# The Shetland hand knitting industry 1790 - 1950; with special reference to Shetland Lace.

by

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## Contents

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## SUMMARY

This thesis traces the development of the Shetland hand knitting industry from 1790 to 1950; the origins and emergence of Shetland lace from c.1840; and, along with the socio-economic consequences of truck, seeks to analyse their contribution to the Shetland economy. As knitting was an exclusively female occupation in Shetland, a brief appraisal of the role of women has been included.

Traditionally the Shetland economy depended on crofting to feed the family, fishing to pay the rent, and knitting - a subsistence activity - to supplement the domestic economy. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Shetland knitters relied on trading their knitwear with both the Hanseatic merchants and migrant fishermen, who came to Shetland during the summer to fish in Shetland waters and trade with its people. This knitwear, produced from locally grown wool, consisted of hose, caps and gloves, but mainly hose - hence the generic term 'Shetland hosiery' which refers to all types of Shetland knitting. It was coarse but cheap; and it was the cheapness of these ill-produced goods which was their attraction to itinerant fishermen and merchants. However, the trade disruptions caused by the French Wars at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century, and the introduction of the Salt Tax in 1712, were responsible for the exodus of the Hanseatic merchants and to a lesser extent, the Dutch fishermen. And from around this time, the marketing of hosiery, inter alia, was taken over by Shetland lairds, although knitters still continued to sell hosiery to visiting fishermen during the summer fishing season. By 1790, knitters were selling or bartering their hosiery through 2 main outlets, that is, visiting fishermen and Shetland merchants. The first specialist hosiery merchant set up in business in Lerwick in 1818.

A prolonged period of stagnation in the stocking trade followed the Napoleonic Wars, which coupled with the poor harvests and fishing seasons, led to great hardship. Out of this time of want, Shetland lace knitting emerged c.1840. It was an immediate success on the southern market, particularly in London where, hitherto Shetland hosiery had never been sold, only becoming available because of the increase in communications with the outside world from the 1830s onwards. Shetland

lace grew in popularity, its fame spreading throughout the world thanks to displays of lace work at exhibitions like the Great Exhibition of 1851. Later in the century, the vogue for woollen underwear - Shetland wool being most highly regarded for its lightness and warmth - led to great expansions in the hand knitting industry.

However, throughout most of the nineteenth century, Shetland fishermen and their families were in the grips of the 'Shetland Method' - a system of fishing-tenures and debt-bondage, which thirled them to their landlord-merchant - and although knitters were not involved directly in this system, they too were enmeshed in a truck system which was to last far longer than the fishing-tenures. By 1872 truck had become so extensive throughout the islands that the Government commissioned a separate Shetland Truck Inquiry. This inquiry exposed the extent to which merchants dealt in truck and its socio-economic consequences. Despite the passing of the Truck Amendment Act in 1887 and another truck inquiry - the Delting Truck Inquiry - in 1888, truck lasted in the Shetland hosiery industry until the Second World War.

Until the inter-War years, the Shetland hand knitting industry was dominated by Shetland merchants centred in Lerwick and remained an 'unorganised' home-based industry, totally dependent on the knitting skills of most of the islands' women. Knitters were employed by merchants on a casual, rather than factory putting-out, basis. All hosiery was knitted by hand until 1922, when the first knitting machine arrived on the islands. The high reputation which Shetland hosiery had gained during the nineteenth century, led to a rise in the number of 'Shetland' imitations, which, mass produced cheaply by machine, were able to undercut genuine Shetland hand knits, posing a serious threat to this important but 'unorganised' industry. It was largely as a result of these events and of the growing economic importance of the knitting industry as the fishing industry dwindled, that the Shetland Woollen Industries Association was formed in 1922 and their trade mark - the Galley mark - registered with the Board of Trade three years later. Machine produced 'Shetland' imitations from all over the world continued to flood the market and the industry might have collapsed if it had not been for the craze for Fair Isle jumpers which knitting machines could not emulate.

Although the first knitting machines in Shetland had been imported in 1922, the effects of competition from locally produced machine-made knitwear was not felt until the early 1930s. This led to unsuccessful attempts to protect the Shetland hand knitting industry - the only hand knitting industry left in Britain - by endeavouring to have the term 'hand-knit' or 'hand-finished' banned from use on machine-made Shetland hosiery. The hand knitting industry went through a period of turmoil with the Galley mark falling into disuse. However, the advantageous hosiery market created by wartime conditions during the Second World War, strengthened the position of hand knitters by allowing them to market their hosiery independent of local merchants, and at realistic prices. In 1943 hand knitters formed their own protective organisation and marketing co-operative, the Shetland Hand Knitters' Association, and finally freed themselves of truck and merchant domination.

After the War, 'Shetland' imitations continued to flood the market threatening the survival of both the Shetland hosiery industry, whether produced by machine or by hand, and the continuing story of the Shetland hosiery industry is one of their struggle to safeguard the future of the industry through attempts, to have the word 'Shetland' kept for hosiery produced exclusively within the islands. By 1950, the Shetland hosiery industry had split into two distinct spheres - the Shetland handing industry and the Shetland machine knitting industry - but fortunately hand knitters and hosiery manufacturers had learned to complement rather than compete with each other, many hand knitters being employed to finish machine-produced hosiery.

## ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| AF | Agriculture and Fishery files (S.R.O.) |
| A.G.M. | Annual general meeting. |
| B.M. | British Museum |
| B.T. | Board of Trade files (S.R.O.). |
| Cd. | Command. |
| C.D.B. | Congested Districts Board. |
| c.o.d. | cash on delivery. |
| DD | Highland Development files (S.R.O.). |
| H.D.B.P. | Highland Development Board publication. |
| HH | Home and Health files (S.R.O.) |
| H.H.I. | Highland Home Industries, Ltd. |
| N.F.U. | National Union of Farmers. |
| N.L.S. | National Library of Scotland. |
| N.M.S. | National Museums of Scotland. |
| N.R.A. | National Register of Archives. |
| N.S.A. | New Statistical Account. |
| O.S.A. | Old Statistical Account. |
| P.P. | Parliamentary Papers. |
| S.A. | Shetland Archives. |
| SEP | Social and Economic Planning files (S.R.O.). |
| S.H.I.A. | Scottish Home Industries Association. |
| S.H.K.A. | Shetland Hand Knitters Association. |
| S.M. | Shetland Museum. |
| S.N.D.C. | Scottish National Development Council. |
| S.P.R.I. | Scott Polar Research Institute( Cambridge). |
| S.R.O. (W.R.H.) | Scottish Records Office, West Register House. |
| S.S.P.C.K. | Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge |
| S.W.I.A. | Shetland Woollen Industries Association. |
| Z.C.C. | Zetland County Council. |

**NOTES.**

1/ Throughout the text 'The Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Truck System (Shetland)' is referred to as the 1872 Truck Inquiry.

2/ The term 'South' is used by Shetlanders to mean the British Mainland.

3/ All monetary values relate to sterling unless otherwise stated. The pound sterling was worth 12 pounds Scots.

## GLOSSARY

**Delling** - To dig and turn over the ground with a spade.

**Gio** - A minor inlet of the sea; usually steep sided.

**Haaf fishing** - Fishing in deep or open ocean as opposed to coastal waters. The term comes from the Norwegian *hav*, meaning ocean.

**Hairst** - A Shetland term used for harvest time or autumn.

**Hap** - A wrap, similar to a shawl, worn by Shetland women outdoors as a protection against inclement weather.

**Kishie** - A straw basket used to carry peats etc., usually by slinging across the back.

**Iodberry** - A store built out into the sea, at which goods could be directly transferred to or from vessels or boats. Peculiar to the south end of Lerwick.

**Merchant-tacksman** - This composite term defines a merchant, usually in business as a fish curer but also running a truck store, who has the leasehold tenure of an estate, land, fishing station, with rights to collect the revenues in return for payment of a sum of money, commonly known as tack duty, to the proprietor. The heyday of the merchant-tacksman was during the nineteenth century when fishing tenures were at their height.

**Niddy noddy** - This is a simple wooden reel on to which spun wool is wound. It is shaped like the letter 'H' with the cross bar measuring 18".

**Outsets** - Small holdings created by enclosing parts of the hill land beyond the hill dyke. Many of these came into being during

the period of population expansion, notably in the eighteenth century.

**Pirn** - Wooden reel used in spinning. Pirns were filled with one ply yarn as it was being spun. To form three ply worsted, three pirns would be filled with one ply yarn. The yarn from these pirns would then be twisted together to form a three ply yarn.

**Scatt** - Scatts were taxes paid from all the lands in the Shetland Islands to the Norse Jarls until 1472 and thereafter to the Scottish Crown.

**Shetland colour-stranded knitting** - Native Shetland wool comes in many natural shades ranging from Shetland black through a range of browns and beiges to a variety of off-white tints. It is from this range of natural colourings that Shetland colour-stranded knitting has evolved. Traditionally this knitting is worked in colour-pattern bands which were repeated at regular intervals throughout the entire garment. These geometric patterns have similarities to those used in Fair Isle knitting. The overall effect is much more subtle than Fair Isle knitting as no dyed yarn is used.

**Tambourers** - Embroiders working with tambour frame and hook on white muslin. The heyday of this work was between 1780 and 1850 when many dresses in white muslin as well as accessories like collars, cuffs, caps and pelerines were tamboured. Ayrshire tambourers came to be known as 'the flowerers'.

**Voar** - A Shetland term used for seed time / Spring.

**Voe** - A derivative of the Old Norse *vagr*, a term applied in Orkney and Shetland to inlets of the sea, generally relatively narrow and sheltered from the open sea.

**Wattle** - A tax imposed under Scottish rule.

**Waulking Mill** - A machine formed of ponderous wooden hammers and originally driven by water power, which beats the virgin woven cloth in a damp state, until the spaces between the warp and weft threads of the web are closely felted together, thus making it a more suitable protection against wind and rain, preventing further shrinkage and giving a firm cloth which will keep its shape during wear. This process could be done by hand or by machine.

**Wool Cards**- These are oblong pieces of wood with handles, covered on the operating side with leather stuck full of fine wire teeth. A pair of wool cards are used to card wool, that is to tease out the fibres prior to spinning.

## List of illustrations.

**Note:** p. = page number...
o.p.p. = oppoiste page number...

Chapter 1.

# Introduction

## Aims.

The aims of this thesis are primarily to carry out a comprehensive survey and analysis of the Shetland Hand Knitting Industry from 1790 to 1950 and to gauge its importance in the islands' economy; secondly to assess the extent of truck and its socio-economic consequences; thirdly, to trace the origin and development of Shetland lace from c.1835 to 1950; and, to incorporate into this study, a brief appraisal of the role of women in Shetland society.

Traditionally the Shetland economy has been based on fishing, crofting and knitting. Generally speaking, the income from fishing paid the rent, whilst crofting provided food for subsistence, and the returns from knitting were used to clothe the family and help supplement the domestic economy. Yet despite this important role which hand knitting has always played in the Shetland economy, it has been undervalued and neglected by historians; there have been no comprehensive studies made of the Shetland hand knitting industry. Several reasons for this omission in Shetland's full and well documented history may be postulated. For example, knitting, regarded in Shetland as women's work, was rarely prosecuted as a primary or full-time occupation and for this reason the true numbers of women knitting for sale have not been adequately recorded by the decennial censuses which have never made provision for secondary occupations. Furthermore, unlike the Aberdeen or Sanquhar knitting industries, the Shetland hand knitting industry, continued without any structured organisation well into the twentieth century, making it difficult to attain hard statistics of the number of women engaged in it, their output, or the value of knitwear exported. Likewise, knitted goods were often bartered or exchanged for shop goods or sold to visitors for money; in either case, these transactions left little or no trace of having taken place, farless provided data for analysis. Possibly the most important reasons for this oversight in the islands' history, is that fishing, a male dominated occupation, has always been regarded as the corner-stone of the islands' economy, whilst women and their work were looked on as secondary to men, despite their many skills

and constant toil. Neither can it be overlooked that the vast majority of books, diaries and accounts written by early Shetlanders and travellers, were written by men. Few of these books fail to make reference to knitting but rarely give detailed information on the Shetland hand knitting industry. Two notable exceptions, are the works by Mrs Eliza Edmondston[1], of the landed Edmondston family of Unst, and of Edward Standen[2], an Oxford merchant who was responsible for introducing fine Shetland hosiery to the London market. Fortunately, there is sufficient documented information from such sources as the Old and New Statistical Accounts of 1791 and 1845, The Poor Law Inquiries of 1843 and 1910, the Shetland Truck Inquiries, merchants' ledgers, Commissary, Sheriff Court, Procurator Fiscal, and Scottish Office Records, as well as contemporary diaries, newspapers and journals, to piece together a comprehensive picture of the Shetland hand knitting Industry from 1790 - 1950. Unlike the Shetland fishing industry, however, with its plethora of customs' records, annual returns and export figures, no such records exist for hosiery. Even the limited number of valuations which are available for the hand knitting industry must be scrutinised very carefully to detect distortion and are, therefore, of limited value as a reliable source.

Truck, defined as payment in kind and not in the current coin of the realm, played such a large part in all aspects of Shetland's primitive, that is barter, economy, that the Government commissioned a separate truck inquiry for Shetland in 1872. This inquiry (which shall be referred to throughout the text as the 1872 Truck Inquiry), was entitled 'The Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into The Truck System (Shetland)' and is the single most informative source of Shetland life and work at that time, and in particular, gives a wealth of details regarding the running of the hand knitting industry, as well as throwing light on the social and economic conditions of nineteenth century Shetland knitters[3]. Sixteen years later, a second smaller and less formal truck inquiry was held in the parish of Delting. The hand-written minutes of this inquiry (simply referred to as the Delting Truck Inquiry) are lodged in West Register House, Edinburgh. It was instigated by the Secretary of State for Scotland, following a petition sent by the knitters and makers of home-spun cloth from the Parish of Delting to Queen Victoria, complaining of the lowering of prices paid to workers after the passing of

the 1887 Truck Amendment Act[4]. Truck, with its many social and economic implications, was so enmeshed in the Shetland way of life and so inextricably linked with the hand knitting industry that a separate chapter has been devoted to an analysis of Truck and the Shetland hand knitting industry.

A separate chapter has also been devoted to the origin and development of Shetland lace. The term "Shetland Lace" is a misnomer, as true lace is defined as 'fine open-work fabric of three main types: bobbin or bone lace made by twisting threads; needlepoint made by looping and knotting threads; and machine made'[5], not knitted. A more correct term for this form of knitting would be Shetland open work. Shetland lace appears to have evolved from a combination of events and circumstances rather than a single, specific event or influence. For example, the abundant supply of fine indigenous wool, the already highly developed knitting skills of local women, coupled with economic pressure caused by hard times during poor harvests, war and trade depressions, led to this beautiful textile-form evolving around 1835 and reaching its peak of perfection at the time of the Great Exhibition in 1851. This distinctive and highly skilled form of knitting rightly deserves greater attention than it has previously enjoyed, not only as a record of the dying skill of lace knitting, but as the important stimulus it gave to the islands' economy following the slump in the knitted hose market in the 1820s and 30s. Like the Shetland hand knitting industry, there have been no comprehensive studies of its origin or development, although Helen Bennett's article in *Scottish Textile History*[6], gives a well researched but limited account of its origin, as does Richard Rutt, Bishop of Leicester, in his excellent book *A History of Hand Knitting*[7]. He acknowledges generous assistance from Helen Bennett.

Any study of Shetland women and their work would be incomplete without an appraisal of the role they played in society and of their contribution to the Shetland economy. Women living and working in a crofting-fishing community frequently had to adopt the dual role of male and female, acting as surrogate fathers, bread-winners, crofters, in addition to their normal role of mother, cook, housekeeper, supplementary wage-earner, in the absence of their menfolk. In Shetland this absence usually ran from May to September, that is during

The geographical postion of the Shetland Islands in relationship to Iceland, Norway and Britain.

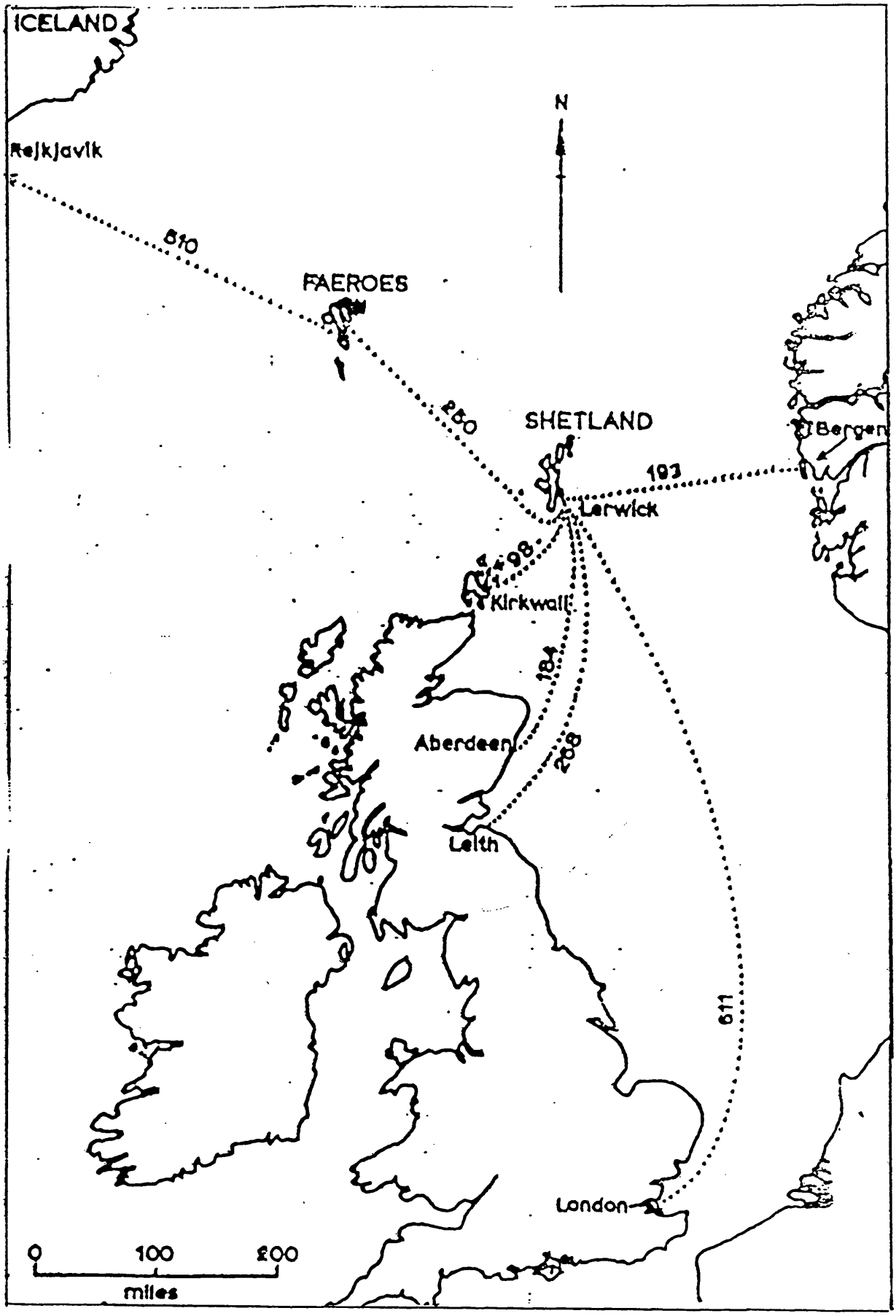



Fig. 1.1.
(Source: Wheeler -1964)

the fishing season, and coincided with Voar* time, the busiest and most important time of year, as it was from whose efforts and skills as crofters that the welfare of the family depended throughout the following winter. As in other fishing communities, Shetland population statistics show an excess female population, due in part to accidents and fatalities at sea, but one which precluded a proportion of the female population from finding a marital partner for support - a point illustrated in Appendix 1. The appraisal of the role of women found in chapters 2, 5 and 6, has been kept brief, as excellent work, including much oral history, has already been carried out in Shetland by Ann Black[8] . Finally the chronological divisions used in chapters 2, 5 and 6 have been chosen to coincide with major events affecting the hand knitting industry. 1872 was the year in which Shetland's major truck inquiry was held, 1918 the end of the First World War which marked a watershed in the organisation of the Shetland hand knitting industry whilst by 1950, hand knitters had to some extent been usurped by knitting machines.

**The Shetland Islands.**

The Shetland Islands lie 184 miles (294km.) north of Aberdeen and 193 miles (308km.) west of Bergen (Fig. 1.1). They have been Scotland's most northerly territory since 1469, when they were mortgaged by Christian I, the Dano-Norwegian king, in part payment of his daughter Margaret's dowry on the occasion of her marriage to James III of Scotland.

The Shetland Islands comprise an archipelago of over 100 islands, only 17 of which are inhabited at the present time. The largest and by far the most densely populated of these islands is called Mainland, and it is on this island that Shetland's capital, Lerwick, is located (Fig. 1. 2). These islands, lying between the latitudes 60 and 61 degrees north, are situated in the North Atlantic where the North Sea becomes the Atlantic Ocean, and are at the centre of the mercantile cross-roads between Germany, Britain, Scandinavia and the North Atlantic sea routes.

The area covered by these islands, which have a land mass of 550 square miles (1408 sq. km.), is approximately 70 miles (112km.) north to south, (excluding Fair Isle lying 25 miles (40km.) south of Sumburgh Head, the most southerly point on Mainland Shetland), and 35 miles

The Shetland Islands.

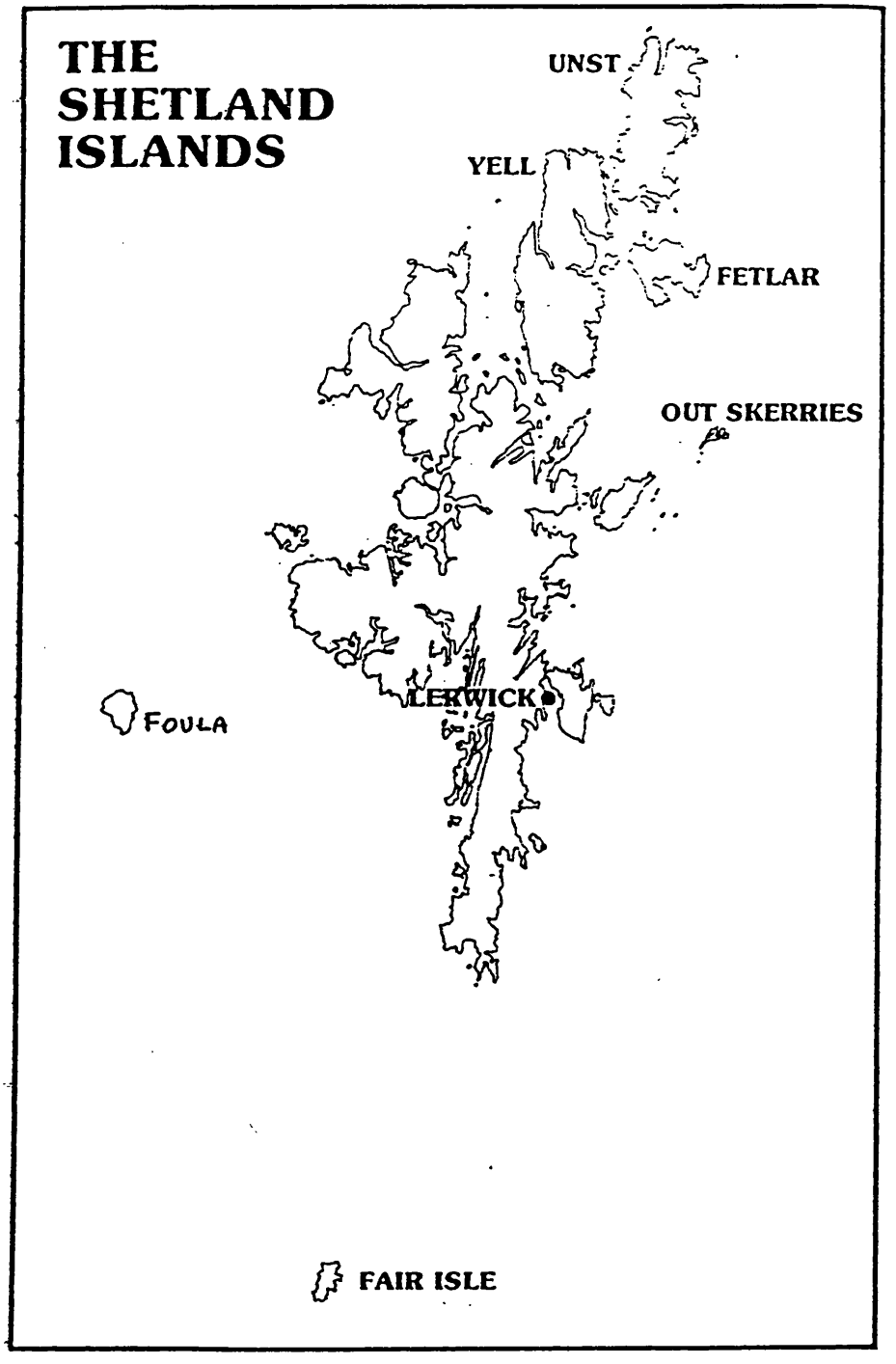



Fig. 1.2.
(Source: Smith, M. and Bunyan, C. - 1991)

(56km.) east to west; that is , from the Out Skerries on the east to remote Foula on the west. In common with other northern settlers, Shetlanders experience very short winter days and particularly long summer ones. Winter days have just under 6 hours of daylight at the winter equinox, whilst in June, July and August, the 'simmer dim' gives almost continuous daylight.

Despite the islands' exposed and northerly situation, Shetland enjoys a surprisingly mild climate with less snow and frost than mainland Scotland. This is due to the beneficial effect of the Gulf Stream. The North Atlantic depressions sweeping in from the west, do however, bring strong winds, and constant wind is a feature of Shetland's unusual weather pattern. Rainfall, on the other hand, is below mainland Scotlands' average, because of its low geographical relief - Ronas Hill, at 1,550ft. (450m.) is Shetland's only 'mountain'.

The Shetland Islands, also called Zetland, Ultima Thule or Hjatland, are often locally referred to as 'The Old Rock'. This vernacular term has its origin in the islands' great age of 2,000 million years. In geological terms these islands are a submerged mountain range, the hill tops forming the islands and the sunken valleys, the voes* and firths, and are made up of an assemblage of precambrian rocks of the Dalradian group, with some areas of old red sandstone. Unlike Orkney, this sandstone base does not produce rich soil. Much of its extensive coast line is barren and rocky, whilst the interior is covered with a thick layer of peat, tussock grass, scrub vegetation and wild flowers but is devoid of trees. Many lochs abound and the ground is generally boggy. This plethora of lochs, voes, gios*, and water logged ground, coupled with the lack of roads, explains why boats have, in the past, been the more usual method of transport. No point on the islands is more than 3 miles from the sea.

Shetland's poverty of soil has, in the past, been compensated by the rich fishing grounds located round her shores; these explain why fishing has for centuries been the dominant economic activity for Shetland men, with crofting essentially a subsistence activity to support the family rather than earn money. Ironically, Shetland's exposed northerly position, poor soil and meagre grazing, are the ingredients which have been responsible for producing some of the hardiest sheep in Scotland, whose wool is

exceptionally fine and soft; and it was from this indigenous supply of top quality wool, that the Shetland hand knitting industry evolved , making knitting the third strand in the islands' tripartite economy.

**Shetland Wool.**

Few authorities can agree as to the breed from which the native Shetland sheep is descended. For example, Evershed in his paper to the Highland and Agriculture Society of Scotland, in 1874, reiterated Hibbert's belief that the breed which Shetland sheep most resemble is the Argoli, the wild sheep of Siberia [9], whilst O'Dell writing in 1939, suggested similarities to the Wild Mouflon of Corsica[10]. Prophet Smith addressing a Summer School run by the Education Department of the International Wool Secretariat in 1958, claimed that the most likely connection is with the mountain sheep of Northern Norway[11], and goes on to say that "Cut off for long periods from cross-breeding with other strains, the Shetland sheep slowly developed into an independent breed". In a more recent study, Professor Wheeler of Newcastle University, stated that:

> ...it is generally agreed that the present animals show traces of primitive mouflon and urial (or turbary) blood, and indeed, in many ways the breed must be much the least "improved" of British sheep, retaining, for example, such anatomical peculiarities as having only 13 vertebral tail bones compared with the 20 or more in most breeds"[12].

It is however, generally agreed that the wool from these sheep is one of the finest wools produced in Britain. David Loch, the ardent promoter of the Scottish woollen industry, stated in 1780:

> Zetland ... produces sheep with the best wool, not inferior to that of Spain, from which I have often had stockings manufactured much finer than any of the kind I ever saw; which were beautiful beyond description[13].

The wool has a very short staple, is light, soft , silky and extremely warm but not hard wearing. The fineness of the wool is dependent on the part of the animal from which it is taken - the area around the neck providing the very finest wool. 'Rooing', rather than the quicker method of shearing, had been the tradition in Shetland until the 1950s. By this means the wool was plucked from the sheep and was said to aid the fineness of the fleece by leaving the longer, coarser hairs on the sheep

and by not blunting the fine ends with clippers. It is believed to be a painless process as by the summer months fleeces are hanging off and easily removed by hand plucking.

A characteristic of this breed, and one which can be attributed to its primitive features, is the variations of fleece colouring. The most common colours are off-white, gray, and Shetland black. 'Moorit', a reddish-brown colour, 'shaila' a grayish-black, are just two of the many natural colourings common to these sheep. These natural colourings are used to advantage in traditional Shetland colour-stranded knitting* and in the subtle grading or blending of tones in Shetland haps*.

The average fleece weight of 1 1/2lbs. from pure Shetland sheep, as compared to 5-6lbs from Black-face or Cheviots, led many agricultural improvers, like Sir John Sinclair and Thomas Mouat of Unst, to experiment with cross breeding in attempt to increase fleece and carcass weights[14]. The first cross-breeding experiments, advocated by Sir John in the 1780s, had the unfortunate consequence of producing an outbreak of sheep scab[15]. This outbreak, first reported in 1786, had a devastating effect on the flock numbers. Edmondston, writing on the subject of sheep scab in 1809, remarked "There is not one left in fifty of the number that was a few years ago"[16]. Other experiments have failed to produce sheep as hardy, or with a fleece as soft, or as the pure native breed[17]. Even less sophisticated measures, such as moving sheep to better pasture, have backfired. The nutritionally poor quality of their moorland feeding and the privation to which they are exposed during winter months - often having to forage for seaweed below high water mark when hill feeding had been exhausted - paradoxically seem to be the essential ingredients for maintaining the particular qualities of this primitive breed's wool[18]. For example, Cheviot sheep reared in Shetland produce a finer quality of wool than the same breed reared in the North of Scotland[19].

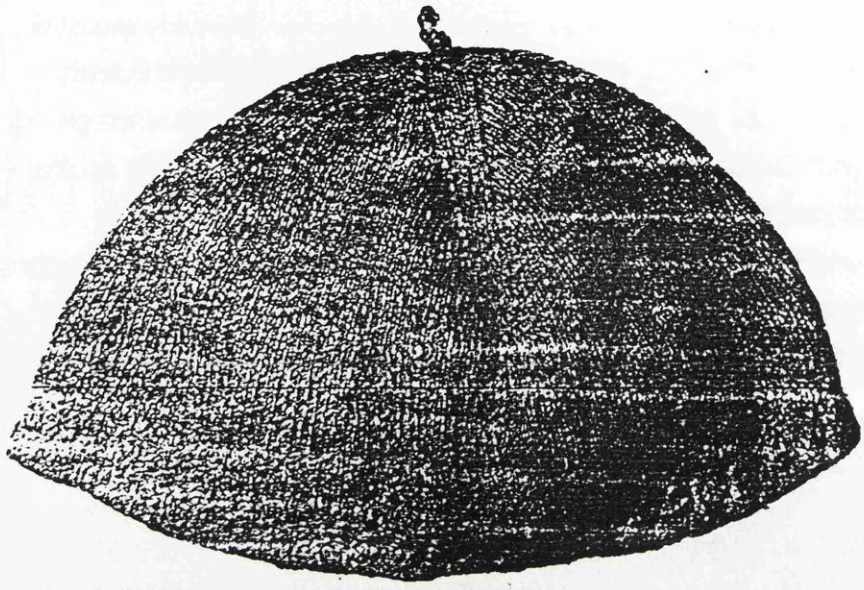
**Origin of hand knitting.**

This abundance of good quality native wool, naturally lent itself to the development of a local weaving or knitting industry based on wool. A combination of circumstances seem to have favoured the development of the hand knitting rather than the tweed industry. Wadmel, a coarse

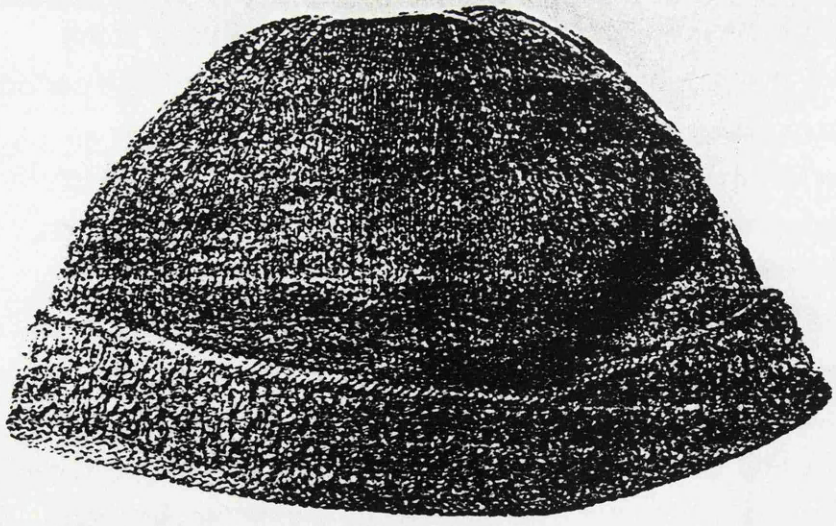
cloth formerly woven for rent payment, was replaced by money payments during the first half of the seventeenth century[20], but continued to be made occasionally for home use until the middle of the nineteenth century[21]. Against the weaving industry the following drawbacks are apparent. Firstly, weaving, traditionally a male occupation, required capital outlay on a loom and the space to work at this cumbersome object; secondly, Shetland men traditionally earned their living from the sea and apart from crofting, were not land based; thirdly, Shetland wool was found to be too soft for tweed weaving, giving a loosely woven cloth, which without a waulking* mill to finish it, on the islands, quickly went shapeless with wear. Whether due to these adverse circumstances or to the fact that knitting fitted in with the rhythm of crofting life - being able to be combined with other activities - or to the higher ratio of women to men, forcing more women to support themselves or simply to the greater industry of women, it was hand knitting and not weaving for which Shetland and its wool became famous.

Knitted material is formed by using a continuous yarn and interlocking loops of yarn with the aid of two or more needles or wires as they are called in Shetland; prior to the use of wires, sticks were used[22]. There is no documented evidence to determine when the skill of hand knitting reached Shetland. As knitting spread through western Europe in the fifteenth century, it is probable that it reached Shetland during this period and, with the abundance of native wool available locally, rapidly developed. As far back as the fifteenth century, Shetland had established trade links with the Hanseactic ports of Hamburg, Bremen, and Lubeck; England and Scotland, whilst still retaining strong Scandinavian ties, even after 1469[23]. Renaissance paintings of the 'Knitting Madonna' confirm that knitting was an established skill in fourteenth century Germany and Italy[24]. Richard Rutt, Bishop of Leicester, states that Coventry cappers (cap knitters) can be traced back to the thirteenth century and were established by 1424[25], whilst David Bremner stated "About the middle of the fifteenth century peasants began to wear knitted instead of woven woollen caps"[26]. The skill of knitting may have arrived in Shetland from any of these countries or from Iceland or the Faroes, both countries having a well established export trade for knitted garments before 1600[27]. 'Makkin', the Shetland

Gunnister Man



Cap knitted with a looped pile on the inside, from Gunnister, late seventeenth century.



Cap from Gunnister, late seventeenth century.

Fig. 1.3.
(Source: Henshall, A. - 1951 - 52)

dialect word for knitting, comes from the Norn verb 'mak', defined by Jakob Jakobsen as 'to knit woollen yarn'[28]. This may indicate a Scandinavian origin. Unfortunately, there is insufficient evidence to accurately determine the origins of knitting in Shetland[29].

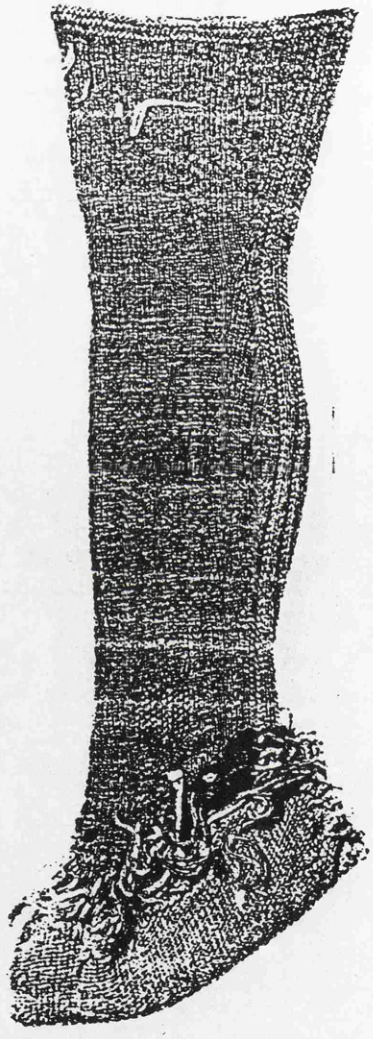
The earliest documented references to woollen stockings in Shetland are to be found in the *Court Book of Shetland 1615-1629.* Here three separate references are made to the theft of 'sockis' between the years 1615 and 1625; mittens and garters are also mentioned[30]. However, although it is clear that these items were made from wool and were most likely knitted, there is no specific mention of knitting[31]. The first direct reference to stockings being constructed by knitting is found in an early seventeenth manuscript by Richard James, an Anglican priest. Accompanying Sir Dudley Diggs on an embassy to Russia in 1618, James visited Shetland and described the women as "...given to knitting mittens and stockings which the Hollanders and English do buy for rarity"[32]. It is likely that the skill of knitting had been established well before this date, as for example David Bremner in his *Industries of Scotland*, in 1869, stated that "...upwards of three centuries ago, Scottish peasants were knitting hose" [33]. However, as there is a total absence of evidence about its early development, no assertion can be made. Nor is there any documented evidence to indicate by which sea route knitting arrived in Shetland.

Mundane garments such as stockings, gloves, and caps made for everyday use by common people, disintegrate with wear or perish with age, leaving little or no trace for the historian to examine. Scotland is fortunate in having in the Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, a rare set of knitted woollen garments from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, which were found in Shetland. In 1951, in a shallow grave near the Lerwick-Hillswick road, leading to Gunnister, in the parish of Northmavine, the body of a fully clothed young man was found preserved in a peat bog. One of the Swedish coins found in the man's purse has been dated to 1690, thus fixing the date of the man's death at around 1700[34]. Gunnister Man had two brown woollen caps. The one found on his head was heavily felted and knitted in stocking stitch on four needles; the second cap was found wrapped round a horn spoon in the man's pocket. This cap, also constructed in stocking stitch was slightly

Gunnister Man

Gloves from the Gunnister burial.

Fig. 1. 4.



Stocking from the Gunnister burial.

Fig. 1.5.

Purse from the Gunnister burial.

Fig. 1.6.

(Source: Henshall, A. - 1951 - 52)

larger than the one found on Gunnister man's head, and had a looped pile in the inside and a tiny knitted loop on the crown (Fig. 1.3). His gloves were worked in brown wool in stocking and garter stitch, with lines of decorative stitches down the back of the hand, had no seams and showed considerable skill in their finger and thumb construction (Fig. 1.4). The stockings, 23ins (58cm.) from thigh to heel, with a foot length of 11ins. (27.5cm.), were worked in garter and stocking stitch, except for the panels at the back and the clocks at the ankles, both knitted in moss stitch (Fig. 1.5). Gunnister Man's purse is multi-coloured and worked in the colour-stranded knitting, now referred to as Fair Isle knitting (Fig. 1.6). The knitting is even and regular and obviously carried out by someone skilled in the understanding of the techniques of shaping, patterning and the construction of knitted woollen articles. It is not possible to tell if these garments were knitted in Shetland - the presence of foreign coins in the man's purse proves nothing about his origin [35] but it does prove categorically that knitting had reached a high degree of sophistication and skill by the end of the seventeenth century and was seen in Shetland.

**Early Traders.**

Although Gunnister Man's knitted garments cannot automatically be attributed to local knitters, it would seem most probable that this was the case, as a thriving stocking trade had been built up with visiting Hanseatic merchants and migrant Dutch and German fishermen. By the middle of June these fishing fleets had congregated in Bressay Sound, and a large fair was held on the 24th, St. John's Day, to which the local people would bring their goods to barter, the women having knitted in anticipation of this annual event[36]. In exchange for fresh produce and knitted stockings and mitts, the Dutch would barter brandy, shoes, gin, tobacco and Dutch money. Likewise, the Hanseatic merchants set up their trading booths in advantageous locations rented from local land owners, and from which they traded with the local people. Martin Martin, writing c.1695 stated the importance of trade with visiting fishermen and merchants :

> The Hamburgers, Bremers, and others, come to this country about the middle of May, set up shops in several ports, and sell divers commodities, as linen, muslin and such things are most proper for the inhabitants, but more especially beer, brandy and bread, all of

which they barter for fish, stockings, mutton, hens etc. and when the inhabitants ask money for their goods, they receive it immediately [37].

Brand, who visited Shetland in 1700 as one of a commission of ministers sent by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to examine the state of the Church in the north, gave an interesting insight into the hand knitting industry and its place in the islands' economy at that time:

> The Hollanders also repair to these waters in June...for their herring fishing, but they cannot be said so properly to trade with the country, as to fish upon their coasts, and they use to bring all sorts of provisions necessary with them, save some fresh victuals as sheep, lambs, hens etc. which they buy on shore. Stockings also are brought by the country people from all quarters to Lerwick and sold to these fishers, for sometimes many thousands of them will be ashore at one time, and ordinary it is with them to buy stockings to themselves and some likewise to their wives and children; which is very beneficial to the inhabitants for so money is brought into the country, there is vent for the wool, and the poor are employed. Stockings also are brought from Orkney, and sold there, whereby some gain accrues to the retailers, who wait the coming of the Dutch Fleet for a market [38].

Under the direction of the Hanseatic merchants Shetland enjoyed a relatively stable and prosperous economy. This period of Hanseatic trade domination lasted from c.1500 to the beginning of the eighteenth century, when two separate events severely disrupted the status quo and had a catastrophic effect on Shetland life and trade. These two events were, the burning of the Dutch Fleet in Shetland waters by the French in 1703 and, the introduction of a tax on foreign salt in 1712.

The burning of the Dutch Fleet in Shetland waters, regarded by Dr. Hance Smith as one of the most important contributory causes to the decline in the economy and the poverty of the lower classes in the 1700s[39], caused a temporary cessation in, but not the total extinction of, the lucrative visiting market created by the Dutch fishers. Thomas Gifford of Busta stated that:

> These Dutchmen used formerly to buy a considerable quantity of coarse stockings from the country people for ready money at tolerable good prices, by which means a good deal of foreign money

was annually imported, which enabled the inhabitants to pay the land rent, and to purchase the necessaries of life; but for several years past that trade has failed, few or none of those busses coming, and those that come if they buy a few stockings, it is a very low price, whereby the country people are becoming exceedingly poor, and unable to pay the land rent[40].

However, by 1774, the trade was obviously thriving again:

The whole time the fleet lay the country people flocked to Lerwick with loads of coarse stockings, gloves, night caps, rugs and a very few articles of fresh provisions. Several thousand pounds are annually drawn for the first article, tho' a pair of stockings seldom sells for more than 6d or 8d. I don't say but they make finer stockings than these, having been informed of a pair of stockings made in Lerwick and sold at 36sh. ster., but the most valuable for the country in general, and the most profitable, are the coarse ones, of one very thick thread, which consumes a great deal of wool, but requires not a great deal of labour. The country folks are very smart in their bargains with the Dutch; they are now paid in money for everything, no such thing as formerly trucking one commodity for another...[41].

Of even greater long term consequence was the introduction of the tax on foreign salt in 1712 which , backed up by the promise of a bounty on all fish cured with British salt and by British merchants, was designed to break the monopoly of foreigners fishing in British waters. Its effect was to reduce drastically the number of foreign fishermen and traders, and in Shetland, to force local landowners to fill the economic vacuum left by them. To this end many were forced not only to take over the role of fish curers but also to take over the role of these visiting merchants as exporters of the county's produce and importers of their needs.

Extensive details of this transition from landowner to merchant -laird, were given by Thomas Gifford in 1733:

Commodities yearly exported are, fat well dried cod, ling, tusk and saith fish, some stock fish and salted herrings, butter, fish oil, stockings and worsted stuffs to foreign markets; and wool, horses, and skins coast-wise to Orkney and Scotland. For the exporting of

> fish, butter and oil which is the principal product of Zetland, there used formerly ten or twelve small ships to come here annually from Hamburg and Bremen, and these Hamburg and Bremen merchants had their booths in the most convenient places, where they received the fish, butter and oil from the country people ... These foreigners did yearly import hemp, lines, hooks, tar, linen-cloth, tobacco, spirits and beer, for the fishers, and foreign money wherewith they purchased their cargoes. But when the high duty was laid upon foreign salt, and custom house officers sent over, and a custom house settled at Lerwick, these foreigners could not enter, and so the inhabitants, and many of the heritors or landlords, were obliged to turn merchants and export the country product to foreign markets, and had in return for money and such other necessaries as the country could not subsist without[42].

By comparison to these Hanseatic merchants, the new merchant-landowners now directing Shetland trade were amateurs, with only a few, like Thomas Gifford of Busta and John Bruce of Symbister, meeting with success in their trading ventures. Initially it was possible for them to keep their land and fishing interests separate. However, as the combined adverse circumstances of famine, war, smallpox epidemics, coupled to their own lack of commercial expertise, took its toll, it became increasingly difficult to separate the two functions; and it was from this fusion of land and fishing interests that the fishing-tenures and truck system arose, which lasted until the end of the nineteenth century.

**Fishing tenures.**

During the eighteenth century Shetland suffered from many poor harvests both at sea and on the land, causing widespread hardship and destitution; a situation which led to an accumulation of unpaid rents and extended credits, and one which was undoubtedly aggravated by the absence of foreign buyers. As the landlord's returns from their land diminished, they turned to fishing, the cornerstone of the Shetland economy, to make good their losses. To this end, they contracted with their tenants to buy their catch and increased the number of their fishermen-tenants by encouraging early marriages by the offer of land, and to accommodate this increase in population, split crofts into outsets*. Even allowing for the introduction of the potato in c.1750

which enabled the land to support a larger number of people than the traditional crops of bere, barley, oats, turnips and cabbage, crofts became so small that they could no longer adequately support their occupants. Fishermen-tenants fell heavily into their landlord's debt, so that this system, instead of benefiting the landlord led to the social and economic bond between him and his tenant tightening. Unwittingly, both had become victims of this system, named by Brian Smith, Shetland archivist, the 'Shetland Method'[43].

This increase in population did enlarge the laird's fishing crews, but it also put the islands' scant food resources under great strain; what benefit the laird may have gained from larger catches, was more than wiped out by the heavy burden of an increased number of near-destitute people looking to him for support. Ill feeling between the two arose as families fell deeper into debt. It was the laird who set the price paid for wet fish, but it was also the laird, through whose stores the fishermen were paid, who set the price of goods and provisions. The fisherman and his family had become trucked to his laird, with apparently no legitimate means of breaking free from this trap. One possible solution was the clandestine sale of fish to other merchants. This practice was much frowned on by lairds, who felt that their tenants had a moral obligation to sell their fish to the laird who provided them with credit in times of need and who supported the poor who were unable to pay him; "whereby," as Thomas Gifford forcibly pointed out, "a considerable part of my Stock is sunk"[44].

Prolonged periods of famine led to the balance between subsistence and destitution becoming more precarious. After the crop failures of 1782 and 1783, many landowners went bankrupt, whilst others turned to landless merchants, engaging them to manage their business affairs. By the 1770s, the landless merchants had begun to emerge as a new and separate class between the laird and his tenant.

**Shetland stocking trade.**

Throughout this bleak period in Shetland's history, there is no doubt that fish remained the dominant force in the islands' economy, as Customs Quarterly Returns for the Port of Lerwick and other sources show. It is difficult, if not impossible to gauge the economic importance of the

Exports: Foreign Trade 1742 - 90

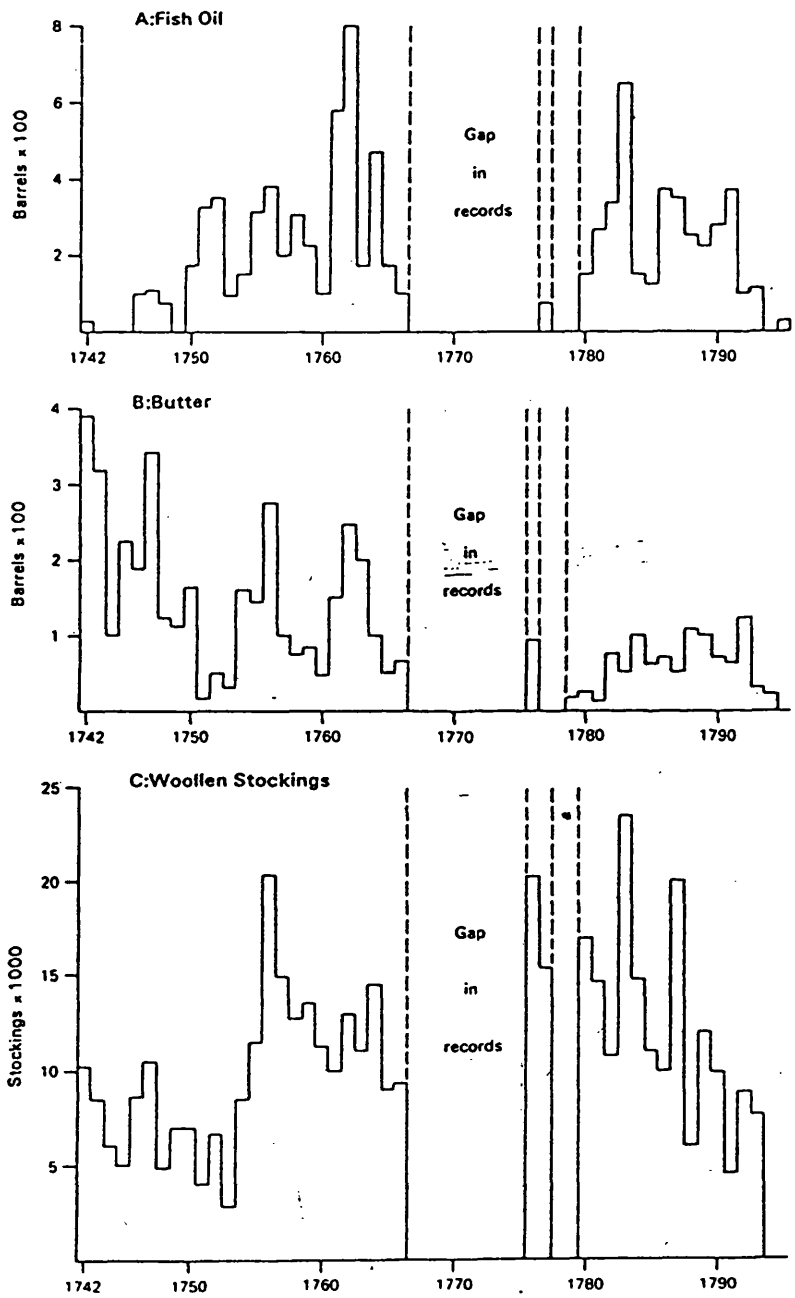



Fig. 1.7.
(Source: Smith, H. - 1984)

hosiery during this period. This is due to the total paucity of accurate records for hosiery exports and to the difficulties of assessing the quantity of hosiery sold casually to migrant fishermen and merchants. Hance Smith describes the trade in hose before 1790 as very much incidental to that of fish, fish oil, butter and kelp[45], although Custom's Quarterly Returns (see fig. 1.7) show that from 1742 to 1790, between 11,000 and 23,000 pairs of woollen stockings were exported annually. Court of Session productions show that Shetland hose were being exported to Edinburgh, Hamburg, Spain, Lisbon, Madeira, Antigua, Barbados, and Virginia [46]. The earliest record of the export value of Shetland hosiery was made by Sir John Sinclair in 1767 , when he estimated its value to be £1,650. His estimate of fish exports was £11,375 , making hosiery equivalent to one seventh of the value of the fish exported[47]. In the absence of data explaining how Sir John arrived at this estimate for hosiery exports, it is difficult to gauge its accuracy.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, there seems to have been a marked deterioration in the standard of knitted hose - many of the ministers entries in the Old Statistical Account decry this manufactury as a miserable mis-spending of time and waste of wool[48]. Standards had dropped so low that attempts were made by the Commissioners of Supply to introduce a branding system to improve the quality. Thomas Mouat of Unst, landowner and a Commissioner of Supply, was much involved in this scheme, in which he had a considerable vested interest, as in 1779 stockings were being accepted as currency for payment of rent and duties[49]. This use of stockings as a medium for rent payment, was undoubtedly forced upon the landlord in the absence of money usually obtained from the sale of stockings and fresh produce with visiting merchants and fishermen.

