

Shetland Knitwear in Extreme Environments



Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary in Shetland jumper following the ascent of Mount Everest, 1953.

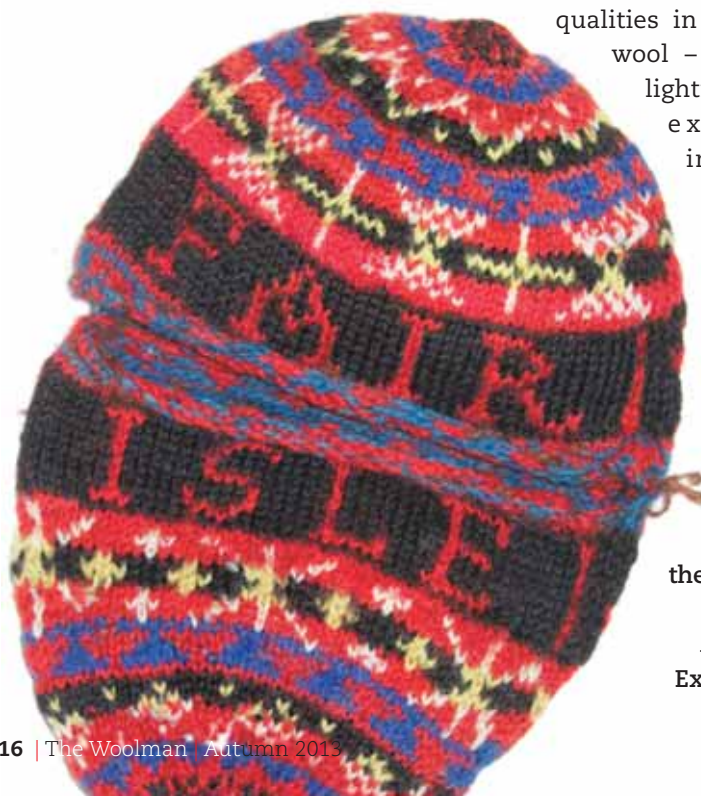
Shetland is world-renowned for its woollen knitwear. It produced literally millions of stockings, long-johns, spencers, scarves, mittens, shawls, stoles, and pullovers, all sold away from Shetland. But part of the remarkable history of Shetland knitwear is how garments found their way to the most extreme environments on earth. Shetland's woollen textiles contributed to the comfort, well-being, and indeed life preservation of Britain's sailors, explorers, and mountaineers.

It is because of the inherent qualities in Shetland wool – softness, lightness, but excellent insulating

properties, that it was the material of choice for outdoor clothing before modern man-made fibres were developed. Shetland's spinners and knitters made the most of these qualities by processing each fleece to extract the right fibre qualities for the intended garment. In the first instance, the garments were made for local fishermen and crofters, and sold or traded to passing whalers, traders, and foreign fishermen. With the Heroic Age of Exploration in the late 19th century, Shetland knitwear caught the attention of expedition leaders.

One of the earliest records of Shetland knitwear worn by explorers concerned the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition to the South Pole in 1902. Scottish naturalist W. S. Bruce, expedition leader, was financially assisted by brothers Andrew and James Coats Jr. from the Paisley thread firm. Their support included kitting out expedition members with all manner of Fair Isle knitwear – from pullovers to tobacco pouches. The knitwear was bought directly in Shetland during summer yachting trips by the brothers. So much knitwear was bought that between 1899 and 1902 four notices were published in Shetland newspapers remarking on the Coats' purchases. Crew members photographed in their patterned garments against the white polar landscape may have served to enforce the Scottish identity of the expedition, since Bruce struggled to obtain support from English institutions and individuals who, at the time, were behind Scott's campaign.

During the Heroic Age of Exploration in the Antarctic, Shetland-made woollens made a considerable contribution to the comfort of explorers. Sir Ernest Shackleton's failed attempt to cross the southern continent in 1911, leading to months of survival on ice floes and in small boats, was supplied with woollens from a small, woman-owned business in central Shetland. Anne Pottinger was the wife of a local schoolmaster and mother of 10 children. She ran a knitwear business from her home at the schoolhouse. Her price list shows she supplied mainly underclothing and outerwear accessories. The garments purchased by the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition were hand-knitted, most likely from hand-spun wool.



