archipelago, but we're the furthest north. The main port that we go to, because we're accessible by boat or by

plane, is Aberdeen on the Scottish [mainland](#). And we're about the same distance from Aberdeen as we are to [from] Bergen, Norway. Up until 1469, Shetland was part of Norway and then it got [traded](#) to Scotland. But there's still a lot of [Norse heritage](#) in Shetland, so Shetlanders typically... they don't do the Scottish cultural things that [mainland](#) Scots do, neither do the Orcadians. So they don't wear kilts, they don't play [bagpipes](#). It's a Norse culture that we inhabit. So this is why we have a fire festival in January and the months of winter.

LANDSCAPE

We then asked Christiansen about the islands' history, landscape and weather system. As she explains, certain characteristics have shaped island living and informed the evolution of its economy. **Carol Christiansen:** The islands are quite [rugged](#). They have a very [cliff](#), coastal edge, but there are also beautiful, [sandy beaches](#) as well. Because we're in the [Gulf Stream](#), we have [fairly mild](#) winters and cool summers. In the summer, it generally doesn't get much above 15 degrees Celsius, we only get that maybe a total of a month out of the year. Generally it's 10 to 12 degrees, so it's quite cool. But in the winter, yes, we get snow and it does [freeze](#), but it usually doesn't get much below minus 5 Celsius. The main industries here are fishing and [renewable power](#). We have a big terminal here where oil from the North Sea and from the west of Shetland in the Atlantic come in and are put into large [oil tankers](#). And then we also have [wind farms](#) because of course we're really, really windy. In terms of farming land, it's not very rich. Orkney is far richer and always has been; they [raise](#) a lot of [cattle](#) and have milk products, whereas in Shetland it's more focused on sheep. We don't really have any trees as such, but we have a lot of hills and they're covered in [heather](#) and in [peat](#), which began growing here way back in the Bronze Age. And so the [peat](#) is really, really deep. And a few people still cut it for fuel; they take a particular tool called a 'tusker', and they cut the [peat](#) and then they [dry it out](#) and then they burn it over the winter.

KNITWEAR

Sheep are also a defining feature of the Shetlands. In fact, there are more sheep than humans on the island. They are also vital for the islands' economy and have been so for over five hundred years. **Carol Christiansen:** There are a lot of sheep on Shetland. Like ten times as many sheep as there are humans. And the sheep are very [hardy](#). They are descended from Norse sheep, but they've been sort of changed a little bit in the sense that the wool has been made really soft to make it a good [knitting](#) wool. The sheep are [grazing](#) everywhere and we're actually just starting [to lamb](#) right now. Now the sheep, because of how far north they live, they still [shed](#) their wool. So it used to be that people didn't [shear](#) the wool, they just [pulled it off](#). That's a practice known as 'rooing'. So when the wool starts to [shed](#), it actually is all over fields and you can pick it up and take it home if you want. These little [tufts](#) of wool that are [shed](#) by the sheep are called 'hentilagets'. People started [weaving](#) in the Bronze Age but [knitting](#) doesn't come in until the late 1500s. That's when it finally gets that far north in Europe. Once [knitting](#) comes, it becomes a really important product for people here to sell to passing ships. And in those times, fishermen and traders only came really in the summer months. So people would make a lot of [knitwear](#) — [stockings](#), [caps](#), [mittens](#), even underwear — out of all their wool. And then they would trade it with the [Dutch](#), the Germans, the Swedes, the French, whoever were coming along to trade and fish. So until the First World War, almost all the [knitwear](#) and all the [weaving](#) in Shetland was made out of [handspun yarn](#), so [spinning](#) was also really important. The [spinning](#) starts to go away when it's possible to send the wool to the Scottish [mainland](#) and have it spun up and dyed by machine. And that starts off during the First World War.

HANDMADE

Shetland textiles and the techniques involved have become world-renowned. During Wool Week, people travel to the islands to learn about this centuries-old tradition. **Carol Christiansen:** One of the [hallmarks](#) of Shetland textiles is that even today, in really modern times, with all the machinery available, a lot of the [knitting](#) still has a large amount of hand working as part of it. Some of the [knitwear](#) parts, like the main body, might be knit on a machine,

but all the finishing is done by hand. That has never been mechanised. Shetlanders developed over the years a lot of techniques in the way they knit to make it be done really quickly. They didn't use [patterns](#), they just had it in their heads. And these techniques are some of the things that people come here to learn, especially during Wool Week. There's a kind of a care and a sense of quality in their work that's reflected in the [garment](#). So they make sort of general [knitwear](#) that we know of, like Fair Isle [knitwear](#), but they also make things from really soft under[garments](#) to really [coarse floor rugs](#) out of the same kind of [fleece](#).