The deterioration in the quality was felt to be so widespread, that an assessor was to be appointed by the Commissioner of Supply to ensure that regulations concerning stockings were published in every parish in Shetland. The following is an extract from the instructions which were sent to the Stamper of Woollen Stockings in the South Parish of Unst in 1779:

> All stockings presented to you for stamping you are to compare in size and shape with the Wooden Patterns now delivered you, and all

> such as agree nearly either with the pattern for Men, Women, or Childrens stockings and are knit of one sort of wool, worsted or equal size, free from left loops, hanging hairs, bunt cuts or mended holes you are to stamp near the brow...[50].

Many other details were included in these instructions. It was an expensive scheme to set up and operate, and this alone may give some indication of the importance of knitted hose to the Shetland economy. Prior to this event, no attention had been given to the improvement of the woollen industry.

By the beginning of the period under study, Lerwick had become the established centre of the Shetland stocking trade, the quality of knitted hose had deteriorated, and hand knitting was used for producing family clothes, supplementing the domestic-subsistence economy, as a form of currency for rent payment and as an export commodity both to foreign and British markets. It was from the importance of this stocking or hosiery industry that the term Shetland hosiery is derived. It is used in Shetland to cover all types of knitwear, not just knitted hose.

NOTES.

[1] Edmondston, Eliza, *Sketches and Tales of the Shetland Islands*(Edinburgh 1856); *The Poor Knitters of Shetland* (Paisley 1861) - the latter book was published anonymously under the pseudonym of 'A Lady Resident'. In the Shetland tradition, she is frequently referred to by her maiden name, that is Eliza MacBrair.

[2] Standen, Edward, *The Shetland Islands* (Oxford 1845).

[3] P.P., Cd. 555 (1872) Vol. I., and Cd. 555-1, (1872),Vol. II, The Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Truck System (Shetland).

[4] The Truck Amendment Act 1887, 50 & 51 Vict. c. 46.

[5] Clabburn, Pamela, *The Needleworker's Dictionary*, (London 1976), p. 152.

[6] Bennett, H., 'The Shetland Handknitting Industry' , in *Scottish Textile History*, edited by J. Butt and K. Ponting (Aberdeen University Press, 1987)

[7] Rutt, R., *A History of Hand Knitting*,( London, 1987).

[8] Black, B.A., *The role of women in the Shetland Economy* - unpublished dissertation, Glasgow University 1989.

[9] Evershed, H., *Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland*, 1874, Vol. VI, 'On the agriculture of the islands of Shetland', p. 206; Hibbert, S., *Description of the Shetland Islands*(Edinburgh 1822), p. 228.

[10] O'Dell, A.C., *Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands*, (Lerwick 1939), p. 93.

[11] Smith, P. *Wool Knowledge*, Winter 1958, 'Shetland sheep and Shetland's wool industries', part 1, p. 4.

[12] Wheeler, *Geographical Field Group Regional Study, No. 11, Isle of Unst* (1964), appendix to chapter 3.

[13] Loch, David, *Essays on the trade, commerce, manufactures, and fisheries of Scotland*, (Edinburgh 1778), Vol. 1, p. 9.

[14] S.A., Index to Garth Papers - catalogue 3, 1ff Belmont, Thomas Mouat to Sir John Sinclair 25/3/1793; 2ff Edinburgh, Sir John to Thomas Mouat 19/9/1793; 2ff Edinburgh, Sir John to Thomas Mouat 25/9/1795.

[15] Smith, H., *Shetland Life and Trade 1550-1914*, (Edinburgh 1984), p. 116; John Bruce of Sumburgh and Arthur Nicolson of Lochend tried to control this outbreak of sheep scab in the south Dunrossness by petitioning for the slaughter of of infected animals and by setting up a fund to compensate those who lost sheep. S.A., Index of Garth Papers - catalogue 3, 1ff. Lerwick (8/12/1786), 962.

[16] Edmondston, A., *A View of the ancient and present state of the Zetland Islands*, (Edinburgh 1809), Vol. I, p. 222.

[17] Robson, J., *Transactions of the Highland Agricultural Society of Scotland*, (1930), p. 63 - 74.

[18] 'A Lady Resident', *The Poor Knitters of Shetland*, (Paisley 1861), p. 3. ; *NSA* , Vol. XV, p. 28 and 74.

[19] It was in fact, the regularity with which such experiments were carried out and the deleterious effect which many had on sheep breeding that led to the formation of the Shetland Flockbook Society in 1926.

[20] Smith, H., *Shetland Life and Trade 1550 - 1914*, (Edinburgh 1984), p. 20.

[21] Edmondston, A., *A view of the Ancient and Present state of the Zetland Islands*, (Edinburgh 1809), Vol. II, p. 3.

[22] Cowie, R., *Shetland*, (Second edition, Edinburgh 1874), p. 186.

[23] Smith, H., *Shetland Life and Trade 1550 - 1914*, (Edinburgh 1984), p. 8.

[24] There are three famous 'Knitting Madonnas' - The Holy Family by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (c.1345) in the Abegg Collection, Berne, Switzerland; Our Lady by Tommaso da Modena (1325 - 75?) in Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna, Italy; and Buxtehude Madonna by Master Bertram Minden (thought to be painted before 1400) in Hamburger Kunsthalle, Germany.

[25] Rutt, R., *A History of Hand Knitting*, (London 1987), p. 58.

[26] Bremner, D., *Industries of Scotland*, (Edinburgh 1869), p. 172.

[27] Hoffman, M., *The Warp-weighted loom*, (Oslo 1964), p. 211 and 225.

[28] Jakobsen, Jakob, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*,(London 1928), Vol. II.

[29] Bennett, H., 'The Shetland Handknitting Industry', in *Scottish Textile History*, Edited by Butt, J., and Ponting, K., (Aberdeen 1987), p. 49.

[30] Donaldson, G., (Ed.), *The Court Book of Shetland 1615 - 1629*, (Shetland library, Lerwick 1991), p. 19, 75 & 126.

[31] Stockings made from woven material were commonly used by the well-dressed until the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, although peasants wore knitted hose well before this time. Rutt, R., *A History of Hand Knitting*, (Batsford, London 1987), p. 62.

[32] *Orkney Miscellany i* (1953), p. 50. Richard James was a learned Anglican priest, born in 1592, who travelled as chaplain to Sir Dudley Digges on an embassy to Russia in 1618. His manuscript account of Poland, Shetland, Scotland, Wales, Greenland and other countries is in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. He died in 1638.

[33] Bremner, D., *Industries of Scotland*, (Edinburgh 1869), p. 173.

[34] Henshall, A., & Maxwell, S., 'Clothing and other articles from a late seventeenth century grave at Gunnister, Shetland', in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, LXVVVVI, (1951 - 52), p. 31.

[35] Several authorities refer to the circulation of foreign coins being more common in Shetland than the coin of the realm. For example, Hibbert stated in his *Description of the Shetland Islands* (1822) that "In consequence of the small barters that are made with foreign vessels, Danish and other coins pass more freely in the country than British money" - p. 282; whilst the Rev. Patrick Neill travelling in Shetland in 1806, stated that "...Dutch and Danish coins are more common than British - *A Tour through Orkney and Shetland*, (Edinburgh 1806), p. 71.

[36] Edmondston, A., *A View of the ancient and present state of the Zetland Islands*, (Edinburgh 1809), Vol. II, p. 2.

[37] Martin, Martin , *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, (1703), p. 385.

[38] Brand, J., *A New Description of Orkney, Zetland, Pightland Firth and Caithness*, (Edinburgh 1703), p. 131.

[39] Smith, H., *Shetland Life and Trade 1550 - 1914*, (Edinburgh 1984), p. 28.

[40] Gifford, Thomas, *An Historical Description of the Zetland islands*, (London 1786), Thule Print 1976 edition, p. 6.

[41] Low, G. *A Tour through Orkney and Schetland*, (Kirkwall, 1879), p. 67.

[42] Gifford, Thomas, *An Historical Description of the Zetland Islands*, (London 1786), Thule Print 1976 edition, p. 28.

[43] Smith, Brian, 'Shetland archives and sources of Shetland history', in *History Workshop* (1977), p. 205-207.

[44] E.S.Reid Tait (ed.), *The Hjatland Miscellany*, iv (1947), p. 111-113.

[45] Smith, H., *Shetland Life and Trade 1550-1914*, (Edinburgh 1984), p. 56.

[46] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), Court of Session Productions, Vol. 23, CS96, (1741-1749).

[47] P.P., Cd., 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, p. 15.

[48] Sinclair, J., *The Statistical Account of Scotland, 1791-1799, Vol. XIX Orkney and Shetland*, (EP edition 1978), p. 544.

[49] S.A., *Index of Garth Papers*, Catalogue 3, 1ff Lerwick (1779) 768.

[50] O'Dell, A.C., *Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands*, (Lerwick 1939), p. 157.

# Chapter 2 1790-1872.

## The Shetland Method

The Old Statistical Account (OSA)[1], masterminded and compiled by Sir John Sinclair, and written by the parish ministers between the years 1791 and 1799, is an invaluable source of information on life in Scotland at that time. Even allowing for a possibly biased and intolerant outlook from the manse, it is possible to piece together a fairly accurate picture of the contemporary attitudes towards agricultural improvements and religious matters, the state of education, living conditions, as well as employment and trade openings, in Shetland during the last decades of the eighteenth century.

The spirit of agricultural improvement sweeping Scotland during the eighteenth century, barely touched Shetland, with only a handful of innovatory landowners. For example, Sir Andrew Mitchell who had petitioned the S.S.P.C.K. in 1756 for allowances to employ two Scotch ploughmen to settle on his estate, met with failure in this venture when Luddite-minded reactionaries smashed his ploughs and mangled his oxen[2]. However, William Bruce of Symbister, was more successful. He was praised by the Rev. George Low for his excellent crops of bere and oats, and for establishing c.1770 a large scale mill for grinding corn near Bigton - the first such mill to be recorded in Shetland[3]. But in general, Shetlanders were scorned for their slovenly and backward farming methods[4]. Few landlords encouraged agricultural improvements, whilst the whole question of precarious land tenure did little to encourage individual innovation. The Shetlander looked upon himself as a fisherman with a croft, unlike the Orcadian who regarded himself as a farmer with a boat. In Shetland, crofting was secondary to fishing and therefore little thought of in terms of investment and improvement.

Religion or creed was of minor importance to the Shetlander. This attitude was aptly summed up by the parish minister of Mid and South Yell:

> In religious matters, they enjoy a happy moderation and uniformity of sentiment; their faith not being distracted by controversy, nor

sectarianism infesting their abodes".[5]

Shetlanders were not irreligious, but neither were they bigoted in their faith. Visiting preachers seem to have always been hospitably and tolerantly treated, regardless of creed or denomination[6]. Methodism became one of the main denominations in Shetland during the first half of the nineteenth century, and by 1850, the four main places of worship in Shetland were the Parish church, Free Kirk, United Presbyterian and Wesleyan Chapel. In church matters, it was not the gospel which provoked many to strong words, but the heavy church assessments imposed, which taken along with scatt*, wattle*, and other taxes, amounted to a heavy burden[7].

This lack of religious fervour may in fact, have had a halting effect on the progress of education and industry in Shetland. The educational state of the islands showed up very poorly in the ministers' returns[8]. The 1696 Act for Settling of Schools which had emphasised the prime responsibility of landowners in establishing a school in every parish and, at the same time, placed on the Church the onus of ensuring that this responsibility was exercised[9], seems to have been ignored. However, this backward state of education may also have been aggravated by Shetland's Scandinavian heritage, which as the islanders were neither Gaelic speaking nor interested in the Stuart Cause, meant that the S.S.P.C.K. had shown little interest in establishing more than one school on the islands. Undoubtedly, the heavy costs involved, the widely dispersed nature of the population, lack of roads, and the increasingly weakened financial state of heritors, benevolent or otherwise, made the setting up and running of schools difficult. Yet despite this dearth of schools, many ministers, whilst complaining of the lack of education, referred to the people as intelligent, as is shown by an extract from the Rev. John Menzies of Bressay's statistical return:

> It is much to be lamented that the education of youth is not more attended to in this country. The people discover a quickness of apprehension, and an aptness to learn, which deserves to be encouraged[10].

Although most ministers bemoaned the lack of manufacturing industries throughout the islands, they seem to have been more concerned with their congregations' spiritual rather than temporal well-being, as, for

example, no attempts had been made by the Established Church to alleviate distress during the terrible starvation years of the early 1780s when "people lived mostly on whelk, limpets and such other shell-fish as the sea-shore afforded"[11] and government meal cargoes had to be sent to prevent mass starvation. In fact, the accounts, written within approximately 10 years of this period of destitution, are devoid of compassion, with few ministers seemingly even aware of the extent of human suffering in their midst, and indeed, one minister, the Rev. John Mill of Dunrossness, complaining of the unsuitability of being asked to oversee the distribution of charity meal in his parish[12]. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church's policy in Ireland, neither the Established Church nor the Free Church - formed after the Disruption of 1843 and noted in many areas for its relief work - seem to have felt any responsibility to help innovate schemes to alleviate distress by creating employment.

This whole problem of destitution and lack of employment, was greatly aggravated by a 34% increase in the population from 15,210 in 1755 to 20,451 by 1790 - an increase considerably in excess of that in any other Highland county[13]. This increase was generally regarded as being the result of the early marriages, and splitting of outsets favoured by landowners, and as the Rev. John Menzies pointed out :

> In most countries, the increase of population is reckoned an advantage, and justly. It is, however, the reverse in the present state of Shetland. Were manufacturers established here, to employ the people, and enable them to procure a comfortable subsistence, their increased numbers would be pleasing to every patriotic mind; but it is believed, that there is at present, in these islands, double the number of people they can properly maintain[14].

The lack of manufacturing industries, mentioned in the OSA by all ministers, was of critical importance to Shetland at the turn of the century, with its escalating social and economic problems, caused by rising population, destitution, changing trading patterns and trade disruptions. The importance of the knitting industry was pointed out by the Rev. James Sands of Lerwick: "The only manufacture, carried on in the parish, is the knitting of woollen stockings, and in this almost all the women are more or less engaged"[15]. Several ministers pointed out the

stupidity of earlier attempts at establishing a linen industry[16], stating for example:

> A linen manufacture was surely improper as a first attempt to introduce manufactures into this country...The same sum expended in establishing a woollen manufacture would have employed many a hand which is now idle, or employed in destroying materials, which ought to be turned to a more profitable account[17].

Many such schemes for promoting the linen industry were set up throughout Scotland around this time, schemes which were regarded by David Loch, the ardent protagonist of the Scottish woollen industry, as "unnatural and absurd" compared to the "superior advantages of woollen manufacture over that of linen"[18]

This reference to "destroying materials", whilst mentioned by several ministers, is unsubstantiated by others. However, it is clear from contemporary writers, that around this time, the standard of knitted stockings had deteriorated[19]. Conflicting reports, make it difficult to assess the extent of this deterioration. For example, the ministers of Aithsting, Delting, and Yell were unanimous in decrying the quality of knitted stockings, whilst those from Tingwall and Unst, referred to them as a' lucrative stocking trade'[20]. By the time the OSA was written, Tingwall stockings were of sufficiently high quality to be marketed in Edinburgh and this trade was attributed to " the patriotic and benevolent exertions of Sir John Sinclair "[21]. If the volume of correspondence between Sir John and Thomas Mouat of Unst on wool matters can be taken as a guide, it would suggest that it was also Sir John who was responsible for introducing Unst stockings to the Edinburgh market [22]. From this, it may be assumed that the quality of the coarse stockings manufactured by the less skilled had deteriorated as the number of Dutch fishers dwindled, whilst the more skilled knitter had turned to her attention to the knitting of finer goods for coastwise exportation to the Scottish market[23].

This then was the picture painted by the OSA of Shetland life and trade at the end of the eighteenth century, with knitting and agricultural work presenting themselves as the main means of employment for women, both modes of employment being no more than subsistence activities.

**Role of women.**

Employment opportunities within Shetland for women throughout this period were limited. In 1802 a straw plaiting industry had been set up in Lerwick by a London company but had ceased to function by c.1840[24]. This company, initially employing 90 girls in Lerwick, opened another branch in Dunrossness. Straw was imported from Dunstable and workers paid on a piece rate basis of 1d: per yard of plaited straw[25]. Another separate factory was started a few years later in Lerwick, so that by 1809 approximately 180 to 200 girls were being employed daily - a very small number compared to neighbouring Orkney where straw plaiting occupied upwards of 4,000 girls, women and old men[26]. Like the linen spinning industry of the previous century, this too failed. The inherent weakness in both these industries lay in their dependence on the importation of the basic raw material, and their subsequent vulnerability to disruption, whether by stormy weather, wars or even smuggling.

However, unlike the straw plaiting industry, the kelp industry, established in Shetland c.1780, benefited considerably from the trade disruptions caused by the Napoleonic wars, as Spanish barilla, preferred by manufacturers to kelp, was cut off by wartime blockades. Kelp, the residue left after the burning of seaweed, was used as a source of alkali in the bleaching trade, and in the production of glass, iodine and soap. This dirty and tedious process employed many women and children in the cutting, gathering and burning of tangle weed. Production, and with it prices, continued to rise until the bottom fell out of the market with the re-introduction of Spanish barilla and pot ashes in the 1820s[27]. Kelp burning continued to provide a limited amount of employment throughout this period, but never regained its former economic significance[28]. Shetland landlords had never exploited or depended on their 'golden fringe' to the same extent as their counterparts in the Western Isles, as for example whilst the Hebrides were exporting between 15,000 to 20,000 tons of kelp annually at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Shetland kelp exports amounted only to 500 tons, and therefore the dwindling economic importance of the industry was less severely felt[29].

Shetland Knitter c.1900

Fig. 2.1.
(Source: Shetland Museum Collection, Lerwick)

Domestic service was a possible source of employment for women, but in Shetland, with its dearth of well-to-do people[30], such opportunities were limited. Domestic employment in Shetland often involved working on the land as well as indoors, and like fishing, could therefore be seasonal; many unmarried women gained temporary employment in this manner during the summer months. Old women were employed to carry peat from the hills to Lerwick, combining this work with stocking knitting - see fig. 2.1. This phenomenon was often commented on by visitors, as for example, James Wilson, a wealthy amateur scientist, visiting Shetland in 1841, recorded in his diary, that when returning from Fort Charlotte in Lerwick, he passed:

> ...droves of women proceeding on their never-ceasing journey to the mosses in the hills for peats, with their cassies or straw baskets on their backs, and knitting eagerly with both their hands... [31].

Others, like 'Baabie' engaged by Hay & Co., made a scratch living acting as a messengers[32], or by hawking[33] or simply by begging[34]. The entries in the Poor Roll of Lerwick in 1843 make it clear that many relied on regular charity from the better off[35]. For example, a Mrs Greirson's name recurs as giving charity to at least nine different people, whilst other entries state 'assisted by a lady in Edinburgh', by Mrs Hunter, Miss Irvine etc. [36].

The fishing industry required women packers and gutters, working in teams of three, during the fishing season which ran from May to September, although unlike the fish wives of the Western Isles, Shetland women did not follow the fishing fleets to other parts of the country and were wholly Shetland based.

The comprehensive role of women in Shetland was summed up in the OSA by the Rev. William Jack of Northmavine:

> The women look after domestic concerns, bring up their children, cook the victuals, look after cattle, spin and knit stockings; they also assist, and are no less laborious than the men in manuring and labouring the grounds, reaping the harvest and manufacturing their crop[37].

In any seafaring community, where the men were absent for long periods, whether at the fishing or whaling, or in the merchant or royal navy, women had to shoulder the responsibilities which normally fell to

Costume of the Shetland fishermen and women c.1820.


Fig. 2.2.
(Source: Hibbert, S. - 1822)

men, in addition to coping with their own homemaking and domestic roles, and their biological function, as bearers of the next generation. As in other seafaring communities, like Peterhead in the north east of Scotland or Staithes in the north east of England, Shetland men expected their women to undertake this multiplicity of tasks as a matter of course. Given their traditional role of head of the household and breadwinner, Shetland men enjoyed this superior status, regardless of the burdens which fell to women. For example, Sir Walter Scott, when visiting Shetland in 1814, noted in his diary that :

> The women are rather slavishly employed, however, and I saw more than one carrying home the heavy sea-chests of their husbands, brothers, or lovers, discharged from on board the Greenlanders[38].

In Shetland, where the family was dependent on the produce of the croft for subsistence, these burdens were considerable, as they included the vital farm work normally done by men in inland crofting areas. It has often been noted that Shetland women were better workers than men, who whenever they returned from the sea, felt that their labours were over and did little to help in the home or on the land, even when they were idle during the winter months[39]. These facts were noted in 'The Third Report on Highland Destitution' in 1849, which stated:

> ... the moment the boat touches the beach the fisherman considers himself a privileged being, exempt from the ordinary lot of humanity, and nearly the whole labour of cultivating the farms is devolved upon the women, who as one of the Sappers remarked, with regard to their efforts in road-making, "The women, Sir, are the best men in Shetland"[40].

It was also the custom for Shetland women, married or otherwise, to supply themselves with clothes from their own handiwork[41]. Fig. 2.2 shows the typical dress of Shetland women and the knitted caps and surtouts of untanned hide worn by Shetland men - the woman is of course knitting.

The constant demands of the croft and family, meant that for married women or women with dependents, employment outwith the home was not feasible. Knitting fitted in with the rhythm of this way of life, particularly as it complemented rather than interfered with croft work,

and was therefore the obvious choice as a spare-time/part-time occupation. For example, the following statement taken from Edward Standen's short treatise on the Shetland Islands reinforces the compatibility of knitting and crofting:

> The Shetland woman knits from childhood: her ball of worsted and wires accompany her everywhere - into the fields, to be taken up at intervals of rest: even during hard work she plies her industrious fingers, for she may be met on the hill-side with a heavy burden on her shoulders, bending beneath the weight, but still knitting[42].

Removed as they were from industrial centres offering steady full-time employment, pluralism of employment was essential and the norm for most people and as the Rev. Patrick Barclay of Unst, pointed out "nobody can earn 'bread' by any one occupation alone...except the minister "[43]. Thus knitting, lending itself to be lifted and laid as time permitted, was ideally suited for married women, women with dependants, widows or spinsters, as a subsistence activity.

**The Shetland hand knitting industry.**

The Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century made little impact on the hand knitting industry in Shetland, which remained a home-based cottage industry whose workers knitted as individuals, or as part of a family unit, using their own home-grown yarn, and relied primarily on the annual visits of the Dutch and other migrant fishers for the marketing of their products. Apart from attempts to improve the quality of stockings knitted as part payment of rent[44], and despite the Highland Society's report on the Shetland woollen industry published in 1790[45], little attention had been given to the organisation and development of this industry by the Shetland merchant-laird or other entrepreneur, until about the 1830s, by which time the demand for stockings had fallen off considerably, with knitters still relying on visiting Dutch fishermen - greatly reduced in numbers - for their main transactions. This lack of organisation was in sharp contrast to Aberdeenshire, regarded as the most important centre of the stocking trade in the north east during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here agents travelled round the countryside, giving out yarn, specifying articles to be made, whilst at the same time, collecting completed orders[46]. Unlike the Shetland hand knitting industry which used only locally produced wool, this trade was

based on both local and imported wool. In 1757 its export value was estimated to be £80,000 and had risen to £200,000 by 1784[47]. However, this important industry went into decline c.1793, and never recovered from the trade disruptions caused by the Napoleonic Wars and the increasing competition from the stocking frame. Aberdeen changed over to the stocking frame, and thus became centred on the factory, and not the domestic, putting-out system, taking the work out of the hands of many crofters and cottars, and denying them a small but valuable source of supplementary income[48]. Interestingly, there is no documentation to suggest that stocking frames - invented in 1589 - ever reached the Shetland Islands then or later[49].

The earliest valuation of the Shetland hand knitting industry at £1,650 (see chapter 1, p. 15) - this sum representing the export value of 50,000 pairs of stockings @ 6d. per pair, with rugs and fine stockings valued at £400 - was, however, a mere fraction of the export value of the Aberdeen stocking trade. Though the hand knitting industry had been described in the OSA as "a miserable mispending of time", by 1797, the total annual production was estimated to be worth £17,000[50].
Following this, the hosiery trade went through a prolonged period of recession, with its value falling to £5,000 by 1809[51]. This was due to the interference to the Shetland trade with the Dutch and German fishermen caused by the Napoleonic wars; and to the great drop in demand for Shetland stockings all over Britain, which Edmondston attributed to the "uncommon degree of attention bestowed at present in these countries to increase the quality and improve the quantity of wool"[52]. Unlike the Aberdeen stocking industry, the Shetland hand knitting industry survived by diversifying into new markets, so that by 1871, Cowie estimated its value to be between £10-12,000[53]. The problems of estimating the value of this industry are dealt with in appendix 4, which lists the different sources for valuation from 1767 to the twentieth century.

Very little detailed information on the hosiery industry is available from after the late 1790s to the 1830s, with only Dr. Arthur Edmondston's *A view of the ancient and present state of the Zetland Islands*, published in 1809, giving such scant information as the knitting of worsted stockings, caps and gloves being 'among the most ancient', and:

> Besides the sale to shipping, stockings are bartered to the

## Imports to and exports from Zetland c.1809

*Imports to Zetland.*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| One regular trading sloop between Lerwick and Leith, makes seven trips every year, and imports each time, exclusive of provisions, goods to the amount of 2000l. | £. | 14,600 | 0 0 |
| Freights on the above, - | | 350 | 0 0 |
| Another regular trader also makes seven trips, and imports each time, exclusive of provisions, goods to the amount of 1500l. | | 10,500 | 0 0 |
| Freights on the above, - - | | 245 | 0 0 |
| Goods imported by vessels not in the Leith trade, - - | | 4000 | 0 0 |
| Flour, barley, rice and bread, | | 3000 | 0 0 |
| Grain and meal, - - | | 8000 | 0 0 |
| 500 tons of salt, duty free, - | | 625 | 0 0 |
| Freight on the above, - | | 600 | 0 0 |
| 200 tons of coals, consumed by the regular inhabitants, - | | 200 | 0 0 |
| Wood, boats, and boards from Norway, including freight and duty, - - - - | | 1800 | 0 0 |
| | £. | 43,920 | 0 0 |

*Exports from Zetland.*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1075 tons of ling, tusk, and cod, at 18l 10s. - - - | £. | 19,887 | 10 0 |
| 45 ditto of sethe, at 10l. - | | 450 | 0 0 |
| 300 barrels of herring, at 1l. 7s. | | 405 | 0 0 |
| 900 ditto of fish oil, at 2l. 10s. | | 2250 | 0 0 |
| 500 tons of kelp, at 8l. - | | 4000 | 0 0 |
| 200 barrels of beef, at 2l. 10s. | | 500 | 0 0 |
| 3 tons of tallow, at 60l. - | | 180 | 0 0 |
| 400 hides, at 10s. - - - | | 200 | 0 0 |
| 20 tons of butter, at 50s. | | 1000 | 0 0 |
| Stockings, gloves, &c. - | | 5000 | 0 0 |
| 100 dozen calf skins, at 12s. - | | 60 | 0 0 |
| 150 dozen rabbit skins, at 7s. | | 52 | 10 0 |
| 12 dozen otter skins, at 4l. 16s. | | 57 | 12 0 |
| Seal skins, - - | | 12 | 0 0 |
| Feathers, - - - | | 50 | 0 0 |
| 150 horses, at 3l. - - | | 450 | 0 0 |
| 100 cattle, at 5l. - - | | 500 | 0 0 |
| 50 sheep, at 10s. - - | | 25 | 0 0 |
| | £. | 34,879 | 12 0 |

Fig. 2.3.
(Source: Edmondston, A - 1809)

> shopkeepers, for such commodities as the people need; and like the wadmal of Iceland, form a principal article of exchange in the country[54],

while Samuel Hibbert, writing in 1822, made only a brief reference to stockings ranging in price 5d. or 6d. to half a guinea, the most common quality costing 3/- or 4/-[55]. From c.1830 it is possible to discern the first signs of organisation in the industry and to trace its development and diversification to the present day. However, this dearth of information does not extend to other aspects of Shetland trade, aspects of trade which affected the hand knitting industry.

The changes in Shetland trade which took place around 1790 were much less clear-cut than those which had occurred as a result of the exodus of the Hanseatic merchants from 1712 onwards. Small, but significant, shifts in trade patterns began to occur as the new class of landless-merchant emerged, usurping the merchant-laird. Lerwick, founded as a trading post with the Dutch in the seventeenth century, was now firmly established as Shetland's main port, trade and distribution centre, and underwent considerable expansion between 1790 and the early 1800s. Timber, imported from Norway for boat building[56] , was now also being used to build lodberries* and merchants' houses in Lerwick. This was also a time of great mercantile expansion with merchants acquiring ship owning interests or co-operating in chartering ships for the export of fish cargoes - the number of trading vessels registered at Lerwick increased sharply during this period [57]. However, the key factor to these merchants' successful expansion lay in their agency work as import-export agents, that is, exporting fish and other commodities from the islands, and importing general commodities in conjunction with British merchant houses[58]. In addition to this, agency work for the Greenland whale-ship owners, proved a lucrative source of income for many merchants, enabling them to expand the retailing side of their business. As Hance Smith pointed out "The period from around 1790 until 1820 was the era of the individual merchant engaging in as many branches of trade as possible"[59]. Thus, although the sale and movement of fish dominated and directed Shetland trading activities, hosiery, locally produced from native wool, was an item which increased trade openings could turn to some profit as is shown in fig. 2.3.

From c.1820, the number of small merchants dealing in more or less every item the community required, rose both in Lerwick and in country districts. The extent of the general merchants business can be gauged from a respondent giving evidence to the Poor Law Enquiry of 1843:

> Shetland business consists of everything a man can make profit by. The merchants here do not confine themselves to any particular branch of business[60].

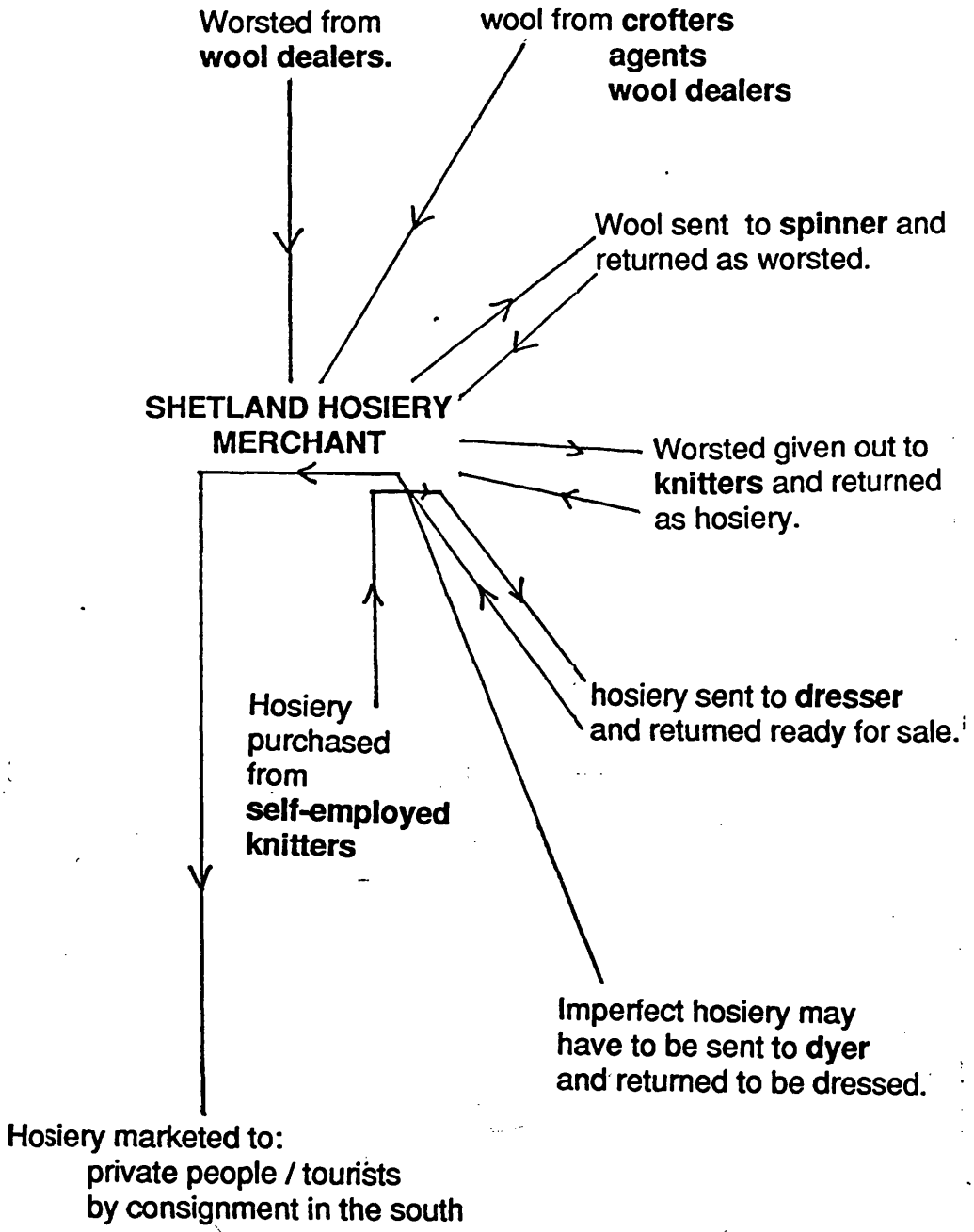
This is borne out by Duncan's 1854 *Zetland Trade Directory* listing no less than 141 merchants in the islands , with 52 of them centred in Lerwick[61]. So that, whilst fish was still the main export throughout this period, other commodities such as hosiery, fish oil, kelp etc. were also being exported, with imports consisting of fishing materials, grain, woollen and linen goods, tea and spirits[62], as well as household stores, for those of better station, which were imported from Leith and Hamburg[63]. As trade with Spain and other continental countries became disrupted by the Napoleonic Wars, it was superseded by coastwise trading, with Leith continuing to act as Shetland's main port of communication with Scotland .

This increase in coastwise trading gradually led to more regular and improved communications with Scotland and was a key factor in the development of the hand knitting industry. For example, Laurence Laurenson, the first to open an outfitter-cum- hosiery store in Lerwick, did so in 1818[64]. He was followed by Robert Linklater in 1835, whose business dealings were so successful that he opened a second shop in Lerwick and a large retail establishment in Princes Street, Edinburgh[65]. From 1832, when the first steamer arrived in Shetland, sailing ships began to be replaced by the more reliable and faster steam ships. By 1838 Shetland had a regular weekly service with Leith during the summer . This service also carried mails. In 1839 a regular service with the North Isles, that is Unst, Yell and Fetlar, was inaugurated, allowing them greater trading participation with Mainland Shetland and Britain. The following year the penny post was introduced throughout Britain - a service which allowed hosiery merchants to expand their markets in the south. By 1840 another large specialist hosiers - Robert Sinclair & Co. - had opened in Lerwick, whilst many small general stores both in Lerwick and throughout the islands, were also dealing in hosiery. This increase

in communications with the outside world, particularly the greater comfort of steamer travel, opened up the Highlands and Islands to tourists. Shetland, popularised by Sir Walter Scott's *Pirate,*[66] was no exception, and enjoyed an influx of well-to-do, leisured visitors during the summer months who were anxious to return home with locally produced knitwear, particularly, the beautiful and prestigious Shetland lace shawls.

In 1842 the collapse of Hay & Ogilvy, Shetland's biggest company, and the Shetland Banking Co., a provincial bank owned largely by the same firm , brought widespread unemployment, hardship and destitution[67]. These bankruptcies, precipitated by three bad harvests between 1835 and 39, successive poor fishing seasons, and a catastrophic gale in 1840, from which the fishing industry never fully recovered, led to widespread unemployment, destitution and hardship. Virtually the whole community was affected by the collapse of the islands' biggest single employer. The earlier collapse of the kelp industry exacerbated this situation; thousands found themselves out of work with no money. Fishing boats lay idle as men could not raise the cash to buy lines or gear. Many who could, joined the merchant navy, whilst young single men emigrated. The old, the infirm and unemployed were left to manage as best they could. This disastrous situation was further aggravated by Shetland's first clearances for sheep walks in Upper Weisdale, in the Parish of Delting[68]. Knitting, the old standby, had become even more important to the domestic subsistence economy, with unemployed men relying increasingly on the earnings of their wives and daughters. The Poor Law Inquiry held in Shetland at this time, illustrated the extent to which women relied on knitting to eke out their pittance. For example, Agnes Coutts, a 71 year old widow, supplemented her monthly allowance of 1/6d. from the Poor Roll by knitting, Grizel Brown earned 4d. a week knitting stockings, whilst, Catherine Green, who supported her paralysed sister, did so by knitting and taking in lodgers, charging them 1d. per night[69]. By 1861 when Shetland population figures peaked at 31,670, there were no less than 142.6 women to each 100 men recorded, which even allowing for the absence at sea of many men, still left a considerable surplus of women without a partner to help support them (see appendix 1 & 2). This surplus, called 'Shetland housewives', with little opportunity of gaining employment, had few resources but their own handiwork[70].

The Shetland hand knitting industry c.1872.




N.B. A small minority of knitters marketed their hosiery independent of Shetland merchants.

Fig. 2.4.

1790 to 1872, was arguably, the most important period in the organisation and development of the Shetland hand knitting industry. During a period when other cottage industries, like the hand knitting industries of the Dales and Cumbria[71], were dying, the Shetland hand knitting industry expanded, with knitters successfully making the transition from coarse stockings to finer ones, and diversifying into knitted lace to meet fashion demands, whilst increasing their output of underwear, traditionally produced for home use, capitalising on "the notion gaining ground that woollen under-clothing is more suited than any other for our variable climate"[72]. The transition had been so successful that by the end of the period, each district had established its own speciality in the hosiery line, with Northmavine producing soft underclothing; Nesting, stockings; Walls and Sandsting, socks and haps; Whiteness and Weisdale, fancy coloured gloves; Lerwick and Unst, shawls, veils etc. [73].

**Organisation of labour.**

Lack of documentation makes it impossible to ascribe the first attempts to organise the hosiery industry to any specific person or even date. However, as Laurenson & Co., was the first firm to set up in the hosiery business as "Shetland Warehousemen and Clothiers" in Lerwick in 1818, it would seem most likely that it was this firm which pioneered the organisation of the Shetland hand knitting industry. The flow chart - fig. 2.4 - shows the basic lines along which the industry had developed by c.1870, with the Lerwick hosiery merchants dominating the scene. Compared to the rigidly structured factory-based system of outworkers and agents operating, for example, with the Ayrshire tambourers* - where patterns, rates of pay and time allowed for the work were lithographed on to pieces of material and distributed from a central source by agents who also collected in the finished work[74] - the organisation of the Shetland hand knitting industry was casual to the point of disorganisation, using neither patterns nor agents for their hosiery.

**Wool and worsted.**

The first stage in the production of Shetland hosiery was to obtain the raw wool, the best and most plentiful supplies coming from the north

isles[75]. The crofter-knitter with her own sheep was in an advantageous position. For merchants and knitters without their own sheep, wool could be obtained direct from the crofter, from farmers, wool merchants, women who bought and slaughtered sheep, selling the wool and mutton separately, from country merchants in the north who did not deal in hosiery but bought wool for resale to knitters or to Lerwick merchants, or wool dealers who bought up wool on a large scale throughout the islands for resale within Shetland[76]. In addition to these arrangements, the larger hosiery merchants in Lerwick had their own agents in the north isles buying up wool for them. These agents were usually small merchants running a general store in country districts. Because of its scarcity[77], Shetland wool was always in great demand and difficult to obtain without ready money. The knitter without her own wool, and no ready money, had problems obtaining wool or worsted. In country districts, she could work as a farm servant and be paid in wool, but in Lerwick, where worsted was regarded as a 'money item', that is, merchants would only sell it for cash, not exchange it for hosiery, it was almost impossible for her to obtain wool or worsted [78]. The raw wool then had to be spun into worsted - worsted being the term used to describe wool which has been spun into yarn.

Throughout this period, native wool was still being hand carded and spun on the islands, that is, mainly in the north isles and in Lerwick[79]. Before spinning could commence, the wool had to be sorted or graded, the fine wool being sold at a higher value, and the coarse wool being kept for domestic use. Carding was the next stage before spinning and, in a crofter-knitter's household, this was generally undertaken in the evening by the female members of the family unit. It was tiring, dirty work occasionally lightened by help from neighbours and the occasion turning into a social called 'a cardin'. Finally spinning, an exclusively female occupation, was usually undertaken by the older members of a family who, being less active, had more unbroken time to sit at it. Outwith the family unit, spinners were employed by private people and by merchants on a domestic, 'putting out' basis, and were paid in cash or in goods at wholesale prices. For example, Margaret Clunas, a native of Unst, was a self-employed spinner, who bought wool from her crofting neighbours, spun the wool and sold the worsted at 3d a cut to Mr Jamieson, merchant in Unst, and was paid in 'money articles' - that is goods at

wholesale prices or provisions not available normally to trucked workers[80]. In her evidence given before the 1872 Truck Inquiry, Margaret Clunas stated that spinning paid better than knitting[81]. Thus, although spinning was more fatiguing than knitting, because of the constant demand for their skills and the better pay, being paid in cash or goods at wholesale prices, spinners were in a superior position to knitters, and less likely to fall victims to the truck system.

The use of imported yarns such as alpaca, mohair, Pyrenees, Bradford, and Scotch by local merchants became increasingly common from around 1840[82]. This departure from the exclusive use of local wool can be attributed to several factors - the expansion in the Shetland hosiery trade, the scarcity of native wool as a result of sheep scab, and the greater availability of alternative yarns because of the general expansion in trading with Scotland made easier by the new regular steamer service, and the rise in advertising through trade journals such as Duncan's *Zetland Trade Directory.*

**Hand Knitters.**

At the manufacturing centre of the whole industry lay the hand knitters. Hand knitting in Shetland has always been an almost exclusively female occupation; the very few males who did knit being regarded as "scornfully effeminate"[83]. In his evidence to the 1871 Truck Commission held in Edinburgh, George Smith, Sheriff Clerk and Clerk of Supply in Shetland, estimated that 4/5ths of the female population were engaged in this industry and suggested that the number of knitters listed in the census returns accounted only for those to whom knitting was their sole means of support[84]. Census returns give an unrealistically low figures; the 1861census gave 1,454[85] knitters, which is far too low considering that Robert Sinclair and Robert Linklater alone were each employing in excess of 300 knitters[86]. But it is likely that George Smith's estimate of 4/5ths is too high, and included women who knitted for family use only. It was generally agreed that census figures represented the 'town knitters', that is the knitters in Lerwick and Scalloway whose sole occupation was knitting[87]. Added to this, it must be remembered that knitting was seasonal, being pursued with great vigour during the long, dark winter months but neglected during the demands of the growing season. Allowing for the fact that the very young and very old would not

be knitting, for the absence of alternative employment and the economic pressure of hard times, a more realistic estimate would be that approximately 2/3rds of the female population was involved to varying extents in hand knitting as an industry[88].

It is clear from the 1872 Truck Inquiry (from which the bulk of the structural information on the knitting industry in this chapter is based) that in this home-based industry knitters fell into two categories; that is self -employed, or employed by a merchant to knit with his worsted. It would be an exaggeration to describe the latter category as employees, as this term implies some regularity of employment, formal contract, set rates of pay etc., none of which existed in the Shetland hand knitting industry until well into the twentieth century.

A self-employed knitter was at liberty to sell her hosiery as she chose, and was generally anxious for sales with visiting merchants, private people and summer visitors rather than local hosiery merchants, as she felt that she got a better return for her work, but more importantly, received ready money for her hosiery. The self-employed knitter was generally a superior knitter to one employed by local merchants, and preferred by them, as they were at liberty to accept or refuse hosiery offered for sale, there having been no previous outlay of worsted. Self-employed knitters were not under contract to sell their hosiery to any one merchant, although it was generally felt that it was wiser to stick to one merchant to ensure future sales[89]. This was a very different situation from fishermen-tenants who were trucked to the one merchant.

Of the 51 knitters examined by Sheriff Guthrie, Chief Commissioner of the 1872 Truck Inquiry, 26 were usually self-employed and only resorted to knitting for merchants when they had no worsted of their own. In this barter economy, where hosiery was paid for in 'soft goods' - that is, tea and haberdashery such as calico and flannel[90] - obtaining wool or worsted was a continual problem as both these commodities had to be paid for in ready money. As well as this initial outlay, money was required for dressing hosiery - that is, washing and finishing of hosiery - as no merchant would accept hosiery unless already dressed[91]. This stale-mate situation made it difficult to become, and stay, self-employed without some other means of support. This was easier for knitters from

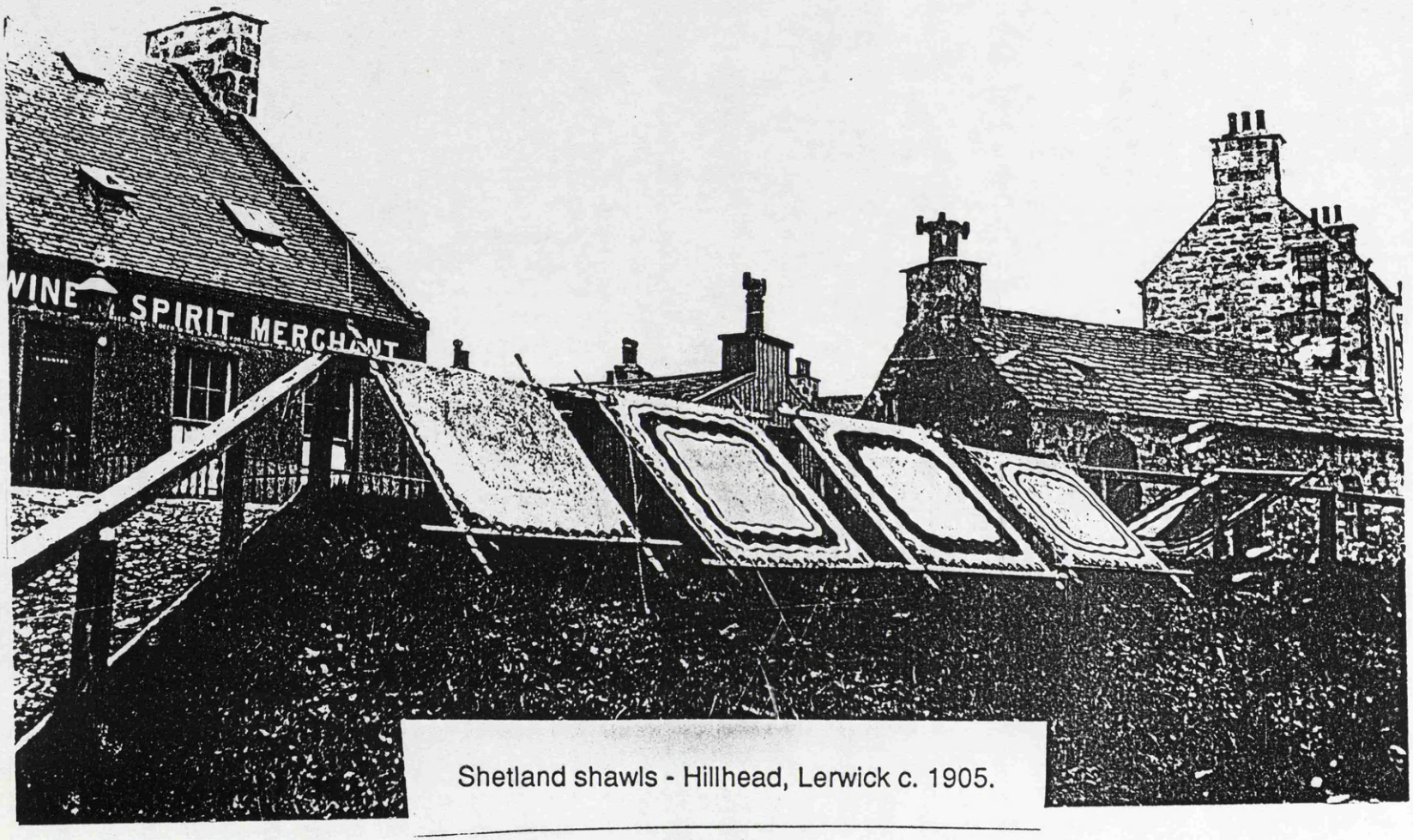
the north isles than Lerwick-based knitters, as many had their own wool and used knitting as a part- or spare-time occupation to be fitted in with crofting work. These self-employed country knitters would sell their hosiery locally to merchants, to summer visitors or occasionally visit Lerwick to sell their knitwear to hosiery merchants[92]. For example, Catherine Petrie of Fetlar, came annually to Lerwick to sell the shawls which she had knitted during the winter. In Lerwick she lodged with Mrs Park of Charlotte Place, and had her shawls dressed by a Miss Robertson before selling them to Robert Sinclair & Co.[93].

