

I travelled to Shetland with my young son for Wool Week 2024 in order to learn more about local wool, yarn production and Fair Isle knitting. Workshops and talks throughout the week took me through the processes of sheep shearing, wool grading and sorting, spinning and knitting.

A talk at Jamieson's and Smith introduced me to modes of sorting and grading Shetland sheep's fleeces. At a workshop with knitter Hazel Tindall I learned how to read basic Fair Isle patterns and translate these into hand-knitting. At a tour of Jamieson's Mill in Sandness I saw this process from a mechanised perspective, witnessing the journey from sheep's fleece through to garment production on a Shima Seiki machine. At a workshop in Walls, I had the chance to work on a 1920s circular knitting machine for the first time, making a pair of woollen socks.

I also spent time learning about local textile traditions; an exhibition at Shetland Textile Museum showcased the lace work of knitter Zena Thomson, and a talk by Dr Carol Christiansen explored the folk symbolism within Taatit Rugs (Shetland pile bedcovers). Finally, in a net mending workshop at Shetland Museum I gained insight into the connection between textiles and the fishing industries, and the skills required to repair nets at sea.

Childcare allowed me to participate in these workshops, and outside of these times my son and I had a chance to visit the landscapes populated with sheep around Lerwick and Sumburgh Head.

Shetland knitting has a strong relationship to the land and this trip gave me a new understanding of approaches to sourcing/ working with yarn, while also enhancing my technical knitting skills. I have a more developed understanding of the relationship of these knitting traditions to their rural island contexts both in Scotland, and internationall