SHETLANDS HERITAGE

We then asked Christiansen about the origins and highlights of Shetland Wool Week. **Carol Christiansen:** Wool Week got started because it was part of a national [drive](#) called The Campaign for Wool, and that was to promote British wool because it's often [overshadowed](#) by Australian wool and New Zealand wool, etc. And the [patron](#) at the time was Prince Charles. And he, of course, has his own farms and he's a great advocate for farming. And so this became a national programme in a way. It just got started on a really [slow basis](#), but gradually, over a couple of years, more and more people heard about it and it became more developed and we offered more courses. And then we started to offer events that were about Shetland's heritage, because a lot of people come, they are knitters or they're weavers, hand spinners, but they also want to know about Shetland itself, its history, its natural history. They like to go hill walking, birdwatching, whatever, listen to music... So we do have a problem in Shetland with accommodation: there isn't enough, so that somehow limits it. But people seem to just come. So it doesn't sound very big [in the scheme of things](#), but for Shetland it's big if we have, say, eight hundred people come for Wool Week.

A BEAUTIFUL FIBRE

And Shetland wool is of very high quality and surprisingly versatile and varied, as she explains. **Carol Christiansen:** I'm a hand spinner, so I tend to work with the [raw](#) wool. But it is so soft but so strong that when you're

working with it, it feels like [silk](#), but then it kind of [fluffs up](#), almost like there's a little bit of Angora in it. So it's just a really beautiful fibre. And we still have the [gene pool](#) in Shetland sheep, where the sheep create wool in lots of different colours. There can be up to like fifteen different [shades](#) of natural colours, from black into greys, into a [range](#) of browns, from sort of yellow browns to red browns, [pale](#) browns like [fawn](#), we call it, and then various whites. So you could do a whole [jumper](#) just in natural colours. You don't have to dye it. And it's just lovely to work with.

FAIR ISLE

Fair Isle has given its name to a particular [knitting](#) technique, which creates a unique pattern. We asked Christiansen to tell us more **Carol Christiansen:** Fair Isle is an actual island and it's between Shetland and Orkney, but it's considered to be part of the Shetland archipelago. It's only four miles long and two miles wide, and I think there are about sixty people that live there right now. So it's a tiny place, and that is what's given its name to this coloured patterned [knitting](#). And it seems as though it started off with making what are called 'keps', a cap that fishermen wore, so kind of a [stocking cap](#) type. And these brightly coloured [patterns](#) in them made it easy to see the fishermen in their boat. And in order for the fishermen in the boats to communicate with each other, to see each other, [to keep track](#) of each other, because the water is really, really [rough](#) around there, it was easier if the [skipper](#) had a really brightly coloured cap on his head. So that could be possibly why the bright colours were used, because the [skipper](#) always had the brightest cap on. It's called an OXO pattern, because there's an O and an X and an O, and it [repeats](#) around. And these kinds of [patterns](#), you can also see in the eastern Baltic, Estonia area, for example. We know that the Scots had a lot of trade in places like Riga in Latvia, which is facing western Estonia. So it's possible that Shetlanders were there and [picked up knitwear](#) from there or vice versa. www.shetlandwoolweek.com

Glossary

- **to keep track** = tenere la traccia
- **rugged** = accidentata
- **raw** = grezza
- **jumper** = maglione
- **coarse** = ruvidi, grezzi
- **fawn** = fulvo chiaro
- **wind farms** = parchi eolici
- **mittens** = guanti
- **Dutch** = olandesi
- **cattle** = bestiame
- **silk** = seta
- **spinning** = filare
- **knitting** = lavoro a maglia
- **mainland** = terraferma
- **handspun** = filato a mano
- **patron** = mecenate
- **pale** = chiaro, tenue
- **raise** = allevare
- **stockings** = calze
- **knitwear** = maglieria
- **shades** = tonos
- **range** = gamma
- **skipper** = capitano
- **dry it out** = far seccare
- **shed** = fare la muta
- **hallmarks** = tratti distintivi
- **freeze** = gelare
- **fleece** = lana
- **slow basis** = graduale, lento
- **hardy** = forti, robuste
- **stocking cap** = berretta
- **comprises** = includere, comprendere
- **cliff** = scogliera

- **peat** = torba
- **undergarments** = indumenti intimi
- **in the scheme of things** = in prospettiva
- **dyeing** = tingere
- **oil tankers** = petroliere
- **caps** = cappelli
- **pulled it off** = strappare, tirare via
- **picked up** = prendere
- **floor rugs** = tappeti
- **overshadowed** = offuscare
- **sandy beaches** = spiagge di sabbia
- **fairly mild** = piuttosto miti
- **heather** = brugo
- **garment** = indumento
- **rough** = agitata
- **roaming** = girovagare
- **bagpipes** = cornamusa
- **to lamb** = partorire (un agnello)
- **Norse heritage** = eredità nordica
- **gene pool** = pool genico
- **weaving** = tessere
- **renewable power** = energia rinnovabile
- **yarn** = filo
- **traded** = scambiare
- **tufts** = ciuffi
- **grazing** = pascolare
- **patterns** = motivi
- **fluffs up** = rendere più gonfio
- **drive** = campagna
- **Orkney Islands** = Isole Orcadi
- **Gulf Stream** = Corrente del Golfo
- **shear** = tosare