Catherine Petrie's situation was rather different from that of a self-employed knitter living in Lerwick. Here, wool was difficult to obtain, and unlike the north isles, where knitting was very much an extended family business with all the necessary processes being carried out within the family, in Lerwick wool generally had to be put out to the spinner, who in turn had to be paid in ready money[94]. Dressing too, had to be paid for in ready money; so that unless the Lerwick self-employed knitter had some other means of support, she had great difficulty in remaining in business, particularly as there were other cash demands, such as rent, taxes, food etc. on her slender resources. Her best chance of obtaining ready money, and thereby staying in business, was by selling her hosiery to summer visitors, travelling merchants or through friends or relations in the south who were willing to sell her work for her[95] .

**Knitters employed by merchants.**

Throughout the archipelago, merchants employed knitters to knit for them. This custom of giving out worsted had started between 1840 and 1859[96] and, despite the fact that merchants tried to play down this side of their business at the 1872 Truck Inquiry for fear of infringements under the 1831 Truck Act, the system of employing knitters was still in full swing in 1872. In contrast to the factory based putting-out system in operation in the Borders around this time, Shetland knitters entered into no formal contract with their employer. There were not even any set 'factory days' for returning work or receiving new supplies, nor were any conditions or security of employment offered, although merchants stated that they tried to keep needy knitters in work even when there was little demand for hosiery[97]. Employment was on a piece work basis, that is, payment was made on completion of each item or batch of items

Fig. 2.5.
(Source: Shetland Museum Collection, Lerwick)




Shetland shawls - Hillhead, Lerwick c. 1905.

returned, with the price being set by the merchant. Prices fluctuated according to the time of year and state of the trade. Knitters were rarely paid in cash, although occasionally very small amounts of cash, for example 3d., were given in part payment, with the remainder paid in 'soft goods' or tea.

**Dressers.**

The next stage in the manufacturing of Shetland hosiery was dressing. This was done by women who whitened, scoured, stretched and mended shawls, veils, underwear and other hosiery. These processes required considerable space and equipment. White or off-white hosiery was first whitened using rock sulphur. Old barrels with lids were used for sulphuring. Brimstone was sprinkled on to smouldering (but not burning) coals contained in a metal basket at the foot of the barrel, the hosiery carefully draped over a pole balanced across the top of the barrel and the lid replaced. The sulphur fumes whitened and disinfected the hosiery. Once whitened, hosiery was washed in a mild soap solution, rinsed in luke warm water, laced on to stretchers and left to dry out in the open. Fig. 2.5 shows hosiery at Hillhead, Lerwick, which had been dressed and left outdoors to dry.

As with knitters, dressers could be independently employed or employed by a merchant and paid on a piece work basis[98]. Interestingly, all 5 dressers interviewed by Sheriff Guthrie, were also self-employed knitters, using this secondary form of employment to fill in slack periods[99]. Independent dressers were paid in cash by their clients per item on completion of dressing, the typical fee for a shawl being 6d and for a veil 1 1/2d. Ann Arcus, who was extensively examined during the 1872 Truck Inquiry, dressed hosiery for Robert Sinclair & Co., as well as for private knitters[100]. Her dealings with Robert Sinclair & Co., were confined to dressing, but when dressing for self-employed knitters, particularly country girls, she, and other dressers, also acted as agent, selling their client's hosiery to Robert Sinclair & Co. on a commission basis[101]. This custom was adopted by some country knitters, partly because they did not have sufficient time to spend in Lerwick whilst their hosiery was being dressed and partly because some felt that the dresser could get a better bargain from a merchant[102]. In these cases, dressers arranged the payment for the country knitter's hosiery. This was usually

done in the form of a line (written credit note) which could be redeemed when the knitter next visited Lerwick; alternatively, the price due her would be marked in the merchant's book[103].

Employee dressers, like Mrs John Gifford[104], a Lerwick dresser engaged by Laurenson & Co, organised their work in the same manner as an independent dresser with, presumably the main difference being that they did not have the materials or space to work on a free-lance basis.

**Merchants.**

Whilst the knitters were at the heart of the hosiery production, it was the merchants who dominated it economically, as it was in their hands that the bulk of the marketing lay. Merchants ran their businesses on the store system, that is using truck shops to pay their workers. A reasonably clear picture of the "complicated, antiquated"[105] business dealings of the nineteenth century hosiery dealers can be gleaned from the comprehensive information given in the 1871 and 1872 Truck Inquiries, with confirmation from the many other primary and secondary sources available.

In Shetland the store system, based on the barter system used by the Hanseatic merchants, was the customary and accepted way in which knitters were paid[106]. For fishermen this system disappeared in the mid 1880s, but trucking continued for knitters well into the twentieth century. Despite its many disadvantages, it was a system convenient for the domestic economy as, for example, in country districts, merchants both bought all that the district produced and sold virtually all that the district required:

> The merchant...buys all that leaves the country, from a whale to an egg, and sells everything that the country people want, from a boll of meal or a suit of clothes, to a darning needle[107].

In the town, the merchants confined their purchases largely to hosiery and wool, although some smaller Lerwick shops bought eggs and other home produce. These cumbersome business methods were indicative of the shortage of working capital experienced by merchants throughout the early days of their increased trade with Scotland and of the acute shortage of currency in Shetland - the legacy of barter trade with visiting foreigners and prolonged periods of destitution - coupled with the

Arthur Laurenson.

46. Arthur Laurenson of Leog, b. 4.11.1832, d. 14.11.1890. He was made responsible for the decoration of the new town hall, Lerwick, opening in 1884. He travelled widely to pursue his literary and linguistic studies.


This advertisement was for the firm of Laurence Laurenson, b. 29.9.1799, d. 11.1.1867, father of Arthur Laurenson pictured above. Arthur ran the firm after his father died.

Fig. 2.6.
(Source: Robertson, M. - 1991)

general risk involved in the hosiery trade. Few merchants were prepared to overextend themselves as Hay & Ogilvy had done. Shortage, or even downright lack, of capital forced most merchants, particularly country merchants like James Williamson of Mid Yell[108], to run their business from their domestic premises, thus cutting down overheads by combining living and working costs. Even Robert Linklater described as 'a leading draper and hosier' lived above his shop in Commercial Street, Lerwick for many years before moving to a separate dwelling. During this period of emergence into a modern economy, many merchants, like William Pole of Mossbank and Arthur Laurenson[109] used judicious marriages - for themselves, their siblings or sons and daughters - to raise capital to extend their business interests.

**Arthur Laurenson, Lerwick hosiery merchant.**

The following analysis is largely based on the evidence of Arthur Laurenson[110] (Fig. 2.6) and paints a fairly representative picture of the workings of a large Shetland hosiery dealer around the middle of the nineteenth century. Arthur's father, Laurence Laurenson, set up in business in 1818 as 'Draper, Outfitter and Hosier', and was succeeded by his son, who went into partnership with his brother-in-law in 1867 to form Laurenson & Co. The following reminiscence by T. Manson, editor of *The Shetland News*, throws light on the extensive nature of Laurenson & Co.'s business dealings in Britain:

> A large connection was built up in the south, the firm enjoying the patronage of royalty, many of the nobility, and doing besides an extensive wholesale trade...Besides hosiery and drapery, millinery and dressmaking were branches of the business which won and maintained a high reputation[111].

The buying and selling side of Laurenson & Co. business dealings involved up to twenty different stages, ranging from the initial acquisition of wool, to the purchasing of 'soft goods' with which to pay knitters, through to the final dispatch of hosiery for marketing. Once the wool had been purchased, it had to be put out to spinners, or alternatively, worsted either could be ordered from the north isles or imported from southern spinning mills. Next, hosiery orders were sent out to country merchants who acted as agents for the firm, or to knitters engaged locally. Knitters who were employed to knit for Laurenson & Co.,

involved the firm in a considerable amount of extra work, a point made by Arthur Laurenson in the 1872 Truck Inquiry:

> The raw material has to be ordered, and money paid for it pretty soon; and then it has to be given out, and these accounts kept, and the articles have to be dressed. In fact we have 3 or 4 times the trouble about articles of that description which we have with regard articles we buy in exchange[112].

Arthur Laurenson does not state how many knitters he employed, other than to say that this practice of employing knitters which had started in the mid forties, was in decline. On return of the completed work by the knitter to Laurenson & Co., Laurenson's shopmen reweighed the knitting to ensure that the firm had not been cheated of any worsted given out by them, and then gave out goods in exchange for the work. Arthur Laurenson fixed set rates of pay for standard items such as veils, gentlemen's drawers, and ladies' sleeves, the rates being based on the state of the hosiery trade and on what other local merchants were paying at that time[113]. Unlike Robert Sinclair and Robert Linklater, Arthur Laurenson did not give out lines or pass books recording work received and goods given out in exchange. Such books were much less common with knitters than with fishermen. Money payments, when given, were recorded in a separate 'cash book' and had to be authorised by one of the partners. If goods were not required, a note was made in the shop's 'work book' of the amount of goods due[114].

Knitting was also 'purchased' from self-employed knitters. Laurenson & Co. dealt extensively in country hosiery, that is ladies and gentlemen's underwear and lace work. Where a self-employed knitter brought in an individual item, like an intricate shawl, one of the partners - not the shopman - would fix the price. The next stage was to have hosiery dressed and if need be, dyed. Work to be dyed or redyed had to be sent south. For instance, Robert Sinclair & Co. used P. & P. Campbell of Cockburn Street, Edinburgh[115]. After dressing, hosiery was sorted, priced, ticketed, invoiced and packaged ready for posting south. A 'letter book' was kept recording invoices and correspondence with other merchants and wholesalers. Finally on the buying side, freighting had to be arranged and markets found either through agents or by direct contacts with merchant houses in the south, or even in the case of sub-standard hosiery, arrangements made to auction it in job lots[116].

The different transactions listed above, necessitated the merchants employing clerks, book keepers and shopmen/women. These employees held permanent positions and were paid on a weekly rate, unlike the merchants' own dressers and knitters, who were merely paid per item. It was the book keeper's responsibility to deal with and keep records of orders and invoices of both hosiery and soft goods, the clerk's duty to keep the day to day entries of accounts, lines, pass books etc. in the various day books, letter books, womens' books, the shopman/woman's job to serve at the counter, weighing and giving out yarn to knitters, reweigh it on return and exchange it for goods, settle with self-employed knitters and issue lines, as well as helping with the sorting and packing of hosiery; whilst it was the partner's responsibility to authorise any cash payments, price any exclusive items individually, ticket hosiery for export, as well as finding the best markets for his goods[117].

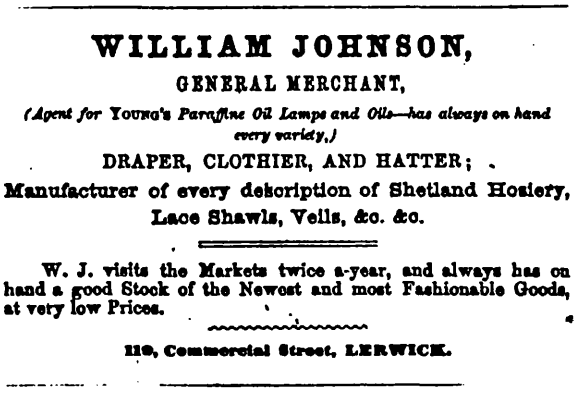
This whole time consuming business was aggravated by the lack of uniformity in the Shetland hand knitting industry.

> There is great difficulty ...owing to the want of uniformity in the articles, and the great variety of them. You can never get two shawls alike; you cannot even get a dozen pair of half-stockings alike. If you were to get an order for twenty dozen socks of a particular colour, size, and price, you would not be able to get that number of socks alike in Shetland[118].

This lack of uniformity limited demand for Shetland hosiery, particularly when mass production, based on knitting machines, in areas like, for example, Leicester, could guarantee uniformity of colour, size, shape. Therefore, it was only warehouses in the south familiar with these peculiarities who dealt with Shetland merchants. Not surprisingly in the face of this type of competition from machines, Shetland hosiery merchants constantly had difficulty in marketing all but the best of their hosiery - items which were not reproducible by machine - and only did so on the strength of the profit they made on their 'soft goods'.

In addition to Laurenson & Co., Robert Linklater & Co., and Robert Sinclair & Co., the three largest hosiery dealers in Lerwick, James Tulloch and William Johnson, both ran smaller hosiery businesses along the same lines, whilst Thomas Nicholson and Hugh Linklater, stated that

William Johnson.



**WILLIAM JOHNSON,**

GENERAL MERCHANT,

*(Agent for* YOUNG's *Paraffine Oil Lamps and Oils—has always on hand every variety.)*

DRAPER, CLOTHIER, AND HATTER;

Manufacturer of every description of Shetland Hosiery, Lace Shawls, Veils, &c. &c.

W. J. visits the Markets twice a-year, and always has on hand a good Stock of the Newest and most Fashionable Goods, at very low Prices.

110, Commercial Street, LERWICK.

Fig. 2.7.
(Source: *Peace's Almanac and County Directory*, 1884)

they were drapers, obliged to accept hosiery in order to carry on their business.

William Johnson's advertisement (fig. 2.7) gives an interesting insight into the running of his business on the store system principle. This combination of general merchant, draper, clothier, hatter and manufacturer of every description of Shetland Hosiery, lace shawls, veils etc. was typical of all but a few of the larger shop keepers at that time. His reference to visiting the market twice a year, refers to the southern market, most likely Edinburgh, where presumably he arranged the marketing of consignments of his hosiery, whilst purchasing 'soft goods' to exchange with his knitters.

**Country merchants.**

In country districts not one of the merchants examined by Sheriff Guthrie, dealt exclusively in hosiery - although Spence and Co. of Unst, dealt extensively in it. However, acting as fish curers or running a general store, most country merchants like those in Lerwick, found that in the absence of money and in order to do business, they had to accept hosiery as a form of currency, exchanging it for goods[119]. For example, Hay & Co.'s Uyeasound Shop Records show many entries of hosiery, despite the fact that William Hay, when giving evidence before the 1871 Truck Inquiry in Edinburgh, stated that his firm did not deal in hosiery[120]. Ready money was in such short supply and times so hard for everyone, that most merchants had to resort to the old barter system of payment in kind in order to obtain sales, with hosiery as a "principal article of exchange..."[121].

**Hay & Co., Uyeasound, Unst.**

An examination of this shop's ledgers and day books[122] gives a fascinating insight into the running of a country store in the late 1850s. In 1856 Hay & Co. obtained the lease of the premises at Uyeasound and Newgord from the Garth estate, with the intention of developing the herring and white fish industry, running their shop at Uyeasound on the store system to provide their fishermen with gear and provisions. In addition, Hay & Co. acted as wholesalers to many other country shops, supplying them with goods imported from the south - see fig. 2.8. The shop manager also had instructions to buy eggs, butter, feathers and

Hay & Co.'s wholesal dealings from 1844

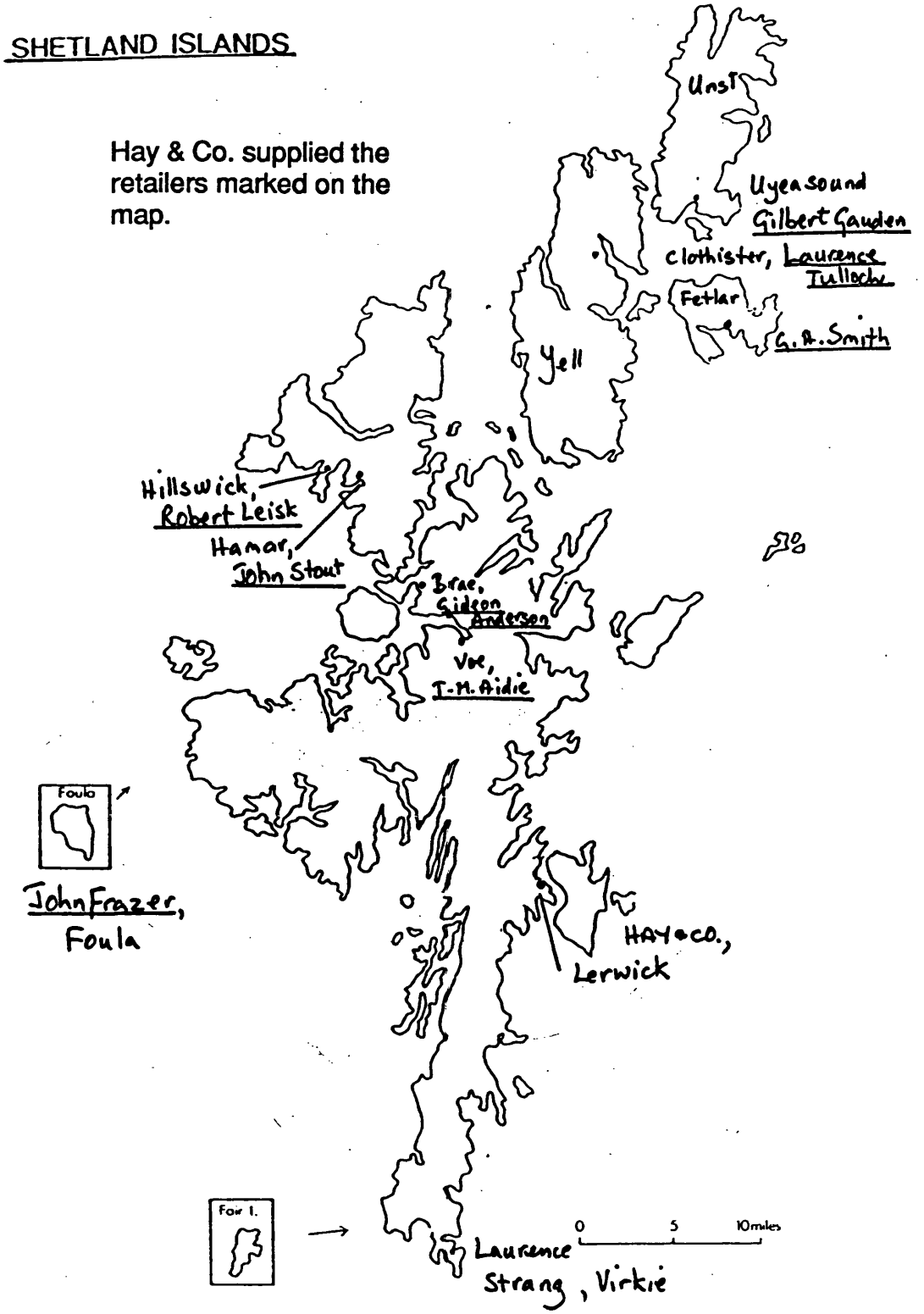



Fig. 2.8.
(Main source: Nicolson, J.R. - 1982)

other home produce as well as fish[123]. A separate folio was kept for each commodity purchased[124]. Provisions, clothing, ironmongery and much more were all dealt with by country merchants[125]. Hay & Co. bought locally spun worsted and sold the bulk of their hosiery to Robert Leisk & Son. Robert Leisk bought mainly veils, shawls, and fine stockings, and was allowed a discount of approximately 2 1/2% on hosiery purchased from Hay & Co., who also supplied Robert Leisk & Son with imported mohair - black, white, brown and 'super silky black mohair'[126]. Times were not easy and ledgers show unsold hosiery lying at Hay & Co.'s Lerwick depot from 1 February 1861 and then being shipped to New Zealand for sale 18 months later. This shop was not a success, largely because of inept management, and was closed in 1868 and the stock handed over to the new firm of Spence & Co. ,who took over the tenancy early in 1868, and dealt extensively in hosiery[127]. This failure undoubtedly explains why William Hay denied dealing in hosiery .

The crux of the whole hosiery business lay in the merchants' ability to find a market for his goods. Merchants like Laurenson & Co, Robert Sinclair & Co., Robert Linklater & Co., who dealt almost exclusively in hosiery, were able to establish contacts with southern firms and pursue their business in a professional manner, not being bogged down by the many different functions carried out by country merchants. This specialisation of dealing in one or two commodities obviously paid off, as for example, Spence & Co. who took over at Uyeasound from Hay & Co., dealt successfully in fish and hosiery well into the twentieth century[128]. Mr Sandison, partner in Spence & Co., travelled south each year to establish market contacts. In May 1868 he travelled to England and later in August went to Glasgow and Edinburgh, looking for new markets for fish cured by the firm, but at the same time managing to establish new markets for his hosiery in Glasgow and London[129]. Giving evidence before the 1872 Truck Inquiry, Alex Sandison stated: "my object in dealing in hosiery is more to oblige my customers than because it is an article on which I make a profit"[130]. Like all the merchants examined in the 1872 Truck Inquiry, Alex Sandison bemoaned the lack of profit on hosiery because it was difficult to market in the south[131]. However, he was an astute enough business man to realise that in order to sell in his shops he must accept hosiery. Less successful country merchants had considerable difficulty in marketing their hosiery; Sandison sold hosiery

to Lerwick merchants, or sent it south when suitable trade openings arose. Shetland country merchants also acted as agents for the Lerwick merchants. For example, Arthur Laurenson regularly sent orders to country merchants "... for hosiery just the same as we order goods from the south, and the merchants in the country make them up...we pay them in cash"[132]. This last method was doubtless preferable as payment was faster and guaranteed.

The two major differences between the country stores and the Lerwick hosiery stores were, firstly that country merchants stocked provisions, ironmongery, boots, as well as 'soft goods', which they were prepared to exchange for hosiery; and secondly, in the true tradition of running a business on the store principle, merchants were prepared to extend credit to their knitters by allowing them to run up accounts, which in 1872, Lerwick merchants professed not to do, although interestingly, Commissary Records show that at the time of Arthur Laurenson's death in 1890, Laurenson & Co.were owed a total of £1,668-6/2d., much of it made up of small debts run up by knitters[133]. Thus the country knitter was in a much more advantageous position than the town knitter.

**The marketing of hosiery by merchants and agents.**

Obtaining a market for hosiery in the south - generally in London, Glasgow or Edinburgh - was probably the most difficult and protracted of all the merchants' dealings. This was done on the consignment principle, with merchants shouldering the risk and burden of freighting and of delayed payment - often up to 18 months - plus the cost of paying a sales agent in the south on a percentage basis and a 5% discount for cash, even when payments were greatly delayed. With the exception of Robert Linklater who had his own retail shop in Edinburgh, neither Robert Sinclair nor Arthur Laurenson or any of the smaller hosiery merchants, were working as part of a consortium, feeding large wholesalers.

Commissary Records, show that Shetland hosiers dealt with a large number of retail and wholesale hosiers in the south[134]. The large wholesale hosiery dealers in the south, like Mr Mackenzie, Shetland Warehousman, Princes St., Edinburgh, and Mr Thomas Peace of Kirkwall, Orkney, visited Shetland annually to purchase hosiery at

wholesale prices from both knitters and Shetland merchants; whilst , for example, Mr John White, Frederick Street, Edinburgh employed local agents - in this case, Miss Mary Hutchison of Lerwick - to complete orders for him. On receiving a hosiery order from him, Miss Hutchison would purchase wool or worsted give it out to selected knitters with oral instructions as to what was to be produced . Miss Hutchison then arranged for the dressing and freighting of these items, and in due course received a post office order or bank cheque from Mr White. Her knitters were not trucked but paid in cash, and it was this payment in cash which ensured that she was never at a loss for willing knitters and had the pick of the best from which to choose[135]. Mr White also employed a number of skilled knitters, like Andrina Anderson, who sent work to him independent of an agent[136]. Agents were also employed by Lerwick merchants, as for example, Joan Ogilvy from Unst, acted as an agent for Peter Edward Petrie, a hosiery dealer in Lerwick[137]. Peter Petrie would supply Joan Ogilvy with goods from his shop, with which she paid local Unst girls, whilst herself working on a commission basis[138]. Edward Standen, a merchant of great Christian charity, bought knitting direct from knitters which he sold on the London market[139].

**The marketing of hosiery by self-employed knitters.**

Hosiery could also be marketed through benevolent private people, thus by-passing merchants, and obtaining both a better price and payment in cash. The 1872 Truck Inquiry mentions Mr Garriock of Reawick, Dr Hamilton of Bressay, Dr Cowie's lady, the Rev. Mr John Walker's lady and Miss Jessie Ogilvy as people buying hosiery from needy people on a charitable motive and not on a business basis[140]. These people would obtain orders from friends or from the south and buy hosiery from needy people who had no means of earning their livelihood other than by knitting[141]. Such transactions were invaluable to knitters, as they were paid in ready money, and could therefore buy food, pay their rent. After the introduction of a regular steamer service and the subsequent rise in the number of summer visitors, knitters sold their knitting direct to them by either going to local lodging houses, or a by accosting visitors in the street[142]. In the country "A great loss arises to the poor cottars, from travelling pedlars, who tempt them with worthless trumpery, and carry off the produce of their industry at very low prices "[143]. Merchants too, were

on the look out for sales to private persons, but were still very dependent on marketing the bulk of their hosiery outwith Shetland.

**Profit on hosiery.**

The poor returns and lack of profit from hosiery, were complaints constantly aired by merchants, knitters, philanthropists, and Commissioners of Supply alike. In fact, it was probably the only point on which everyone connected with the hosiery industry could agree. It is extremely difficult to work out realistic figures of profit and loss, particularly in the absence of shop books and invoices. Appendix 5 has been compiled from information taken from the 1872 Truck Inquiry, and shows the profit made on fine knitted articles. Even this can not be taken as more than a guide as it is often difficult to decide from the evidence if the price stated referred to the price paid in wages or the price at which merchants sold these items. In addition, few merchants were prepared to divulge their business dealings in detail in an open court in front of their rivals and employees, and were prone to evading questions or giving misleading or confusing answers. For example, Arthur Laurenson, regarded as an honest, upright and reliable witness, was not prepared to give the profit made on a black shawl costing 15/- to produce, whose worsted cost 4/6, with 10/- being paid to the knitter and 6d. to the dresser[144]. It must be remembered that the curse of the Shetland hand knitting industry was the risk involved in marketing it. This was primarily caused by poor quality work depressing hosiery prices and, because in the absence of machinery and mass production, each item produced by hand knitters was unique, a one-off. This was in contrast to, say the Borders, where retailers could place large orders, stating exact quantities, specifications and delivery dates. The very nature of hand knitting was against this type of uniformity and organisation. Recommendations had been put forward suggesting that merchants set up workrooms in Lerwick, give out patterns and set knitters to work on a factory system[145]. Shetland workers were not used to such rigid working conditions, and these proposals were not adopted. Hand knitters continued in their old independent way, of knitting what they chose to, so that merchants were often left will an ill-wrought assortment of unsaleable goods, and adopted a policy of lowering the prices paid for hosiery to guard against loss from these, whilst still

ensuring an overall profit by allowing a 25% profit margin on drapery, that is 10% above that allowed in the south[146].

By the time of the 1872 Truck Inquiry, Shetland had an excess of 5,402 females to males, an imbalance which left many women without the support of a spouse. For these spinsters knitting and agricultural work, with the addition of seasonal kelp and fish work, were the only modes of employment open to women. At knitting it was estimated that veil knitters could make, if very industrious, 6/- a week and at stocking and underclothing, an average of 4/- to 5/- a week[147]. However, as these sums were of course paid in 'soft goods' or truck credit, it meant that the true value of the goods was reduced by 25%, which coupled with the lack of ready money, caused considerable hardship for many knitters. And it was the hardship experienced by these knitters and by Shetland fishermen, which led to the 1872 Truck Inquiry (Shetland).

NOTES.

[1] All references to the OSA are taken from the 1978, revised edition of *The Statistical Account of Scotland 1791 -1799*, Vol. XIX Orkney and Shetland.

[2] Kemp, J., *Observations on the Islands of Shetland and their inhabitants* (Edinburgh, 1801), p. 7.

[3] Low, G. *A Tour through the islands of Orkney and Shetland,* (Kirkwall, 1879) p. 188.

[4] OSA, p. 377; Hibbert, S., *Description of the Shetland Islands*, (Edinburgh, 1822), p. 424..

[5] OSA, p.547.

[6] S.A. D1/83. Unpublished journal of letters sent by Sarah Squires to her family while travelling as a Quaker preacher in Shetland, Orkney, and parts of northern Scotland in 1843. In Shetland she was met unfailing with generous hospitality and religious tolerance. An interesting letter accompanying the gift of this journal reads as follows "...having a deep and continuing concern for the Shetlanders, and her recorded 'correspondence with liberal minded ministers' which enabled her to the end of her life to channel through the Society of Friends financial and other support to Shetland in times of need" - the most likely would be Turnbull, Ingram and Stevenson of Hillswick . Extensive accounts of the religious tolerance and kind hospitality shown to visiting preachers are given in Professor D. Flinn's *Travellers in a bygone Shetland- an anthology* (Edinburgh 1989, chapter 14).

[7] OSA p.376 and 415. Many of these taxes were of Scandinavian origin and had been retained unfairly after annexation in 1469. In addition to church assessments, scatt, wattle, and ox penny, tenants paid rent by merk value of their land, and cess.

[8] OSA, introduction by Graham J. p. li and lii.

[9] Ibid.

[10] OSA, p. 397.

[11] Op. cit., p. 422.

[12] OSA, p. xlvi, which refers to the Rev. John Mills of the Parish of Dunrossness, refusal to oversee the distribution of charity meal in 1783. He referred to this task as "a trade I was never employed in and have no mind to undertake...now". Shetland County Library Archive: MSS Sheriff Court Records. These records have now been transferred to the Shetland Archives.

[13] OSA, p. lix & xlii.

[14] OSA, p. 396.

[15] Op. cit., p. 444.

[16] Efforts by the Mitchells of Westshore, to establish a linen industry, based on imported flax, at Catfirth, Nesting, in 1760, failed miserably with the loss of £1,600 capital. Edmondston, A., *A View of the Ancient and Present State of the Zetland Islands,* (Edinburgh 1809), Vol. II, p. 3 and 4. This was the same family whose oxen were mangled and ploughs smashed.

[17] OSA., p. 421.

[18] Loch, D., *Essays on the trade, commerce, manufactures and fisheries of Scotland,* (Edinburgh 1778), Vol. I, section II, p. 2b.

[19] Op. cit., p. 381, 406, 544.

[20] Op. cit., p. 491 and 507.

[21] Op. cit., p. 491.

[22] S.A. Catalogue 3 of the Garth Papers. 1ff Lerwick (8/12/1786) 962; 2ff Edinburgh (3/5/1792); 1ff Belmont, Unst (25/3/1793) etc. This correspondence continues until at least 18/1/1797 with a letter from Sir John Sinclair thanking Thomas Mouat for the gift of a pair of stockings (2ff Edinburgh).

[23] Standen, E, *The Shetland Islands* (Oxford 1845), p. 31.

[24] *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, (Edinburgh 1845), Vol XV, p. 4; *Shetland Times*30/3/1874.

[25] Edmondston, A, *View of the ancient and present state of the Zetland Islands* (Edinburgh 1809), Vol. II, p. 14 - 15; Neil, P. *A Tour through Orkney and Shetland* , (Edinburgh 1806), p. 71.

[26] Sinclair, C., *Shetland and the Shetlanders* (1840), p. 99.
[27] *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, (Edinburgh 1845), Vol. XV, p. 134; Gray, M., *The Highland Economy 1750 - 1850*, (Edinburgh 1957), p. 124 - 141.
[28] *Shetland Times* 24/6/1872; *N.S.A.*, p. 68.
[29] Hunter, J., *The Making of the Crofting Community*, (Edinburgh 1976), p. 16; Smith, H., *Shetland Life and Trade 1550 - 1914*, (Edinburgh 1984), p. 147.
[30] Edmondston, E., *Sketches and Tales of the Shetland Islands* (Edinburgh 1856), p. 34.
[31] Wilson, J. *A voyage round the coasts of Scotland and the Isles*, (Edinburgh 1842). Extract taken from Flinn, D., *Travellers in a bygone Shetland- an anthology* (Edinburgh 1989) p. 50.
[32] Nicolson, J.R., *Hay and Co.*, (Lerwick 1982), p. 20.
[33] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 425, q.16,657. Saturday was the traditionally accepted day for beggars to call at the homes of those known to give to the poor.
[34] P.P., Cd. 564, (1843), Minutes of Evidence of Poor Law Inquiry, Synod of Shetland, Presbytery of Lerwick, p. 189; evidence of Dr. I. Cowie.
[35] Op. Cit., p. 198.
[36] Ibid.
[37] OSA, p. 464.
[38] Flinn, D., *Travellers in a bygone Shetland - an anthology* (Edinburgh 1989), p. 84. This reference is to an extract taken from Sir Walter Scott's journal of his trip to Shetland in 1814, when he accompanied Robert Stevenson, Commissioner of the Northern Lights on the annual his annual tour of inspection and investigation. It was from information gathered on this trip that Scott wrote *The Pirate.*
[39] Edmondston A., *Ancient and present View of the state of the Zetland Islands* Vol. I, p.56.
[40] 'A Scotsman', *A Trip to Shetland* (1872), p. 28.
[41] Edmondston, E. *Sketches and Tales of Shetland* (1856), p. 183.
[42] Standen, E. *The Shetland Islands* (Oxford 1845), p. 30 and 31.
[43] OSA, p. 387.
[44] S.A. Index of Garth Papers, Catalogue 3. 1ff, Lerwick 1779, no. 768.
[45] B.M. 1029, H.4, *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland, to whom the subject of Shetland wool was referred*, (Edinburgh 1790).
[46] O'Dell, A.C. and Walton, K., *The Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (London 1962), p. 120 and 121.
[47] P.P., Cd., 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, p. 19.
[48] Gulvin, C., *The Scottish Hosiery and Knitwear Industry 1680 - 1980* (Edinburgh 1984), p. 16.
[49] P.P., Cd. 326 (1871), Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Commission Act 1870, p. 879, q. 44,152.
[50] Edmondston, A., *A View of the Ancient and Present state of the Zetland Islands*, (Edinburgh 1809), Vol. I, p. 224.
[51] Op. cit. Vol. II, p. 3.
[52] Op. cit., Vol. I, p. 224.
[53] Cowie, R., *Shetland*, (Edinburgh 1874), p. 186.
[54] Edmondston, A., *View of the Ancient and Present state of the Zetland Islands*, (Edinburgh 1809), Vol. II, p. 1 and 2.
[55] Hibbert, S., *A description of the Shetland Islands*, (Edinburgh 1822), p. 441.
[56] Henderson, T., 'Shetland boats and their origin', p. 53, in Baldwin, J., (Editor), *Scandinavian Shetland* (Edinburgh 1978).
[57] Smith, H., *Shetland Life and Trade 1550-1914*, (Edinburgh 1984), p. 93.
[58] Op. cit., p. 95.
[59] Op. cit., p. 128.
[60] Op. cit., p. 106, taken from the Minutes of Evidence taken before the Poor Law Enquiry Commission for Scotland, 17-20 July, p. 82- 221.

[61] Duncan's *Zetland Trade Directory*, 1854, p. 113.
[62] Hibbert, S., *A description of the Shetland Islands*, (Edinburgh 1822), p.86
[63] OSA, p. 527.
[64] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 41 , q. 2120.
[65] Op. cit., p. 58, q. 2666; p. 71 q. 3199; p 72, q. 3243.
[66] Sir Walter Scott visited Shetland in 1814 and used his idea of the islands as they had been about the year 1700 as the setting for *The Pirate* published in 1821.
[67] Smith, H., *Shetland Life and Trade 1550-1914*, (Edinburgh 1984), p. 109.
[68] Cowie, R., *Shetland*, (Edinburgh 1874), p. 309.
[69] P.P., Cd.564, (1843) Minutes of Evidence of Poor Law, Synod of Shetland, Presbytery of Lerwick Poor Roll of Lerwick.
[70] 'A Lady Resident', *The Poor Knitters of Shetland*, (Paisley 1861), p. 16; P.P., Cd. 326, (1871), Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Act 1870..., p. 882, q. 44, 273.
[71] An excellent summary of the decline in hand knitting around the beginning of the nineteenth century is given by Richard Rutt - *A History of Hand Knitting*(London 1987), p. 101 - 103.
[72] Standen, E., *The Shetland Islands*, (Oxford 1845), p. 32.
[73] Tudor, J. R., *The Orkneys and Shetland*, (London 1883), p. 160.
[74] Finlay, I., *Scottish Crafts*, (London 1948), p. 103.
[75] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 47, q. 2298.
[76] Op. cit., p. 4, q. 155; p. 52, q. 2481; p. 407, q. 16050; p. 389, q. 15397; p. 230, q. 9548; p. 46, q. 2289; p. 73, q. 3278.
[77] Op. cit., p. 70, q.3182.
[78] Op. cit., p. 29; q. 1428; p 37, q. 1886; p. 283, q. 11545; p. 4, q. 1547.
[79] Op. cit., p.47, q. 2297; p. 33, q. 1726; p. 4, q. 153.
[80] Op. cit., p. 78, q. 3491.
[81] Op. cit., p. 285, q. 11618.
[82] P.P., Cd. 326, (1871), Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Commission Act 1870... p. xcvi, q. 44,290.
[83] Edmondston, E., *Sketches and Tales of Shetland* (Edinburgh 1856), p. 171.
[84] P.P., Cd. 326, (1871), Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Commission Act 1870... p. 879, q. 44178.
[85] *Edinburgh Almanac 1874*, p 143.
[86] P.P., Cd., 555-1, 1872 Truck inquiry, p. 59, q. 2680 and p. 71, q. 3214.
[87] P.P., Cd., 326 (1871), Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Commission Act 1870..., p. 882.
[88] Census returns are of little value when trying to estimate the true number of women knitting hosiery for sale in Shetland, as many women knitted as a subsistence activity. The census returns do not take seasonal or secondary occupations into consideration. To add to these difficulties, the classes of occupation under which knitters are included change from census to census, so that it is not always possible to discern the difference between a general textile or wool worker from a knitter.
[89] P.P., Cd., 326, (1871), The Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Commission 1870..., p. 879, q. 44158.
[90] P.P., Cd., 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 408, q. 16105. 'Soft goods' were bought in by Shetland hosiery merchants to exchange with knitters in payment for their hosiery. These 'soft goods' were mainly in the drapery line and included cotton, wincey, calico, feathers, velvet, flannel, as well as hats, petticoats,jackets, boots, tea, soda, soap, blue, starch, etc.
[91] Op. cit., p. 34, q. 1737.
[92] Op. cit., p. 56, q. 6348; p. 35, q. 1803 -1806.
[93] Op. cit., p. 28 and 29.
[94] Op. cit., p. 38, q. 1961; p. 285, q. 11610; p. 33, q. 1726.
[95] Op. cit., p. 389, q. 15391; p. 77, q. 3430; p. 288, q. 11758.
[96] Op. cit., p. 41, q. 2138.
[97] Op. cit., p. 43, q. 2179.
[98] Op. cit., p.33, q. 1729; p. 79, q. 3500; p. 35, q. 1800; p. 397, q. 15784.

[99] Op. cit., p. 33, q. 1730; p. 53, q. 2495; p. 38, q. 1973; p. 350, q. 14036.
[100] Op. cit., p. 33, q. 1760.
[101] Op. cit., p. 3, q. 105; p. 34, q. 1746; p. 38, q. 1980.
[102] Op. cit., p. 34, q. 1779.
[103] Op. cit., p. 36, q. 1843.
[104] Op. cit. p.45, q. 2240.
[105] Op. cit., p. 43, q. 2183.
[106] P.P., Cd. 555, 1872 Truck Inquiry, (Thule Print edition 1978), p. 45.
[107] Op. cit., p. vi.
[108] Johnson, R. L., *A Shetland Country Merchant,* (Lerwick 1979).
[109] See chapter 6, William Pole and Arthur Laurenson. William Pole's father-in-law was a hosiery merchant, and Arthur Laurenson's brother-in-law, William Tulloch, a partner in the firm.
[110] P.P., Cd., 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, evidence of Arthur Laurenson p. 41 - 49.
[111] Manson, T., *Lerwick during the last half century,* (revised edition , Lerwick 1991), p. 54.
[112] P.P., Cd., 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p46, q.2271.
[113] Op. cit., p. 46, q. 2272.
[114] Op. cit., p. 44, q. 2218.
[115] Op. cit., p. 69, q. 3104.
[116] Op. cit., p. 69, q. 3120.
[117] Op. cit., p. 67 - 70.
[118] Op. cit., p. 43, q. 2194.
[119] Op. cit., p. 142, q. 5747.
[120] P.P., Cd. 326, (1871), Report of the Truck Commission (Part II - Special Reports), p. xcvii. Evidence of William Hay.
[121] Edmondston, A., *A view of the ancient and present state of the Zetland Islands,* (Edinburgh 1809), Vol. II, p. 2.
[122] S.A. D1/36/3.
[123] Nicolson, J.R., *Hay and Co.* (Lerwick 1984), p. 21.
[124] S.A. D1/36/3.
[125] The following selection of shop goods is taken from the June and July entries of the shop ledgers of Hay & Co.'s Uyeasound shop in Unst: 4 sacks of biscuits, 3 1/2lb. sugar, 28 yds. linen peck, 1 sack fine flour, 3 sacks oatmeal, 2 sacks parsnips, rooves, 2lb. rase nails, 7lb. iron bills, 1 gross shoe heels, 1 doz. hand saw files, 12lb. mixed pins, 3 doz. iron spoons, 1 doz. scissors, 3 bolts no. 6 canvas, 1 doz. handkerchiefs, 6 guernsey frocks, 1 doz. cow braces, 1 doz. India rubber braces, 1 silk dress and trimmings, 4 1/2lb. brown mohair, 3 3/4lb. black and white mohair, 1 doz. wool cards, 1/2 gross thimbles, 1 gross steel wires, 7lb. starch, 1 gross 100yd. pirns, 3 7/8lb. super black silk mohair. (S.A. D1/36/1).
[126] S.A. D1/36/1.
[127] Nicolson, J.R. *Hay and Co.*, (Lerwick 1984), p. 20.
[128] Sandison, A., *Unst, my island home,*(Lerwick 1968), p. 56.
[129] Ibid.
[130] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 248, q. 10203.
[131] Op. cit., p. 142, q. 5743.
[132] Op. cit., p. 48, q. 2345 & 2346.
[133] S.A., Commissary Records of Zetland, Vol. x, SC12/36/9, Arthur Laurenson.
[134] Marshall and Snellgrove, London; Peace and Low, Kirkwall; John Sandison, Wick; J & A Drumond, Stirling; A.& J. Douglas, Glasgow; G.H. Lee & Co., Liverpool; George Haig, Rothesay; Greensmith & Son, Harrowgate; Arnot & Co., Glasgow; George Peak & Co., Manchester; Peter Lyle, Leith and many more (S.A. SC/12/36/6, Vol. 7 1874).
[135] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 31 evidence of Miss Hutchison.
[136] Op. cit., p. 79, q. 3501.
[137] Op. cit., p. 236, q. 9763.
[138] Ibid.

[139] See Chapter 4.
[140] P.P., Cd., 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 283, q. 11536; p. 28, q. 1392; p. 32, q. 1632; p. 425, q. 16660; p. 57, q. 2628; p. 283, q. 11536.
[141] Op. cit., p. 283, q. 11536; p. 286, q. 11673.
[142] Op. cit., p. 37, q. 1926.
[143] Edmondston, E., *Sketches and Tales of the Shetland Islands*,(Edinburgh 1856), p. 176.
[144] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 45, q. 2259.
[145] P.P., Cd., 326, (1871), Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Commission Act 1870..., p. 884.
[146] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 45, q. 2246 &2245.
[147] *The Scotsman*, 24/1/1871.

Chapter 3.

## Truck and the Shetland hand knitting industry 1790-1950.

With a snow-white hap on her head,
and rivlins tied on her feet,
A fair-haired, rosy-cheeked
Shetland maid
Trudged with a kishie of peat.
Trudge, trudge, trudge,
She trudged the scathold along,
And still as she went, with her
body bent,
She sang this sorrowful song:

From the morning till late at night
My knitting wires seldom are still;
I can clip & roo, & card, & spin too
And knit whatever you will.
Knit, knit, knit
A shawl that the Queen could wear,
A stocking or sock, or a sailor's frock,
To keep out the Greenland air.

But my labour is all in vain
Somebody has stolen my luck
For all that I make to the shop
I must take
And hand it over to Truck.
For calico, sugar and tea;
No money I get for the wares I knit,
Or it would be better for me.

My father he goes to the haaf,
In a boat that floats like a duck,
But the cod and the ling to the
man he must bring
Who keeps the station for Truck.
Truck, truck, truck,
For the meal we got last year;
Since he worked when a boy in
the trucker's employ
He has lived in hunger and fear.

My brothers Magnus and Tom
Made a trip to Davy's Straits,
But all that they earned when
they returned
Was kept for my father's debts.
Truck, truck, truck -
Oh! shame on the Kingdom and Crown
And fie on the laws that dally & pause
In putting the truck-rig down.

With a snow white hap on her head
And rivlins tied on her feet,
A blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked Shetland maid
Trudged with a kishie of peat.
Trudge, trudge, trudge.
She trudged the scathold along,
And still as she went with her body bent,
She sang that sorrowful song.

(From *"King James Wedding and Other Poems" by J. Sands*)

Strictly speaking, truck was the system whereby wages were paid in kind rather than in 'the coin of the realm'. However, in Shetland by the time of the 1872 Truck Inquiry, the term had been extended to include the exchange over the shop counter of local produce for shop goods or services. This extension of trucking is usually referred to as 'barter-truck' and had become the norm in Shetland's close-knit internal trade dealings.

Trucking in Shetland was a legacy from the days of the barter trade with the Hanseatic merchants and their merchant-laird successors; from bartering with Dutch and other fishermen; and from the payment (or

part-payment) of rents and teinds in local produce, customary in Shetland up to the end of the eighteenth century. From this legacy, developed the 'Shetland Method'[1], whereby the fisherman was tied by a system of barter and debt-bondage to his local merchant-laird or merchant-tacksman*, who bought his fish and his family's produce and upon whom he and his family depended for their croft, and for everything not gained directly from the land or sea. And it was this bond between the land and sea which lay at the heart of the whole truck system in Shetland. In essence, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the land could not support its vastly increased population - which had risen by approximately 50% from 20,451 in 1790 to 30,670 by 1861- without the importation of meal and other foodstuffs. The fishing industry had to produce a commercial surplus to foot the bill for such imports. However, poor fishing seasons and/or harvests necessitated the extension of credit, offered by the store system, without which widespread starvation or mass emigration would have been rife.

In Shetland the victims of truck, as opposed to barter-truck (that is, people who exchanged their produce whether hosiery or home produce with merchants in return for provisions) were the fishermen, fish handlers, fish curers, and kelp gathers who worked for their landlord-merchant, and the knitters who knitted for the merchant using his worsted. The most vulnerable of this group was the fisherman-tenant and his family, as failure to fish to his landlord could lead to forty days' notice and eviction, which was a daunting prospect in Shetland, with its oversaturated population struggling to scratch a subsistence living, and alternative employment opportunities almost non-existent.

> Eviction to a Shetlander is a serious matter... A new farm is always difficult to get. In the south ... a man can shift from town to town and get employment; but here, if he leaves his house and farm, he has no place to go except Lerwick, and there is no room to be got there, either for love or money [2].

It was to Lerwick that many of the people thrown out of work by the collapse of Hay and Ogilvy, made homeless by clearances[3] or simply destitute from the harvest failures in the 1830s and 1840s, went to in the hope of finding refuge. According to one contemporary commentator, Lerwick and Scalloway had become the Poor House of Shetland[4]. The Truck System, an indicator of poverty, destitution and oppression,

became even more widespread, and as the Truck Commissioners pointed out in 1871, large families, ill health, bad times, accidental misfortunes, swell the population, making the unfortunate still more so. However in Shetland it was not just the poor but the whole society, regardless of class or profession, that was caught up in the truck system. By 1872, trucking was so enmeshed in the Shetland way of life that despite the inherently faulty principles on which it had been founded, it had become the accepted norm. This is illustrated by the following statement made by Mr. Bruce, younger, of Sumburgh before the 1872 Truck Inquiry:

> There are no doubt many things in the Shetland system of trade which might be improved, but the system is of long growth, and is so ingrained in the minds of the people, than any change must be very gradual: a sudden and sweeping change to complete free-trade principles and ready money payments would not suit the people, but would produce endless confusion, hardship and increased pauperism[5].

Whilst it was the fishing-tenures which lay at the heart of the truck system, using truck in its legal sense, it was the barter-truck system which was responsible for perpetuating trucking in the hand knitting industry and in almost all internal trade dealings.

Truck was by no means a new phenomenon or one peculiar to Shetland. It was in fact a national, rather than a local issue. At the time of the Union with England in 1707 Scotland was a relatively backward country economically, exporting - with the exception of linen cloth - primary products such as cattle, coal, wool, hides, fish and salt[6]. Article 15 of the 1707 Act of Union had greatly enhanced Scotland's trading markets and economy, and as trade openings increased, so too did trucking. The many new entrepreneurs who flourished during this period of trade expansion and industrial growth, often did so at the expense of their work force, so that by 1790, truck was enmeshed in the everyday dealings of many working class people. In Scotland it was most widespread and insidious in industrial areas like Motherwell and Hamilton and in mining districts in Ayrshire. In these areas, wages were paid by the employer into the company store, and it was through this store that rent was paid and other necessities purchased, being debited against the worker's account. The worker was truly thirled to his

employer as he received no ready money to spend how or where he pleased. He was also the victim of exploitation as prices in truck stores were notoriously high[7]. This type of trucking led to apathy and despair, and offered workers little opportunity of breaking free from the poverty trap.

Generally speaking, trucking in Shetland, was run on more benevolent lines than in the larger industrial areas. For poorer people the credit afforded by the truck system was a real form of 'social security', with fishcurers and merchants virtually running their own welfare system - the more benevolent of whom inevitably went under with their clients or died penniless. For example, James Williamson of Mid Yell when he died in 1872 had been in business for more than forty years as a general merchant selling all manner of provisions, as well as nails, cotton, shirting, India rubber shoes etc. and at the same time purchasing from his customers fish, livestock, bird's eggs and hosiery. He also ran the sloop *Matilda,* and farmed a croft. He died worth £2[8]. A kindly merchant like James Williamson, soon found that in hard times he was bearing the burden of extended credit for many of his poorer customers. His papers contain many letters from local men who had gone off to sea or to the gold mines of Australia and California, asking him to provide for their mothers or wives in their absence. Other types of credit transactions included lending money, handing out provisions to people on the Parochial Board, paying rent, providing mort cloths and so on. Willingly or otherwise, James found himself in the role of a welfare officer which was to cost him dearly. An accumulation of bad debts and his own misadventures in business, left his widow virtually penniless[9].