Knitted tobacco pouch made in Fair Isle for the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition,

Publications available from The Clerk

A Short History of the Worshipful Company of Woolmen by Gordon Huelin PhD FSA

The Woolmen's Tale by David Buirski

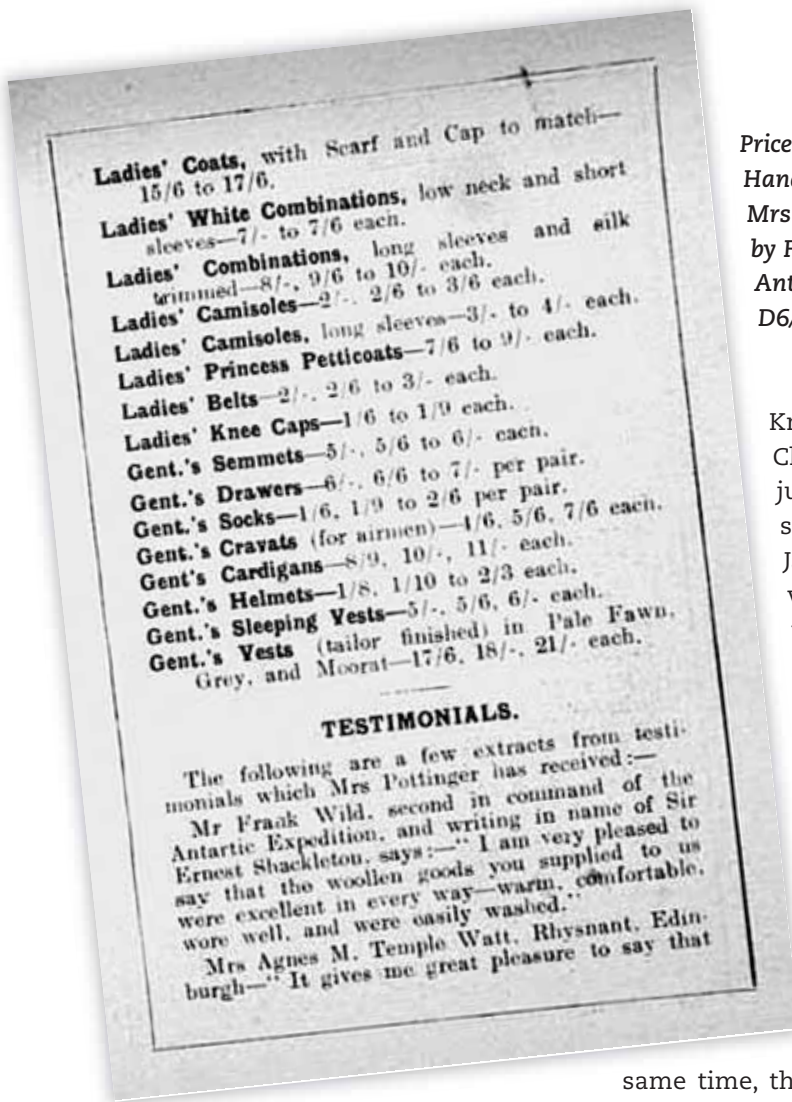
"There Is No Substitute For..." by Past Master Richard Proctor

A Layman's Commentary on The Register of Freedom Admissions of the Worshipful Company of Woolmen by Lt Col (retd) WJH Clark

Woolmen's Umbrellas, Scarves and Ties

The Clerk has a stock of Woolman's umbrellas, scarves and ties for sale. Woolmen's Scarves – £30; Woolmen's Umbrellas – £25; Woolmen's Ties – £30 Ladies silk scarves – £20 Silk bow ties – £15

Please make cheques payable to the Worshipful Company of Woolmen, and arrange collection with the Clerk from Painters' Hall; this is best achieved at the Civic Dinner.



Price list for Real Shetland Hand-Knit Goods, supplied by Mrs AH Pottinger, with testimonial by Frank Wild, Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, c1916; D6/294/1/p69.

Knitters worked over the 1952 Christmas period to make the jumpers before expedition supplies left Britain in January. Unfortunately, there was not time to hand-spin the yarns, so a lightweight machine-spun yarn was used. The style, quality, and weight closely resemble the traditional fishermen's sark, or woollen under-shirt, examples of which are preserved in the Shetland Museum's textile collection. Both the Sark and Everest jumpers each weigh only 200 grams (7 ounces). At the

same time, they provide a soft and very warm layer of insulation that absorbs body moisture but retains airflow between under and outer garments. The jumper quality was later marketed in the ready-to-wear clothing trade as the Everest jumper, a tradition that continues today. ■

Dr Carol Christiansen

This research was aided by a generous grant from the Worshipful Company of Woolmen.

Dr Carol Christiansen, Shetland Museum and Archives.

Each of these garment types had different qualities built in – the semmet, or vest, was soft and light; the helmet (balaclava), made of coarser wool, harder spun and tightly knitted. This type of clothing was de rigour for Shetland's fishermen, whalers, and crofters working in harsh weather, so it is no wonder that Shetland could supply appropriate knitwear to polar explorers.

The most notable example of Shetland knitwear in extreme environments occurred in the successful 1953 ascent of Mount Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. Shetland firm T.M. Adie & Sons received orders to supply 24 jumpers of various sizes for each member of the team.

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