The 1831 Truck Act, which replaced a long series of measures[10] passed during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, primarily dealt with the prohibition of payment of wages in kind and had little or no effect on stamping out truck in Shetland or elsewhere. And as a result of the many complaints about the widespread practice of wages being paid in kind, Parliament appointed the Truck Commission under the Truck Commission Act of 1870 to look into these problems, and to examine the degree to which the act of 1831 was being contravened. During the course of 1870 and 1871 the Commission held sittings in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Gloucester, Prescot, Birmingham, Nottingham and

Map of the Shetland Islands showing where the 1872 Truck Commission held sittings.

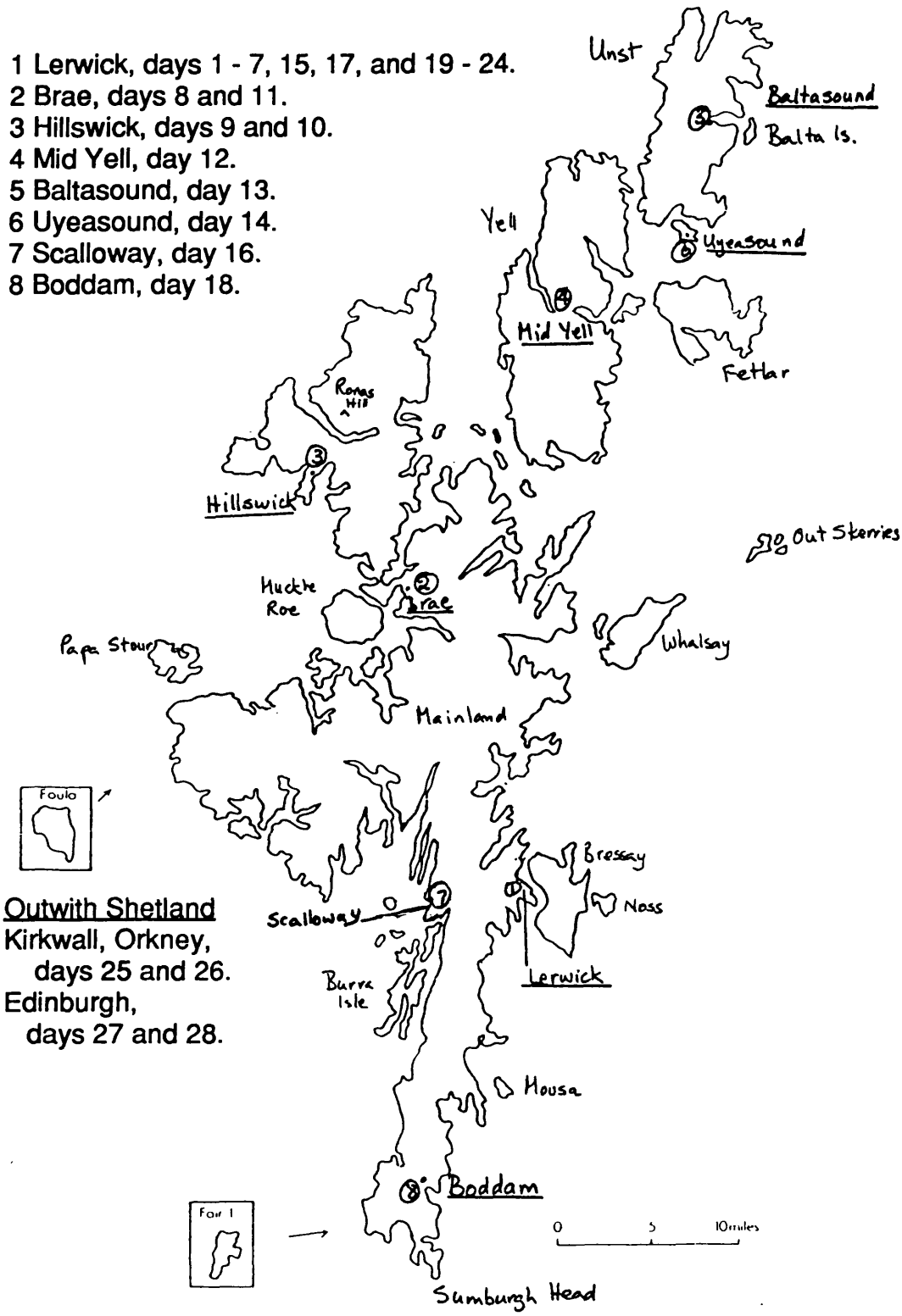



Fig. 3.1.
(Source: P.P., Cd. 555-1, (1872), Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to Inquire into the Truck System (Shetland).

London[11]. The case of Shetland was brought to the notice of the Commissioners by four influential people connected with Shetland: Mr George Smith, solicitor, who in his eight years residence in Shetland, had held many public offices like sheriff clerk, clerk of supply etc. ; Mr A.J. Hay, merchant and fish curer and member of the firm of Hay & Co.; Mr William Walker, sheep farmer and factor for one tenth of the islands; and Dr. T. Edmondston, landowner and medical doctor in the island of Unst[12]. Wm. Hay and John Walker gave evidence at the sittings in London and Edinburgh and it was this that led to the decision to hold a separate inquiry for Shetland - the Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Truck System (Shetland) in 1872.

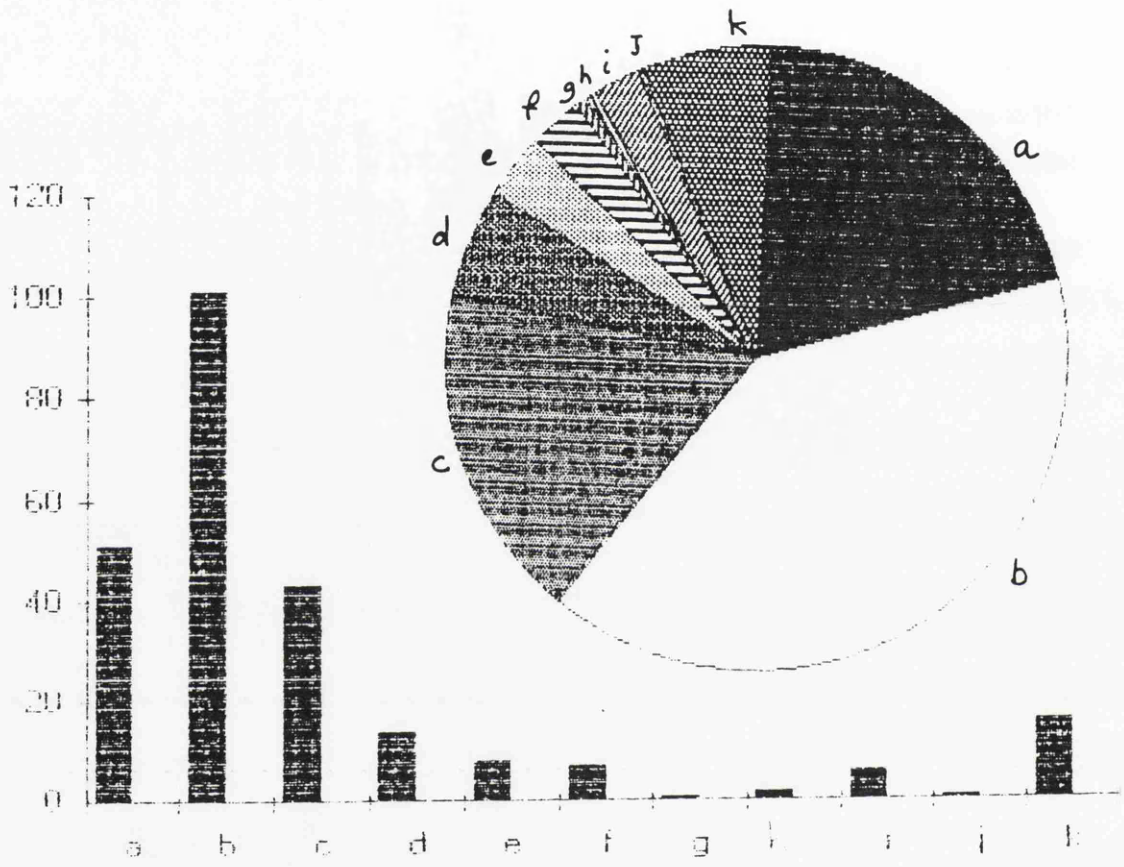
The chief commissioner of this inquiry was William Guthrie, a Glasgow sheriff of enormous energy, immense patience and incorruptibility. On receiving his warrant as a commissioner under the Truck Commission Act of 1870, he proceeded to Shetland and started his inquiries immediately on arriving there on 1st of January 1872. Hearings were held in Lerwick, Brae, Hillswick, Mid Yell, Balta Sound, Uyea Sound, Scalloway, Boddam, Kirkwall and Edinburgh (Fig. 3.1). Although the majority of Guthrie's time was spent in Lerwick, many 'country' people from outlying districts and islands were also interviewed. Citations were sent to people whose names had been put forward by local officials and dignitaries, but it was also made clear that anyone wishing to make a statement would be free to come forward and do so. Thus, it is not unreasonable to assume that Sheriff Guthrie interviewed a fair cross section of the inhabitants. The 1872 Truck Inquiry was largely concerned with examining the effect of truck on the fishing and hand knitting industries. In all 17, 070 questions were asked and along with their answers, recorded in two volumes[13]. As well as fishermen and knitters, local doctors, ministers, inspectors of the poor etc., were interviewed (Fig. 3.2).

As regards the hand knitting industry, in his summing up of the inquiry Sheriff Guthrie noted that :

> Originally the trade was entirely carried on by persons knitting the wool grown by their own flocks, or procured from their neighbours; and they bartered the articles so made to merchants in Lerwick or elsewhere for goods of every kind. Transactions of this kind, which

1872 Truck Inquiry (Shetland).

The charts, shown below, illustrate the distribution of occupations of the 250 people examined by Sheriff Guthrie.




a/ 51 knitters.
b/ 101 fishermen.
c/ 43 merchant proprietors.
d/ 14 shop assistants/clerks/artisans.
e/ 8 professional people - doctors, ministers, teachers and solicitors.
f/ 7 officials - Inspector of the Poor, Customs Officer, Lighthouse keeper.
g/ 1 factor/managers.
h/ 2 farmers.
i/ 6 non-Shetland merchants
j/ 1 weaver.
k/ 16 shopkeeper/agents.

Fig. 3.2.
(Source: P.P., Cd. 555-1, (1872), Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to Inquire into the Truck System (Shetland).

> are still common, do not fall within the provisions of the existing Truck Acts, which apply only to the payment of *wages,*and not to sales... Although payment in goods, or in account of work done with the merchants' wool may be held to be an offence under the existing law, the custom of barter has so long existed in Shetland, and is so thoroughly interwoven with the habits of the people, that the question has never been raised in the local courts, and it does not even appear to have occurred to merchants that they might be held to infringe the law. In regard to both branches of the trade, the sale or barter of the knitted articles, and the employment of women to knit them, evidence has been freely given by the merchants themselves[14].

It was only since around the mid 1840s[15] that the merchants had started giving out worsted - this date significantly coinciding with the collapse of Hay & Co. and the Shetland Banking Company in the 'hungry forties' - that hosiery merchants had become liable to prosecution under the 1831 Truck Act.

This then was the situation which had been developed over the years, with the exchange of hosiery for goods, rather than ready money, as the norm. An effort had been made by Arthur Laurenson, principal partner in Laurenson & Co. and Robert Sinclair of Robert Sinclair & Co., to show that they did give out small amounts of cash for specific purposes such as rent payment. However, Sheriff Guthrie was quick to realise that these payments were so small and so infrequently made as to be negligible, and that cash payments were confined to highly skilled knitters like Catherine Brown formerly of Lerwick, or Joan Ogivly from Unst[16], whose work was always in demand and much sought after by all the merchants. Interestingly, Margaret Jamieson of Quarff, who knitted for Robert Sinclair, related how, having persuaded Robert Sinclair to give her 9d. in cash, he was unable to do so as there was no money in the shop, and he had to borrow the cash from one of his serving-men![17] A recurring phrase from the evidence of knitters, was that they never asked for money for their hosiery as 'it was not the custom' or that 'merchants never gave it'[18]. In the early days of trucking, groceries were available for hosiery[19], but by the time of the 1872 Truck Inquiry, in Lerwick nothing but 'soft goods' or 'lines' (credit notes) were available for hosiery. The smaller mark up on groceries and their perishable nature made

them less profitable than 'soft goods' with their almost limitless shelf life; oatmeal and hosiery did not mix well, as meal was found to attract moths which damaged hosiery stocks. Lines were issued if the knitter did not want goods that day, or in the case of Robert Sinclair, if the shop was very busy[20].

This custom of payment in 'soft goods' particularly told against the town knitters dependent on knitting as their sole means of livelihood. Charlotte Sutherland who pointed out that "Knitting does very well in Lerwick for those that have friends to live with and keep them, but not for me when I had to look after myself", had to leave Lerwick and go to Orkney where she could get cash for her hosiery[21]. This custom of payment in goods led to a whole infra-structure of ancillary sales and to a network of middlemen. For example, these knitters frequently sold their 'soft goods' or bartered them with neighbours for provisions. Mary Coutts from Scalloway stated that she exchanged tea which she had received for hosiery with farmers for potatoes and meal but had sometimes had to get her aunt to go as far as Walls and Sandness to make such exchanges[22]. Guthrie noted that:

> tea especially is a sort of currency with which knitters obtain supplies of provisions... in one account, more than a half of the total amount consists of 1/4lb. packages of tea[23].

The excessive consumption of tea was frowned on by many moralists as a misuse of time and effort. For instance, Edward Standen who was responsible for introducing fine Shetland hosiery to the London market c.1840, decried this widespread addiction in Shetland:

> The fondness for tea is carried to an excess by the Shetland wife; for the sake of it she knits at all opportunities, spending sometimes in this way the whole of the wool and labour of the season, when a part of it ought to be applied to her husband's comfort, in giving him warm clothing for his exposure on the sea. Thus he suffers by his wife's intemperance, not in spirits but in tea[24].

Lines also acted as a form of currency and were sold at a reduced rate to their face value[25]. There is also a mention of lines being bought by charitable persons to help knitters[26]. In Lerwick, such sales were necessary to raise ready money not only for rent payments but also for food, doctor's bills and many of the other necessities of life. Another

means by which money could be obtained, was by employing a hawker on a commission basis to sell the 'soft goods' received in payment of hosiery. Hawkers, such as Betty Morrison and Jean Yates, went round the country districts selling or exchanging these 'soft goods'[27]. In the 1872 Truck Inquiry, Dr R. Cowie referred to sumptuously dressed knitters, starving through want of ready money with which to buy food[28]. This extravagance in dress - locally referred to as 'bedizened' - was noted by many writers[29], and represented truck in Shetland at its most pernicious. This custom of paying knitters in soft goods also had the hidden effect of creating an unnaturally high demand for drapery, to the extent that hosiery exchanges were propping up many merchants' drapery trade. Surprisingly, this acute shortage of ready money does not seem to have led to prostitution, Shetland having the second lowest illegitimacy rate of any Scottish county[30]. Only one of the knitters interviewed, a Margaret Tulloch spinster from Lerwick, sounded as if she might have been augmenting her meagre income in this manner, as she described how men would come to her house to buy tea which she would make for them[31]. However, prostitution among knitters, euphemistically referred to as 'evil courses' by Sheriff Guthrie, remained a moot point, as when questioned on this issue, Mrs Anderson, one of the older witnesses from Lerwick, evaded this question, rather to Sheriff Guthrie's annoyance[32].

The obvious and over-riding disadvantages of truck, were the limitations it placed on its recipients' freedom of choice. The same Mrs Anderson felt that if knitters received money for their work they could save a good deal by spending less on clothes or put money in the missionary box. However, the church, never slow to pass by an opportunity to make money, did so by raising funds in kind. The United Free Missionary Magazine related how some twenty Fetlar girls met once a week at the manse, and by donating their own wool, time and skill, raised £14-7/3d. for foreign missions[33]. A rather sad case of a victim of truck was noted by Sarah Cracroft, Lady Jane Franklin's niece. Lady Franklin and her niece, travelled to Shetland in 1849, in the hope of learning news of the whereabouts of her husband, Sir John Franklin the explorer, from the returning Greenland whalers. At the same time, she was involved in a scheme to promote emigration to Australia for young Shetland women[34]. However, although the passages offered were assisted, interested

parties had to tender a £1 deposit. This proved a major stumbling block as few knitters could raise such cash. Sarah Cracroft, recorded how one eminently suitable candidate asked Lady Franklin if she might give one of her finest knitted shawls instead as her deposit as she had no money[35]. The diary does not state if this request was granted. Interestingly, Dr. A. Edmondston, writing in 1809[36], noted that many of the girls employed in the straw plaiting industry earlier established in Shetland, used their cash earnings to leave Shetland and emigrate to Edinburgh and take up domestic employment there.

Trucking in the country districts was less pernicious and caused less hardship than in the town, as other forms of work, like fish or field work, were more readily available. Most people had their own produce or were able to earn it by outdoor work, although even there, lack of cash still had its problems as Charlotte Johnston's case study illustrates[37]. Charlotte Johnston lived at Colafirth, near Ollaberry, and knitted and dressed hosiery for Mr Morgan Laurenson, merchant at Hillswick. Mr Laurenson allowed Charlotte Johnston to run up an account on credit, and in order to settle these debts, had continued to send her hosiery to dress, although she no longer wished to work for him. It appears that she got into debt through having a house built; unable to pay the workmen in cash she paid them in tea and other provisions, taking out a great deal more provisions from Mr Laurenson's store than she needed for her own use. This was by no means a unique case. Workers seem to have accepted that it was often not possible to be paid in cash, as for instance the girl who helped Catherine Borthwick, a Lerwick knitter, with her peats was quite happy to accept a petticoat as payment[38].

One of the peculiarities of the hosiery trade, as described in the evidence given by merchants, was the lack of profit they realized on hosiery sales. Merchants stated that they invoiced hosiery to wholesalers and retailers in the south at the same price which they had paid for it in goods, or so little higher as to cover only the risk and loss upon damaged articles and job lots. The only exception to this was fine lacework, often bought for cash, and on which they were assured a profit. From the evidence presented to him, Sheriff Guthrie tended to feel that merchants, when invoicing their goods to trade purchasers in Edinburgh, London and elsewhere, did so at prices sufficient to free them from any loss, allowing

only a very small profit amounting to no more than a small commission for the trouble of disposing of hosiery[39]. This was not the case when dealing with private purchasers - a smaller but still considerable trade - in which they realized a substantial profit. In the absence of cash hosiery was taking the place of money as a form of currency among knitters and merchants. Initially, Shetland merchants who dealt in hosiery were drapers and clothiers or general merchants who sold their wares in exchange for hosiery rather than money, and in order to make allowances for this inconvenience, raised the profit on their shop goods beyond the normal retail level; southern merchants allowed a 15% mark up on their drapery, whilst Shetland merchants took a 25% profit[40] . Therefore, although merchants denied that there was a profit in any but fine lace hosiery, merchants obtained a profit on their hosiery - this profit amounting to a hidden or double profit on their shop goods. For example, if a merchant bought tea at a wholesale price of 1/6d. per lb. and sold it in his 'cash shop' for 2/- he would make a 33.3% profit. However, if he sold the same tea in his 'truck shop' for 2/6d. per lb., he would then be making 66.6% profit. As Sheriff Guthrie pointed out:

> But while the merchants assert that they have no direct profit upon their sales of knitted goods, or at least none but the smallest, they do not deny that, in order to repay themselves for the trouble and risk involved in the two transactions upon which this profit is realized, they charge considerably more for their tea and drapery goods than the ordinary retail price in other districts. In other words, although there is nominally no profit upon the knitted goods there is a double profit, or a very large profit, on the drapery goods, tea, etc., bartered for it[41].

In addition, Sheriff Guthrie noted that in some places there were two prices for goods according to whether they were paid for with hosiery or with money[42]. For example, Robert Sinclair who kept two drapers shops in Lerwick, a 'truck shop' and one which dealt purely in cash sales, admitted grudgingly that there was 'a very small shade of difference' between the price of goods in the two different shops[43]. This two-price system also prevailed in rural districts and from it arose two anachronisms. Firstly, the system of 'money items' and secondly, the practice of giving less money for hosiery than its value in goods -usually 20% or more. 'Money items', such as Shetland worsted, were not

available through truck exchanges and could only be purchased for cash. When cash was given to knitters in payment for their work, a discount of 20 - 25% was deducted by merchants for this concession; therefore, a knitter who would have received 1/- in truck goods, would receive only 9d. in cash.

At the heart of the whole matter lay the profit margin merchants allowed on the goods they exchanged for hosiery. It is difficult to assess the extent to which merchants exploited knitters in this issue of prices. On the one hand the minister of Northmavine, the Rev. James Sutherland, stated that he bought in his provisions from the south as he could not afford to buy at the local store[44] and Mr. Newlands, a factory inspector, stated having seen flannel which sold in Glasgow at 3 1/2d. a yard, being sold at 1/- in Shetland[45]. This was probably an extreme case and not a particulary valid comparison, as freight and handling charges upped the price of all goods imported to Shetland. For the same reasons, Shetland country merchants had to charge higher prices than in Lerwick. On the other hand, a knitter who relied on her merchant to take her possibly poor quality, and therefore difficult to resell, hosiery, and to extend her interest-free credit in times of need, was fortunate to be accommodated by him. On the whole, Sheriff Guthrie felt that:

> In Lerwick...competition and the greater facility of communication with other places, have kept the prices of the necessaries of life to a moderate figure. No complaints were made as to prices there [46].

However, he goes on to point out that:

> It is a fact of some significance, that few persons above the condition of peasants purchase supplies for family use from the shops in Shetland. Provisions, groceries, as well as clothing, are to a large extent imported by private individuals from Aberdeen, Leith and Edinburgh[47].

It is also difficult to separate the extent of truck from barter-truck, particularly as most local transactions were based on the latter. However, unlike the fishermen, knitters were not directly trucked through land tenure - there is only one instance mentioned in the 1872 Truck Inquiry of a knitter's hosiery merchant also being her landlord[48] - nor were they generally thirled to the one merchant. In country districts, the distances between shops usually meant that knitters dealt with the same

local merchant, but some did save up their hosiery and travel to Lerwick occasionally, whilst in Lerwick knitters dealt with the merchant from whom they felt they got the best bargain.

Looking at the truck system in Shetland as it stood at the time of the 1872 Truck Inquiry, it is easy to make judgements based on twentieth century standards. It is particularly easy to condemn the merchants and to label them as oppressive tyrants living off the 'fat of the land' at their clients' expense. In reality, there was little or no 'fat' and those merchants, marketing their goods as they did on the consignment system, had much of their capital tied up in hosiery, and in addition, were shouldering all the risks inherent therein. Hosiery merchants were suffering the effects of prolonged periods of extended credit, capital scarcity, and a fall off in demand for hosiery, all aggravated by the quantity of poor quality hosiery foisted upon them, whilst isolation, acute poverty, evictions and wool shortages, had severely disadvantaged the knitters' position; all of which added up to an inevitable extension of trucking. For example, when Arthur Laurenson, principal partner in Laurenson & Co., died in 1890, a memorial was erected to his memory by the people of Lerwick, in recognition of services to the community[49]. He founded the Shetland Library and Scientific Society, was a town councillor, member of the School and Parochial Boards, director of the Shetland Fishermen's Widows Fund, had organised the destitution appeal for Foula in 1885, and the travelling and accommodation arrangements of the Fair Isle girls attending the Shetland stall at the Edinburgh International Exhibition in 1886[50]. Commissary Records show Arthur Laurenson's net personal estate to be only £1,346-15.6d., not a large sum for a leading merchant. It is interesting that Laurenson's biographer, Catherine Spence, does not mention his partnership in Laurenson & Co. and makes no allusion to his hosiery business; Arthur Laurenson seems to have been more interested in his literary and public works rather than in business pursuits. For example, he travelled to Norway, Sweden and America for literary and linguistic studies, and became a voluntary teacher in the Lerwick Instruction Society[51].

Despite the pains taken by Sheriff Guthrie to investigate fully the true state of truck in Shetland, the 1872 Truck Inquiry, lasting almost four months, did virtually nothing to change the truck system in Shetland. It

had no agitational value and was followed by no legislation until 1887. It did, however, leave a lasting record of Shetland life in Victorian times, both in the actual report and in the contemporary press - little compensation for contemporary Shetlanders! Brian Smith pin-points the inherent weakness in the 1872 Truck Inquiry as Sheriff Guthrie's failure to link the tenurial system with the truck system[52]. In Guthrie's own words: "I have not felt myself at liberty to enter upon the land question in Shetland..."[53]. And it was this omission which rendered the report as good as useless in bringing the truck system to an end. Shetland had to wait for more than another decade before change came.

Possibly the greatest evil of trucking in the hand knitting industry in Shetland, was that the system inadvertently propped up the poor quality knitter and her inferior articles. Many merchants for charitable reasons[54], or through force of habit, continued to buy poor quality hosiery. Naturally this led to an overall lowering of prices to compensate for the risk with this type of work, but more significantly, it acted markedly against the hand knitting industry as a whole, lowering its reputation in a time of increased competition from machine made goods. That trucking continued for so long in the Shetland hand knitting industry, was undoubtedly due to the presence of this poor quality hosiery, carelessly and hastily produced, to the isolation and generally low standard of living, and to a continuing high excess of females to males, coupled with lack of alternative employment for women. As Lord Napier, the chairman of the royal commission set up in 1883 to 'inquire into the condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland', astutely pointed out - for crofters with their lack of tenure:

> conditions of life for a family in the island of Heisker in the outer Hebrides, or Foula in the Shetland Islands, are almost as different from those of a family in Midlothian or Middlesex, as if they lived in another hemisphere[55].

He concluded, rather prematurely in the case of knitters:

> ...we remain under the impression that abuses incidental to the isolation of the country, the ignorance and poverty of the people, and the power of monopoly or combination among employers, are gradually melting away, and have to a large extent disappeared before the forces of increasing intelligence, public opinion and commercial competition; that the interest of the employer and

> employed are being harmonized by natural causes; and that legislative interference ought not to be hastily attempted ... [56].

The Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act followed in 1883. Based on Lord Napier's investigations, although rejecting his recommendations[57], the Act gave crofters security of tenure, fixed fair rents, compensation for imporvements, and the facility to increase holdings, and finally freed the Shetland fisherman-crofter from the evils of truck, so that when anti-truck legislation did come in 1887, it was unnecessary in practical terms for all but the hand knitters. Knitting, a subsistence activity inextricably linked with barter-truck, lagged behind the fishing industry and experienced a very protracted transition from a barter to cash economy. For fishermen this period of transition from truck to free trade was much shorter. In addition to the security of tenure granted by the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act, the boom in the herring industry in the 1880s and the increase in modern communications, acted to help fishermen market their fish independently of their merchant-landlord. Unlike the knitters, who worked in isolation or in family units, fishermen formed co-operatives buying shares in boats and/or companies. For example, the Shetland Fishing Company, registered in 1872, was set up with the specific aim of prosecuting fishing free of truck[58]. This type of unity helped strengthen a concerted effort to break away from truck. It took knitters another seventy years before they too united to form their own protective and marketing organisation.

Giving evidence before the Napier Commission in 1883, William Garriock, merchant from Reawick, pointed out that "In every insular locality the merchants must to accommodate the people both buy and sell and give credit"[59]. Thus, although money payments were felt to be preferable, for many knitters the truck system continued to provide an invaluable safety net against destitution. In country districts, knitters still depended on their local merchant to buy their hosiery, eggs and other produce and when need be, advance them meal or other necessities against work to come. The trucking of hosiery had done much to keep the poor alive, supplying them with both food and raiment, and many knitters, especially those who knitted inferior articles, felt deeply indebted to their local merchant. An illustration of this is found in a letter to *The*

*Shetland Times* dated 9th April, 1887. It is written in the Norm dialect and simply signed 'a knitter':

> Ales! ales! Dey rin doon what dey caa "truck", and rin doon da merchants, but if it wisna fur baith some o' wis wid be waur off[60].

It was generally recognised that it was the risk associated with the poor quality knitwear that led to the merchants setting such high profit margins. In effect, the poor knitters were benefiting at the expense of the superior ones, with the old system being best for the former.

Fifteen years after the 1872 Truck Inquiry, the Truck Amendment Act was passed on the 17th September 1887. Section 10, which dealt with homeworkers clearly stated:

> Where articles are made by a person at his own home, or otherwise, without the employment of any person under him except a member of his own family, the provisions of this Act shall apply as if he were a workman, and the shopkeeper, dealer, trader, or other person buying these articles in the way of trade were his employer, and the provisions of this Act with respect to the payment of wages shall apply as if the price of an article were wages earned... [61].

In essence, this act set out to plug the loop-hole regarding the payment of home workers in cottage industries, but although section 10 was almost tailor-made to suit Shetland hand knitters, trucking continued unchecked. Unfortunately, the Truck Amendment Act coincided with a depression in the hosiery trade and it was feared that the new act, rather than helping knitters, would bring the country to a standstill and close down stores[62]. The newspapers warned dealers in country districts that it was part of the Procurator Fiscal's official duty to investigate and prosecute offences under the act[63]. Dealers started to refuse to buy hosiery unless it would meet the requirements of an order received for hosiery[64]. The price paid by merchants to knitters for hosiery fell by 25-30%. For example, ladies' spencer which had formerly been bought for 1/4, were now only fetching 8d, whilst knickerbockers went down in price from 2/- to 1/4[65]. The hand knitting industry was in turmoil, with truck being as warmly defended as it was hotly denounced. Leonard Lyell, M.P., addressing a meeting of constituents in Lerwick Town Hall in 1888, defended the act, feeling that it would ultimately benefit both knitters and merchants, by leading to the production of better quality hosiery, thus enabling merchants to find "a more ready and remunerative

market"[66]. Many knitters felt themselves worse off than before the passing of this act, and the opinion of Margaret Johnston from the island of Muckle Roe, was commonly held among the knitters: "Our only complaint against the cash system is that the prices of the goods remain the same, and we get less for our hosiery"[67].

This state of affairs led to the knitters and makers of claith (home spun cloth) in the Parish of Delting, sending a petition to Queen Victoria asking her to suspend section 10 of the Truck Amendment Act. The Queen referred this petition to a committee of the Lords of the Council for consideration, which resulted in the Sheriff-Substitute of Shetland, David MacKenzie, being asked to hold an inquiry. This inquiry, known as the Delting Truck Inquiry, was conducted on far less formal lines than the 1872 Truck Inquiry, with no official citings or hearings taking place. The hand written report - it was never officially printed - is lodged in West Register House, Edinburgh[68].

At the 1881 census, Delting had a population of 1,654 people, being a decrease of 205 from that of 1871- a decrease in line with other Shetland parishes. Out of this number, the names of no less than 500 knitters and makers of home spun cloth were to be found on the petition. However, many of these names were given in people's absence - for example girls at school -and were written in by Peter Blance, the man responsible for going round the parish with the petition. In short, not all the names on the petition were added with the owner's permission, although, it was averred that no pressure had been used. However, Sheriff MacKenzie felt that the main complaint of the petition, namely the loss occasioned to the knitter by the low prices given by the merchants for hosiery in cash, was one which was felt by all, whether signatories of the petition or not. The petition was drawn up, not by knitters, but by the following merchants: Mr. Pole, of Pole, Hoseseason & Co., Mossbank, Mr Inkster of Brae, Mr Sinclair of Graven, all of whom were aggrieved by the new system of cash payments. In effect these merchants were using the knitters to agitate for a return to the old, and to them, more profitable system, and having discussed the complaints made to them by the knitters as to the operation of the new Act, drew up the Petition as embodying these complaints, and as a means by which the knitters might give expression to their alleged grievances. Mr Pole's son, helped

Sheriff-Substitute MacKenzie's route round the parish of Delting, during the Delting Truck Inquiry, 1888.

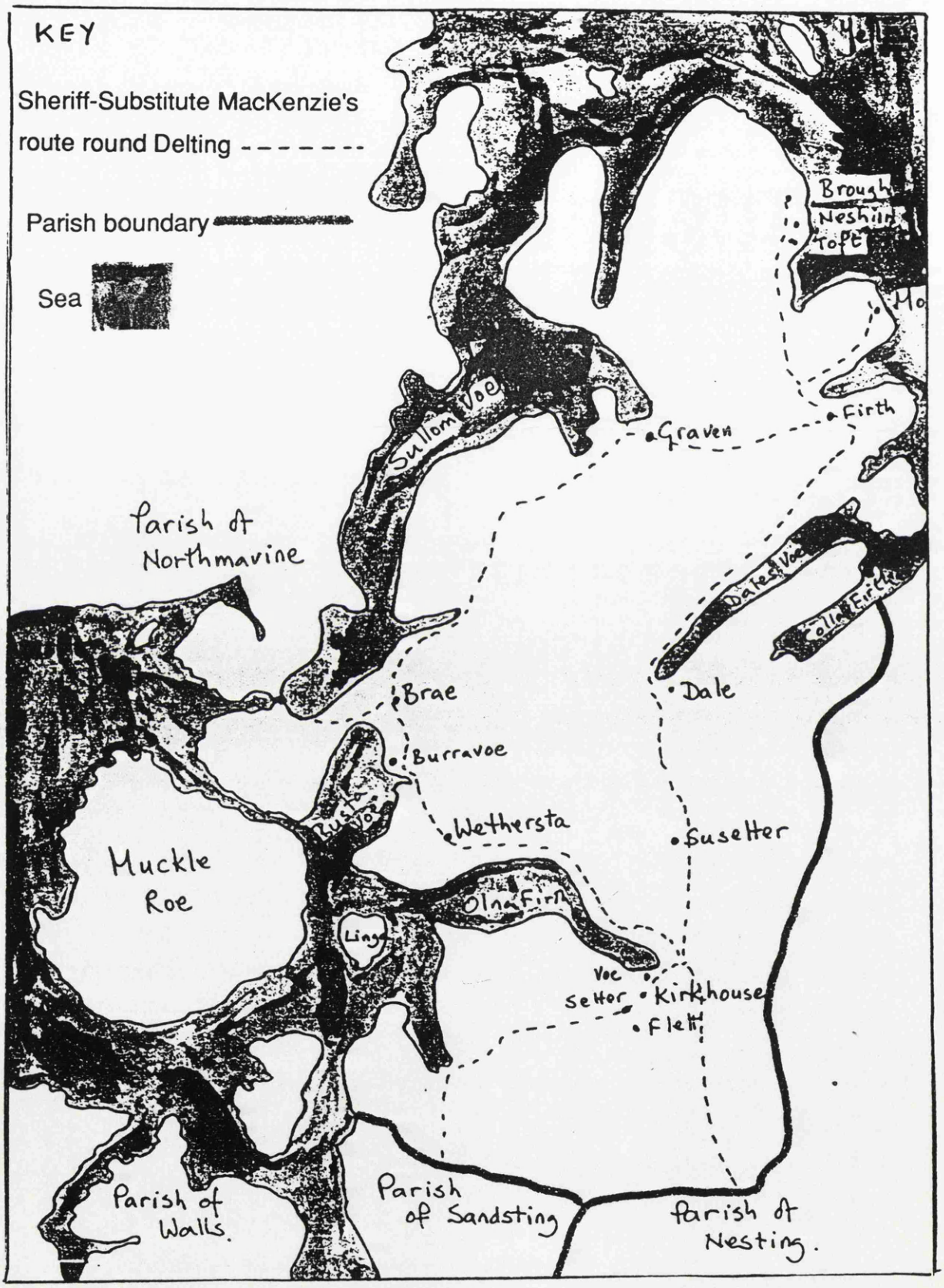



Fig. 3.3.
(Source: S.R.O. [W.R.H.], HH1/848, The Delting Truck Inquiry 1888).

by Mr Woods the Firth Public School teacher, wrote out the Petition. The Petition, was then given to Peter Blance, a seaman, for the purpose of laying it before the knitters, prior to being forwarded to Mr. Leonard Lyell, M.P.

Sheriff MacKenzie began his inquiry by travelling to the Parish of Delting on the 20th June, 1888. The following day, he visited Voe and its neighbourhood "calling upon the cottagers and conversing with them. In this manner I traversed the districts of Voe, Kirkhouse, Flett, Susetter, Dale etc." (Fig. 3.3). Sheriff MacKenzie found the knitters intelligent and industrious "knitting by the fireside and on the hillside", and felt that they gave their evidence in a frank and unbiased manner and :

> ...while making the complaints which are noticed in this Report they as a rule spoke in a tone of friendship and kindliness towards the merchants with whom they dealt, often expressing their obligations under which they stood for what the merchant had done for them in hours of need. This in my opinion was done without servility...[69]

As was the custom throughout Shetland prior to the Truck Amendment Act of 1887, knitting had been exchanged for goods, the merchants fixing the price of both. In Delting, unlike Lerwick, these goods were not confined to drapery but embraced every article of domestic consumption, and where knitters did not use their own wool, but got it first of all from the merchant, the exchange took the form of advances upon the credit of the work to be done. Occasionally small sums of money were paid for hosiery but only if the merchant felt the knitters needs were extremely necessitous. Section 10 of the new enactment had changed the character of these transactions. Knitters now received cash, but only the amount the merchant chose to give - it was the merchant who set the price paid for hosiery and the price of the provisions he sold. The inquiry showed that a reduction of between 10 to 30% or even more, was made on the price of hosiery when paid for in cash. However, when the knitter came to spend this money she found that the price for shop goods was in no way lowered in consideration of her paying for them in cash, and it was this double loss, which caused so much hardship, that was at the nub of the whole inquiry.

Other interesting points came to light in this inquiry. Firstly, some merchants got round the enforced cash payment system by 'tabling

down the money'[70], that is laying the money on the counter, whilst making it clear that if it was taken out of the shop, the knitter need not return in future with hosiery to sell. Secondly, the number of shops in the parish were few and the distance between them considerable. This led to an absence of competition and to the knitters, particularly the old and infirm, being virtually forced by distance to shop where she had sold her hosiery. For example, a poor old woman whose needs were pressing and who had to walk 8 or 9 miles over hilly and boggy ground to sell her hosiery at the nearest shop, was unlikely to be physically able to undertake a journey to another part of the parish to spend her earnings. Thirdly, many knitters were sending their hosiery south, as they could get almost double for it that way, as was illustrated by, Sarah Boyle of Toft, who stated that the little shawls which she sold for 5/- or 6/- in the south, brought in only 3/- locally. Sending hosiery south had to be done through the Post Office which the local merchant also ran in his shop. It was felt that this dual function of the merchant caused embarrassment to the knitter and could prejudice future dealings with the merchant.

Sheriff MacKenzie came to the conclusion that the knitters of Delting were not complaining of the recent Act, but of the merchants' action in lowering the price for hosiery without a corresponding lowering of the price of goods which had been adopted in consequence of the passing of the Act, and felt that:

> Whether this is a necessary and permanent consequence of the Statute, or merely an experimental and temporary cause of action, time alone can... show[71].

He felt that, as the Act had only had a trial of twelve months, it would be premature to pass judgement until a longer time had elapsed. Sheriff George Thoms, the Procurator Fiscal of Shetland and ardent adversary of truck, was very much against any suspension of section 10[72]. The Scottish Secretary, commended MacKenzie on the thorough and tactful way in which he had managed the investigation, but felt that "...the only remedy to the evils complained of seems to be private enterprise instituting competition" and suggested that the Post Office might be asked to look into the possibility of establishing post offices other than in the merchants' shops[73].

Section 10 of the Truck Amendment Act was not suspended nor was any action taken. Surprisingly little space was given to this inquiry in *The Shetland Times.* More interest seems to have been centred on Peter Blance's unaccountable part in the petition and the number of false signatures, than anything else. From the knitters' stand point, the generally accepted point of view was voiced by Ellen Clark, a knitter from the Livinister and Firth district, who stated " I don't care what system it is, if I could only get a fair price for the article"[74].

This was the state of affairs in 1888, with barter-truck as extensive as ever, as the following extract from *The Shetland Times* illustrated:

> At present the system of barter is so general all over the islands that the doctor has to keep a yard on purpose of receiving his fees, which take the form of fowl, fish and all manner of useful articles[75].

However, this was not a static situation. With the help of the increased communications with the south, particularly the parcel post, and the interest of both philanthropists and the anti-truck league, many of the more skilled knitters like the Shetland lace knitters, were by-passing local merchants and marketing their hosiery outwith the islands. As will be seen in the chapter on Shetland Lace, the amount of patronage Shetland knitters received was small compared with, say, the Harris Tweed Industry[76]. However, from 1872 onwards there was an increasing awareness by the well-to-do of the destitute state of many Shetlanders and, in keeping with the Victorian work ethic, many individuals and organisations strove to render some assistance. For example, the Shetland Knitters Repository was set up in Edinburgh in 1884 with the specific aim of selling Shetland hosiery free of truck[77]. The Countess of Aberdeen, the Repository's patron did much good work by arranging drawing room sales and opening exhibitions of Shetland hosiery. She was an informed speaker and dedicated worker in the fight against truck[78]. The Shetland stand at the Edinburgh International Exhibition in 1886 was also highly successful in bringing the evils of truck to the notice of the public. The Shetland stand was organised by Sheriff Thoms, resident of Shetland and ardent campaigner against the evils of truck, who believed that by bringing the knitter and purchaser closer together, it would help to bring the truck system to an end. Relays of 6 girls, 3 from Fair Isle and 3 from the rest of Shetland, were sent down to Edinburgh[79].

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SHETLAND AND FAIR ISLE HOSIERS,

*ESPLANADE, LERWICK, SHETLAND, N.B.*

KNITTING OF ALL KINDS IN SILK AND SHETLAND WOOL.
ORDERS PER POST PROMPTLY ATTENDED TO.

*Telegrams—SCHOOR, LERWICK.* KNITTERS PAID IN CASH.

Fig. 3.4.
(Source: *Mansons' Shetland Almanac*, 1893.)

SCHOOR & CO.'s

LIST OF ARTICLES

IN

SHETLAND HOSIERY.

LADIES' DRESSES. LADIES' DRAWERS.
LADIES' VESTS. LADIES' SLEEVES.
LADIES' SPENCERS, in White, Grey, and Scarlet.
CHILDREN'S VESTS. CHILDREN'S SPENCERS.

BEAUTIFUL SHETLAND VEILS
FOR LADIES AND CHILDREN.

LACE SCARFS AND CRAVATS,
IN GREAT VARIETY.

LADIES' HEAD-DRESSES.

FINE SHOULDER SHAWLS AND LARGE SHAWLS,
OF LACE TEXTURES, IN VARIOUS COLOURS.

WARM INFANT HAPS,
IN WHITE AND GREY.

LARGE WARM HAPS.

The hand-knitted Hosiery of Shetland has long been celebrated and highly esteemed for *Extreme Softness* and *Great Elasticity*—combining, as it does, the *Greatest Amount of Warmth with the Least Possible Weight.*

INSPECTION INVITED.
PRICES VERY MODERATE.

SHAWLS AND OTHER GOODS CLEANED AND REPAIRED.
ANY SPECIAL ORDER GOT UP ON SHORTEST NOTICE.

Fig. 3.5.
(Source: S.A., D1/139.)

Individual names also crop up in anti-truck propaganda. For example, an article written in *Womanhood* in 1899 credits Margaret Currie (nee Colvin), a native Shetlander, with alerting the 1872 Truck Commissioners to the plight of the knitters, the result being:

> ... a Bill was passed which made the whole system illegal, and it was at once and for ever abolished, while each woman was for the future able to command a fair price in cash for her work[80].

This article is so farcically inaccurate as to render its contents of little worth, but other sources suggest that Margaret Colvin did sell Shetland hosiery to the nobility and royalty, sending the cash back to the knitters[81]. She is reported to have taken pity on a 'poor creature' who had been offered such a miserably low sum of money by the local merchant for her fine lacework, that she offered to give her some money, taking the shawl to try and sell herself[82]. This she did by sending it to her late husband's hosier in Edinburgh, who paid a good price for it and ordered more. She established contacts with wholesalers in London and sold the fashionable lace work through the drawing room parties held by the aristocracy, undoubtedly using her energies in the fight against truck to further her own social standing:

> My work prospered, and being on a visit to Edinburgh...to Lady Emma MacNeill, only sister of the Duke of Argyll, I made the acquaintance of the Princess Louise....They were most kind, not only by making purchases themselves, but in introducing the industry of the Shetlanders to Her Majesty the Queen, and to members of the aristocracy[83].

As a result of her crusade, she opened a truck-free hosiery shop - Schoor & Co., Esplanade, Lerwick, which was run by her sisters, Mrs. Schoor and Mrs. Muir, and which paid knitters in cash[84]. Figs. 3.4 and 3.5 show Schoor & Co., advertising as Shetland and Fair Isle Hosiers paying their knitters in cash. Schoor & Co., sold direct to the public, and judging from their prestigious patronage and awards, obviously had a high reputation for quality. This would have been a natural consequence of dealing in cash, as they would have had the pick of the knitters' work. In addition to shop sales, this company ran a mail order business and took advantage of the telegraph system installed in 1870[85]. An interesting statement from the 1908 Truck Inquiry, referred to a Lerwick shop which paid its knitters in cash - undoubtedly Schoor & Co. - having to delay payments for several weeks due to lack of funds. Although,

Schoor & Co. lacked working capital, many knitters were still happy to be out of pocket for a short time when money was required, rather than go to truck shops. There is no evidence to show that other merchants followed suit. Schoor & Co. remained in business for at least 25 years[86].

Truck in the hosiery industry, continued largely unchecked by the legislature well into the 1900s. Between 1887 and the 1908 Truck Inquiry[87] there were only 8 prosecutions in Shetland under the 1887 Truck Amendment Act, with far from punitive fines ranging from £1 to £2-10/- being imposed (appendix 3). In no way did these prosecutions benefit the knitters' lot. .The most noticeable effect of both the 1872 Truck Inquiry and the Truck Amendment Act of 1887, had been to bring the hosiery trade to a standstill periodically. Wary of possible prosecution, merchants steered clear of giving out work every time it looked as if the Truck Amendment Act might be enforced.

Following the prosecution of a Shetland hosiery merchant in 1902, there was felt to be a temporary improvement in the situation, however, it seems to have been short lived as Parliament found it necessary to hold another truck inquiry in 1908[88]. In *The Scotsman's* 1908 annual review of Shetland, Fordyce Clark, journalist and native Shetlander, pointed out that :

> The Truck Act since it came into force has been more noticed in the breach than in the observance ... undesirable conditions which called it into existence do not now obtain to anything like the same extent[89].

The 1908 Truck Inquiry, chaired by the Lord Advocate, the Rt. Hon. Thomas Shaw, devoted considerable time to trucking in the Shetland hand knitting industry. Evidence concerning Shetland was given by Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, in her role as President of the Scottish Home Industries Association (S.H.I.A.), by Miss Mary Paterson, inspector of factories, Mr Archibald Newlands, factory inspector in whose territory Shetland lay, Mr James Kirkland Galloway, Procurator Fiscal of Shetland, and Mr Gifford Gray, Superintendent of the Shetland County Police. Although this inquiry was not confined to Shetland, it amply highlighted how little trucking in the Shetland hand knitting industry had changed since 1887, or even 1872. For example, the following

statement made by Miss Paterson showed that goods were still being exchanged for hosiery:

> In Lerwick the hosiery people who have shops for the tourists and so on all keep tea, simply for the purpose of paying the hosiery knitters, who do not buy hosiery... [90],

whilst it was clear from statements made by Mr Newlands, that a reduction was still made if cash was given in exchange for hosiery:

> What is known as the two price system is practiced. A cash buyer can buy for considerably less than a knitter can get in truck transactions. That varies as much as 10 to 25% on the price of the goods [91].

Rather embarrassingly for the Duchess of Sutherland and the Scottish Home Industries Association, the inquiry brought to light that the S.H.I.A. was extensively involved in truck, mainly in the Western Isles where the largest purchaser of Harris Tweed was found to be a Glasgow tea merchant[92], but also in Shetland. The lace shawls bought by the S.H.I.A. were not bought direct from knitters but through the hosiery merchants - a severe affront to the Shetland knitters as the S.H.I.A. had been set up as a marketing organisation for home workers, whose policy it was to buy directly for them, paying a fair price[93]. However, the inquiry also exposed what had been blatantly obvious since the passing of the new Act, that the Shetland Constabulary stood by whilst trucking went on under its very nose. Hasty and rather thin explanations were proffered by Gifford Gray, as to the difficulties of a shortage of manpower and the problems posed by the police having to wear their uniform on duty. The Lord Advocate was irritated and unrelenting. Action was to be taken. From the knitters' standpoints, few were prepared to come forward and report their truck merchant for fear of reprisals. This point was noted by Miss J. Cochrane of Edinburgh, who described herself as "a humble fellow worker against the dread evils of the Truck system" and who, since 1900, had been visiting Shetland, buying up hosiery which she mainly sold through the Scottish Home Industries, 132 George St., Edinburgh. In a letter to Mrs Tennant, one of the commissioners of the 1908 Truck Inquiry, she averred:

> Unluckily it [Truck Amendment Act] gets enforced in Shetland occasionally for a short time and then it is dropped. Each time that happens it is a great misfortune. Some women support it and they are marked and can sell no more knitting. All around observe the

> consequences. Hence it is nearly impossible for the authorities to find cases to prosecute...If only the women could be assured that the Truck Act has at last come to stay numbers would flock to assist the authorities. It is the uncertainty that is the ruin... I assure you it is the uncertainty of the powers that be continuing to act that paralyses all [94].

The outcome of the 1908 Truck Inquiry was a predictable lowering of prices and reduction in hosiery sales, a few token prosecutions with some half dozen merchants being fined derisory sums (appendix 3), but reality was business as usual, and it really did seem as if the Shetland hand knitting industry would never rid itself of truck. However, as *The Scotsman* pointed out:

> If the Truck Act is to be stringently enforced, it will be a sorry thing for Shetland, and the sooner the knitters realise this the better. It is futile to force the hands of the merchants in this way. It is unreasonable to expect them to accumulate piles of unsaleable hosiery goods and pay ready cash for same...[95].

The survival of truck in the Shetland hand knitting industry continued because of this unmarketable poor quality hosiery. Improved communications meant that the knitters of good quality hosiery, particularly Shetland lace, were by-passing increasingly local truck shops for their sales; poor quality work was perpetuating the system and giving Shetland hosiery a bad reputation. Free trade principles enjoyed by Shetland fishermen, were being unnaturally and unhealthily suppressed in the hosiery industry. But for the increasing competition from machine knitted imitations (dealt with in Chapter 5) which were undercutting Shetland hosiery and threatening to exterminate the Shetland hand knitting industry, truck might well have lingered into the ultra-modern Oil Age of the sixties. Understandably, knitters resented the low prices being paid for hosiery, but they seemed incapable of seeing that complaining would not halt the march of progress and that it was only by raising standards and producing well designed, evenly shaped and perfectly knitted articles, they could compete favourably with machine produced ones. By knitting exclusively for the luxury market, where top prices demanded top quality, truck could have been eliminated and the future of the hand knitting industry secured.

The hosiery merchants were well aware that if they were to survive, they would need to replace truck with cash payments. However, chronic shortage of capital meant that much of their wholesale trade was done by barter, whilst extended credits of up to 18 months and the general uncertainty of the trade, made it almost impossible to run their businesses on modern lines. For example, Miss Paterson, in her evidence to the 1908 Truck Inquiry, stated that :

> One merchant in particular said to me that the system was much more extensive than I knew of; that as a matter of fact he could hardly stop it unless it were stopped at the same time on a big scale; that his transactions with the people who supplied him with goods were carried on in the same way with the Glasgow merchant and so on - that he paid them in Shetland goods also[96].

Cash payments and short credits were deemed by most to be preferable to the old system, but thwarted by lack of capital, this system presented difficulties of implementation, and as the Duchess of Sutherland, in her capacity as President of the S.H.I.A., pointed out to the Lord Advocate, Thomas Shaw, "Our desire is not to have truck...when we make advances to the people we do so to keep them from starvation..."[97]; a policy which had been adopted and sanctioned by the Government during the destitution years of the 1840s, when islanders were paid in meal for labouring on the 'meal roads' and the elderly and infirm set to work earning their allowance by knitting[98].

Just before the outbreak of the First World War, the Highland and Islands Home Industries Report, complied by Dr W.R.Scott, of St. Andrews University, was published[99]. Considerable space was devoted to the Shetland hand knitting industry, but very little to the vexed question of eradicating truck. In fact, Dr Scott seemed more taken up with the "complete absence of the rush and strain of factory work..." and other rather nebulous advantages of home workers, than he did with help for trucked knitters. He noted that knitters felt "the view is prevalent that the enforcement of the Truck Act has been prejudicial to them"[100]. As with the aftermath of the Truck Amendment Act when the Delting knitters had suffered from a considerable lowering in the price paid for hosiery, it was reported in *The Scotsman* "There is a strong feeling amongst the knitters that Government should be petitioned to repeal the

Truck Act"[101]. Nothing came of this, but the 6 prosecutions (shown in appendix 3) under the Truck Amendment Act which had taken place between 1908 and 1910, had led to a nervousness amongst merchants about giving out hosiery. This move, coupled with the depression in the hand knitting trade brought about by, not only machine made goods, but also by the great rise in the number of Shetland imitations flooding the market, led to prices having fallen more than in proportion; that is, the conversion of 'soft goods' into cash was not in line with their monetary value. Failing to grasp the extent or true nature of trucking and the Shetland hand knitting industry, Scott concluded "...in the summer of 1912, several merchants had decided to abandon this side of the business"[102]. In reality this was not the situation and amounted to little more than the usual tactics employed by merchants to evade prosecution.

Arguably, the First World War, did more to eradicate truck than past legislation. War time shortages, trade disruptions, and the cash payments received for hosiery sold to servicemen billeted locally, helped even the poorer knitter to turn her work to cash. For example, the Board of Agriculture, working in conjunction with the Army Authorities, suggested that wool be supplied to Shetland knitters to knit socks for the Army[103]. The Board recognised that such a scheme could best be organised by one of the Associations or Committees interested in the furtherance of home industries who were familiar with local conditions, and asked the Co-operative Council of the Highland Home Industries to undertake this scheme, promising a grant of £100 towards the administrative costs[104]. Through its success, Shetland hand knitters received £2,300 paid in small sums to individual workers. In addition to this scheme, the pre-war supply of cheap imported underwear from the Continent, which had been entirely cut off by the War, led to an increase in demand for Shetland hosiery, and to a rise in prices. The benefits of the War on the Shetland hosiery had given the trade an additional boost. By 1918, it was reported that demand was much greater than supply. And it was this shift from foisting unwanted articles on to local merchants, to knitting to order for money, which allowed Shetland hand knitters to participate temporarily in a fully developed, modern , albeit artificial, market and to break free of truck.

However, a post-war slump in the hosiery industry was severely felt in the autumn of 1920 when cheaply produced machine made goods reappeared on the southern markets , and the Shetland hand knitting industry was in a state of stagnation. Shocked by their sudden loss of earnings, knitters, desperate to 'sell' their hosiery, inevitably resorted to trucking with their local merchants again. Scottish Office records show that in 1924 truck was still an issue in the Shetland hand knitting industry[105]. The Board of Agriculture for Scotland's 1924 report on "The social and economic conditions in the Highlands and Islands", suggested that co-operative credit might help overcome this problem and felt that a home industry might be regarded as an agricultural purpose within the meaning of the Agriculture Credit Act of 1923[106]. This scheme was not pursued and trucking continued unchecked until the Second World War.

The presence of many thousands of servicemen stationed on the islands during the Second World War, had the enormously beneficial effect of allowing the knitter to cut out the middleman-merchant by dealing directly with this new local market. And it was this unique position of strength which encouraged knitters to band together and set up their own knitters' co-operative, the Shetland Hand Knitters Association (S.H.K.A.)[107]. This association was regarded by many as one of the main factors which put an end to any remnants of the barter system, by establishing set rates for prices of knitwear[108], although contemporary Scottish Office files suggest that this statement may have been over-optimistic:

> The barter system, resulting in the exchange of knitted goods for the necessities of life through a local merchant is still practiced and cannot be defended as being a sound system in the interest of the industry. It is detrimental to the maintenance of a high standard in design and craftsmanship, and it is said to result in the knitting of a large quantity of goods which are of inferior quality[109].

Despite the lingering existence of small amounts of trucking, it can be said that the Second World War was to the hand knitter what the Crofters Holding (Scotland) Act of 1886 had been to the fisherman.

The Shetland hand knitting industry had survived into the twentieth century because of the cheap and flexible supply of its labour force; its workers' pressing economic needs meant that knitters were prepared to accept payment in goods, and a pittance at that. The introduction of the

non-contributory Old Age Pension in 1908, increased communications, the slow but steady rise in the general standard of living, increase in the local circulation of cash and alternative employment opportunities, all eroded this archaic time warp. Thus, hosiery which had been the only means by which many Shetlanders had been able to purchase goods, was replaced by cash and with it barter-trucking at last came to an end. However, it must be recognised that whilst truck in the Shetland hand knitting industry had been responsible for perpetuating inferior work, thereby threatening the hand knitting industry 's existence, it had done much to prevent widespread destitution and hardship, rural depopulation, and emigration. By present day standards, life for many was at a grim subsistence level, but for the many cottars and 'Shetland housewives' with no land and little means of support, knitting offered an alternative to the Poor House for the old and emigration for the young.

NOTES.

[1] See Chapter 1, p. 13 & 14. The Shetland Method has been dealt with extensively by Dr Hance Smith in *Shetland Life and Trade 1450-1914* and in his introduction to the Thuleprint edition of Vol. I of the 1872 Truck Inquiry, and by Brian Smith, Shetland archivist, in an article entitled 'Shetland Archives and Sources of Shetland' in *History Workshop*, (1977), p. 203-214.

[2] P.P., Cd. 326, (1871), Report by the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Commission Act 870..., p. 10.

[3] Upper Weisdale was cleared during the 1840s. This was Shetland's largest single clearance. Uyea Island off Unst, was cleared in 1850 and by 1857 half of Fetlar had been cleared. Some evictions took place in Yell in the early 1870s.

[4] Evidence of William Hay given before the Poor Law Inquiry 1843, Synod of Shetland, Presbytery of Lerwick, p.189

[5] P.P., Cd. 555, 1872 Truck Inquiry, (Thule Print edition 1978), p.11.

[6] Munn, C. *The Scottish Provincial Banking Companies*, (Edinburgh 1981), p. 2. The total circulating coinage in Scotland in 1707 was estimated by Adam Smith to be just over £1m. - ibid.

[7] Court, W.H.B., *A concise economic history of Britain*, (Cambridge 1967) p257.

[8] Johnson, R.L., *A Shetland Country Merchant -a biography of James Williamson of Mid Yell 1800-1872* (Lerwick 1979), p. 12. When he died in 1872, James Williamson's credit at the bank was £2.0.1d. He had an undisclosed number of accounts outstanding which proved irretrievable.

[9] Op. cit. The business dealings of James Williamson were compiled from old shop papers found by Robert Johnson, a descendant of James Williamson. From these tattered and mouldy papers, Robert Johnson, pieced together the story of James Williamson's struggles as a small nineteenth century merchant.

[10] 1 & 2 Wm. IV. c. 36.

[11] P.P., Cd. 555, Vol. I of 1872 Truck Inquiry (Thuleprint edition), introduction p.v.

[12] P.P., Cd. 326, (1871), Report by the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Commission Act 1870... p.xcv.

[13] This inquiry's official title is 'Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Truck System (Shetland)'. It was published in two volumes, Cd. 555, and Cd. 555-1. Volume I comprises Sheriff Guthrie's submission to the Truck Commission, summarising his findings and giving his general observations. Volume II, records the Minutes of Evidence of this truck inquiry.

[14] P.P., Cd. 555, 1872 Truck Inquiry, (Thule Print edition 1978), p.45

[15] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 41, q. 2138.

[16] Op. cit., p. 236 & p. 437.

[17] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 350, q. 14,042.

[18] P.P., Cd. 555, 1872 Truck Inquiry, (Thule Print edition 1978), p. 45.

[19] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p.35.

[20] Op. cit., p. 53, q. 2512.

[21] Op. cit., p. 426, q. 16,660.

[22] Op. cit., p.284, q.11,601.

[23] P.P., Cd. 555, 1872 Truck Inquiry, (Thule Print edition 1978), p. 48.

[24] Standen, E., *The Shetland Islands*, (Oxford 1845), p. 17.

[25] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 5, 34, 47, 237 etc.

[26] Op. cit. p. 6, q. 300.

[27] Op. cit., p. 425 from the evidence of Mary Duncan. Mary Duncan was interviewed in Kirkwall by Sheriff Guthrie. She had been forced to leave Shetland and live in Orkney, as she could not obtain money for her knitting, and having no other means of support, had difficulty in maintaining herself. Mary Duncan mentions both Betty Morrison and Jean Yates and stated that there were "dozens of others, hawked about goods got from knitter in

the same way".

[28] Op. cit. p. 369, q. 14,699.

[29] Op. cit. p. 182, q. 7546; P.P., Cd. 4443, (1908), Minutes of Evidence taken before the Truck Inquiry, (days 1 - 37), p.137, q.3415; Edmondston, E. *Sketches and Tales of Shetland* (1856) p. 34.

[30] Flinn, M.W. (ed.), *Scottish Population History from the 17th Century to the 1930s*, (Cambridge 1977), pp. 350-1. The percentage of illegitimate births for Shetland during the period 1861-5 was 4.36 per 100 live births compared to Banffshire, also a fishing district, which was the highest of any Scottish county with 16.62%. The Scottish average for this period was 9.5 illegitimate births per 100 live births.

[31] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 30 q. 1492.

[32] Op. cit. p. 30, q. 3524.

[33] S.A., D21/1. *Record* - Missionary magazine, undated but thought by Brian Smith, archivist, to be about 1921.

[34] The emigration scheme was organised by Rev. Dr. Lang described by Lady Franklin as "an apostle of emigration and an old acquaintance of Australian days (Woodward, F., *Portrait of Jane - A life of Lady Franklin*,( London 1951), p. 208). Sir John Franklin had been Governor of Tasmania between 1836 and 1843.

[35] S.P.R.I., Ms. 248/240, Unpublished Journal of Sarah Cracroft 1849 , p. 34.

[36] Edmondston, A. *A View of the Ancient and Present state of the Zetland Isles.* (Edinburgh 1809), Vol. II, p. 141.

[37] P.P., Cd. 555-1 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 397-399.

[38] Op. cit., p. 32, q. 1645.

[39] P.P., Cd., 555, 1872 Truck Inquiry, (Thule Print edition), p. 48 & 49.

[40] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 45, q. 2246 & 2247.

[41] P.P., Cd. 555, 1872 Truck Inquiry, (Thule Print edition), p. 49.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 179 -186.

[45] P.P., Cd. 4443, (1908), Minutes of Evidence taken before the Truck Committee Vol. II (days 1-37), p. 139.

[46] P.P., Cd. 555, 1872 Truck Inquiry, (Thule Print edition), p. 31.

[47] Op. cit. p. 32.

[48] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 40. , q. 2095.

[49] Manson, T.J., *Lerwick during the last half century*, (revised edition, Lerwick 1991), p. 236.

[50] *The Shetland Times* 26/12/1885 and 10/4/1886. M. ROBERTSON 108

[51] Spence, C., *Arthur Laurenson, his letters etc.*, (London 1901), p. 21. M. ROBERTSON 108

[52] Smith, Brian, 'Shetland archives and sources of Shetland history', in *History Workshop*, (1977), p. 211.

[53] P.P., Cd. 555 1872 Truck Inquiry, (Thule Print edition), Vol. I, p. 56.

[54] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 50, q. 2390.

[55] P.P., Cd. 3980, (1884), Crofters and Cottars, Highlands and Islands of Scotland, p. 44 and 67

[56] Op.cit., p. 47 & 48.

[57] Dewey, C., 'Celtic agrarian legislation and the Celtic revival: Historicist implications of Gladstone's Irish and Scottish Land Acts 1870 - 1886', in *Past and Present*, no. 62 - 65, (1974), p. 62. Instead of reviving the highland township, Gladstone presferred the restoration of "customary" tenant rights on the Irish model .

[58] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), BT2/396.

[59] P.P., Cd. 3980, (1884), Crofters and Cottars, Highlands and Islands of Scotland, p.243.

[60] *Shetland Times*, 9/4/1887.

[61] P.P., Cd. 4443 (1908), Minutes of evidence taken before the Truck Committee, p. 142.

[62] *The Shetland Times* 21/5/1887.

[63] *The Shetland Times* 22/10/87.

[64] Ibid.

[65] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), Delting Truck Inquiry, HH1/848. Sheriff MacKenzie's summing up.
[66] *The Shetland Times*, 1/9/88.
[67] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), Delting Truck Inquiry, HH1/848. Evidence of Margaret Johnston.
[68] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), Delting Truck Inquiry, HH1/848.
[69] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), HH1/848, Sheriff-substitute MacKenzie's Report.
[70] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), HH1/848. Evidence of Peter Blance.
[71] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), HH1/848. This extract is taken from Sheriff Substitute MacKenzie's summing up of the inquiry.
[72] The 1887 Truck Amendment Act was referred to locally as 'Sheriff Thom's Act'. This information is from Cd. 4443, (1908), p. 394.
[73] S.R.O. (W.R.H.),HH1/848 Comments of Scottish Secretary (unnamed) in accompanying Scottish Office papers, dated 12/12/1888.
[74] S.R.O. (W.R.H.),HH1/848 Delting Truck Inquiry. Evidence of Ellen Clark, knitter.
[75] *The Shetland Times* 26/5/1888.
[76] "The Long Island, and particularly Harris, had long been known for the excellence of the weaving done there. Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, the cloth was produced mainly for home use or for a purely local market. In 1844 the Earl of Dunmore directed some of the weavers in Harris to copy the Murray tartan in "tweed", and the result was so successful that he adopted it for his keepers... besides using it for his own use. It was seen that a material could be produced for which an outside sale might be hoped, and Lady Dunmore devoted much time and thought to the introducing of the tweed to her friends, and then to improving the process of production". (Munro, Lewis. *Scottish Home Industries*, Dingwall 1895. p. 68 & 69).
[77] S.A. D6/292/6. Extract from *The Scotsman* in E.S. Reid Tait Collection. This Repository was closed in 1899 as it was felt that it had succeeded in counteracting the effects of the barter system by affording Shetland knitters a suitable outlet for their sales with the regular receipt of money for their hosiery. During its fifteen years the Repository enjoyed the prestige of the Countess of Aberdeen as its Patron, with the Earl of Moray, Dr. John Moir, and Mrs Jessie Saxby and others, on its committee of management.
[78] *The Shetland Times* 26/5/1888.
[79] *The Shetland Times* 1/5/1886.
[80] *Womanhood*, Vol. 4, March 1899, p. 288.
[81] *Kensington Weekly Advertiser and Society Journal*, March 26 1890; *Camberwell Morning Post* from Shetland Archives D1/134; Robertson, M., *Sons and Daughters of Shetland* (Lerwick 1992) p. 34. Both the *Kensington Weekly Advertiser* ... and *The Camberwell Morning Post*, depict Margaret Colvin as rather a vain social climber in their sarcastically written reports, and it is likely that Margaret Colvin used her energies against truck to further her own social standing.
[82] *Womanhood*, Vol. I, March 26 1899, p. 286.
[83] Ibid..
[84] Manson, T. *Lerwick during the last half century (1871-1917)*. Reprinted by Lerwick Community Council, 1991, p. 118.
[85] *Mansons' Shetland Almanac*, 1893.
[86] Ibid.
[87] P.P., Cd. 4443, (1908), Minutes of Evidence taken before the Truck Committee, Vol. II. (days 1 -37).
[88] P.P., Cd. 4442, 4443, 4444, (1908), Minutes of Evidence taken before the Truck Committee.
[89] *The Scotsman* 20/1/1909.
[90] P.P., Cd. 4443 (1908), Minutes of Evidence taken before the Truck Committee, Vol. II, p 118.
[91] Op. cit. p. 135.
[92] Op. cit., p. 118.
[93] P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, p. 42.

[94] S.R.O. (W.R.H.),HH1/848 Letter from Miss J. Cochrane to Mrs. Tennant, dated 6/1/1909.
[95] *The Scotsman* 20/1/1909.
[96] P.P., Cd. 4443, (1908), Minutes of Evidence taken before the Truck Committee, p.118.
[97] Op. cit., 168.
[98] Flinn, D., *Travellers in a bygone Shetland - an anthology*, (Edinburgh 1989), p. 226. Professor Flinn takes this passage from the Captain Craigie's diary. Captain Craigie arrived in Lerwick in 1847 as Resident Inspector for the Central Board. It was his duty to oversee the distribution of relief work and meal.
[99] P.P., Cd. 7564 (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, 1914. Dr. Scott had been promoted to professor by the time the report was published.
[100] Op. cit., p. 91.
[101] *The Scotsman* 20/1/1909.
[102] P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on the Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, p. 92.
[103] P.P., Cd. 8282, (1915), 4th Report of Board of Agriculture for Scotland, 31 December 1915, p. lviii.
[104] Ibid.
[105] S.R.O. (.W.R.H.), AF42/7902.
[106] Ibid.
[107] The formation of the Shetland Hand Knitters Association, its constitution etc. is fully covered in Chapter 6. Shetland Archives have some information in D1/76 file.
[108] Mitchell, I., Johnson, A., Coghill, I., (editors), *Living Memory* (Lerwick, 1986), p. 23.
[109] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), SEP12/30, "Some impressions on the Shetland Woollen Industry", prepared by Major the Hon. Robert Bruce of the Crofter Woollen Industries Committee of the Scottish Council on Industry - October 1944.

Earliest extant example of Shetland lace knitting c.1837.

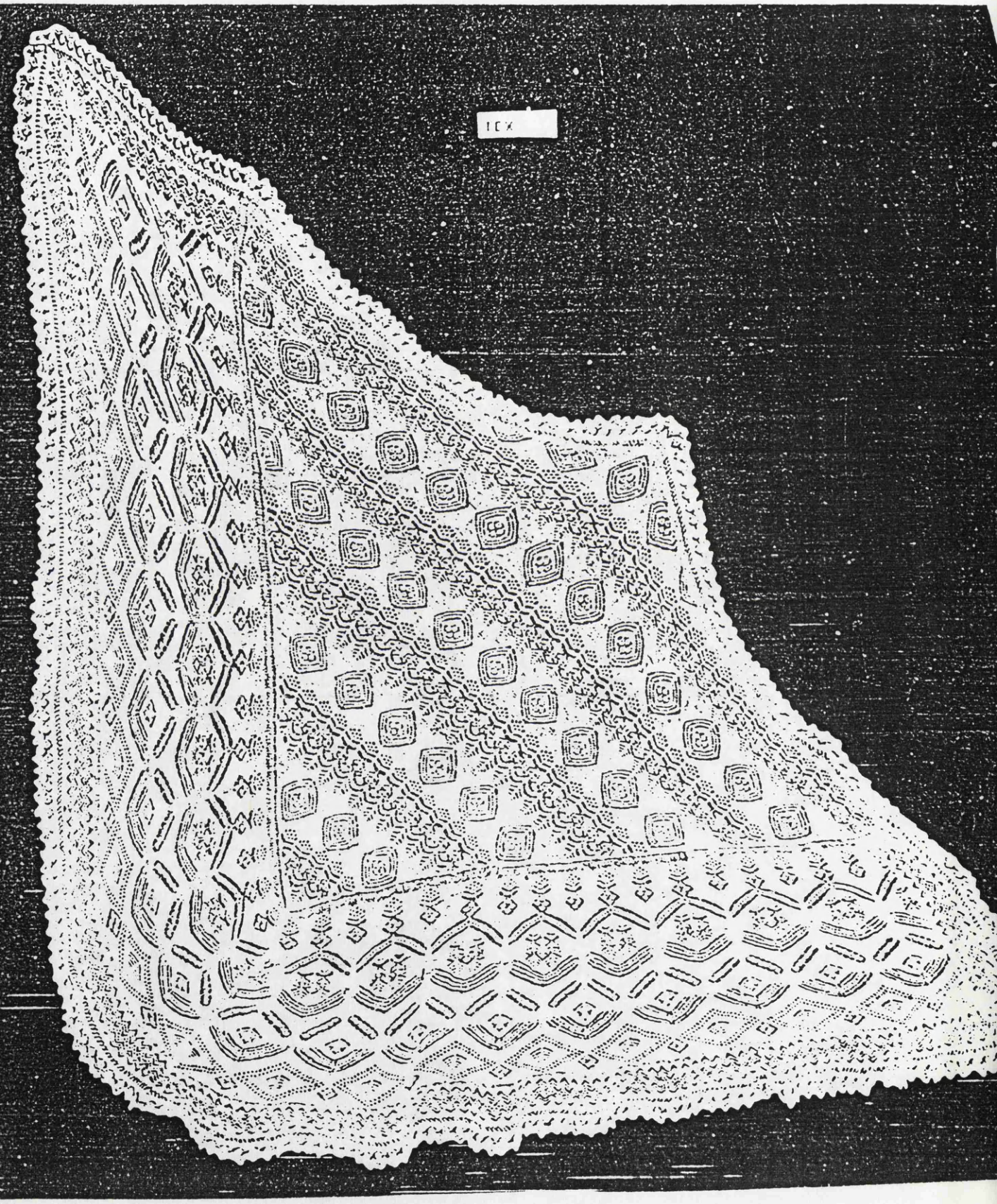


Fig. 4.1.
(Source: Shetland Museum, Lerwick)

Chapter 4.

## The origin and development of Shetland Lace.

Fig. 4.1 is a photograph of what is believed to be the earliest extant example of Shetland lace knitting. This three-cornered shawl is reputed to have been worn by John Bruce of Sumburgh at his christening on the 4th of June 1837[1]. It was knitted from extremely fine hand-spun native wool and, although less intricate than those of a later date, is a representative example of nineteenth century Shetland lace knitting. Strictly speaking, the term Shetland lace is a misnomer[2]; a more correct term would be Shetland open-work. However, the beauty, delicacy, and artistry of Shetland lace, surely justifies the use of the word lace. As previous chapters have shown, Shetland lace was unknown at the beginning of the period under study, not emerging until c.1840.

The failure of Shetland's long established stocking trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century[3] led to widespread hardship, exacerbated by poor harvests at sea and on land, so that by the time the Poor Law Commissioners visited Shetland in 1843, many people were found to be destitute. And it was during this prolonged period of extreme want and lack of alternative employment for knitters that Shetland lace emerged. This emergence was due to benevolently minded individuals who sought to help knitters fill the economic vacuum left by the stagnation in the stocking trade, by encouraging them to adapt their skills to produce this highly fashionable open work.

### Origin.

Many writers have attempted to pin-point the origin of Shetland lace knitting; most accounts have been incomplete, whilst others have been inaccurate or improbable. For example, James Norbury (1904-72), a television lecturer and pioneer in travelling to discover local knitting traditions, stated authoritatively in his book *Traditional Knitting Patterns*:

> In the early years of the nineteenth century a Mrs Jessie Scanlon visited Shetland, taking with her a collection of hand-made laces she had acquired during the Grand Tour. The Hunter family of Unst, who were very excited about these laces, developed a technique for copying them in hand knitting. The work of the family became famous, and one of the earliest lace

> shawls they knitted was presented to Queen Victoria in the early years of her reign[4].

This account may be true but it is unsubstantiated by source material and James Norbury, an enthusiastic but untrained researcher, had a reputation for "drawing broad conclusions from slender evidence"[5]. Mrs Jessie Scanlon's name fails to crop up in any of the more reliable accounts of the origin of Shetland lace written in the nineteenth century, whether by Shetlanders or outsiders. However, in fairness to Norbury, there was a Hunter family living in Unst who became well known for their lace knitting and Queen Victoria was presented with gifts of fine knitting in 1837. It seems most likely that the secondary source on which James Norbury based his assumption that it was the Hunter family who had created Shetland lace, was taken from *A Treasury of Knitting Patterns:*

> The Mrs Hunter who originated this pattern was a member of the famous Hunter family of the Isle of Unst, the most northerly of the Shetland Islands. The Hunters began and developed the art of Shetland lace knitting and have created lace shawls for the British Royal Family from the time of Queen Victoria to the present[6].

Insufficient evidence makes it difficult to assess the extent of this family's contribution to the origin of Shetland lace. Lack of primary evidence would suggest that Norbury resorted to some convenient guess work to paint a romantic picture for his viewers and readers. Unfortunately, for lack of research into the origin of Shetland lace, his work is still referred to, and so the 'Jessie Scanlon myth' is perpetuated.

Undoubtedly the most reliable, semi-contemporary account of the origin of Shetland lace, is to be found in Dr Robert Cowie's *Shetland*, first published in 1871[7]. This account is somewhat of a conundrum, but unravelled, basically tells the following story: Samuel Laing, parliamentary candidate for Orkney and Shetland, whilst visiting Shetland in 1833, stayed in Lerwick as the guest of Mr Charles Ogilvy, partner in Hay and Ogilvy. Mr Laing's daughter later sent Mr Ogilvy's infant son a christening cap which she had knitted in open-work in fine Lille thread. This christening cap was much admired and subsequently copied by a lady related to the family, who also knitted a pair of mitts in a similar style. This same lady in 1837, made a fine invalid cap for Mr Frederick Dundas, then M.P. for the county. Mr Dundas, when in

# The First Shetland Shawl.

I stood on a cliff, while the Eastern beam
Shot forth o'er the sea its liquid gold stream;
I watched as the shadows awoke from their dream,
And fled from the glance of the waters' bright gleam.
Silence reigned o'er the deep—the Storm-wave slep't,
While Ripples alone had their vigils kept;
And now in the gold of the morning they dip't
Their feet, while along the dark rocks they trip't.
In vain did I listen for Ocean's old Hymn,
There seemed a brief pause in that PSALM OF TIME;
Yet Ripples kept chanting a silvery chime
That awoke infant echoes in dark rocks sublime.

Yet a strain of sweeter flow
On my ear is falling now—
'Tis the Mermaid's voice, I know,
Singing matins soft and low.
See her sit wild cliffs between,
Image of an Ocean Queen,—
Brow of pearl and locks of green,
Radiant in the morning sheen.
See her take her finest ball
Spun in deep-sea *Coral-Hall*,
And with pearly fingers small
Knitting the *First Shetland Shawl*.
Knitting "Wave," and "Pearl," and "Shell"
(Long she'd known these patterns well),
While her song, "The Ocean Swell,"
Held my ear with magic spell.
Swift these pearly fingers play,
Weaving threads from morning's ray,
Dyed in colours fresh and gay
From the rainbows of the spray.
Swiftly now, and swifter still,
In the richest patterns fill—
With the "Wave," the "Pearl," and "Shell,"
Weave the "Diamond," "Branch," and "Bell."
Now, in Robe of pearly hue,
On the rock she stood to view,
Near, the wondering fishes drew,
And on wing the sea-birds flew,
Yielding each the homage due.

But a Sea Nymph rode on a gilded cloud
To meet the sun as he rose from the flood,
And, envious, she the Mermaid viewed
As Queen of the Sea in her Robe so proud;
And downward she flew, and upward she drew
From Mermaid's shoulders the mantle new.
The Mermaid then raised a dolorous cry;
The Nymph, unheeding, and bounding high,
Did over the crags and the mountains fly,
Displaying her trophy to earth and to sky.
The Mermaid then blew her *Enchantress' Shell*,
And followed the Nymph with her deadliest spell.
Paralysis seizing her, down she fell,
And drop't her robe on a heathery dell.

A Thulean maiden, with surprise,
Saw the bright thing descend the skies;
And as she gazed with wondering eyes,
She flew to seize the matchless prize.

*P.S.*—Thule's daughters, great and small,
Thank your stars for this wind-fall;
But you should acknowledge all,
*Mermaid* knitted the *First Shawl*.

LERWICK, *August*, 1868. R. S.

Fig. 4.2.
(Source: S.A., D6/292/24)

Shetland is reputed to have shown this cap to his Lerwick landlady and encouraged her to get the younger knitters to imitate the fine work in knitted shawls. This however, met with no success. The story continues that Mr Edward Standen, a merchant from Oxford, whilst travelling in the islands in 1839, saw a shawl being knitted by 'the above-mentioned lady' and on his return to Lerwick, mentioned it to the person he was lodging with and encouraged her to get other knitters to follow suit, thus "giving a fresh impetus to the fine-knitting of Shetland"[8]. And it was from this point that Shetland lace knitting became recognised in its own right. This account, albeit rather confusing, is undoubtedly more plausible than credit being given to an unknown Mrs Scanlon, or even to a mermaid as the poem *The First Shetland Shawl* suggests (fig. 4.2)[9]. Furthermore, contemporary writers like Rampini and others, and twentieth century Scottish Office files, refer to Dr Cowie's account of the origin of Shetland lace and presumably would not have done so unless they felt it was of a trustworthy nature[10].

In an interview Miss Ida Sandison, summer time resident of Unst, and descendant of the Edmonstons of Buness, Unst, claimed that her great grandmother, Mrs Eliza Edmondston, had taught local women this art, copied from the lace in her trousseau[11]. This explanation seems unlikely, when in *The Home of a Naturalist*, Mrs Edmondston's daughter, Mrs Jessie Saxby, mentioned that her mother's trunk, containing all her wedding garments, had gone to the bottom of the sea in a storm in Lerwick harbour[12]. In a letter dated 21/4/1928 to a Mrs. L.D. Henry, Jessie Saxby claimed that Shetland lace knitting began in 1832 when "My mother - at the suggestion of a gentleman friend - began the lace work and taught it to the women"[13]. However, Mrs Eliza Edmondston (1784-1869), or in the Shetland tradition of keeping one's maiden name, Mrs Eliza MacBrair, in her book *Sketches and Tales of Shetland*, makes no such claim and herself gives a very plausible explanation as to how Shetland lace evolved:

> ...the open work knitting now so attractive to the poor artists, as to the public, is an invention for which the Shetland females themselves deserve all credit. From the simplest beginnings , led on and encouraged by some ladies as a pastime, it has progressed from one thing to another, till it has attained its present celebrity, without the aid either of pattern book, or of

> other instruction than the diligence and taste of the natives themselves[14].

Nor is there any reference to Mrs MacBrair having taught local girls to knit fine lace in either Lady Jane Franklin's or her niece Sophia Cracroft's, journals written during their visit to Shetland in 1849[15]. These chatty journals are full of domestic issues - Sarah Cracroft's containing a wealth of information on Shetland knitting. It would seem most probable that Mrs Eliza MacBrair, with whom Lady Franklin and her niece stayed in Unst, would have mentioned her connection with lace knitting, especially as she produced fine open-work to show Lady Franklin and gave her some "very pretty mittens etc. for sale to benefit a few"[16].

Whilst it would appear that Mrs Eliza MacBrair cannot be credited with having 'invented' Shetland lace knitting, she deserves much credit, as her daughter states in her small book *Shetland Knitting,* for "being influential in encouraging and instructing knitters in fine lace work"[17], for her work in publicising the plight of Shetland knitters, and for making the public aware of the beautiful knitted products of these islands. This she did through her pen, hoping that it "... may inlist some kindly heart and generous hand in the patronage of the most northerly of the British Isles"[18]. Her two main works were, *Sketches and Tales of Shetland* and *The Poor Knitters of Shetland*; the former published in 1856 and the latter under the name 'A Lady Resident'[19] in 1861. In *The Poor Knitters of Shetland* reference is made to a visitor coming to the islands in 1838, who suggested that shawls and handkerchiefs, with a few open work stitches as a variety would likely be marketable and remunerative:

> The idea was eagerly embraced and some ladies leading the way, one pattern after another was tried and adopted, long before pattern books ever reached this latitude, till gradually the combination of stitches and patterns reached its present perfection [20].

The visitor may have been the Oxford merchant, Edward Standen or Frederick Dundas M.P.

The gradual emergence of Shetland lace with "some ladies leading the way", rather than its origin being attributed to a single person or date, seems likely, as throughout Scotland in the nineteenth century, it was customary for fine knitting to be undertaken as a pastime by the female members of the leisured classes. Shetland was no exception. A hand

written journal by an unknown author, written in the year 1832, and entitled *An excursion to the Shetland Islands* referred to the fine stockings knitted in Shetland:

> The finest fabrics are generally the handiwork of daughters of the ministers, or people in a respectable station, who having nothing wherewith to occupy their spare time...not infrequently employ it in this way; and woollen work of the finest kind is equal in texture and smoothness of appearance to silk.[21]

It was around 1835 that this pastime became a fashionable craze among English and Scottish ladies. This popularity was reflected in the introduction of the first written knitting patterns or 'recipes' to appear on the market. In Scotland, Jane Gaugin of George Street Edinburgh, was the first to have printed privately in 1836, three knitting recipes for friends[22]. Next came her 'Small work on fancy work', published in 1837[23], which was followed by several other new recipes and numerous reprints[24]. These attractive hard backed books with a few colour prints and illustrations, were published by "I.J. Gaugain - Foreign and British depot of Berlin patterns and materials for ladies fancy work, 63 George Street, Edinburgh and Ackermann & Co., London"[25]. A recipe for "A handsome Shetland square knit shawl", complete with laundry instructions, was included in her 1842 *A Lady's Assistant for executing useful and fancy designs in knitting , netting and crochet work* [26]. Whilst Shetland knitters did not follow written knitting patterns, but knitted their patterns from memory, with their highly developed skills in fine knitting, it would have been relatively easy for the ladies of the upper classes to copy stitch patterns from the work of their Edinburgh friends. Shetland's close ties with Edinburgh were further strengthened by the custom of the better-off sending their children , including daughters, to school in Edinburgh[27]. In addition, some Edinburgh families, like Mrs A. Traill who summered in Fetlar for health reasons, migrated from the city to summer in Shetland[28].

It is disappointing that there is no mention of lace knitting in the *New Statistical Account* (NSA) or the 1843 Poor Law Inquiry - although the latter contains many references to knitting[29] - as this would help to pin-point the date when Shetland lace emerged. The following extract taken from *The Poor Knitters of Shetland*, published in 1861, stated:

> Until within the last 15 or 20 years, knitting for sale in these islands was confined to stockings and seamen's coarse frocks; the remainder of the wool was home-made into blankets and stuffs for common wear. It is now found more profitable to purchase Manchester and Leeds made cloths, and manufacture for sale the native wool into all sorts of delicate fabrics suited to the invalid - the noble - the lovely - and the wealthy benevolent [30].

In 1851, William Baillie Mackenzie, hosiery merchant and importer of Shetland lace, at 126 Princes Street, Edinburgh, stated in his entry in the *Great Exhibition Catalogue:*

> Knitting is the chief employment of the female inhabitants of these isles in their own homes. Stockings have been made there from a very ancient period; but the fanciful knitting comprising shawls, etc. is of a recent introduction [31].

This dating of around 1840 for the emergence of Shetland lace knitting can be verified finally from evidence given by, Arthur Laurenson, chief partner in Laurenson & Co., before the 1872 Truck Inquiry: "It was about 1840 or 1841 that the making of shawls began to get very common here"[32]. It was shawls which were knitted initially in Shetland lace.

**Edward Standen.**

Edward Standen - mentioned in Dr. Cowie's account of the origin of Shetland lace - made a brief but vital contribution to the story of Shetland lace knitting. Like many of the stories surrounding the origin of Shetland lace, his is rather involved, nor is it without a few queries. The bulk of reliable information on Edward Standen is to be found in his small treatise on the Shetland Islands, published posthumously in 1845[33]. The introduction to this work, written by a friend of the family, referred to Edward Standen's keen interest in helping Shetland knitters. When visiting the islands in 1844, he had been the only survivor in a boating accident, which had however, left him weak. The following year, feeling it his Christian duty to return to Shetland, as God had spared him from drowning, he caught pneumonia and died at Sandlodge[34]. The front piece of Edward Standen's published treatise is entitled *A Paper on the Shetland Islands, read at the opening of the Devonport Mechanics Institute, when an exhibition was made of choice specimens of Shetland knitting.* In his text, Edward Standen referred to the home spun yarn

# MRS. EDWARD STANDEN,

## No. 28, HIGH STREET,

## OXFORD,

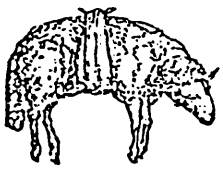
Desires to acknowledge with gratitude, the kind support which her Establishment has received since the decease of her late Husband. She begs to remind her Friends, that the

## SHIRT - MAKING

branch of her business is under the superintendence of Mr. T. NICHOLLS, late of the firm of W. & T. Nicholls, St. James' Street, London. From his great experience in this department and in the

## GENTLEMEN'S MERCERY

trade in general, she can with much confidence undertake, that in quality of make and material, combined with moderate prices, the greatest satisfaction will be afforded to her customers



## SHETLAND

## KNITTED GOODS

Of every description, wholesale and retail. Shawls, Scarfs, Stockings, Socks, Mittens, Under-clothing for Ladies' and Gentlemen's use, and all other Goods of this Manufacture, so successfully introduced by the late Mr. STANDEN.

Fig. 4.3.
(Source: S.A., SA2/59)

used in these examples as competing with, and surpassing, that spun by the finest machines and to the knitwear as "...showing so great a variety of patterns in fancy work, and such exquisite knitting in plain work"[35].

The queries in the Edward Standen story are as follows: Firstly, was he a hosiery merchant when he first visited the islands in 1839, or a dealer in Shetland ponies as *The New Shetlander*[36] stated, or as a friend of Arthur Anderson[37], who was involved in the Shetland Fishery Company at Vaila, was he in some way connected with the fish trade? Secondly, whatever his reasons for visiting Shetland, why was he giving a paper and exhibiting hand knitted Shetland articles at a Mechanics Institute? Presumably he held the work of these remotest of all islanders in high esteem and was using their example to encourage other unfortunates to greater things. Thirdly, was the Standen & Co., which exhibited fine Shetland lace at the Great Exhibition in 1851[38], his company? Unfortunately there is a dearth of documented evidence to provide answers to these questions. Fig. 4.3 shows his widow advertising as trading at 28, High Street, Oxford, but does not mention a warehouse at Jermyn Street, London. However, an article in *The Shetland Times*, dated 16/10/1909, referred to Joseph H. Standen - one of Standen's eight sons - having visited Shetland, and went on to describe him, as in business at the time of his father's death (1845) in the firm of 'Standen & Co.' Edward Standen's friendship with Arthur Anderson, may provide many of the clues in filling in these missing links. In 1837 Arthur Anderson suggested to a few Shetland knitters that they made some hosiery to be presented to the newly crowned Queen Victoria. This suggestion was followed up and Arthur Anderson personally presented both the Queen and the Duchess of Kent with some very fine hosiery. Queen Victoria responded handsomely by placing an order for one dozen pairs of stockings and requested that she be billed for them[39]. Possibly, as a result of encouragement from Arthur Anderson, Edward Standen started importing hosiery from Shetland.

It is apparent from his treatise that he was a deeply religious man, and therefore it may have been that, whilst travelling through the Shetland Islands on whatever business, he became aware of both the plight of the knitters in the hard times of the 1830s and 40s, and of the commercial viability of their handiwork, and felt it his Christian duty to help these

A Russian lace shawl c.1987.

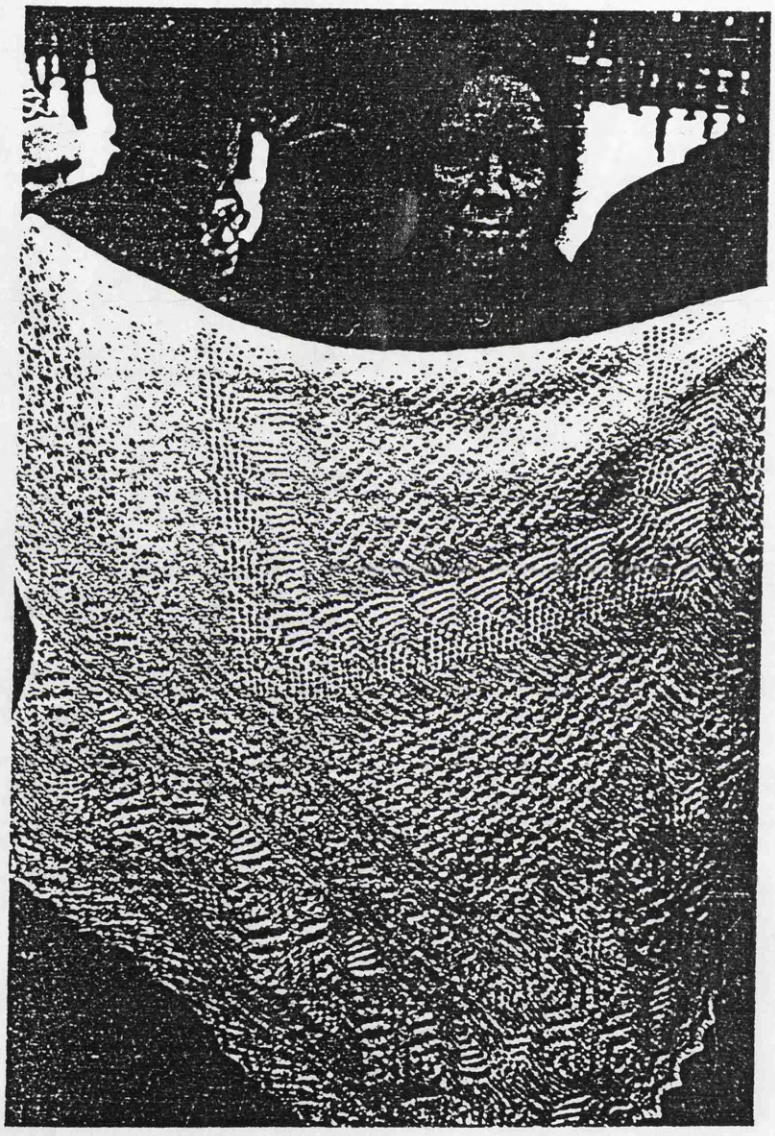


Fig. 4.4.
(Source: Dr. S. Hovmuller, Stockholm)

people by marketing their work in the south. It was this introduction to the London market which was responsible for spreading the fame of Shetland lace and in creating a demand for this fine lace work:

> ...and by introducing the goods into the London market, was the means of converting what had been for a few years previously followed as a pastime, by a few amateurs, into an important branch of industry, affording employment to a large proportion of the female population of the islands[40].

Standen's contribution to the story of Shetland lace was admirably summed up in the introduction to his book:

> It is, indeed, to his enterprise and energy that the public are indebted for the introduction into England of a comparatively unknown article of manufacture; whilst the inhabitants of Shetland owe to his sound judgement and honourable liberality, the development of resources with which they had been hither to unacquainted, but which have already proved of incalculable benefit to them...[41].

Thus the origin of Shetland lace can be attributed to an evolutionary development fostered by benevolently-minded Shetland ladies, who wishing to alleviate the distress of destitute knitters in the hard times of the 1830s, helped them to adapt their skills, turning this subsistence activity into a highly marketable product; whilst, the emergence of Shetland lace c.1840 on the southern market, can be attributed to the happy coincidence of Edward Standen's visits to Shetland. Without Edward Standen's contribution, Shetland lace is unlikely to have ever reached such fame, but more importantly, such constant demand for Shetland lace on the southern markets, acted as a stabilising force helping to stave off destitution, unemployment and rural depopulation.

**The origin of Shetland lace patterns.**

Many of the stitch patterns used in Shetland lace knitting like, Madeira stitch, Madeira cascade (also called old Spanish lace pattern) and others, are of Spanish origin and it is tempting to assume that there may have been some connection with Spain and Portugal, particularly, as Spain was regarded as the home of the finest white knitting in the world. As Shetland travellers and merchants sailing to America would have made their last stop at Madeira before picking up the trade winds necessary for the voyage across the Atlantic, it is tempting to draw some

A Russian lace shawl.

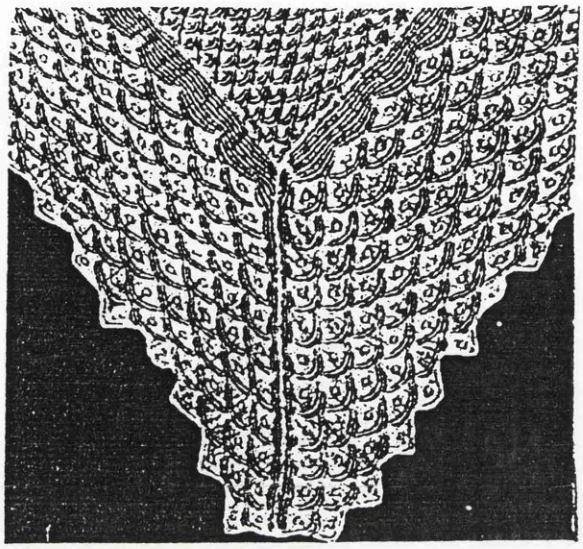


Fig. 4.5.
(Source: Compton, R - 1983)

A shawl from the Azores.

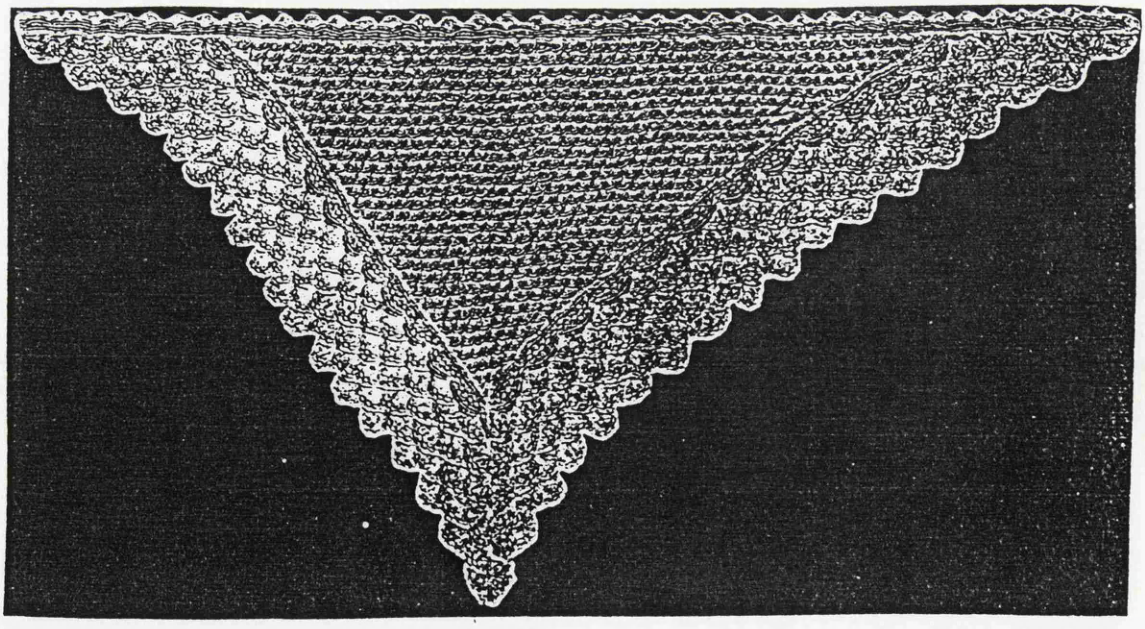


Fig. 4.6.
(Source: Rutt, R. - 1987)

connection. However, there is no evidence to verify this supposition. Mrs MacBrair, in fact tried to make this connection herself, but without success. She mentioned having looked into this channel for possible connections with Madeira, Germany, and Malta but asserted:

> We are, indeed, aware, that in Madeira, Germany, Malta, etc., very fine specimens of knitting in cotton and silk thread are produced; but after making every possible enquiry, we cannot make out, that they were in advance of the Shetlanders in the invention of the art[42].

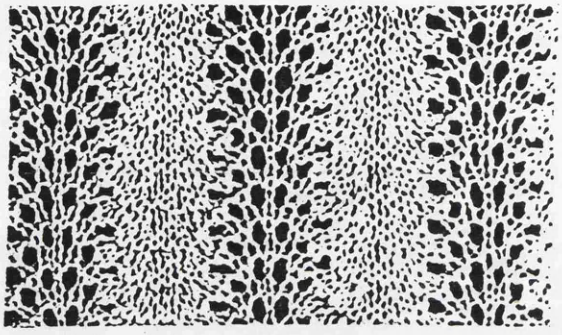
It is interesting that there may be a link with Russia. Jessie Saxby mentions having seen a Russian shawl exactly like Shetland lace in the Edinburgh Museum and interestingly states, "No doubt the work was known in England but not in our Isles before 1832"[43]. A shawl offered for sale in a Moscow market in 1988 (fig. 4.4) is knitted in a very similar in style and design to a Shetland lace shawl - the Russians also have the same tradition of passing the shawl through a wedding ring[44]. The origin of this type of knitting in Russia, is thought to have come from the Volga-Deutsch in the eighteenth century[45]. Furthermore, a beautiful lace shawl, exhibited in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and knitted in the Shetland style, is attributed to Russian origin - fig. 4.5 - and is extremely similar to fig. 4.6, which was knitted in vegetable fibre in the Azores. This similarity adds to the difficulty of trying to pin-point the origin of a particular type of knitting, and the cases of duplication from different parts of the world, shows the wary approach which must be taken when tracing the spread of knitting.

Several references have already been made to the fact that Shetland knitters never wrote down their patterns. Their work was frequently referred to as 'growing under their hands'. Dr. Robert Cowie, remarked that many of the peasant girls displayed great artistic talent in the invention and arrangement of patterns, which were formed "out of their own heads"[46], with the knitter often having no preconceived idea as to the stitch patterns to be used in the finished article. In her journal, Sophia Cracroft mentioned being told by a Mrs. Williamson of Hillswick, that:

> the women follow the most intricate patterns by recollection merely, and without any written directions. Some of them invent designs of which there are immense variety[47].

Two traditional Shetland lace knitting patterns.

'Old Shale'



'Print o' Waves'

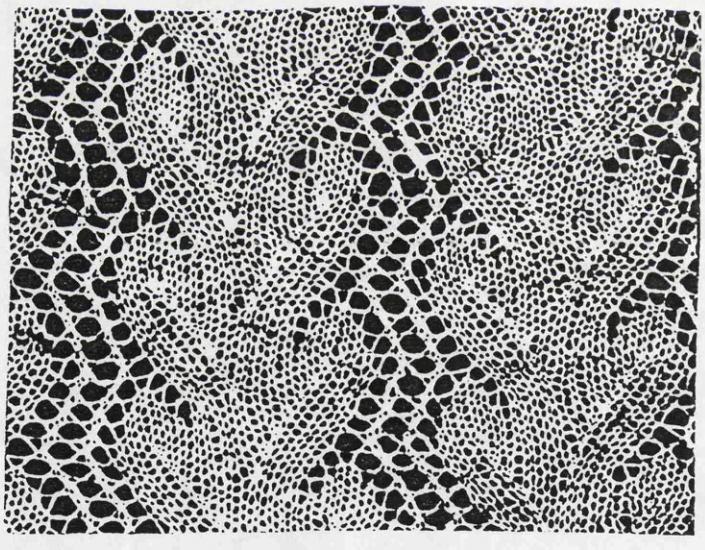


Fig. 4.7.

Inevitably, when meeting together knitters would 'swap' patterns[48]. Not only did Shetland knitters use no pattern books, but they knitted with great speed.

> Their fingers move, with a rapidity their eye can scarcely follow, over the most complicated patterns, with no rule but memory and minute attention[49].

Girls learned to knit from an early age and would go through an unstructured and totally informal type of apprenticeship, picking up their skills from the older female members of the family. Patterns were handed down from mother to daughter, with possibly a little individuality added each time. Daughters would progress from plain to lace knitting. Mrs Joan Mouat of the Heritage Centre, Unst, and lace knitting gold medallist at the Royal Highland Show, related how girls would learn to knit lace by knitting the plain rows between the patterned ones and thus intuitively picking up this skill[50].

Looking at old examples of fine lace shawls it is still somewhat of an enigma as to how the artistry of the design and the arithmetical computations necessary to achieve this, were married together with such perfection. Throughout the nineteenth century, all but the very small number of women belonging to the professional and upper classes, lived in overcrowded, smoke-filled, inadequately lit hovels, without proper washing facilities or even a suitable place to store their delicate white lace work. Although many knitters had two pieces of knitting on the go at the one time - coarse socks which they worked at between times, and lace knitting which was done in the evenings[51] - it is difficult to imagine how Shetland women, with the constant demands on their time and whose labours perpetually soiled and roughened their hands, managed to produce these works of art. This point was mentioned in a lecture on Shetland Lace given by Mrs L.D. Henry in March 1931:

> ... if you could see the primitive houses in which these people live, the little buts and bens dotted here and there on scraps of cultivated land and clinging to the folds of the barren wind-swept mossland, you also would wonder how it was possible that such delicate wool as you see here to-day could have had its origin in such surroundings[52].

Bestway knitting pattern leaflet.

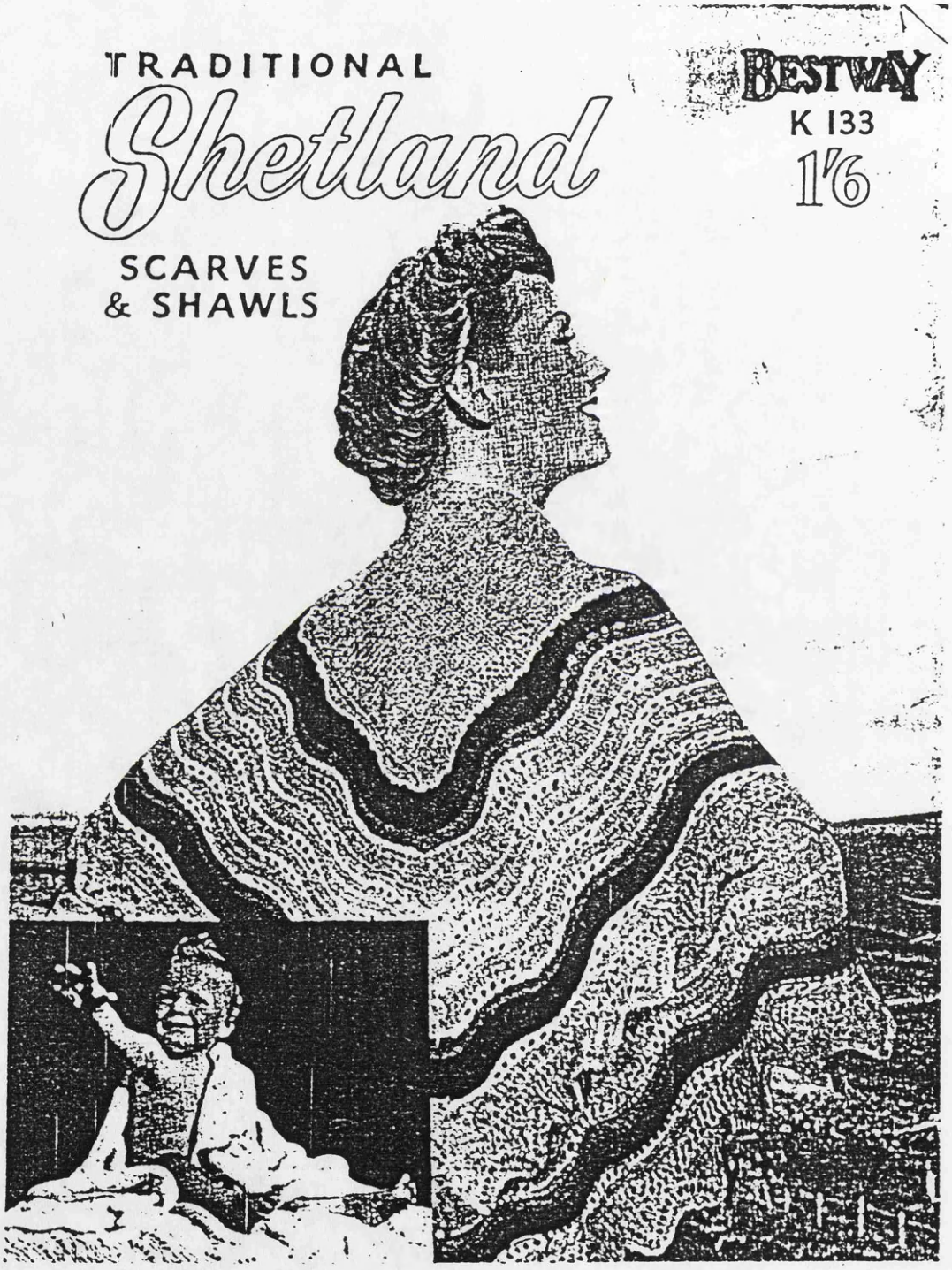



Fig. 4.8.

Shetland lace has a wealth of stitch patterns with names such as peerie flea, cat's paw, acre, leaf, the puzzle, and many, many more. Tradition has it that these patterns were inspired from nature, as for example, 'old shale' being formed by the motion of the waves on the sand, and 'print o' waves', by the turbulence of the sea (fig. 4.7). Many of these patterns have now been put into written pattern form by firms like Bestway (fig. 4.8) and Patons, to make them available to the general knitting public, although patterns are rarely used by Shetlanders themselves. The Hunter family, mentioned earlier in connection with James Norbury, worked in association with Patons, and were the first to write down Shetland lace patterns in a commercial form. Fig. 4.9 shows extracts from an old printed pattern by the Hunters, whilst fig. 4.10 illustrates 'Mrs Hunter's pattern'.

Mrs Hunter's pattern.

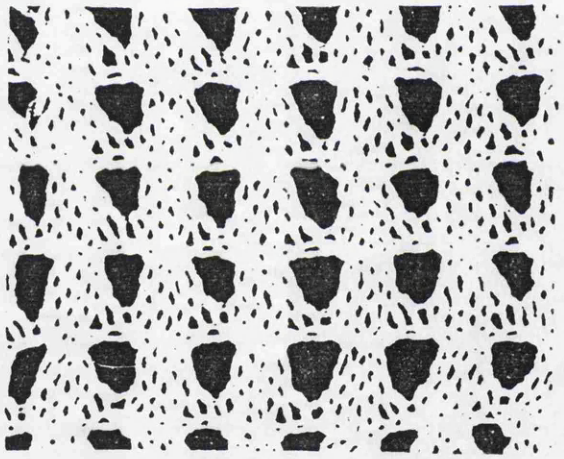


Fig. 4.10.

(Source: Walker, B - 1968)

Other names well known in connection with top quality lace spinning and knitting are the Sutherland family, the Jamieson sisters, and Mrs. Johnston, all of Unst.

**Location.**

Unst, the most northerly inhabited island in the Shetland archipelago, was the home of the very best lace knitting, as this was where the very best wool was grown[53]. Lerwick, was the Shetland Mainland centre for lace work[54]. Lerwick knitters however, never attained the same reputation for excellence as those of Unst. Sophia Cracroft noted this difference whilst staying in Unst with the Edmondstons:

We talked of the Shetland knitting which is said to be more

# KNITTED SHAWL

based on a traditional Shetland pattern and designed
by Mrs. A. Hunter of Unst

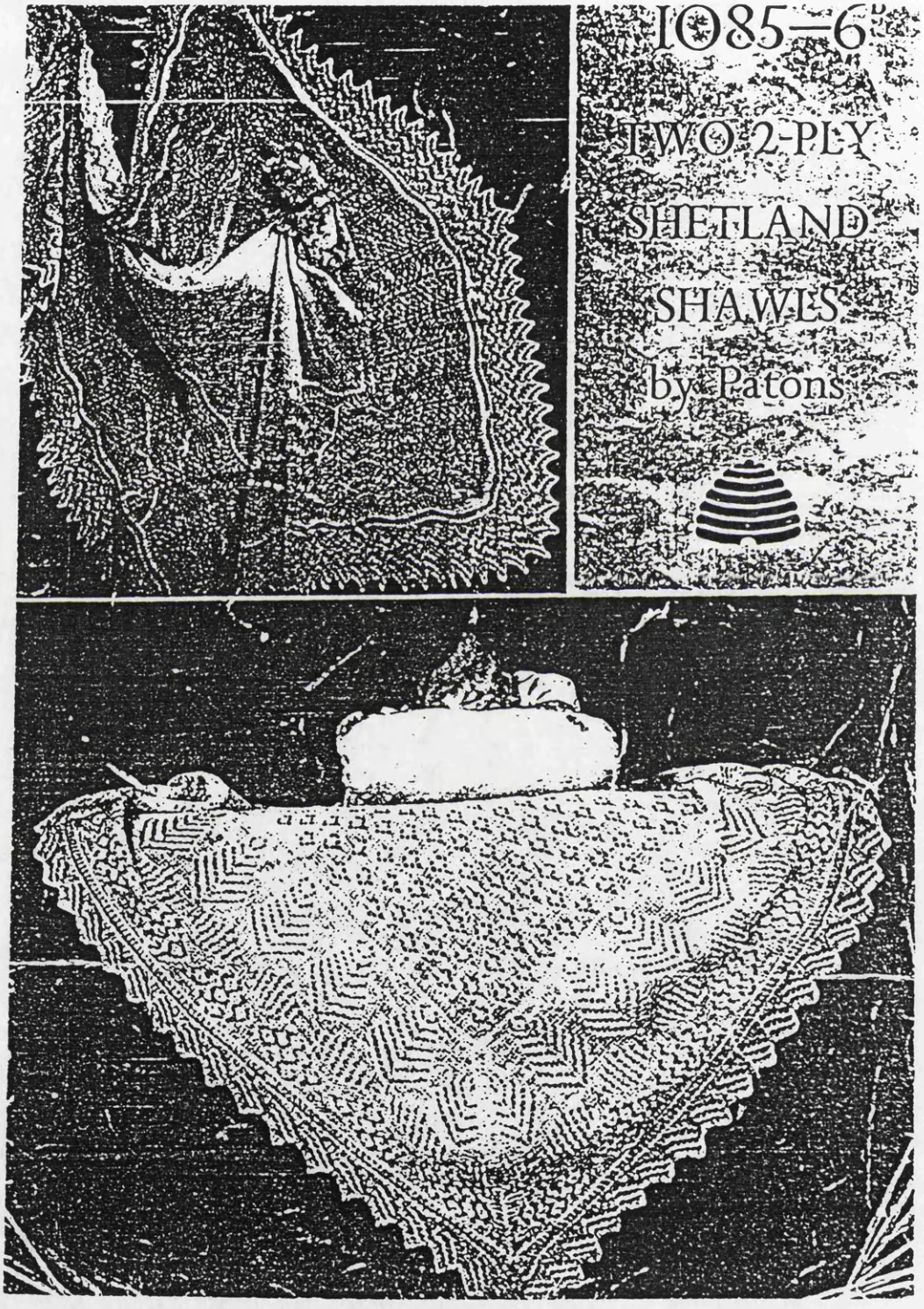



Fig. 4.9.

> beautiful in Unst than in any other part and some stuffs of exceeding beauty were shown to us and some bought by my Aunt. We now regret having spent so much money on shawls etc. in Lerwick where they are not so fine made as those made here[55].

Unst spinners were famed throughout Shetland for their superior skills[56]. The connection between Lerwick and Unst as the homes of the finest lacework, probably stems from several factors: The finest wool was grown and the finest lace worsted spun on Unst, whilst Lerwick was the marketing centre for lacework; the clearances from the north isles, meant that many homeless people came to Lerwick, where there being no alternative employment, they were forced to take up knitting, using their skills and wool connections with the north; and possibly because in the summer time, the more well-to-do families moved out of Lerwick and took up residence in the country, particularly Unst, which was regarded as the "Bath or Brighton of Shetland"[57], taking their knitting skills with them[58].

**Lace yarn.**

Shetland lace is knitted on 2 knitting needles or wires - Shetland knitters never used circular needles. Imported wires rather than home made wooden pins, were used for knitting Shetland lace. Wires had been used by Shetland knitters from at least the early 1800s, when Edmondston, referring to the manufacturies in Shetland, wrote in 1809 "the knitting of worsted stockings, caps and gloves, on wires, by the women, is amongst the most ancient"[59]. By the time of Lady Franklin's visit to Shetland in 1849, brass wires were being used as unlike steel wires, they did not rust[60]. Only the finest wool was used for lace worsted. It was plucked from around the neck and breast, and from behind the ears of the sheep. This wool, which has a very soft, silky feel and short staple, was sometimes combed rather than carded to separate the fibres before spinning, as it was felt that carding was too rough and would damage the delicate fibres. Before carding or combing, the wool was teased or lightly plucked to loosen the fibres. Both combing and carding were laborious, tiring and dirty operations. If carded, a pair of wooden wool cards* was used. The wool was lightly oiled, placed between the wool cards which were then gently drawn apart in opposite directions, thus separating the fibres. To avoid breaking the fine ends of the yarn, it was

necessary to draw the hands well apart; this was one of the most exhausting parts of the whole process of preparing the wool for spinning. Using the backs of the wool cards, the wool was then made into small rolls. This prepared wool was now ready for spinning.

Spinning, described in *Scottish Home Industries*, as "pretty, graceful work, but very tiring...the poor old women, who are the principal spinners, complain very much of aching backs and sides after a spell of it" [61], was carried out on old lint wheels or the upright Scotch or Norwegian-type spinning wheel. For fine lace yarn, two pirns* were filled, and these yarns twined together into lace worsted, reeled into hanks on a niddy-noddy* or upright wool winder, ready for knitting. Fine lace worsted was measured in cuts of 100 threads, rather than by weight - a thread being one turn of the niddy-noddy and approximately one yard long[62]. Writing in 1861, Mrs Edmondston noted that only a few people could spin from one ounce of raw wool, three thousand yards of thread, which being three-fold (that is made up of three plies), made nine thousand yards in all[63]. The spinning of very fine lace yarn - sometimes referred to as gossamer or cobweb yarn because of its fragility and delicacy - required great skill and patience and only a few could spin to such a high standard. At the time of the 1872 Truck Inquiry, Shetland wool was still being spun on the islands, but the number of spinners left who could spin fine worsted was dwindling and imported Scotch (also called Pyrenees) worsted, silk and black mohair were regularly being imported and used for lace knitting[64]. *The Old-Lore Miscellany of Orkney, Shetland, Caithness and Sutherland* of 1907 described cottage spinning as a lost art, and stated that spinning wheels had become no more than curiosities[65]. Hunter Bros., Wool Spinners, Sutherland, started up in 1907, and along with Pringle of Inverness, dealt with the vast bulk of the Shetland clip[66]. However, no machine has ever been able to card or spin fine Shetland wool to the same standard as an expert hand spinner, although these firms did produce a lace weight yarn.

**Knitted articles in Shetland Lace.**

Shetland lace knitting is most famous for its beautiful shawls. These varied in size, style, colour and construction, from very large square ones, which would be used folded over to form a double triangle, to

Three different types of Shetland shawls.

Fig. 4.12.
Crepe shawl.

Fig. 4.13.
Hap shawl.

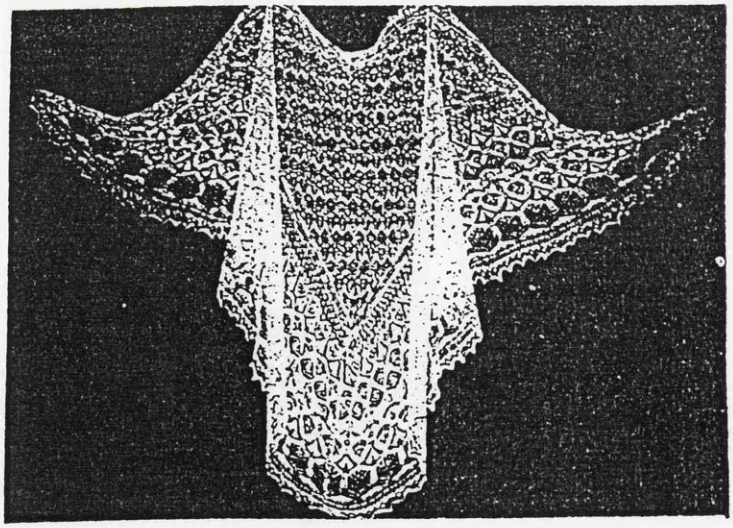


Fig. 4.11
'Cobweb' triangular Shetland shawl

(Source: Smith, M. and Bunyan, C. - 1991)

smaller three cornered ones, with white, grey or scarlet for general use, and black for mourning. Figs. 4.11- 4.13 show a variety of Shetland shawls. On average, it took approximately 6,000 threads of fine home spun worsted, weighing 2oz., to make a good sized fine lace shawl - often called 'wedding ring 'shawls, as they were so fine that they could be drawn through a wedding ring - whilst, a medium weight shawl required 4 - 5oz. of yarn[67]. These shawls were measured in scores, 23 score being a fairly large size. A score referred to the number of stitches and therefore a 23 score shawl would have 460 stitches on each side. Fig. 4.14 shows the ingenious technique used to create a seam-free square shawl. The knitter started with the lace edging. Approximately 10 stitches were cast on, and the lace edging knitted to the same length as the perimeter of the finished shawl. Once completed this edging was divided into quarters, and stitches picked up from each quarter to knit up the borders, which in turn formed the sides of the centre. The centre was then knitted in as shown in Fig. 4.14. By casting on only a very small number of stitches to start the lace edging, no harsh lines or seams were used which would have detracted from the shawls cobwebby perfection.

Crepe shawls have lace edges and borders but are knitted with a plain centre. Expert knitters felt that crepe shawls were as demanding on the knitter's skill as a fully patterned lace shawl, as considerable dexterity was required to knit the garter stitch centre in the perfect, even tension necessary to avoid irregularities. Hap shawls were generally knitted in two or three ply worsted, and traditionally had lace edgings, coloured borders and plain self-coloured centres. Although plainer than the one ply ring shawls, great skill was required in grading the natural colours used for the borders. Alice Grierson, in her report to the Scottish Home Industries Association c.1895, described the care and patience required to select, weigh out the wool in ounces, half-ounces, and quarter-ounces, before carding and spinning each shade separately, prior to knitting[68]. Hap shawls, incidentally, were the only type of lace work worn by local women, and even then their shawls would have been coarser than the ones knitted for export. As well as shawls, veils or clouds, neckties, falls, stoles, cloaks, opera cloaks or burnouses, wedding veils, trains for court dresses, ladies lace sleeves and stockings, and handkerchiefs were all knitted in Shetland lace. Veils, which to some

Construction of a Shetland lace shawl.

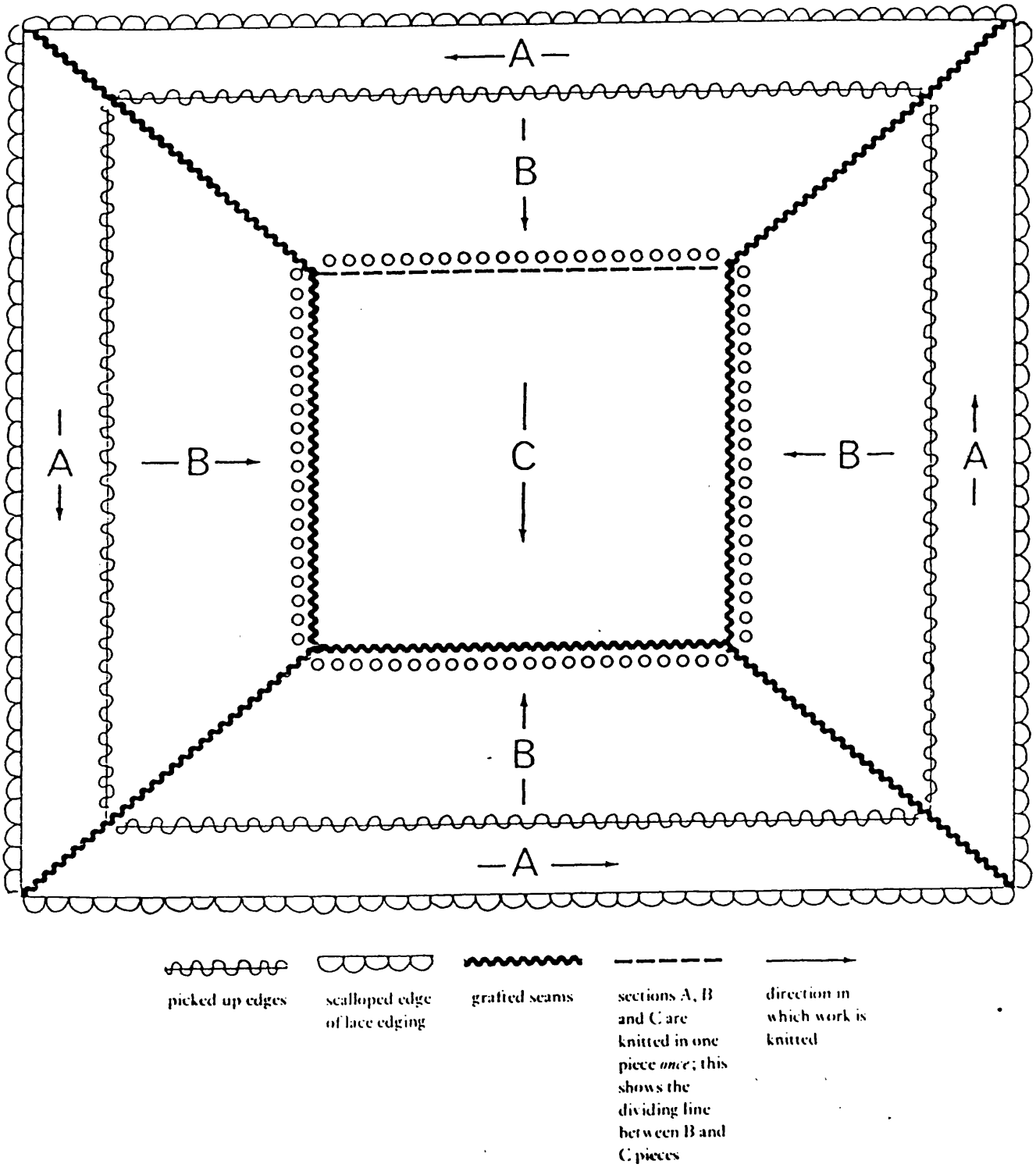



Fig. 4.14.
(Source: Don, S. - 1981)

extent superseded shawls after 1850[69], took approximately 1/2oz. of wool to knit.

Extracts from the 1851 Great Exhibition Catalogue.

142 MACKENZIE, WILLIAM BAILLIE, 126 *Prince's Street, Edinburgh*—Proprietor.

Articles knitted by the hand in the Shetland Islands, from the wool of their sheep.

Shawls; handkerchief; child's frock; veils of the natural-coloured wool; white and coloured gloves; ladies' white and coloured mitts; ladies' brown and white stockings, very fine wool; an extremely fine pair of stockings; natural-coloured socks; white knee-caps; brown leggings, natural colour; sleeves; ladies' caps; nightcaps; wigs; comforters, and shirt.

Specimen of Shetland yarn, handspun; and of the Shetland wool, as it is taken from the sheep.

Articles that are knitted in Fair Isle, one of the Shetland Islands.—Fair Isle socks, gloves, vest piece, comforter, and cap.

Shawls and veils, knitted by the hand in Shetland from a thread spun by machinery, composed of wool and silk together.

[Knitting is the chief employment of the female inhabitants of these isles in their own homes. Stockings have been made there from a very ancient period; but the fanciful knitting, comprising shawls, &c., is of recent introduction.]

174 LINKLATER, —, *Shetland Isles*—Producer.

Specimens of knitting peculiar to the Shetland Isles.

213A LERWICK LOCAL COMMITTEE, *Scotland*—Producers.

Specimens of knitting from the Shetland Isles.

217 WESTMINSTER, the Marchioness of.

Specimens of Shetland hand-knitting.

281 STANDEN & Co., 112 *Jermyn Street, St. James's*—Importers.

White Shetland knitted shawl. Bridal veil. Pair of white stockings. Brown, grey, and white gloves—natural colours. The Shetland wool of which these specimens consist is hand-spun.

Fig. 4.15.

(Source: Great Exhibition Catalogue, Vol. II, pp. 485, 499, 585,587 & 589)

Fig. 4.15 is made up of the extracts from the Great Exhibition Catalogue, and lists all entries which included Shetland lace exhibits - William Baillie Mackenzie's list being by far the most comprehensive. Whilst, fig. 4.16 shows the magnificent madder and ivory bridal veil displayed by Standen & Co., at the Great Exhibition in 1851. There is no record as to who knitted it, or how long it took, but judging by its large size, it must have taken many hundreds, if not thousands, of hours to knit[70].

## Earnings.

Despite the exquisite workmanship and the many, many hours of labour required to produce top quality Shetland lace, few knitters could make a living from knitting alone. For example, appendix 5, compiled from information given in the 1872 Truck Inquiry, shows weekly earnings ranging from 2s3d to 5s7d, making the average amount earned weekly by knitting 3s9d. It must be stressed that due to lack of specific and detailed information, these figures can be no more than a rough approximation of the average weekly earnings of a lace knitter. These figures do however, tally reasonably well with contemporary estimates: *The Scotsman* reported in 1871 that "at veil knitting and shawl knitting the females, if

Madder and ivory bridal veil displayed at the Great Exhibition, 1851.

Fig. 4.16.
(Source: Shetland Museum, Lerwick)

very industrious, will make 6/- a week; and at hosiery and underclothing 4/- to 5/-"[71]. As earnings were generally paid in goods throughout most of the nineteenth century, and the merchants' profit on these goods was abnormally high, the real value of these earning would be reduced by approximately 25% [72]. Because of the small return in real terms which knitters obtained for their labours, most skilled knitters endeavoured to by-pass their local merchants, selling their lacework, when the opportunity arose, through alternative channels, such as merchants from Edinburgh, Orkney, agents in Shetland, or to private persons visiting the islands or to those "who desire to do the poor Shetlanders a kindness", ordered direct from the knitters[73]. At the same time, the Arts and Crafts Movement was gaining momentum and the public attitude to cottage industries changing.

**Patronage**

In the Machine Age of the nineteenth century, many concerned people were beginning to realise that the craftsman had become usurped by machines; worse still, that man had become a mere cog in the whole process of industrialisation. With the introduction of piece- and shift-work, few workers had the satisfaction of being responsible for the creation and completion of a factory produced article. Idealists, like Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and William Morris, deplored this loss of creative individuality, and spoke out against its deleterious effect both on the morale of the worker and on the artistic value of his manufacture; tried to halt the march of progress by encouraging the revival of rural craft industries. And it was on these ideals that the Arts and Crafts Movement emerged around the 1870s.

The Arts and Crafts Movement (c.1870-1914), said to have its origins in a middle class crisis of conscience[74], was welcomed and supported enthusiastically by many middle and upper class women, whose position in society precluded them from gainful employment, but whose belief in the 'work ethic' made them abhor their enforced idleness. They threw themselves into reviving and supporting cottage industries, organising instruction for workers and arranging the marketing of their goods, often through exhibitions and drawing room sales. It was usually the middle class women who did most of the work, whilst the upper classes and aristocracy lent support through the prestige of names, possibly opening

exhibitions or arranging drawing room sales for their wealthy friends to attend. The ailing hand-made lace industry, which enjoyed royal patronage and whose products carried the mark of wealth and prestige, was particularly popular with this type of philanthropist who gave it whole hearted support. Lace associations, like the Diss Lace Association in Norfolk, sprang up all over Britain. In Scotland, lace industries were started in Orkney, New Pitsligo and Tarbet, as cottage industries to create employment[75].

The increase in cruise steamers opened up the remote Scottish islands and coastal highland districts to an energetic, ever increasing and aspiring middle class which had made its money in industry or trade, and to whose Christian charity, many crofters had reason to be thankful for help in times of destitution. For this newly moneyed class, with its superiority and self-righteousness, travel to these remote places was very much in vogue. The poor destitute crofter, was to them not much more than a museum piece and an object of pity. In Shetland these visitors were welcomed as cash buyers of hosiery, but in the more destitute and remote islands, like for example, Hirta in the St. Kilda group, they unwittingly upset the fragile balance between subsistence and destitution.

From this wave of philanthropy and interest in rural crafts, which swept Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Shetland lace industry enjoyed a beneficial spin-off. It must be remembered, however, that the Shetland lace industry was not a dying one which was being revived, but one which had grown from the need to adapt to changes in fashion, one whose workers could not easily be supplanted by machinery, one which had rarely enjoyed sustained patronage, and one which was still dominated by the truck system - the latter being a subject dear to the hearts of many righteous Victorians. The 1871 and 1872 Truck Inquiries, extensively covered by the national 'dailies', had for many, put Shetland on the map, and much indignation had been aroused by the merchants' treatment of the knitters. It was this oppression by man, not by machine, which led to sporadic bouts of patronage; the Shetland lace industry never enjoyed the undivided support of a single patron, as for example had the Gairloch hose industry, started during the potato famine years of 1846-48 by Sir Kenneth Mackenzie to alleviate

distress[76], or the Harris Tweed Industry, whose success was largely due to the patronage of Lady Dunmore in the 1840s and later to that of the Duchess of Sutherland under the auspices of the Scottish Home Industries[77].

The gossamer filminess and exquisite workmanship, along with the inherent romanticism of hand wrought articles from the 'lonely isles', made Shetland lace items particularly suitable for entering competitions and displays at exhibitions. At the Great Exhibition, there were 5 exhibitors of Shetland lace (see fig. 4.15), Standen & Co., of London, Mackenzie of Edinburgh, and Linklater's of Lerwick and Edinburgh were the 3 merchant houses exhibiting, whilst the Lerwick Local Committee and the Marchioness of Westminster[78] also exhibited Shetland hosiery. Twelve years later, the Lerwick Ladies Committee presided over by Miss Ogilvy - possibly the relative of the Ogilvy family mentioned in Dr. Cowie's account of the origin of Shetland lace - presented to Princess Alexandra on the occasion of her marriage to the Prince of Wales, 'the handsomest collection of Shetland knitted goods ever brought together'[79].

Duplicate of the shawl presented to Princess Alexandra on the occasion of her marriage to the Prince of Wales in 1863.

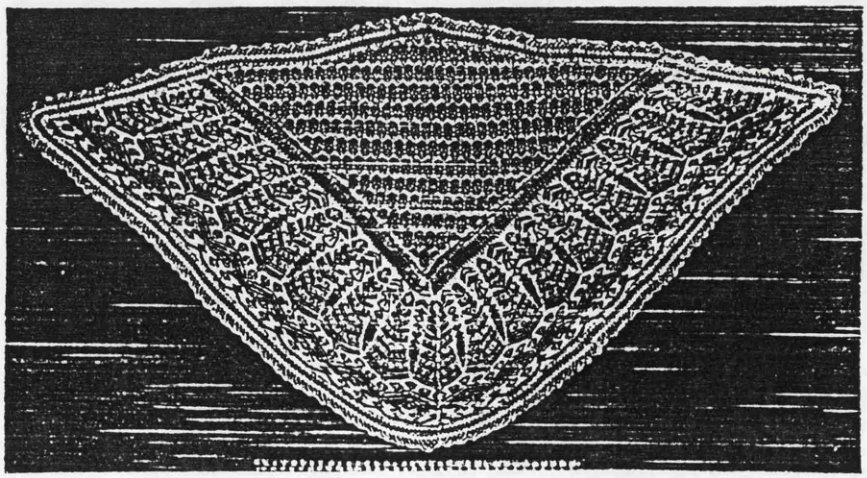


Fig. 4.17.
(Source: Royal Museum of Scotland (N.M.S.), Edinburgh)

Fig. 4.17 shows a copy of the shawl included in this gift. Shetland lace knitting won medals at numerous exhibitions at home and abroad. The bridal veil shown in fig. 4.16, won a gold medal at the Great Exhibition. Catherine Brown formerly from Lerwick, one of the expert knitters who gave evidence before the 1872 Truck Inquiry, won a prize at the London Exhibition of 1870; she knitted a silk opera cloak for the Princess Alexandra, Princess of Wales[80]. It was also at exhibitions that royal patronage could be forthcoming. For example, at the Edinburgh International Exhibition of 1886, Queen Victoria and the Princess of Wales were presented with Shetland lace shawls from Unst. They also made purchases from the Shetland stand. This stand won a gold medal diploma. Shetland lace was even shown at exhibitions abroad. For example, in 1893 a beautiful lace shawl knitted by Marion Nisbet of Unst, was displayed at the Chicago Exhibition. The shawl measured 2 1/2yds. square and was spun from 2 1/4oz. of wool. A correspondent, trying to describe the shawl, stated:

> It is impossible to give an adequate idea of the fineness of the thread and the delicacy and perfection of the work, but the thread - fine, it seems, as human hair - has all been spun twice, and if you untwist a strand of it you will find that it consists of two threads twisted together. Twelve miles of wool (single yarn) are knitted into this wonderful shawl; and the centre as well as the border is richly patterned...and took the best part of two years to knit [81].

Shetland lace knitting has always had links with the British Royal Family. Several instances, starting with Arthur Anderson's gift to Queen Victoria, have been listed above. In the mid 1890s, Ellen Smith from near Lerwick, was commissioned by Queen Victoria to knit an exact replica of her favourite but worn-out black shawl [82]. These small amounts of royal patronage, have always had the beneficial effect in either boosting sales, creating fashion trends or simply reminding the public of the existence of Shetland lace. Even after the First World War, *The Scotsman*, reporting on 'Shetland in 1925', finds space in this short article to excitedly report that:

> A rumour was current some little time ago that the Queen had her benevolent eye on the Shetland shawl ndustry, and intended

> to do her best to make these shawls fashionable, and so bring prosperity to the women of the islands [83].

The popularity of Shetland lace was at its peak from around the time of the Great Exhibition of 1851 to the 1872 Truck Inquiry in 1872. From 1872 until the turn of the century, there was still a steady, but reduced, demand for Shetland lace. For example, *The Shetland Times* in December 1885, stated that the Edinburgh International Exhibition of 1886, would "bring to light ... Shetland shawls - not so much knitted lately because of change in fashion"[84]. The change in fashion referred to is the decline in the vogue for crinolines - a fashion which was at its height from 1856 to 1868 - shawls being particularly suitable for wear with these bulky dresses.

Shetland lace has never totally gone out of fashion, being regarded as a classic form of knitwear, but twentieth century demand has never come near that of the nineteenth century. The First World War brought not only changes in women's fashions, but also a considerable upheaval to the social and economic circumstances of the more well-to-do, that is, the traditional purchasers of Shetland lace. During the War, Shetland hosiery sales enjoyed a boom, but practicality rather than elegance, was of paramount importance, with warm spencers, small haps and gloves, ousting lace knitting in popularity[85]. Probably the most marked decline in the popularity of Shetland lace was noted during the inter-War years, when Fair Isle knitting became popular. The trend for delicate, feminine creations, seemed to die with the War and the women of the new society, less hidebound by class and inherited wealth, who emerged after the War, were free to enjoy a more physically active lifestyle. Fair Isle knitwear was ideal for sports and children's wear; also for the new jumpers and cardigans adopted by the more liberated female of the 1920s.

Attempts by Mrs Jessie Saxby and her cohort, Mrs L.D. Henry, to revive the dying Shetland lace industry were made in 1928. Both ladies wrote to the press appealing for support and patronage for Shetland knitters[86]. Mrs Saxby's appeal highlighted the hard times the islands were experiencing, emphasising the effect such periods of unemployment had

on the population with people drifting away to other parts of the country, and appealed for:

> ...some philanthropic person with a long purse and a wise head, will establish in our Isles a 'hadd' of native sheep, and the beautiful industry which has (for nigh a century) given employment to our women will be restored[87].

In a subsequent article, Mrs Saxby proposed, that in the face of diminishing supplies of native wool, knitters should turn to using linen yarn for lace knitting; she stated that she had been in touch with a Glasgow firm specialising in linen goods[88]. Nothing came of this scheme. Mrs L.D. Henry's article in *The Scotsman* appealed to ladies to lend their drawing rooms for Shetland lace sales to try and prevent the demise of this industry. Her attempts to revive Shetland lace knitting through an appeal in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* in October 1928 are of particular interest, as this article highlighted Shetland lace knitting as the victim of the 1920s craze for Fair Isle knitting:

> ... the furore of the Fair Isle jumper, which spread over the world like wildfire, and created an unprecedented demand for work, which offered them more money, and a quicker return than their lace shawls could bring them. In this way there has only been a small loyal remnant of lace knitter working in Shetland, during these post-war years, and at the present moment, there is a very real danger that the industry will disappear altogether, unless some help and guidance are given to it from outside the islands[89].

The decline in fortune of the Shetland lace industry thereafter, was inextricably bound up with the Shetland hosiery industry and will be looked at as an integral part of the Shetland hand knitting industry.

NOTES.

[1] S.M., No. Tex. 7771.

[2] The definition of true lace is given in chapter 1.

[3] See chapter 2, p. 27.

[4] Norbury, J., *Traditional Knitting Patterns,* (Batsford, London, 1962), p. 173. Also by James Norbury *The Penguin Knitting Book,* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1957) - on page 18 of this book he repeats the 'Jessie Scanlon story' but also adds for good measure: "The Shetlanders, who were already ardent knitters, mainly following the Scandinavian tradition which had been taken to the islands by the Norse settlers in the ninth century..." There is of course no surviving evidence to suggest that knitting may have reached the Shetland Islands via these early Norse settlers.

[5] Rutt, R., *A History of Hand Knitting,* (Batsford, London, 1987), p. 3.

[6] Walker, Barbara, *A Treasury of Knitting Patterns,* (Batsford 1968), p. 150.

[7] Cowie, R., *Shetland,* (Edinburgh 1874), p. 184 - 187.

[8] Op.cit., p. 185.

[9] This poem signed R.S. may have been written by Robert Sinclair, of Robert Sinclair & Co. As well as being a successful businessman, he was also renowned for his literary ability, particularly his story *Da Tief o' da Neaan* written in dialect.

[10] Rampini, C., *Shetland and the Shetlanders* (1884), p. 86 & 87; Tudor, J.R., *The Orkneys and Shetlands, their Past and Present State,* (London 1883), p. 160; P.P., Cd. 7564, 1914, Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, p. 33.

[11] Conversation with Miss Ida Sandison in Unst, July 1988.

[12] Edmondston, B., and Saxby, J., *The Home of a Naturalist,* (London 1888), p. 41.

[13] N.M.S., Henry, L.D., MSS. Letter from Jessie Saxby to Mrs. L.D. Henry, 21/4/1928.

[14] Edmondston, E., *Sketches and Tales of Shetland* (Edinburgh 1856), p. 177.

[15] S.P.R.I., Ms. 248/240, unpublished *Journal of Sophia Cracroft in Shetland in 1849* and unpublished *Journal of Lady Franklin in Shetland in 1849.* See Truck chapter for details of Lady Franklin's stay in Shetland.

[16] S.P.R.I., Ms. 248/240, unpublished *Journal of Sophia Cracroft in Shetland 1849,* p. 147.

[17] Saxby, J., *Shetland Knitting,* (Lerwick - undated), p. 4.

[18] 'A Lady Resident', *The Poor Knitters of Shetland,* (Paisley 1861), p. 9.

[19] Although anonymously published as being written by 'A Lady Resident', the content and style are so similar as to leave little doubt as to it being the work of Mrs Eliza Edmondston (nee MacBrair).

[20] 'A Lady Resident', *The Poor Knitters of Shetland* , (Paisley 1861) p. 5 & 6.

[21] S.A., SA2/52. Unknown author. *An excursion to the Shetland Islands.* The extract quoted in the text, refers to Lerwick, 28th May 1832.

[22] Rutt, R., *A History of Hand Knitting* (Batsford, London 1987), p. 112.

[23] Ibid.

[24] N.L.S. Gaugin, Jane. Author of *The Lady's Assistant for executing useful and fancy designs in knitting, netting and crochet work* . 2nd edition, (Edinburgh 1840). The N.L.S. has 9 of her knitting recipes, dating from 1840 - 1863.

[25] N.L.S. Gaugain, J., *The Lady's Assistant for executing useful and fancy designs in knitting, netting and crochet work,* (second edition, London 1840). The information in the text is taken from the inside front cover.

[26] N.L.S., Gaugain, J., *A Lady's Assistant knitting, netting and crochet work,* (second edition, London 1842), p. 105 - 117, with washing instructions on p. 118.

[27] Flinn, D., *Travellers in a bygone Shetland - an anthology,* (Edinburgh 1989), p. 34, taken from the unpublished journal of J. Ker. This journal is lodged in the N.L.S.

[28] P.P., Cd. 4978, (1887), Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, q. 66,317. Mrs Traill is described by Mr Thomason, parish councillor at Walls and Sandness,

as residing at 23 Duke Street, Edinburgh and "a lady of means and position, who resides a great deal in the islands for health reasons, and who takes a sympathetic interest in the inhabitants, especially the very poor".

[29] P.P., Cd. 564 , (1843), Minutes of Evidence of Poor Law , Synod of Shetland , Poor Roll of Lerwick.

[30] 'A Lady Resident', *The Poor Knitters of Shetland* (Paisley, 1861), p. 2

[31] *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition 1851,* Vol. II, p. 585.

[32] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 41, q. 2138.

[33] Standen, E., *The Shetland Islands*, (Oxford 1845).

[34] *New Shetlander*, Voar Number 1963, No. XVIII, p. 12, 'Profiles from the Past'.

[35] Standen, E., *The Shetland Islands*(Oxford 1845), p. 32.

[36] *New Shetlander*, Voar Number 1963, No. XVIII., p.12, 'Profiles from the Past'.

[37] *The Shetland Times*9/10/1909.

[38] *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition 1851,*Vol. II, p. 499. Entry no. 281 reads thus: Standen and Co., 112 Jermyn Street, St James - Importers. White Shetland knitted shawl. Bridal veil. Pair of white stockings. Brown, grey, and white gloves - natural colours. The Shetland wool of which these specimens consist is hand-spun.

[39] *Shetland Journal,* 31/10/1837; Nicolson, John, *Arthur Anderson, a founder of the P & O Company,* (Lerwick, 1932) - first published in 1914- p. 59 - 61. Queen Victoria's reply to Arthur Anderson, dated 16/12/1837, reads as follows:

> ...I am further directed by the Queen, to forward the size of a stocking, and to request that one dozen pairs should be finished for H.M. of a similar size, and forwarded to me when completed, together with a bill, which I will immediately pay, either to you, or to any other party, who may be appointed to receive the money.' signed, H. Wheatley.

[40] Cowie, R., *Shetland*, (Second edition, Edinburgh 1874), p. 185.

[41] Standen, E., *The Shetland Islands*, (Oxford 1845), p. 6.

[42] Edmondston, E., *Sketches and Tales of Shetland* (Edinburgh 1856), p. 177 & 178.

[43] N.M.S., L.D. Henry MSS., letter from Jessie Saxby to Mrs L.D. Hentry dated 21/4/1928. The Royal Museum of Scotland could find no trace of this shawl in March 1992.

[44] Correspondence with Dr. S. Hovmoller, University of Stockholm, Sweden, January 1990.

[45] Rutt, R., *A History of Hand Knitting*, (Batsford 1987), p. 95.

[46] Cowie, R., *Shetland* , (Second edition, Edinburgh 1874), p. 186.

[47] S.P.R.I., Ms. 248/240, unpublished *Journal of Sophia Cracroft in 1849*, p. 194.

[48] 'A Lady Resident', *The Poor Knitters of Shetland*, (Paisley 1861), p. 9.

[49] Op. cit., p. 6.

[50] Conversation with Mrs Joan Mouat in Unst , July 1988.

[51] Edmondston, E., *Sketches and Tales of Shetland* (Edinburgh 1856), p. 172.

[52] N.M.S., L.D. Henry MSS. Lecture given by Mrs. L.D. Henry on Shetland lace 30/3/1932.

[53] S.A., Index of Garth Papers, Catalogue 3, 2ff, Edinburgh (3/5/1792), 1229. Letter from Sir John Sinclair to Thomas Mouat of Unst informing him that the Highland Society considered the Unst sheep the finest example of the Shetland breed.

[54] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p.42, q. 2131 and 2139; P.P. Cd. 326 (1871), Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Commission Act , 1870...p. 883, q.44,305.

[55] S.P.R.I., Mss. 248/240, *Journal of Sophia Cracroft in Shetland 1849, p.* 144.

[56] S.A., SA2/52. Unknown author. *An excursion to the Shetland Islands.* The reference to fine knitting in Unst is taken from the entry for the 28th May, 1832; P.P., Cd. 326, (1871), Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Truck Commission Act, 1870... p. 883, q. 44,306.

[57] Edmondston, E., *Sketches and Tales of Shetland*, (Edinburgh 1856), p. 39.

[58] Sinclair, C., *Shetland and the Shetlanders*, (Edinburgh 1840), p. 127.

[59] Edmondston, A., *A View of the ancient and present state of the Zetland Islands*, (Edinburgh

1809), Vol. II, p. 2.

60 S.P.R.I., Mss. 248/240, unpublished *Journal of Sophia Cracroft in Shetland in 1849*, p. 194.

61 Munro, L., *Scottish Home Industries*, (Dingwall, 1895), p. 117.

62 Edmondston, E., *Sketches and Tales of Shetland*, (Edinburgh 1856), p. 177.

63 'A Lady Resident', *The Poor Knitter of Shetland*, (Paisley 1861), p. 4.

64 P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p.49, q, 2366.

65 *Old Lore Miscellany of Orkney, Shetland , Caithness, and Sutherland*, 1907-8, Vol. I, p. 89.

66 Correspondence with Hunter Bros., August 1991; O'Dell, A.C., *Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands*, (Lerwick 1939), p. 161.

67 Edmondston, E., *Sketches and Tales of Shetland*, (Edinburgh 1856), p. 176 and 177.

68 Munro, Lewis, *Scottish Home Industries* (Dingwall 1895), p. 118.

69 P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 41, q. 2138.

70 This bridal veil is housed in the Shetland Museum, Lerwick, where the largest and most beautiful collection of Shetland lace knitting is kept. Lack of space permits only a very few items to be displayed at any one time. The Heritage Centre at Haroldswick, Unst, has more space devoted to lace knitting and has on display a comprehensive exhibition of spinning wheels, wool combs, wools and worsted etc. as well as many pieces of lace knitting. Outwith Shetland, the best collections of old and twentieth century Shetland lace are to be found in the Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, and in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The Royal Museum of Scotland's Shetland hosiery collection, includes many interesting specimens, particularly veils, of silk and mohair knitted lace, as well as beautiful Shetland wool items and Miss Ida Sandison's comprehensive collection of Shetland hosiery, wool and knitting equipment. For conservation reasons, it is the policy of the Royal Museums of Scotland, to display textiles for no more than two years - and even then, the work is displayed under dim lighting and sometimes behind curtains to prevent exposure to constant light which causes disintegration and discolouration. The Royal Museum of Scotland's Shetland lace collection, stored at the Custom's House, Leith, may be viewed by appointment. It is particularly interesting to have the opportunity to look at and to handle these old pieces of lace knitting, as they have a lustrous but muted 'colour' and silky feel which is not to be found in machine carded or machine spun lace yarn. The oldest existing example of Shetland lace (fig. 4.1) is housed at The Shetland Museum, Lerwick. It measures 2 yards on the longer side and has a slight peak to go over the baby's head, and 1 1/2yards on the two shorter sides; in 1977 was valued at £575 (Shetland Museum Records, no. 7771)

71 *The Scotsman* 24/1/1871. Report from 1871 Truck Inquiry held in Edinburgh - evidence of George Smith, Clerk of Supply.

72 See chapter 3, p. 60 and 61.

73 'A Lady Resident', *The Poor Knitters of Shetland*, (Paisley 1861), p. 7.

74 Naylor, G., *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (London 1971), p. 7.

75 P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914) Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland p. 30 & 50; S.R.O. (W.R.H.), AF 43/225.

76 Munro, Lewis, *Scottish Home Industries*, (Dingwall 1895), p. 84.

77 P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, p. 33.

78 This entry by the Marchioness of Westminster, seems to be an isolated involvement with Shetland lace knitting, as her name does no crop up again in connection with Shetland.

79 Cowie, R., *Shetland* , (Second edition, Edinburgh 1874), p. 187.

80 P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 437, q. 17018. Catherine Brwon gave her evidence before the Truck Commission in Edinburgh where she had moved to in order to start a Shetland hosiery business.

81 *People's Journal* 27/8/1889.

82 Ibid.

83 *The Scotsman* ?/1/1926.

[84] *The Shetland Times* ?/12/1885.

[85] *The Shetland News* 30/12/1915 and 4/1/1917.

[86] *The Shetland Times* 7/4/1928 ; *The Scotsman* 29/6/1928; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* 6/10/1928.

[87] *The Shetland Times*, 7/4/1928.

[88] N.M.S., L.D. Henry MSS. *A New Industry for Shetland Women* by Jessie M.E. Saxby - no source or date available.

[89] *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 6/10/1928.

Chapter 5 1872-1918.

## Dawn of Modernisation.

The period 1872-1918 was of vital significance to the development of the Shetland hand knitting industry, as increased communications with the south led to its great expansion. For Shetlanders in general, this was a period of oscillating and intermittent progress towards a modern Shetland, with truck declining, the old 'Shetland Method' disappearing, and in its place, a modestly prosperous economy emerging, largely based on the principles of free trade.

In 1872 Shetland's first regular weekly newspaper, *The Shetland Times*, appeared[1]. Apart from local news, this paper carried much national and international news, culled from the pages of national 'dailies', like *The Scotsman*. From this date, not only could the inquiring Shetlander become more aware of what was happening in the next parish, but he could also keep abreast of events within Britain and throughout the Empire, thus helping to erode his sense of isolation, identifying more with Britain than with Scandinavia, and severing the last remnants of traditional Scandinavian ties. *The Shetland Times*, along with other contemporary newspapers, journals and books, Scottish Office files, and Parliamentary Papers, comprise the main sources for this chapter, which seeks to investigate the impact of increased communications on the development of the hand knitting industry, and the changing social and economic conditions of knitters, brought about by legislation in public health and amenities, education and land reform.

Scanning the pages of the 1872 editions of *The Shetland Times*, it is apparent that the scene is set for a modern Shetland to emerge, but, not without a struggle. On the one hand, the papers carry numerous advertisements for imported consumer goods, such as patent medicines, provisions and imported worsted, as well as services like the direct biweekly steamer service with Aberdeen and the weekly service with the Northern Isles, and for the new Thule Hotel and the arrival of tourist cruisers in Lerwick, and interestingly, the arrival of large numbers of Dutch herring busses; whilst on the other, the columns are full of economic gloom and despondency, with for example, potato disease and sheep scab spreading, and the Unst chromate quarry closing down[2], with

kelp alone showing a good return[3]. The fact that kelp burning was important enough to have been reported by *The Shetland Times*, was an indication of the hard times in which people were living. Kelp, one of the few industrial commodities which many of the crofting counties could produce, was economically viable only in times of hardship or destitution, when the meagre wages paid to kelp burners for this dirty, labour intensive work, meant that any form of remunerative employment was better than none[4], and like the sifting, sorting and recycling of rubbish commonly undertaken by women in urban districts during this period, was only feasible because of the very cheapness of human labour and the desperate need for employment.

Thus, this period opens with the islands' economy in a depressed state and destitution widespread. *The Scotsman*, reporting on the 1872 Truck Inquiry, refers to the living conditions and circumstances of the people of Shetland as "deplorable"[5]. Yet again destitution appeals were circulated by philanthropists from as far away as Glasgow and London. One such pamphlet entitled *Statement regarding the Poor in Shetland*, admirably summed up the situation:

> There are, we believe, few, if any, of the districts of Scotland where the poor are so numerous as in the Shetland Islands. This is attributable to various causes:- narrow circumstances in general, casualties in sea faring life, and to the small number in Shetland of that wealthier class by whose Christian charity the sufferings of the poor in other parts of the land are so much alleviated[6].

The severity of fishing accidents, like the Gloup disaster of 1881 when 58 men and boys from one Delting village were drowned, diminished during this period, as steam drifters replaced open boats for deep sea fishing, although war casualties during the 1914-18 War unfortunately redressed this balance. Little local charitable help for the poor continued to be the norm, with major landowners being absent for much of the year, or like Lord Zetland[7], strongly opposed to any increase in the overstretched poor rates, and regarding charity as an encouragement to the idle.

It was just prior to the beginning of this period, that Shetland's first wave of emigration started in the 1860s. The following table shows the steady rise in emigration up to the turn of the century:

Emigration statistics to Scotland from Shetland.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1861 | 1,939 | 1891 | 4,284 | 1921 | 4,915 |
| 1871 | 3,055 | 1901 | 5,400 | | |
| 1881 | 3,724 | 1911 | 4,388 | | |

Fig. 5.1

(Source: O'Dell, A.C. - 1939)

J.R. Nicolson reckoned that the total number of emigrants (that is, not just to Scotland) from Shetland between 1871 and 1881 was 4,640[8]. Unlike many districts in the Highland and Islands, Shetland had been spared full scale clearances[9], and with them the social unrest and break down of local administration which occurred in the Western Isles during the 1880s. Whether for this reason, or because of the symbiotic relationship between the land and sea which made it easier to survive periods of destitution, or the summer migration of some men to the Greenland whaling, or pluralism of employment - but not migration - for women, or simply because people were too poor to emigrate, Shetlanders as a whole, had in the past, failed to turn to emigration in times of hardship. The 1871 decennial census (appendix 2) showed, for the first time, a drop in population which was to continue throughout this period. This drop was in line with the other crofting counties but contrary to the national figures for Scotland, which rose by almost 10%. Rural depopulation was on the increase with the number of inhabited islands falling from 30 in 1871 to 24 by 1921[10]. The steady fall in population can largely be attributed to advances in technology and increased communications with the outside world. For example, Shetlanders were able to take advantage of the availability of jobs outwith Shetland and were encouraged to do so by the lure of free or assisted passages to Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The demise of trucking in the fishing industry, followed by its rapid expansion and modernisation, generated considerable wealth, and with money replacing barter, allowed for greater mobility of labour. Whether through word of mouth, correspondence from migrant friends and relatives, or through the Press, Shetlanders were more aware of the world around them and the opportunities it offered. The rise in the Merchant Navy in the late 1800s, meant that many men were away from home for longer periods than during the fishing season, whilst many decided to settle in other ports as the strong Shetland community in Leith showed[11].

It was during this period that the advances in steam, postal and telegraphic communication which helped bring Shetland 'closer' to the Scottish mainland, were consolidated. The introduction of the parcel post in 1883, enabled knitters to break away from their local merchant, allowing them to sell direct to the public, to send their wool to the Scottish Mainland for spinning, and to order worsted by post. Fishermen in particular, benefited from the new telegraphic system, opened in 1870. This enabled them to ascertain in advance the most lucrative markets, which along with the introduction of steam drifters, contributed to Shetland being regarded in 1898 as"...the most important herring fishery in the kingdom"[12]. Improved communications meant not only speedier and more regular services for travellers and traders, freight and news, but also a subtle shift in outlook from that of an insular and isolated island community, to the broader concept of Shetland as an integral part of Britain, governed from Westminster. Advances in education, parliamentary and land reform, enabled Shetlanders to better themselves, whilst the social benefits of increased spending in both local amenities and health, led to an improved quality of life. Often beset by the difficulties caused by distance and isolation, these changes slowly percolated to the crofting counties.

Education was one field in which the difficulties of isolation, were highlighted. Progress was curtailed by lack of roads and transport, rather than funds, in Shetland, as although the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act established a School Board in every parish, the difficulties inherent in travelling to school, meant that it was not customary for children under the age of 7 to attend school[13]. In the field of secondary education, the 1883 Education Act raised the upper limit of school age from 13 to 14, and in 1895 the Secondary Education Committee allowed Shetland a grant of £550-17/11, to help make provision for this expansion[14]. In 1889 school fees were abolished. By 1912, Shetlanders - generally regarded by visitors and educated people as being intelligent and having a quick turn of mind - were well catered for with 66 schools, that is, an average of 1 school per 71 pupils, compared to 1 school per 82 pupils for the crofting counties taken as a whole[15]. As the Napier Report had shown, Shetland, with its Anderson Institute, donated by Arthur Anderson and opened in 1862, for secondary

The growth of Lerwick, 1877 to 1928, based on 6" Ordinance Survey maps, and Admiralty charts.

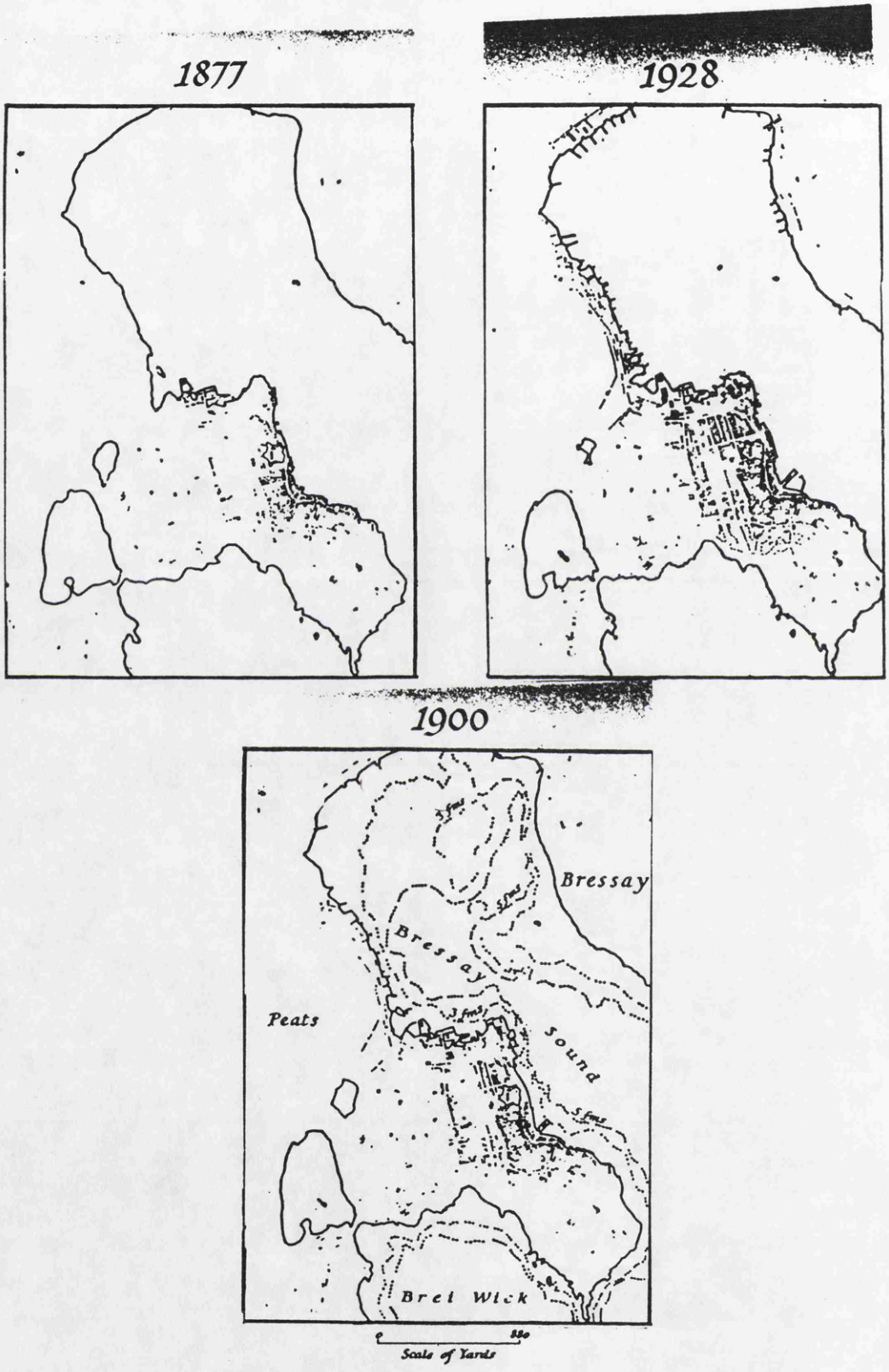



Fig. 5.2.
(Source: O'Dell, A.C. - 1939)

pupils, was more favourably placed than most other Highland and Island communities [16].

The 1832 Reform Act, which had given the vote to proprietors and tenants with land of an annual value of £10 or over, and truly represented Shetland for the first time[17], was followed by the 1884 Reform Bill, giving 3000 men in Shetland the vote[18]. Arguably, the most significant of these legislative changes for Shetland, was the 1886 Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act, and not, as would be natural to expect, the Truck Amendment Act. Hopes had run high after the 1872 Truck Inquiry of impending reform and economic expansion, but in reality, life changed very little, as the vexed question of land tenure, the root cause of the 'Shetland Method', had not been dealt with by Sheriff Guthrie[19]. The Napier Commission, sitting in 1883, recognised the importance of land tenure, and, following the passing of the Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act in 1886, the Crofters' Commission was established to travel throughout the Highlands and Islands to listen to appeals from crofters against their landlord, and in Shetland, began its hearings at Dunrossness in August 1889[20]. Oppression and apathy were replaced by freedom of speech and enterprise. An educated and informed society was emerging, and one, which freed from the shackles of debt-bondage, was vociferous in demanding its rights and expressing its views.

In 1889 local government was reorganised, with the Commissioners of Supply largely being replaced under the terms of the Local Government (Scotland) Act. This act separated Orkney and Shetland into two counties and established a Zetland County Council made up of representatives elected by the people; Poor Relief (and certain other functions) were excluded from Zetland County Council's remit.[21] Meantime, Lerwick was expanding and emerging as a modern port and bustling town. Fig. 5.2, illustrates the marked expansion in Lerwick's growth between 1877 and 1928, whilst Appendix 8 shows the steady growth in Lerwick's population between 1871 and 1921. Overcrowding, not peculiar to Lerwick, fell steadily from 2.8 persons per windowed room in 1871, to 1.5 by 1921[22], as house building increased. Around this time, in a move to increase their respectability, many established merchants separated their dwelling and work places, by having substantial sandstone houses built on the outskirts of the town. For

Steamer Day in Lerwick, mid 1880s.

Fig. 5.3.
(Source: Shetland Museum collection, Lerwick)

instance, Robert Sinclair's handsome "St. Clair Villa", Clairmont Place, was one of the first villas to be built in the late 1860s in Lerwick's 'New Town'[23]. To accompany such refinements, foul smelling open sewers were replaced by a piped sewage system, a fresh water supply was piped down from Sandy Loch, streets and sidewalks, once little more than midden-heaps, were cleaned up and paved, and some even lit by the new gas installation. The Zetland County Council and Lerwick Harbour Trust were formed and an imposing Town Hall and new harbour built, along with leading lights, fog horns and lighthouses. Fig. 5.3 shows a modern, thriving port, comparable to many Scottish coastal towns of this era.

The Public Health Act of 1897 provided for a sanitary inspector in Lerwick, with assistants in every district, although lack of funds meant that they were unable to take action when necessary. Despite this, when interviewed by the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress in 1907, Mr Henry Pearson Taylor, Medical Officer of Health for Shetland, stated that his main concern for the health of the islands lay in providing medical aid for the remote islands, and not with sanitation, a major issue in the West Highlands at that time[24].

However, progress did not automatically bring affluence. Hard times continued into the twentieth century, with all 12 Shetland parishes declared congested by 1901[25]. Towards the end of the century, the quartering of the poor gradually disappeared. In 1888 a Poor House[26] was opened, although never fully utilised, and in 1908, the non-contributory old age pension, instigated for those with an annual income of less than £30 per annum, amounted to 5/- a week and greatly eased the problems of old age, the chief cause of poverty in the Highlands and Islands[27]. Social conditions, highlighted in the Truck Inquiries, showed that life had changed little in rural areas. For example, houses with straw roofs were still being built in 1883, although, the houses of the poor in Shetland were considerably better than those in the Western Isles[28]. The security occasioned by the Crofters' Commission meant that many tenants were carrying out minor improvements themselves, whilst emigration helped ease the problem of overcrowding in Shetland.

The Congested Districts (Scotland) Act of 1897 set up the Congested Districts Board to help develop rural areas of high unemployment and low living standards[29], but did little to help unemployment in Shetland. Whether through lack of enterprise or lack of capital, no new industries were created during this period, although Hay & Co.,[30] Shetland's largest company, and both the fishing and knitwear industries, continued to expand until the outbreak of the First World War. Board of Trade files, show upwards of 10 Shetland companies going into liquidation between 1872 and 1914, a serious but almost inevitable consequence of rapid economic expansion during this transition period from a barter to cash economy[31]. The three Truck Inquiries of 1872, 1888 and 1908, and the Poor Law Inquiries of 1883 and 1910, revealed that for many, life was still at a subsistence level, but against this, Shetlanders were spared the turmoil and social upheaval of an industrial society. By 1900 Britain was the most urbanised country in the world, with less than a quarter of its people living in rural districts, and of them only 7% were engaged in agriculture[32]. The crofting family with its land and boat, enjoyed a better and healthier quality of life than one, say in Paisley, where the whole family would possibly be engaged in working long hours in the damp, noisy and dangerous cotton mills, and living in squalid, overcrowded conditions, often isolated from their extended family.

The outbreak of the First World War, finally removed any feeling of isolation. The islands were used as naval bases and Lerwick as an examination port, and rendezvous for the Bergen-Methil convoys, which travelled via Lerwick. Large numbers of service men were billeted locally. This influx of personnel brought with it increased job opportunities, particularly for women, who found employment in ancillary services. For fishermen, the War was the final blow to the, by then, ailing fishing industry. Restrictions in fleet movement, the difficulties of getting fish to market and the ever-present threat of enemy submarines, all hampered their activities. And it was really from this point that hosiery gained in economic importance as fishing revenues declined.

**Role of women.**

Details of the comprehensive role of women, so inadequately recorded by census returns, have been greatly added to by recent oral history studies, such as *Living Memory* and *A Hint Da Daeks* [33], but obviously

Shetland women knit, whilst man reads newspaper, c.1900.

Fig. 5.4.
(Source: Shetland Museum collection, Lerwick)

deal only with living memory, and are thus confined to the late nineteenth and twentieth century. From Victorian times, and particularly from around 1880 onwards, photographs add a fascinating insight into the role of women. From these, it is possible to learn details of dress, appearance, living conditions, domestic habits, modes of employment and working conditions, along with a plethora of other details which are generally thought too insignificant to record, but added together, give a realistic picture of the life style of a bygone age. Three photographs from the Shetland Museum's collections are shown in Fig. 5.4 - 5.6 and are representative of the main occupations of women throughout this period; that is knitting, fish and croft work.

The many chores and burdens which fell to women in a fishing-crofting community remained largely unchanged until the First World War. The establishment of naval bases on the islands, gave women additional employment outside the home. Prior to this, temporary absences at the fishing and whaling, taking men rather than women away from their homes, meant that during these prolonged absences, the cares of the home and labour of the croft, still fell to women. It was only during seed-time and harvest, that Shetland men - never noted for their energies on land - gave anything like steady assistance with the croft. That many women had to look to themselves for help is illustrated by an extract from *A Hint da Daek*:

> At one time she [mother] was on her own, and half a dozen o kids, so dey maybe helped some; but dere wisna much dey could do. So sho aye did a lok o croft work - I don't know how she managed, but she managed. My oldest sisters was maybe left da school, or coming dat stage, so dey'd a been a big help. But there were a lok o work for da women folk on dis crofts[34].

The list of onerous tasks which women were expected to undertake seems daunting by to-day's standards:

> Whin I left da school, oh, I god oot here apo da rigs ta wark, hoe taaties an neeps, dell taaties and dell eart, an go ta da hill ta raise peats, an turn peats, an stack peats, and carry peats home; I milked cows too. We kirned and made butter[35].

Fig. 5.6 taken c.1910, illustrates the back breaking work of delling* undertaken by teams of women. The burdens which fell to women were further aggravated by the continuing imbalance of the sexes with for

Fishwives at North Ness, Lerwick c.1895.

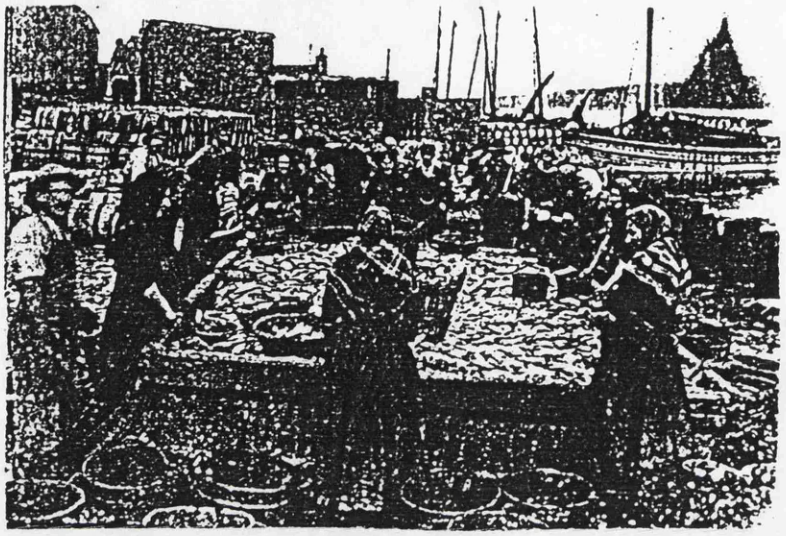


Fig. 5.5.

A team of women delling c.1910.

Fig. 5.6.
(Source for both photographs: Shetland Museum collection, Lerwick)

instance, 126.9 women : 100 men in 1901 (appendix 2), as many women would remain unmarried and have to look to themselves for their own support. However, 'May you geng manless to the grave' wasn't such a dire curse during the war years, as the large concentration of servicemen helped, at least temporarily, to improve marriage prospects for local women.

Occupations undertaken by Shetland women during this period, varied little from earlier periods. Census returns are a poor source of information in giving a true picture of the work of women, and even children, as they fail to take into account monotonous and constant, unpaid domestic and crofting work, seasonal and secondary occupations; nor do they include the labour of children, who often helped out with domestic and crofting chores. That knitting was the single largest occupation is clear from census returns. For example, in the 1901 census, out of the 7445 females of 10 years and upwards who were returned in the census as engaged in occupations, no less than 5045 were working at hosiery; that is, 67.8% of the work force[36]. Women seem to have been reluctant to leave the islands and seek employment elsewhere - even temporarily as was stated by Mr Henry Pearson Taylor, Medical Officer for the North Isles district of the Zetland County Council. Giving evidence before the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, in 1907 he stated that Shetland fish wives would not go beyond Baltasound and Lerwick, nor would they leave the islands to be trained as nurses, being able to make a reasonable living from gutting in the summer and knitting in the winter[37]. Women gutters could easily earn £1 a week during the season, but less than 10/- a week from knitting during the winter. In Whalsay, a team of 2 women and 3 children, could make £25 during the kelp season[38]. An interesting development in the role of women in fishing families took place around the turn of the century when the haddock fishing started to be prosecuted. Traditionally, Shetland women's contribution to the family unit as regards fishing, had been indirect and confined to domestic responsibilities and to their role as surrogate father and head of the household. Shetland women had never been as critically involved in the family fishing unit as their Yorkshire counterparts, who, for example, had to collect bait, sometimes walking up to twenty miles to find it [39]. However, with the new haddock fishing, women helped out by rising at 3

am to bait hundreds of small and closely set hooks on haddock lines, as unlike the ling hooks, the men could not bait them on board as they shot their lines[40].

Pluralism of employment - for Shetland women this meant invariably, knitting in the winter and fish, land or kelp work in the summer - continued as an important theme in female employment and undoubtedly made a significant contribution to staving off rural depopulation[41]. However, despite the fact that the role of women had apparently remained unchanged until the outbreak of the first World War, times were changing. By 1909, Lerwick had both a Suffragette Movement[42] and a Women's Working Association. The War brought an unexpected, if only temporary fillip to the hand knitting industry. Shortages and rationing acted as a catalyst to price rises. Knitters had never had it so good!

**The Shetland hand knitting industry 1872-1918.**

This was a period of great expansion and radical change for the Shetland hand knitting industry, but also one of fierce competition from machine-made imitations. At the time of the 1872 Truck Inquiry Shetland lace and undergarments were in great demand. Shetland hand knitted hosiery had gained such national acclaim for its warmth, softness and high quality workmanship, that the word 'Shetland' had become a prestigious symbol of quality knitwear. Unfortunately this led to manufacturers all over the world flooding the market with spurious 'Shetland' hosiery causing great damage to the Shetland hand knitting industry.

Information from the 1872 Truck Inquiry, suggests that veils were the most popular item being made at that time, with large quantities being knitted for both Robert Sinclair & Co. and Robert Linklater & Co. But as the demand for the 'health' properties, popularly regarded as inherent in Shetland wool, increased from c.1890, so too did the merchants' production and range of underwear and outer garments rise to meet the demand of this lucrative market, kindled by Dr. Jaegar's 'woolleners' in the late 1880s[43], and commented on by Cathcart Wason, M.P. for the county:

> Your Shetland goods, your Shetland hosiery, have great peculiarities of their own...but there is a softness and elasticity about Shetland goods, and also medicinal properties about them, which make them extraordinarily useful to many people, who are perfectly willing to pay considerably more money...than they would pay for machine-made goods[44].

During this period the export value of the trade rose from an estimated £10,000 in 1871[45] to £100,000 by 1920[46]. Appendix 4 gives a full list of estimated valuations of the hosiery industry from 1790 to 1950, along with an analysis of the problems of realistically assessing the true value of the Shetland hand knitting industry. This great expansion in the trade can largely be attributed to the rise in communications, particularly the mail service which not only opened up the market to the trade, but also allowed wool to be sent to Scotland for spinning from c.1890[47] and knitters to sell direct to the public with greater ease. Between 1890 and 1905 the number of parcels posted from Shetland rose from 23,036 to 75,920, whilst those received also rose considerably[48]. Improved communications highlighted the relative economic advantages of different locations. The inter-island steamer service started in 1868 helped open up the Scottish market to small hosiery traders, as for example, records from the Old Haa', Burravoe, Yell[49], show, with local dealers trading with Arnott & Co., 19 Jamaica Street, Glasgow, and John W. Black of 25 North Bridge, Edinburgh. Ease of communications increased the volume of wool being sent to the Scottish mainland for spinning, and from 1872 onwards, advertisements regularly appear in the local newspapers and trade journals for machine spinning at 'moderate charges'. By 1884 Alexander Laing, Wool Merchant, Aberdeen advertised that orders would be executed with promptness at moderate charges due to "the most improved machinery"[50]. As the practice of sending wool off the islands to be spun became more common, the number of commission agents working for Lerwick merchants and for Scottish woollen mills, grew, so that, for instance, by 1909, Hunter Bros., of the Sutherland Wool Mills, Brora, were employing 14 agents in Shetland and advertising for agents in unrepresented districts [51].

The rise in tourism, with the regular steamer services, considerably expanded the retail side of the hosiery merchant's business as hosiery shops were a great tourist attraction. For example, writing in 1871, Dr. R.Cowie stated:

> To the tourist the most attractive place of business is that of the hosier, whose shop presents a tempting display of the far-famed Shetland goods, of every size, shape, pattern, and shade[52].

These increases in communications were however, not without their teething troubles as the following extract from an appeal to the C.D.B. in 1898 for assistance to improve postal services, showed:

> The hosiery trade has greatly developed in recent years...The introduction of the parcel post has been of great assistance in developing this industry, and an increase in the certainty and frequency of mails, would...lead to further development by enabling the merchants and knitters to execute orders with promptness and regularity which are now impossible[53].

The document goes on to instance a case where the same post bringing a letter ordering knitted goods also brought a second one, demanding why this order had not been executed. However, despite these teething troubles, and little extraneous help - this proposal was turned down by the C.D.B. - the Shetland hand knitting industry continued to adapt and expand.

The Shetland hand knitting industry remained a cottage industry dependent on female labour, and one on which the female population, given its excess number of females to males, relied on heavily for employment. Knitting remained a valuable supplementary source of revenue for many crofters and cottars in providing the additional comforts of life, like tea and new clothing, as well as the basic necessities. Knitting undertaken during slack periods, fitted in between times or combined with other tasks such as carrying kishies of peat, was time gainfully employed which would otherwise have been unprofitably spent. It was only in Lerwick, with its prevalence of 'Shetland housewives', that knitting continued to be prosecuted full time and as the sole means of support. These knitters worked long hours for very poor returns. For example, in 1909 it was rare for a good knitter to be able to make an average of 7 1/2d. a day [54], which compared

unfavourably with £1 a week which gutters could easily earn[55]. 'Shetland housewives' were in many ways no better off than factory workers in the large textile centres of Scotland, although they were not outworkers in the factory putting-out sense, as had been formerly used in the peripheral industrial areas, like Ayrshire, for tambourers[56]. It was this group of town knitters, totally dependent on their labours and without capital behind them, which was caught in the truck poverty trap, as they could not afford to give up dealings with their local merchant.

Between 1872 and 1918, several major changes took place in the structure of the industry. Firstly, there was a marked increase in the number of knitters by-passing Shetland merchants, selling direct to the public or to home industry associations, like the Scottish Home Industries Association[57], made possible by philanthropic interest and improved mail services. Secondly, by the end of this period, as trucking diminished so too did merchant domination of the hosiery trade, and many merchants made good this loss by expanding their businesses to include wool broking, particularly during and after the war, when wartime conditions sent the price of raw wool soaring[58]. Thirdly, machine spinning was gradually replacing hand spinning, so that by c.1914, most wool was being sent away to be spun[59]. However, the most significant development during this period was the growing competition from the ever increasing number of Shetland imitations which undercut the price of genuine Shetland articles and threatened to annihilate the Shetland hand knitting industry.

Merchants were slow to respond to this threat and failed to take action until the early twenties, although proposals for a protective organisation had been mooted in 1909[60]. This problem of failing to adapt from a position of monopoly to one of competition, was a common one faced by many British merchants around the turn of the century. The growing number of foreign imports was also causing concern in many spheres, and was a problem from which the Shetland hosiery trade was not exempt. For example, adverts for Shetland wool made in Germany and South America were not uncommon[61]. Unscrupulous competitors were capitalising on the term 'Shetland' being synonymous with quality knitwear. Machine-made imitation Shetland shawls were produced in such quantities that consumers came to accept them as the genuine

article[62], and knitters of good quality, genuine Shetland lace, were in the same position as the Devonshire Honiton lace makers, whose trade had been so severely hit by machine-made imitations, that purchasers would not accept a good piece of Honiton lace as genuine[63]. The inevitable temptation to cut prices by lowering quality proved too great for many Shetland merchants and knitters. Substantial numbers of poorly executed and mis-shapen knitted garments, often made from non-Shetland yarn, appeared on the market so that not infrequently London dealers were returning unsatisfactory work to source[64]. This short-sighted lowering of standards and lack of enterprise, acted against the industry by destroying the precise qualities on which it had established its high reputation, a state of affairs recorded in the 1914 Home Industries report:

> It would be difficult to find an industry of a similar comparatively small magnitude upon which so many and sustained attacks have been made - some of them insidious, some clumsy, but all tending to diminish the reputation of, and the demand for, the original hosiery [65].

The difficulties of competition from machines and the subsequent lowering of standards facing the Shetland hand knitting industry, were problems being felt by other rural industries and the importance of rural industries to help sustain life in the Highlands and Islands was one of the concerns of the Congested Districts Board. In an attempt to halt rural depopulation and regenerate the highland economy by encouraging and assisting rural industries, Dr. W.R. Scott[66] of St. Andrew's University, was appointed by the C.D.B. in 1911, to investigate and report upon the Home Industries in the congested districts and, in particular, on the relation of these industries to the life of the people of the Highlands and Islands. The following definitive statement is taken from this report and aptly summed up the importance of hand knitting in Shetland at that time when all its 12 parishes were designated congested.

> Rural industries occupy a distinct and important position in the economic life of country districts...In particular, where the crofts are small or poor, and where there is a large cottar population, home industries are necessary for the support of the people, while any considerable extension of such occupations will have a material effect in raising the standard of comfort. Indeed, the nature of the work in the vicinity of the home constitutes an adaptation of the

people to an environment which, from the point of view of agricultural production, is an unkindly one[67].

This was particularly true in Shetland with its large landless cottar class and excess female population, many of whom had settled in Lerwick.

It is apparent from this report that it was textiles which formed the backbone of the cottage industry in the Highlands and Islands. These textile industries ranged from the very small production of lace at Tarbert, Loch Fyne, and knitted hose at Gairloch, Portree and Lewis, to the Shetland hand knitting industry and the large and well established Harris Tweed Industry; it is interesting to make a brief comparison of the latter two.

Both the Shetland lace and Harris tweed industries had their origins in the hard times of the 1830s and 40s, when the failure of the potato crop, together with bad fishing seasons and evictions, led to severe distress in these districts, districts where the standard of living was already very low. As can be seen from chapter 4, lace knitting emerged because of the interest of local M.P.s, local ladies and Edward Standen, all of whom were anxious to help alleviate distress amongst destitute knitters, caused by the stagnation in the hose market. Similarly, the Long Island, in particular, Harris, had a well established reputation for the excellence of its weaving, which, up until the middle of the nineteenth century, had been mainly produced for home use or the local market. In 1844 the Earl of Dunmore directed some of the Harris weavers to copy the Murray tartan. This they did so successfully, that it was adopted by him for his own family and staff's use. Thereafter, Lady Dunmore spent much of her time improving the production of the tweed and in introducing the tweed to her aristocratic friends[68]. Like Shetland hosiery, the reputation of Harris tweed was based on production being entirely by hand, that is, hand carded, hand spun, home dyed and hand woven. Harris tweed differed in one major respect with regards to the native wool; this wool did not have the high reputation of the native wool, unlike the Shetland hosiery industry whose native wool was regarded as one of the finest in Britain[69]. Harris tweed enjoyed the direct support of the Scottish Home Industries Association and the aristocratic patronage which went with it. Shetland hosiery was very much on the periphery of this inner circle and never wholeheartedly experienced this good fortune.

By the turn of the century, both industries were beginning to fall prey to machine imitations and the subsequent temptation to lower standards to survive. In Lewis, tweed makers resorted to including machine carded wool in their work, but as this did not have the same soft feel as hand carded wool, it changed the character of the tweed. This illicit practice led to weavers having to sign a declaration stating that their tweed was "entirely hand-spun, hand-woven, and home dyed Harris tweed"[70]. This system did not prove satisfactory and a registered trade mark was applied for from the Board of Trade, which led to Harris tweed being legally defined as "tweed hand-spun, hand-woven, and dyed and finished by hand in the islands of Lewis, Harris, Uist, Barra and several purtenances, and all known as the Outer Hebrides" [71]. A trade mark was registered in 1911 and a Harris Tweed Association formed to undertake the stamping of webs. Thus by 1911, Harris tweed had not only established a high reputation but also, a Board of Trade registered trade mark, its own association to safeguard its interest, plus the patronage and market outlet of the S.H.I.A., who established two local depots, one at Tarbert in Harris and the other in Stornoway, Lewis, to accommodate this industry. This was a much stronger and more favourable position than the Shetland hand knitting industry enjoyed, although interestingly a *Report on Social and Economic conditions in the Highlands and Islands(Congested districts) of Scotland*, pin-pointed both Harris and Shetland as the main centres of successful domestic industries by 1924[72].

The Shetland hand knitting industry lagged behind the Harris tweed industry, not forming a woollen industries association until 1922, nor gaining its own trade mark until 1925, nor even consolidating its position with the S.H.I.A. - a local depot was never opened, and Shetland knitters had to market their hosiery through the S.H.I.A.'s Inverness depot[73]. Attempts to set up a protective organisation had come to nothing. In 1909, Cathcart Wason, M.P. for the county, proposed setting up a Shetland Hosiery Association in conjunction with the S.H.I.A.[74] The proposed association, whose objectives were to promote Shetland hand spinning, hand weaving and hand knitting, got as far as obtaining as its president, the illustrious surgeon, Sir Watson Cheyne, Bart, who had been Lord Lister's chief assistant before succeeding him

as Professor of Clinical Surgery at King's College, London. In addition, they had enlisted several other distinguished patrons, including the Marquis of Zetland and Captain Laing, Lieutenant of the County. What is surprising, is that nothing came of this apparently well planned organisation. The influx of machine-made goods and yarn marketed as real Shetland, which had initially sparked off the need to establish a protective organisation, had, in no way diminished. Professor Scott who had visited Shetland during 1912, whilst researching material for his *Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands*, and urging Shetlanders to form such a protective organisation, made no reference to this proposed association, which seems to have inexplicably, vanished as quickly as it had appeared. In this report Professor Scott, had recommended the setting up of a body to supervise the industry and to look into the advisability of establishing a trade mark. He outlined suggestions for nine possible trade marks which would clearly indicate the exact nature of the manufacture of the garment (see appendix 7). Professor Scott's recommendations for a protective organisation, were taken up by the Board of Agriculture, who called a meeting of all concerned in the hosiery industry, for 18th August 1914, but had to be cancelled because of the war[75]. As a result Professor Scott's proposals were shelved.

Cheap imitations continued to flood the market, and rather than uniting to combat this fierce competition, merchants turned to using more and more machine spun Shetland worsted and imported yarns. A steam operated carding mill, owned by T.M. Adie of Voe, Delting, was in operation c.1912[76]. Purists resisted such yarn believing that, as it took away the natural softness of the wool, people would question whether the finished article was of Shetland manufacture of not, and this in turn would lead to falling sales. The dilemma here was that machine spinning allowed a greater quantity of Shetland yarn to be used, but in debasing its qualities, made it easier for machine made copies, which could be produced at half the cost, to be put on the market as 'real Shetland'[77]. Out of this confusion, some Shetland wholesalers felt a need to attach labels to their hosiery bearing such statements as "Real Shetland Wool", "Hand Knit" etc., to try and regain public confidence in the genuine article. No common policy was adopted. Meantime, concern was being expressed at the diminishing purity of the native breed of sheep and

ultimately the quality and reputation of the hosiery. The formation of a 'flock book' was suggested which would perform the same function as a 'herd book' for cattle. However, like many suggestions for the survival of this important industry, failure to agree amongst themselves, apathy and the difficulties facing post-war farmers, ensured that it came to nothing for some years.

During the 46 years spanned by this period, inevitable changes in fashion took place. Lace knitting, so fashionable amongst the privileged classes in the era of Queen Victoria and crinoline dresses, was badly hit by the War. Warmth, comfort and practicality, were the features required in wartime and Shetland lace was too delicate and impractical for anything but drawing room wear. Changes in fashion became more available to a wider set of people, a more mobile and physically active woman, whose lifestyle was reflected in her clothes. Skirt hems rose to ankle length to allow greater freedom of movement, and it was only for evening wear, that the more elaborate and restricting garments were worn. The market for Shetland lace never died away completely, but never regained its prestigious position in the fashion world.

**Organisation of labour 1872-1918.**

The domination of the Shetland merchant on the hand knitting industry gradually faded as circumstances more favourable to the knitter emerged. The advent of the parcel post in 1883, the anti-truck lobby following the 1872 and 1888 Truck Inquiries in Shetland, the slight shift of public focus and attention from the Highland Clearances in the Western Isles and Sutherland, to the Land Reform Movement throughout the crofting counties, and the rise in the number of organisations through which hosiery could be sold, all helped to emancipate the Shetland knitter and slowly free her from truck. Those knitters fortunate enough to obtain cash sales for their hosiery were able to organise their expenditure, be more discerning in their sales, and seek more profitable markets. Thus much of the better quality hosiery was being siphoned off, leaving the poor and mediocre to the Shetland merchant. Meantime, Shetland was going through a consumer revolution. The rise in monetary payments in almost every sphere of the economy increased demand for imported goods and allowed far greater

To Wool Growers.

Alexander Rennie, woollen manufacturer, having now appointed Mr James Aitken, merchant, Lerwick, his agent for Shetland, for the receiving of parcels of wool to be manufactured, and settling the accounts thereof, would respectfully solicit an increase of orders from that country.

---

Parties forwarding their wool to Mr Aitken, will have it forwarded every few weeks in one package, per steamer, thus affecting a saving of carriage as well as ensuring its safe conveyance. All Freights and Carriages from Lerwick to Mill of Aden paid by A.R.

---

Consigners will favour to send their wool clean, washed and orders, name and address inside parcel.

---

Wools dyed any colour and made into blankets, plaidings, serges, tweeds, jerseys, crumbcloths, winceys, twill, sheetings, worsted etc.etc. Good workmanship, quick despatch and moderate charge guaranteed.

Mill of Aden, Mintlaw, Aberdeen.

Fig. 5.7.
(Source: *The Shetland Times* 25/11/1872)

mobility of labour, and as the new century opened, hosiery was gradually ceasing to be used as a substitute currency for money.

The Delting Truck Inquiry of 1888, showed great similarities with the 1872 Truck Inquiry as regards the industry's organisation of labour. From the evidence given at the three Truck Inquiries held in Shetland between 1872 and 1908, it would appear that the number of knitters employed by merchants fell during this period, and when knitters were employed, it was usually for a special article required for a specific order[78]. There are no statistics to back up this assumption, merchants being particularly wary of divulging the actual number of knitters they employed, as in so doing they could be fined under section 10 of the 1887 Truck Amendment Act. This fall in numbers was partly due to repeated slumps in the hosiery trade, the extra work involved in employing knitters upping the cost, and the prosecutions under the Truck Amendment Act; which, taken with the quantity of quality knitting by-passing local merchants and the undercutting of prices by machine-made knitwear, led to the demise of the three largest hosiery merchants who ran their businesses in the 'old style'. Robert Linklater died in 1876, Robert Sinclair emigrated to New Zealand in 1885[79] , and Arthur Laurenson, died in 1890, although his firm continued in business until 1917[80].

**Spinning**

As the amount of locally grown wool and the hand knitting industry expanded, hand spinning could not meet the demand for home spun worsted. And from around 1890 the amount of raw wool being sent to the new power mills springing up along the north east coast of Scotland, steadily increased. Pringles of Inverness and Hunters Bros. of Brora were the two mills most popular with Shetland hand knitters[81]. The reasonable rates charged by the steamer 'Earl of Zetland' and the introduction of the parcel post, meant that it was not only merchants but also knitters who could take advantage of this facility. Fig. 5.7 shows an advertisement for the Mill of Aden to which both merchants and knitters could send their raw wool. Knitters could send their wool direct to the mills, use their local agent or send it through merchants who freighted it in bulk at reduced rates. The trend for private knitters to send their wool to Scotland grew as knitters found that machine spun worsted went

The Petrie Family dressing shawls c.1910.

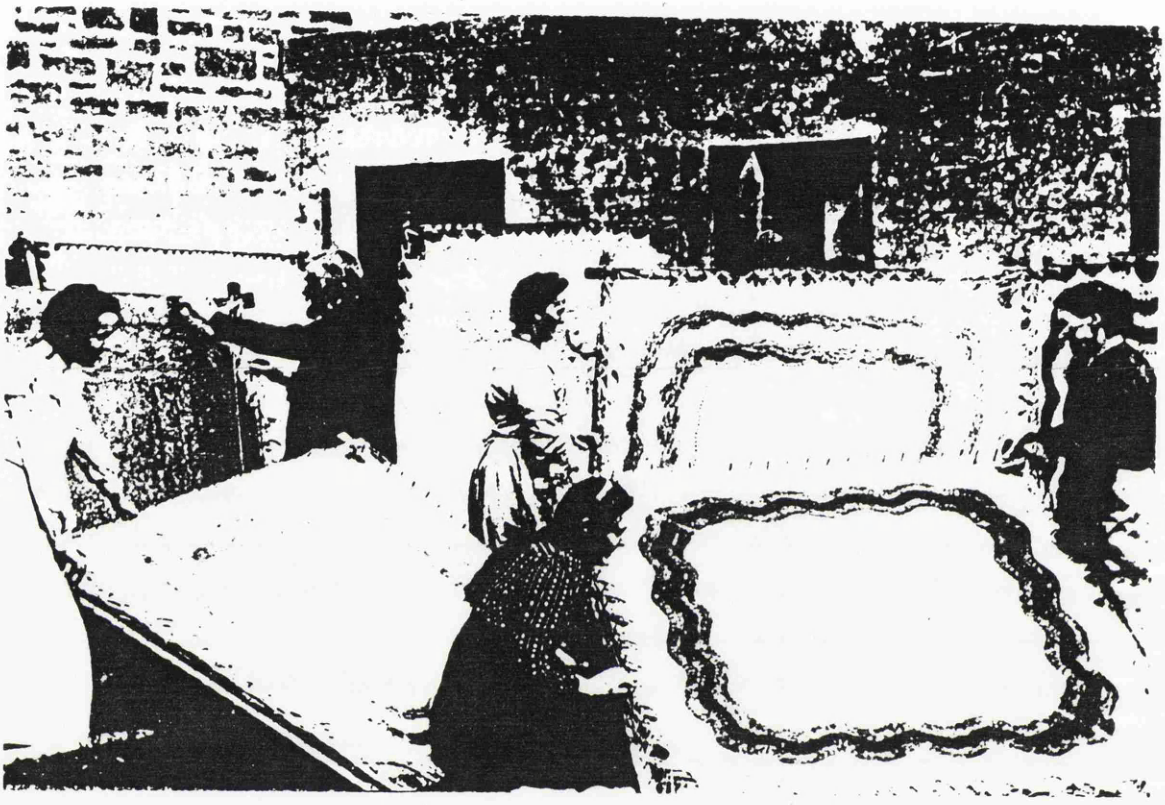


Fig. 5.8.
(Source: Shetland Museum collection, Lerwick)

further and was easier to knit[82]. This practice of sending wool to be machine spun led to the demise of hand spun Shetland wool except for the fine lace yarns, which no machine could surpass. Spinners of the very fine cobweb yarn became scarce and by 1922, spinning wheels were little more than curiosities.

**Dressers**

Hosiery had to be dressed before it could be valued, and as goods were priced and ticketed before leaving Shetland, it meant that this was always done in Shetland. *Mansons' Shetland Almanac and Directory,* under the heading of 'Trades in Lerwick', listed 'cleaners and dressers of Shetland hosiery', and for example, gave 4 dressers in 1892, and 6 in 1902. This list would have represented the independent dressers in Lerwick. There are no records to indicate the number of employee dressers, but as the trade was expanding, presumably so too did the number of its ancillary workers rise. Fig. 5.8, taken in 1910 by the well known Shetland photographer, J.D. Rattar, shows the Petrie family at work. P.E. Petrie is listed in *Mansons' Almanac* as 'a cleaner and dresser of Shetland hosiery', at Albany Street, Lerwick in 1892[83], but by 1905 was specialising in shawl dressing[84]. This is significant, as the move to specialisation would indicate considerable developments in the trade. The parcel post had also given a boost to this side of the hosiery industry, as there are several references to customers being advised to send their hosiery back to Shetland for cleaning and dressing[85]. Shetland dressers had such a high reputation that, even outwith Shetland there was a demand for their skills[86]. For example, in the 1895 report of the Central Branch of the S.H.I.A. based in Edinburgh where there was a considerable Shetland colony, reference was made to "The art of washing Shetland goods is only known to the Shetlanders, and thus much employment is also given by the Association"[87].

**Knitters.**

Throughout this period, knitting remained a home-based activity, but one which was gradually changing from a subsistence activity to a secondary occupation. The family unit was still the backbone of this cottage industry, although even this unit was being eroded by the advances in modern technology, with wool being sent off the islands for spinning. By 1918 there were still no knitwear factories/units or knitting

machines, nor was there any division of labour in the factory sense, in Shetland. Knitters were mainly knitting and marketing as individuals, with no united body of representation behind them. For example, during the 1908 Truck Inquiry when asked if the workers had any co-operative movement, trade or workers' union or organisation, Mr A. Newlands, factory inspector, replied "There is no organisation among the workers"[88]. Nor had workers banded together to protect themselves from exploitation. This lack of representation is surprising when it is remembered that Shetland had both a Working Women's Association and a Suffragette Association by 1909. Shetland women seem to have been slow to band together and voice their grievances, as in both the fish and hosiery industries, it was the women who held the upper hand - without their labour there would have been no product to market. At the heart of this apparent apathy lay poverty, isolation and the difficulties of rural travelling, coupled with the volume and multiplicity of tasks in which women were constantly involved. Time was of the essence - animals still had to be tended, peats flitted, leaving little time in reserve. The attempt made in 1909 by Cathcart Wason, to promote a Shetland Hosiery Association "...to encourage and foster this great industry, which is of such enormous importance to Shetland"[89] - had come to nothing; and it was not until 1943, that knitters were to form their own co-operative, protective association, the Shetland Hand Knitters Association (S.H.K.A.)

**Marketing and knitters.**

One of the most marked features of this period, was the increase in direct sales between knitters and the public. These sales, which had been rising since around the mid 1880s reached unprecedented heights during the War. And it was these wartime conditions, allowing knitters to by-pass their local merchants and sell direct to servicemen for cash, which were the final blow to the merchant's supremacy and dominance of the Shetland hand knitting industry, splintering the industry into two separate marketing factions: that is, knitters selling direct to the public, and merchants selling wholesale to retailers and to a lesser extent, retail to tourists and visitors to the islands.

At the time of the 1872 Truck Inquiry, the differentiation of knitters into two groups, had been made up of self-employed knitters and those who knitted with the merchants' wool. However, after this date, these two

groups were gradually restructured into those who sold to, or knitted for local merchants, and those who sold their work independent of them. Looking at the former, there is ample evidence in the 1888 and 1908 Truck Inquiries, and the Press, to confirm that, apart from their drop in numbers, their organisation had otherwise changed very little. This group invariably represented the poor or inferior knitter, for whom life was a continual hard struggle against the system and survival. Moreover, it was this group, and its inferior workmanship, which was playing into the hands of industrialists by lowering the high reputation of Shetland knitters. It was also this group who, relying on their merchant for credit in times of need, could not have survived without the aid of truck. Many merchants were kindly in their transactions, but basically they were both trying to survive in a changing world in which there was no place for either them or for the products of their labours. Machines had usurped this type of knitter and her inferior products - poor shaping and workmanship, lack of uniformity and in general carelessness, were the disadvantages which gave machines, with their uniformity of production, superiority over hand knitters. There was no intrinsic value in this type of hand knitting.

**Marketing and the independent knitter.**

By-and-large, this group was made up of superior knitters who increasingly enjoyed many opportunities to market hosiery independent of local merchants, as is shown in the chart on the following page:

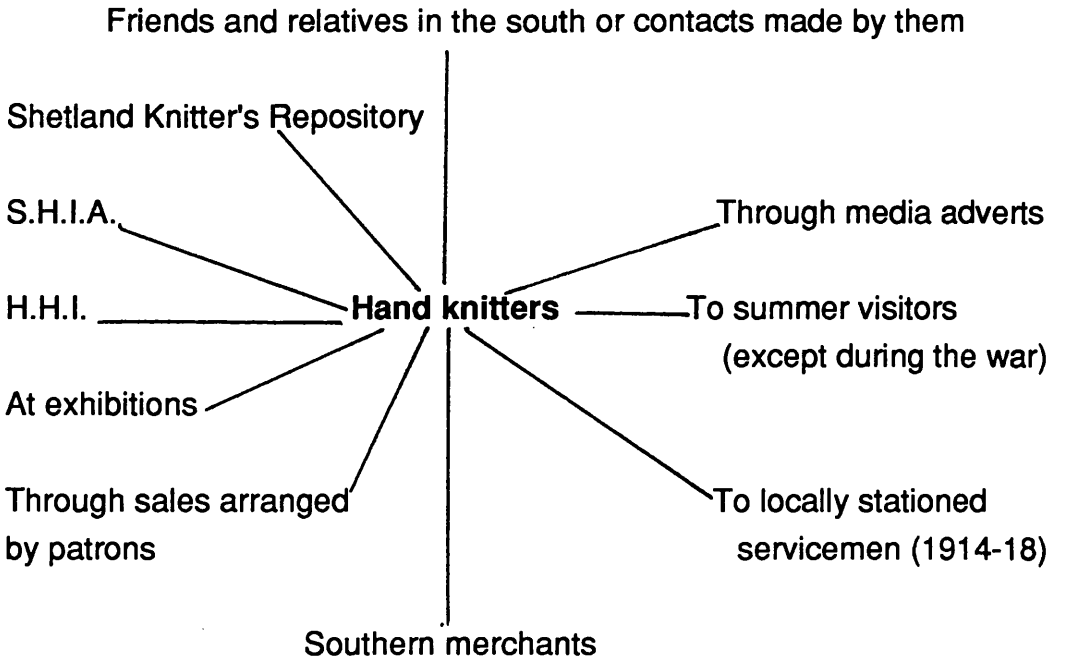



Fig. 5.9.

Unlike the Harris tweed industry, whose success can largely be attributed to the help and guidance of patrons, Shetland knitters had never benefited to any large extent from such attentions, with the Shetland Knitters' Repository in Edinburgh, being the nearest Shetland knitters had come to enjoying direct patronage[90]. Other local patronage came from Sheriff Thoms and local ladies like Mrs Jessie Saxby, Lady Lyall, Mrs Traill, Mrs Grierson and others.

Shetland was fortunate in developing ties with the S.H.I.A., albeit modest ties compared to the Harris Tweed Industry. Founded in 1889, this Association, whose chief patron was H.R.H. Princess Louise, with the Countess of Rosebery as President, had 3 main objects: To find markets for the produce of home industries, to improve quality by providing instruction and circulating information, and to pay workers a fair price for their labours[91]. The Association was run on philanthropic lines, whilst recognising that it was only as a self-supporting business that the success and permanent existence of the Association could be secured. It was hoped that good and artistic work would sell for satisfactory prices, and that only a sum sufficient to cover the cost of bringing goods to the market on an economical scale would be deducted and that the rest would go to the worker[92] - Shetland hosiery with its wide range of popular garments and beautiful lace work, was well suited to

fulfil their criteria. The S.H.I.A. was divided into four geographical branches- northern, eastern, western and central counties - with a shop at 132 George Street, Edinburgh and depot at 14 Lower Grosvenor Place, London. The northern counties branch, which had the benefit of the pioneer work which had been done for the previous 30 years in aiding workers in the Harris Tweed Industry, proposed bringing the hosiery of Shetland to a wider and better market than it had hitherto reached[93]. In the S.H.I.A.'s 1895 publication, *Scottish Home Industries*, Lady Lyall, wife of Sir Leonard Lyall, M.P. for the county from 1885-1900, is credited with having done this:

> Lady Lyall has done much for our industries - not only bringing us into touch with the S.H.I.A., but also selling quantities of our work - she has further helped to improve its quality by obtaining better prices[94].

Alice Grierson, wife of Andrew Grierson, landed proprietor of Quendale and Deputy Lieutenant of Zetland, was Shetland's local S.H.I.A.'s representative - Shetland came under the jurisdiction of the S.H.I.A.'s northern counties branch, based at Inverness. In her 1895 report to the S.H.I.A., Mrs Grierson, stressed the time consuming nature of hand carding, spinning, and knitting, and brought to the public's attentions the desperate plight of many knitters left with no other means of support but their knitting, and emphasised that the truest charity was to pay well for work. What her report failed to give, was an annual valuation of sales made through the S.H.I.A. Sales with the S.H.I.A. must have been quite considerable if the endless list of articles knitted is anything to go by. These included shawls - lace and haps - sleeping jackets, bed stockings, head squares, chest protectors, cholera belts, cardigan jackets, spencers, sleeves, leggings, respirator veils, helmets, gloves, mitts, wristlets, for ladies; there are also extensive lists of articles made for babies, children and gentlemen.[95]

Two other references to the S.H.I.A. would suggest that Shetland knitters continued to market hosiery through the S.H.I.A. until its termination in 1914[96]. Firstly, a note from a Miss J. Cochrane, dated January 1909 and enclosed with the Delting Inquiry file, referred to her sales of Shetland hosiery, through Miss Rae, Manageress of the S.H.I.A.'s shop in Edinburgh - Miss Cochrane undertook these sales as a private philanthropist and not as an emissary of the S.H.I.A. and had been

selling to them since 1900, sending on average £100 back to knitters between 1900 and 1907, but £160 in 1908[97]. Secondly, Cathcart Wason's abortive proposals for a Shetland Hosiery Association to be formed in conjunction with the S.H.I.A.[98]

Further help for Shetland knitters with organisation and marketing, came during the War, from the Co-operative Highland Home Industries (H.H.I.), set up in 1909[99]. In a bid to alleviate unemployment and hardship occasioned by the War and from the restrictions on the use of wool, the Board of Agriculture for Scotland, recognising that Shetland women were expert knitters, proposed that they be employed to knit socks etc. for the Army, and approached the H.H.I. to organise this scheme, with the offer of a grant of £100[100]. This scheme was successfully undertaken by the H.H.I., and by May 1915, over £2,300 had been paid in small sums to individual workers. This amount represented the actual proceeds of the sale of the different articles made, as the cost of postage, packing material, carriage, storage, advertising etc. as well as the salaries of the organisers of the scheme, were met from the funds of the Co-operative Council[101]. The Board, being satisfied that the scheme was helping in a practical way and ensuring the continuance of Home Industries in the islands, gave another grant of £100.

**Hosiery Merchants 1872-1922.**

Working on a combination of the store and consignment principles, merchants bought goods - paying for them in either cash or Shetland hosiery - from Scottish Mainland wholesalers, both to stock their retail drapery shops and to pay their local knitters through the store system. Hosiery was sold on the consignment principle, to wholesale and to retail hosiery dealers throughout Britain. It was particularly this latter practice which hampered mercantile expansion. Shetland hosiery merchants, by 'buying' hosiery, even when out of season[102] from knitters, had large amounts of capital tied up in their hosiery stock and by selling to wholesalers by consignment, shouldered the risk and delay in payment, often having to wait up to 18 months to secure payment. For example, at the time of their deaths, Robert Linklater and Arthur Laurenson, were owed £1,173-18/1d. and £1,668 respectively; these sums were in addition to their shop stock[103]. Lack of capital and delayed

payments, continued to be the scourge of Shetland trade, and protracted trucking in the Shetland hosiery industry, with the smaller merchants lacking the capital to break away from a barter economy, being themselves trucked by their suppliers. Lack of statistics and paucity of business records, make it impossible to judge the extent to which merchants expanded their businesses during this period. Valuations of the hand knitting industry, albeit a doubtful source of information, indicate a steady expansion (appendix 4). Information from Commissary Records, contemporary writers and Scottish Office files, make it possible to piece together a comprehensive picture of the complicated nature of marketing used by Shetland merchants.

The hosiery trade in Shetland continued as a symbiotic affair with most merchants, regardless of size and status, involved to some extent in hosiery, with merchants helping each other out for rushed orders, employing travellers to buy up or fulfil orders in country districts. Hosiery was still used as a form of currency in country districts, whilst, to a lesser extent, lines filled this function in Lerwick - at least at the beginning of the period. The small country merchants, with which the islands abounded, continued their dual roles, buying hosiery and other home produce, whilst retailing by barter, shop goods.

**Hosiery merchants - their organisation and marketing.**

As a result of the complex nature of their business dealings and the symbiotic nature of the hosiery trade in Shetland, it is enlightening to take several case studies of different merchants, representative of the main types of business activities undertaken during this period. To this end the following have been chosen: Robert Linklater of R. Linklater & Co., Shetland hosier of Lerwick and Edinburgh, and Robert Sinclair, the principal partner of Robert Sinclair & Co., Shetland hosiers and drapers, Lerwick, both of whom were examined at the 1872 Truck Inquiry. In the country districts, Wm. Pole of Pole Hoseseason, fish curers and general merchants dealing in hosiery - and an ardent protagonist of truck - and Mrs. M. Smith, a small-time dealer who sold hosiery to agents in London, for cash. Outwith Shetland , the case study chosen is John White & Co., Frederick Street, Edinburgh.

**Robert Linklater** (1811 - 1874). Robert Linklater set up in business as Shetland hosier at 173 Commercial Street, in 1836. These old and dilapidated premises were demolished and rebuilt between 1837 and 1844. The lower portion of the building was used by Robert Linklater as a dwelling house and shop. In 1868 he moved his business to 112 Commercial Street.[104] In all, Robert Linklater had three shops - a retail store in Princes Street, Edinburgh, and two in Lerwick, one acting as a buying depot and warehouse for Shetland hosiery and the other as a drapery store, both trucking with knitters and selling to the public. In Lerwick, he employed at least one shopman, Robert Anderson, a dresser, an agent in Unst to undertake orders for lace knitting, and an agent to dispose of job lots of inferior goods[105]. Robert Linklater bought much of his Shetland worsted from Laurence Williamson of Mid Yell[106]. He also employed over 300 knitters, mainly from the country districts[107]. Robert Linklater dealt mainly in veils and to a lesser extent in shawls and underclothing, but only employed knitters to knit fine Shetland lace, not coarser hosiery[108]. Knitters were paid in goods, although a little cash was given occasionally. Robert Linklater kept a work book where a debit and credit account of each knitters' transactions was recorded. Knitters were given pass books if required, but not lines[109]. Judging from the large number of small debts outstanding at the time of his death in 1874, knitters were allowed to run up accounts to a limited extent - for example, Margaret Anderson from Lunnasting owed him 7/5d., whilst Agnes Williamson and her sister Christina, of Whiteness, between them, owed Robert Linklater £18-18/-[110].

Shetland veil

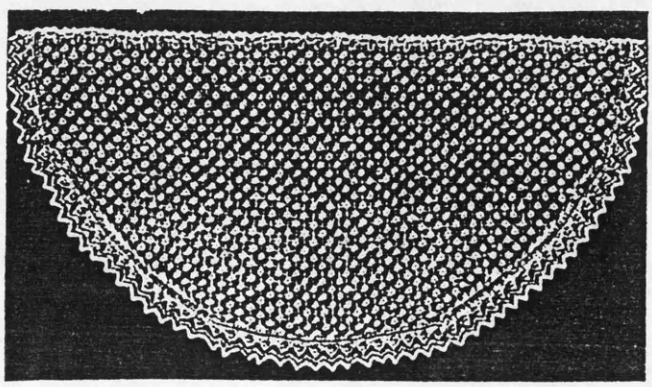
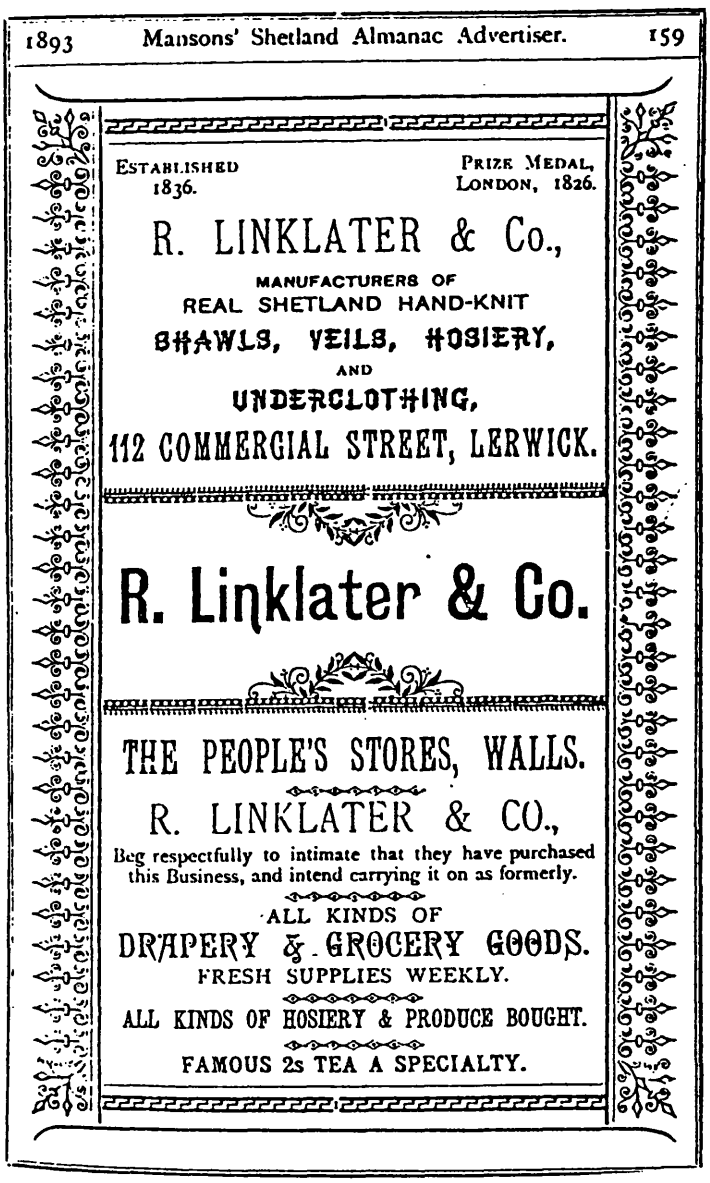


Fig. 5.10.
(Source: Smith, M. and Bunyan, C. - 1991)



ESTABLISHED 1836.

PRIZE MEDAL, LONDON, 1826.

R. LINKLATER & Co.,

MANUFACTURERS OF
REAL SHETLAND HAND-KNIT
SHAWLS, VEILS, HOSIERY,
AND
UNDERCLOTHING,
112 COMMERCIAL STREET, LERWICK.

R. Linklater & Co.

THE PEOPLE'S STORES, WALLS.

R. LINKLATER & CO.,

Beg respectfully to intimate that they have purchased this Business, and intend carrying it on as formerly.

ALL KINDS OF
DRAPERY & GROCERY GOODS.
FRESH SUPPLIES WEEKLY.

ALL KINDS OF HOSIERY & PRODUCE BOUGHT.

FAMOUS 2s TEA A SPECIALTY.

Fig. 5.11.
(Source: *Mansons' Shetland Almanac*, 1893)

Robert Linklater's testimony at the 1872 Truck Inquiry, gave detailed information on the knitting, finishing and marketing of veils[111]. Veils were graded from 1 to 7 with a no. 1, being the finest type and were knitted in Shetland worsted or mohair and then dressed, before marketing.

Fig. 5.10 shows a hand knitted veil. Robert Linklater employed at least one agent on Unst to whom he sent orders, as he felt that Unst was the home of the finest knitting. He also bought hosiery from self-employed knitters. Once received, hosiery was dressed before it could be valued and ticketed, ready to send to his retail shop in Edinburgh. R. Linklater & Co. did not confine its marketing to the Edinburgh store. They sold wholesale to Peace and Low, Kirkwall; Knox Samuel and Dickson, Edinburgh; Marshall and Snelgrove, London; and to numerous retailers as far apart as Wick, Liverpool, Rothesay, Harrogate, Manchester, Leith, Inverness etc. and interestingly, to Pole Hoseason & Co., Delting[112]. This latter rather unusual sale, may be accounted for by merchants helping each other out when a rushed order for which they had insufficient stock, was received. Not all work was of a marketable standard and an agent, paid in shop goods at wholesale prices, was employed to get damaged and shoddy hosiery sold in job lots[113].

Robert Linklater, a senior member of the Town Council and Parochial Board as well as Shetland hosier, died in 1874, leaving £3,945-16/6d. Commissary Records list the value of "the cash in house and shop" at £12-10/- and "the stock in trade and other effects in his shops" in Lerwick at £1,423-8/8d. and in Edinburgh at £465-4/9d., these sums representing his total personal estate, excluding £1,173-18/11d. worth of debts due to him[114]. Of these the "good debts" amounted to £1,056-10/- and represented the amount outstanding from retailers, to whom his company sold wholesale, small Shetland firms, and Shetland knitters. This was a considerable sum to have tied up in the 1870s and must have had a crippling effect on his business. An advertisement by Knox, Samuel and Dickson, dated c.1875[115], referred to their having bought up a second and third consignment from the late Mr. Robert Linklater. As his Shetland business continued until at least 1893, it would seem likely that this stock was from his Edinburgh shop which may have closed down[116]. Fig. 5.11, dated 1893, shows his business as "Manufacturers of Real Shetland Hand-Knit shawls, veils, hosiery and underclothing", as

# OLD LERWICK WORTHIES.

MR ROBERT SINCLAIR.

The above is a portrait of the late Mr Robert Sinclair, who carried on an extensive business in Lerwick as a draper and hosier for many years, first in the premises now occupied by Messrs J. B. Anderson & Goodlad, solicitors, and latterly in the Union Bank buildings (the buildings that were burned down). Mr Sinclair was the soul of geniality and good humour, and was widely known for his pawky, but never ill-natured, wit and old-fashioned sayings, his jokes, and stories. He was leisurely and dignified in his movements, but was nevertheless a keen and successful man of business. He it was who built St. Clair Cottage on the South Hillhead.

Mr Sinclair had strong literary tastes and was an omnivorous reader. He wrote a very interesting story called "Da Tief o' da Neen," which attracted considerable attention at the time. Exceedingly fond of music, and having a very pleasant tenor voice, he regularly attended the choir of the Congregational Church, of which he was a devoted member. Mr Sinclair had a large family, most of whom emigrated to New Zealand in 1885. A fine type of man was Mr Sinclair—shrewd, kindly, and "jokesome," with a kindly word for everyone.

Fig. 5.12.
(Source: *The Shetland News*, 30/9/1937)

continuing and expanding as drapers and grocers out to Walls, in north west Mainland.

**Robert Sinclair** (c.1815 -?1900) .
Robert Sinclair, a farmer's son was born in Twatt, in the Parish of Walls. He later moved to Lerwick to learn his trade, working for James Linklater, draper, of Queen's Street. In 1852, he set up as Robert Sinclair & Co., at 60 Commercial Street, Lerwick, and at the time of the 1872 Truck Inquiry, had two shops in Lerwick - a cash and a truck shop. He was obviously a very successful business man as, in the late 1860s, he had an impressive villa built on the outskirts of Lerwick. T. Manson, editor of *The Shetland News,* described his shop as:

> This shop seemed always to be packed with people selling their wares, with Mr Sinclair, a fountain bubbling over with fun and good humour behind the counter, cracking jokes, and telling stories[117].

This statement seems to be corroborated by the information in Fig. 5.12.

Robert Sinclair ran his business in much the same combined store/ consignment system as Robert linklater. The principle difference between the two, was in the issuing of lines and pass books. Mr Sinclair issued lines and only occasionally issued pass books. According to his evidence Robert Sinclair would have preferred not to give out lines but was obviously unsuccessful in dissuading knitters from taking lines as his line book for the first four days of December 1871 records 74 lines issued. Robert Sinclair had perfected an extensive system for marking lines with the knitter's initials, the amount due and the date. These particulars were also entered in his 'line book'. When knitters exchanged their line for goods, the line was destroyed and the amount due in the 'line book' marked off as paid and dated[118]. Robert Sinclair issued more lines than any other merchant, issuing 6 - 8,000 lines between 1870 and 1872[119]. Like Robert Linklater, he was extensively involved in veil making, employing country people to knit these for him. Mr Sinclair sold mainly to the trade and to visitors in the season. In 1885 Robert Sinclair and his family emigrated to New Zealand[120].

**William Pole** (1839 - 1921). William Pole was the eldest son of William Pole, merchant at Greenbank and Ann Sandison, daughter of Alexander Sandison, merchant, Delting. William Pole junior, started work at the

Union Bank Lerwick, and then joined Mr James Hoseason to form Pole Hoseason & Co. , Merchants and Fishcurers at Mossbank, Delting.[121] In addition, they had a shop at Greenbank, North Yell and owned and ran two fishing stations at Feidland and Gloup. The 1872 Truck Inquiry showed that William Pole had been in charge of the Greenbank shop sometime before 1872, whilst his father ran the Mossbank shop; but by 1872, he was the managing partner in the Mossbank store.

The firm's largest business concern lay with fishing and fish curing. The local men fished for him, and bought or hired their gear and provisions through Pole Hoseason's stores, running up accounts which were settled annually. The firm hired women from the end of May until the end of September to work at the fishing stations - about twenty women at Mossbank and ten at Greenbank to gut and pack fish. These women were paid by the day. They also ran up accounts with Pole Hoseason who kept a separate women's ledger[122]. The women's wages could be settled weekly, every five or six weeks, or at the end of the season. Much of their pay was taken out in provisions, that being convenient to the women and the accustomed understanding - the nearest other shop was one mile away. Both Mr Hoseason and Mr Pole, were landed proprietors, and acted as factors for George Hoseason of Basts, North Yell, and one or two small properties. Mr Pole was also a tacksman for Aywick, East Yell and Sellafirth and Sandwick in North Yell, whose tenants were obliged to fish for him, this being part of the contract for their land. If not required, these tenant fishermen were allowed to go to the whaling or Faroe fishing.

In 1872 Pole Hoseason dealt with hosiery only to a very small extent; not turning over more than £100 worth a year - what proportion of the firm's total turnover this represented, is impossible to ascertain, as no figures were given for his fishing returns. Wm. Pole did, however, deal in Shetland worsted and was the only merchant mentioned in the 1872 Truck Inquiry who sent it south, and so doing, met with his fellow merchants' displeasure, due to the scarcity of Shetland wool[123]. But, by the time of the Delting Truck Inquiry in 1888, Wm. Pole was dealing extensively in hosiery. This shift of emphasis from fishing to hosiery was undoubtedly due to the decline in the haaf* fishing around the mid eighties, the failure of the fishing in 1886 and 1887, and to the terrible

fishing disaster at Gloup in 1881. This was not just a loss of man power to Pole Hoseason but a considerable loss of capital, tied up in boats and fishing gear, to say nothing of the accumulated debts of these men and the greater dependence of their women folk, left destitute. Reluctant as William Pole may have been to deal in hosiery, in hard times of trade depressions and fishing disasters, to keep in business he probably had little option but to accept hosiery as the only form of currency in circulation locally. In the Delting Truck Inquiry, he referred to a knitted garment as "...a value put on it, and it was just franked the same as a pound-note or a shilling, and we had nothing more to do than to pass the goods over the counter" [124]. Wm. Pole's father-in-law, T.M. Adie of Voe, merchant and fish curer, who in 1872 stated that he had given up the hosiery trade two years earlier as there was no profit in it, had gone back to dealing in hosiery by 1888[125].

William Pole, who it will be remembered was the chief instigator of the Delting petition, was very much in favour of truck and felt quite justified in exchanging shop goods for hosiery - to ensure some profit - for his troubles. As he stated to Sheriff Mackenzie:

> The first class knitted goods are comparatively easily sold, and at good prices, but the medium and inferior goods are most difficult to sell. I have known us travel to London and back again to sell that class of goods, and not able to sell £20 worth. And, on the other hand, when we had got it sold, it was generally to parties requiring a long credit. It is very often 12 months from the time we put it into their hands until we get our money[126].

He also stated that the bulk of the knitters were sending their best stuff away and that he was left with the rubbish, which had to be sold in the south by auction, and pointed out that if all the hosiery was of the best quality, the hosiery trade would be a very different one. As Wm. Pole also ran the post office, he would have a fair idea of the amount of work knitters were sending south. For all that William Pole was obviously a tough and astute business man, he was highly spoken of by his knitters, many of whom were dependent on him for their hosiery sales, and realised that despite the poor prices being paid for hosiery, they would have faired no better anywhere else. For example, Ann Blance from Mossbank, said "If it was not for the hosiery we would be very badly off", whilst Mrs Ridlon from Toft, who had knitted to Mr Pole for twenty years,

and had been employed as his dresser for the last twelve, was well aware that it was only through trucking that the poor people could survive. "The merchants take things from the poor that they have very little chance of getting sold, so we cannot be down altogether on the merchants"[127]. 'Things' refers to poor quality hosiery.

Nineteen years after the Gloup disaster, Delting was to suffer another major fishing tragedy. At Christmas time 1900, 22 men were drowned and 4 boats were lost, leaving 15 widows and 61 other dependents. It was through the telegraph service installed at Pole Hoseason's Mossbank store, that the news of the survival of one of the boats came [128]. Shetland country life still centred round the country merchant. Such disasters and their appalling social consequences, ensured that trucking would linger on despite any legislation from 600 miles away. William Pole's truck activities continued unchallenged until 1902, when he was fined the paltry sum of £1 for infringements of the Truck Act[129]. Still undaunted, he continued to believe that the Truck Act was harmful to Shetland interests and that Westminster should not poke its nose in to matters that he felt did not concern them. At the 1908 Truck Inquiry, the Commissioners were told that Pole Hoseason & Co. at Mossbank were the worst offenders, constantly contravening the law by extensive trucking.[130]

A letter to James Clerk, Comb, Mid Yell, illustrates that Pole Hoseason & Co., had expanded their hosiery dealings, selling wholesale to retail dealers in the south and employing local agents on a commission basis to help fulfil orders[131]. The letter asked for one dozen "nice white hap shawls" ranging from 3/- to 6/- each, with the promise of prompt payment in cash. This would infer that Pole Hoseasons were being paid in cash and not goods from their wholesale source. These varied types of marketing arrangements, seem to have been common, with Shetland merchants helping each other out to complete orders. This type of order was much valued as a sale was assured.

For all that William Pole felt that trucking was the only way in which this risky business could survive, he did extremely handsomely out of it. When he died in 1921 he left the vast sum of £20,474-2/4, much of it invested in stocks and shares[132] - it is not possible to estimate what

proportion of this can be attributed to the hosiery side of his multifarious business dealings. After his death, Pole Hoseason & Co., continued in business and were the first Shetland firm to use knitting machines[133]. The firm was bought over in 1946 by Standen & Co. London, whose founder had opened up the London market to Shetland hosiery just over one hundred years ago[134].

**Mrs Mary D. Smith.** (1839 - ?1910) Mary Smith's hosiery and household accounts book, lodged in the Shetland Archives, is the only extant Shetland hosiery merchant's ledger[135]. The term 'hosiery merchant' is in fact rather too grand a title for Mary Smith, who was no more than a small-time dealer selling Shetland hosiery to agents in the south by post. She is recorded in the 1881 census, as a 42 year old widow (and head of the household), residing at Waterside, Gluss Ayre, Northmavine. Her occupation is listed as 'grocer', although her account book, running from 1876-1883, gives little indication of such activity. She conducted her business by employing women to knit for her, then sending parcels on approval to agents in the south. She used the 'Earl' for freighting - that is, the steamship, Earl of Zetland - and sent hosiery to agents in London, Edinburgh, Suffolk, Cheshire and as far afield as Quebec. It seems likely that these agents were in reality patrons of Shetland knitters, selling Shetland goods amongst their friends. This assumption is based on several factors. Firstly, all the addresses of her clients are private addresses, as for instance, Mrs Henderson, 19 York Place, Portman Square, London. Secondly, this Mrs Henderson seems to have extended her patronage at the London end, as their are several entries of shawls and other hosiery being sold to Mrs Irons of 5, York Place, Portman Square, and notes to the effect that other people were to be invoiced along with Mrs Henderson. Lastly, enclosed in the ledger was a short letter, evidently not sent, which can hardly be described as written in an impersonal business manner:

"Waterside", 3 Jan/82.

My Dear Mrs. Henderson,

I send this parcel to you to look at at your convenience - you will just send what you think most suitable and charge whatever price you please. I got the P.O. for which accept of my grateful thanks.

With kindest love to you both, from M.D. Smith, (Excuse haste).

## Mary Smith's Household Expenses 1880

| | Debit | Credit |
|---|---|---|
| Work people's wages | £13-10/- | |
| Robert Mouat for work | £1 | |
| Lerwick accounts | £3-14/8d. | |
| For spinning | £2 | |
| Paper and books | £1 | |
| Meal, tea and barley etc. | £25 | |
| Account from Fulham (? rather illegible) | £6-14/- | |
| Taxes, roads etc. (smudged entry) | £1-17/1d. | |
| Money received for shawls | | £10-15/- |
| For wool 6, for lambs 1 | | £7 |
| Money for shawls | | £9-14/- |
| " " 4 " | | £4 |
| Rents | | £24 |
| Totals | £54-15/9d. | £55-9/- |

Balance = 13/3d.

Fig. 5.13.
(Source: S.A., D25/89)

Mary Smith dealt mainly in clouds and shawls of all sizes and styles. Her parcels also included stockings, ties, petticoats, a muffler and wool. She was paid promptly, that is within two or three months, receiving postal orders, bank cheques drawn on the North Bank, Zetland, cash and postage stamps; employed women to knit for her and had her wool spun on the Scottish mainland. Her records show that the proceeds from her hosiery business and rents were her main sources of income. For example, her 1880 Household Accounts show her outgoings as £54-15/9 and her income as £55-9/-. Fig. 5.13 shows the break down of these figures. By present day standards, an annual balance of 13/3d. appears meagre, but when it is considered that the poor roll allowance was between 1/- and 1/6 c.1910[136] and a dresser earned 5/- a week for her labours, Mrs Smith was fortunate to have a surplus, and may well have had savings in the North Bank, Lerwick.

**John White & Co. - 1830 - 1988.**

Much is known about this prestigious company thanks to two sources of information, one extant and the other lost in the 1980s - the former being an article published in *Scotland of To-day and Edinburgh its capital*[137], and the latter, John White & Co.'s 1908 mail order catalogue[138].

This hosiery business was founded as far back as 1830 by Mr W.B. Mackenzie at 126 Princes Street, Edinburgh. Fig. 4.15 (see p. 97) lists the range of Shetland articles which he exhibited at the Great Exhibition in 1851. William Mackenzie was credited with having pioneered the sale of Shetland hosiery in the south and has been described as the 'Father of the Shetland wool trade'[139]. He is mentioned in the 1872 Truck Inquiry by Mrs Andrina Anderson of Lerwick, as purchasing direct from Shetland knitters both in Edinburgh and when visiting the Shetland Islands[140]. These purchasing visits can be dated to at least 1847[141]. William Mackenzie was succeeded in 1860 by John White, who running the business under his own name, substantially enlarged it, establishing extensive trade links with the Continent and America[142]. John White continued Mackenzie's custom of visiting the Shetland Islands to purchase hosiery direct from knitters[143]. There is, however, no mention of any partnership with Shetland merchants.


*Special Notice :—*

*JOHN WHITE & CO. have now received their New Winter Stock of Shetland Hand-Knit Shawls, Hosiery, Underclothing, and other Comforts, all of the Finest Quality.*

10 FREDERICK STREET, EDINBURGH.

Fig. 5.14.
(Source: S.A. D6/26/24).

In 1882, John White was succeeded by his nephew, a Mr Ramsay, who whilst retaining the old title of John White & Co., continued to extend the scope and influence of his business, increasing the volume of its trade operations year by year[144]. Mr Ramsay had "large numbers" of knitters knitting for him all over the islands, some of whom had been knitting for John White & Co. for generations; this would imply that not only did Ramsay's predecessors visit Shetland to buy hosiery 'on spec', but had also engaged local women to knit for them[145]. The list of articles stocked by John White & Co. in 1890 included under and outer garments, Shetland lace and Fair Isle garments described as "...peculiar by reason of their curious colours and patterns"[146]. The following extract illustrates the high esteem in which this prestigious company was held throughout the world:

> ...Messrs. John White & Co. stand in the front rank of those engaged in distributing the products of this vigorous island industry... (and) do a very large trade in the beautiful and serviceable goods that constitute their speciality, and maintain valuable commercial connections throughout the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Austria, America, and all British colonies of any importance. Their goods are known to be exclusively of the most excellent quality, and their reputation has for many years been their best and only advertisement[147].

John White & Co.

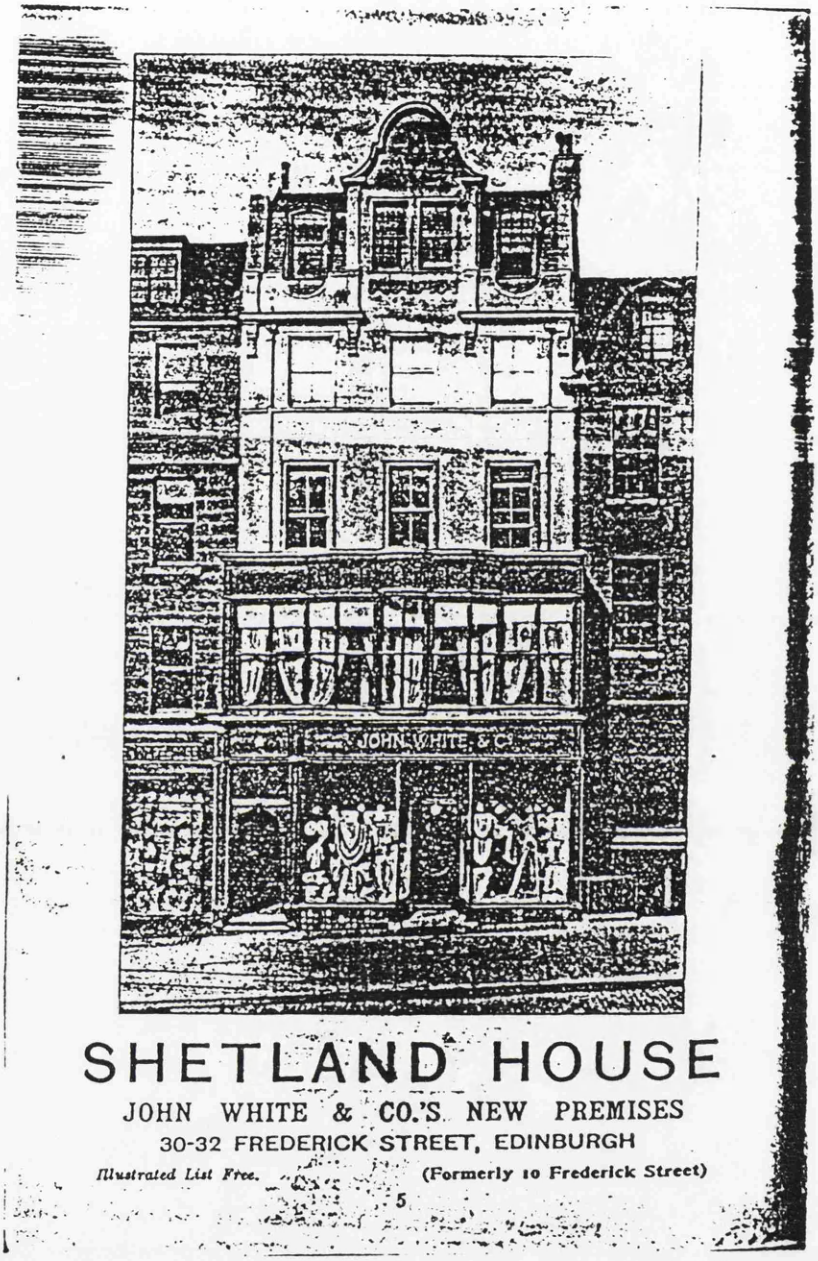



Fig. 5.15.
(Source: *Edinburgh Almanac*, 1904)

Around 1904 John White & Co. moved from 10 Frederick Street to more spacious premises at 30 - 32 Frederick Street[148] (Fig. 5.15). The company dealt in both wholesale and retail trade, carrying on its retail trade on the ground floor and wholesale business on the upper floor of these new premises, and in addition established a considerable mail order business. Their mail order catalogue contains a wealth of detailed information on the type and extent of the company's hosiery business and provides an interesting social review on the types of clothes worn by Edwardians at that time .

John White & Co.'s 1908 mail order catalogue comprised fifty pages with not only photographs and descriptions of the goods for sale, but also details of Shetland life and traditions[149]. The catalogue described Shetland wool as soft, light and warm and greatly sought after for its 'health' qualities and related how famous sanatoria used Shetland shawls as bedcovers because of their lightness and warmth. Numerous shawls are listed. For example, a one yard square shawl cost between 3/6d. and 7/6d., and a two and a half square shawl, 28/- to 38/-, with black shawls an extra 2/-. Many, many other types of Shetland hosiery are listed: motoring scarfs and neckties, clouds and long scarfs, circular and square veils, all in lace knitting were just a few of the more elegant items available by mail order. Shetland wool was felt to be particularly suited to underwear, as in addition to its warmth and lightness, its porous and elastic qualities, allowed it to adapt to the shape of the wearer, so that such garments could be worn 'invisibly', with no trace of additional bulk. Precise measurements were requested for underwear - and if this was not possible, customers were requested to state whether stout, short and so on! Vests, socks, drawers, knee caps, abdominal and cholera belts, gloves, belts and spencers in summer and winter weight were available for babies, children, men and women, with a large choice in each category, as for instance, spencers (vests) came with high or low necks, with or without sleeves, waisted or not. Fair Isle garments were also available. Savings could be made by ordering from the 'cheap goods department'. In addition to hand knitted Shetland hosiery, John White & Co. dealt in machine knitted waistcoats, Shetland 'claith', blankets and rugs.

Patrons were requested to order by letter or telegram, and orders over 10/- were sent post free in Britain and Ireland. When returning goods which had been sent on approval, customers were asked to send a separate letter in advance. Customer files were kept, detailing previous orders and noting temporary summer addresses. New customers had to send cash with their order. Precise washing instructions were given at the end of the catalogue, along with a request that fine Shetland lace should be sent back for dressing. The cleaning and dressing department guaranteed no shrinkage and quick service - washing day was Wednesday, so no garment took longer than eight days to be returned. White garments were treated with sulphur fumes to whiten and disinfect them.

In the days before central heating, it is easy to understand the appeal of Shetland garments and how this business thrived. The parcel post and cheap labour - both Edinburgh employees and hand knitters - had been the essential ingredients which had enabled John White & Co., to develop this side of the business. This thriving business, which drew on the wealth of the middle and upper classes and their interest in health, Shetland garments being "...much recommended by medical men as beneficial to health on account of their lightness and warmth"[150], had been made possible by the advances in modern communications.

John White & Co. was taken over by John Smith & Co. (Wools) Ltd. of 6 Frederick Street, Edinburgh[151], who continued in business trading as John Smith & Co. (Wools) Ltd. until c.1988 diversifying into knitting wools and needlecraft materials[152].

From 1906 to the end of the period, there is a dearth of reliable information on the marketing of Shetland hosiery by Shetland hosiers. Professor Scott's 1914 report on the Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands gives a very comprehensive summary of the Shetland hosiery trade, but is limited in its information on merchants and how they marketed their hosiery. To a very small extent this gap can be filled in from articles in *The Scotsman* and *The Shetland Times.* From around 1910, there seems to have been a slight shift of emphasis from hosiery to wool dealing, as there are several references to merchants outbiding each other and forcing up the price of native wool . This was possibly

Shetland road plexus, 1864 and 1890.

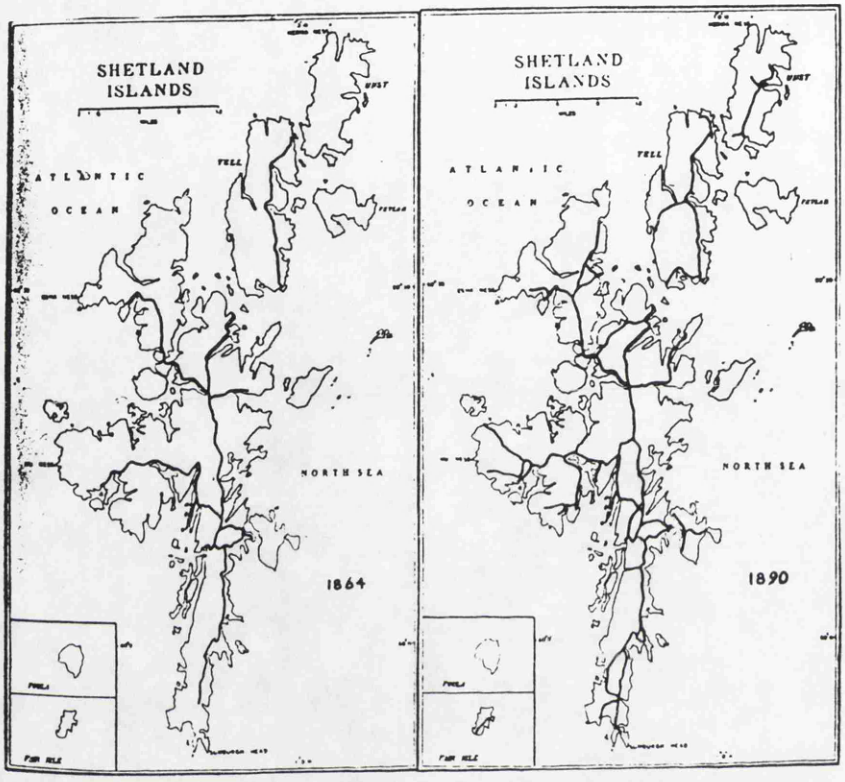



Fig. 5.16.
(Source: O'Dell, A.C. - 1939)

because of the competition from machines undercutting hand knitted hosiery to such an extent that there was little profit in it. There are still references which indicated that quantities of poor quality hosiery had to be sold through auction sales which were damaging the reputation of Shetland hosiery.

Shetland, so literally a backwater of Britain for centuries, had been opened up by the tremendous advances in modern communications, both within the archipelago and with Britain and her colonies. The herring boom of the 80s, peaking around 1905, lasted until the outbreak of the War, and had done much to aid these developments. With 174 curing stations scattered around 26 Shetland ports, 46 of them in Baltasound, Unst and 36 in Lerwick - the two most important centres for the hosiery industry - ease of communication was essential to transport fish rapidly to the most lucrative port.[153] Pedestrian travel had been improved by paths funded by the C.D.B., whilst extensions to the 'meal' roads made cart and stage car travel possible by land (fig. 5.16); and by sea, the inter-island steamer service greatly facilitated local mobility and brought enormous developments to the import and export trades. The herring boom transformed Lerwick; the new harbour and docks, coupled with the ample supply of water and imported coal, needed for steam drifters, established Lerwick as the 'Herringopolis' of the north. Inevitably this migrant population, with money to spend, boosted sales of every description in Lerwick. Shortage of cash gradually became less of a halting factor to trade expansion, and as the amount of cash in circulation increased to all spheres, Shetland slowly moved from a community tied to the land and dependent on crofting for subsistence, to one independent of the land, relying on cash for their 'daily bread'. Increased cash brought increased mobility reflected in the falling population in rural areas and the rise in Lerwick's population which soared from 3,655 in 1871 to 5,533 in 1911, although falling to 5,137 after the War[154] (appendix 8).

Hosiery merchants had not been slow to take advantage of this money supply. They benefited from the wealth generated by the growth of the fishing industry, and in fact, owed much of their success to the opening up of Shetland spurred by the fishing industry. To the hosiery industry in general, advances in communications were its life blood, whilst the

advances in modern technology, were a mixed blessing. For example, whilst machine carded wool saved Shetland spinners time and allowed more worsted to be spun on the islands, it detracted from the soft, fine texture of the native wool, and made it easier to imitate; this was also true of machine spun worsted. However, it was the knitting machine, with its growing number of cheap imitation, which posed the greatest threat to the industry - a situation fuelled by the large quantities of inferior Shetland goods still finding their way on to the market, and aggravated by trucking. As has been shown in the case study of William Pole, it was the destitute, the bereaved, the old and infirm, who unable to help themselves, were acting as a cancer on the islands' hosiery industry. The industry's ability to develop and survive competition from machines, depended on producing quality products aimed at the luxury slot in the market. There was no place for mis-shapen, inferior workmanship in an age of machines and modern technology. The time had come when survival depended on jettisoning these inferior knitters, a very difficult problem when it was their livelihood at stake.

It was a problem facing many home industry associations, as it was so often work from them which kept many out of the Poor House. The Midland Lace Association, is an excellent example of a dying industry which had managed, by unrelenting standards of excellence, to revive the cottage lace making industry in the Midlands. Run on purely business, rather than philanthropic lines, it was able to compete with machine made lace, and even up to the outbreak of the First World War, make a profit. However, such success was not accomplished without its victims - the old and infirm, whose failing eyesight and strength, prevented them from meeting the high standards required by the Association. Extant business records and accounts of this Association, include sad, illiterate little notes from workers no longer able to meet the standards of the Association[155]. Were the Shetland merchants doing the knitters a kindness by accepting inferior work and threatening the industry's survival, or was the Midland Lace Association's policy of excellence at all costs, the soundest policy? In the event, it was the Shetland hand knitting industry which survived, whilst the Midland Lace Association limped along after the First World War, finally terminating in the mid 1920s.

It would be untrue to deduce from this comparison, that the Shetland approach was the correct one. Several factors must be taken into consideration. First and foremost, knitting was a part-time/spare-time occupation for the majority of knitters, which fitted in with the crofting way of life; secondly, as islanders, Shetlanders, unlike Midland lace workers, were unable to pick up employment in nearby towns and cities; thirdly, the Shetland knitter had her own supply of raw material and did not depend on an agent to supply her - she could use or sell the wool, in each case a net gain - and lastly; knitting skills were so greatly developed and so many island women involved, that even if several hundred women had given up knitting or migrated to other parts of the country, the effect would have been little felt. A more valid comparison would be with the Harris tweed Industry's strategy in dealing with spurious 'Harris tweed'. The Harris tweed Industry, as inextricably enmeshed in trucking as the Shetland hand knitting industry for much of this period[156], managed to overcome machine competition by maintaining the high standards laid down and enforced by its Association. As the Government Inquires had invariably[157] shown, living and working conditions in the Hebrides, were marginally worse than Shetland. The social and economic conditions which had been the initial cause of truck, did not disappeared in the Long Isles during this period, but equally, they had not been allowed to interfere with and ruin one of the few valuable assets the islands possessed. By attention to detail and vigilant quality control, the Association was able to survive and expand by capitalising on its reputation by selling to the luxury market in Britain, diversifying into the American market, during British trade recessions. It was of critical importance that all concerned with the Shetland hand knitting industry should unite to fight their common enemy - the knitting machine - by forming a protective organisation, and thereby gaining their own trade mark.

NOTES.

[1] Other local newspapers had appeared prior to 1872, but like *The Shetland Journal* printed between 1836 & 1837, were short lived. *The Shetland News* followed *The Shetland Times* in 1885.

[2] The Baliasta Chrome and Mineral Co., Ltd., went into liquidation the following year (1873). BT2/702, and The Haroldswick Chrome and Mineral Co. Ltd., in 1880 - BT2/763.

[3] *The Shetland Times* 30/12/1872;

[4] Nicolson, J.R., *Hay and Co., - Merchants in Shetland*, (Lerwick 1982), p. 56-7.

[5] Extract taken from *The Shetland Times*, 28/9/1872.

[6] S.A., D6/292/24, p. 66.

[7] N.R.A. 626, Bundle 1, letter to Thomas Hutton from Lord Zetland, dated November 1841.

[8] Nicolson, J.R., *Shetland* , (London 1972), p. 90.

[9] O'Dell, A.C. *Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands*, (Shetland 1939), p. 98, asserts that sheep clearances had reached their peak by 1877.

11 O'Dell, A.C., and Walton K., *The Highlands and Islands of Scotland*,(London 1962), p. 299.

[11] Gregson, K., 'Seamanship and Kinship: one Shetland family's connection with the north east of England', *Northern Studies, 1*16, (1981) p. 29-37; Munro, Lewis, *Scottish Home Industries* (Dingwall 1895), p. 173.

[12] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), A.F.42/263. (1898).

[13] Day, J.P., *Public Administration in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, (London 1918), p.167.

[14] Op. cit., p. 165.

[15] Op. cit., p.166.

[16] P.P., Cd., 3980 (1884), Crofters and Cottars Highlands and Islands of Scotland, p. 77.

[17] Prior to 1832, in theory Orkney and Shetland as one county returned a representative to Westminster, but in practice, Shetland had no say in affairs, since only a few Orcadian landowners enjoyed the right to vote.

[18] *Shetland Times* 17/10/1885; Ferguson, W., *Scotland 1689 to the Present*, (Edinburgh 1968), p. 326.

[19] See chapter 3, p. 64..

[20] Nicolson, J.R., *Shetland*, (London, 1972), p. 80.

[21] The Commissioners of Supply, established in 1667, were not truly representative of the people, being made up of landowners and other influential people.

[22] O'Dell, A.C., *The Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands* (Lerwick 1939), p. 199. These figures are based on census reports.

[23] Manson, T., *Lerwick during the last half century*, (Shetland 1991 - revised edition), p. 230.

[24] P.P., Cd. 4978 (1910), Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, evidence of Henry Pearson Taylor.

[25] The Congested Districts Board designated an area congested if the industrial resources of the locality were insufficient to provide for the need of the population and if the land valuation did not exceed £1 per head. Day, J.P., *Public Administration in the Highlands and islands of Scotland*, (London 1918), p. 207.

[26] In 1865 Arthur Anderson had donated a 'Widows' Asylum' to the people of Shetland. (Nicolson, J.R., *Shetland* , (London 1972), p. 78.)

[27] Day, J.P., *Public Administration in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, (London 1918), p. 111 & 139.

[28] P.P., Cd. 4443, (1908), Minutes of Evidence taken before the Truck Committee, Vol. II (Days 1 - 37), p. 118, question 2743. Evidence of Miss Mary Paterson.

[29] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), AF/42. The Congested Districts (Scotland) Act, set up the Congested Districts Board to aid and develop agriculture; to provide seeds, implements and machinery; to provide land for sub-division among crofters and cottars in congested districts; to aid migration of crofter and cottars from congested districts; to aid fishing; to aid the building

of roads, piers, leading lights etc. and to aid spinning, weaving and other home industries.

[30] Nicolson, J.R., *Hay and Co. - Merchants in Shetland*, (Shetland Times 1982). This book gives an interesting an account of the firm's history.

[31] The most serious of these bankruptcies was the Shetland Steam Shipping Co. Ltd., registered in 1868 with a capital of £5,000 made up of 500 £10 shares. 71 people residing in Shetland had invested a total of £7,100, 50 people investing in only 1 or 2 shares. BT2/294.

[32] Thompson, P., *The Edwardians*, (London 1975), p. 38.

[33] Mitchell, I., Johnson, A., Coghill, I., (editors), *Living Memory*, (Shetland 1986) and Mitchell, I., (ed.), *A Hint Da Daeks*, (Shetland 1987).

[34] Mitchell, I., (editor), *A Hint da Daeks*, (Shetland 1987), p. 6.

[35] Ibid.

[36] P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home industries in the Highlands and islands, p. 84.

[37] P.P., Cd. 4978, (1910), Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, (1910) p. 567, q.6303.

[38] Cowie, R., *Shetland* , (Edinburgh 1874), p. 205.

[39] Thompson, P. et. al., *Living the Fishing* (London 1983), p. 167.

[40] Dey, Joan, *Out Skerries - An Island Community*, (Shetland 1991), p. 77.

[41] Pluralism of employment is still a marked feature in most Highland and Island regions and its importance is recognised by the Scottish Education authorities, as is, for example, shown in a *16+ in Scotland*, (1987), YTS case study of weaving in Lews Castle: "...an important feature of the employment pattern is the need to combine several occupations in order to maintain a living wage".

[42] S.A., D1/32.

[43] Newton, S.M, *Health, Art and Reason*, (London 1974), p. 98 -100. Dr. Jaegar, a German from Stuttgart, revised and had his *Essays on Health Culture* translated into English in 1887. Although he had some very curious ideas about the health properties of animal and vegetable fibres for clothing, he had a great following in Britain - called 'woolleners' - who were anxious to adopted his theories of the beneficial effect of wool next to the skin, not only for warmth and comfort, but also to aid slimming and avoid the noxious vapours he claimed were given off by vegetable fibres!

[44] *The Shetland Times*, 4/9/1909.

[45] Cowie, R., *Shetland* (Edinburgh 1874), p. 186.

[46] O'Dell, A.C., *Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands* (Lerwick 1939), p. 159.

[47] Op.cit., p. 158.

[48] Op. cit., p. 179. The number of parcels delivered in Shetland rose from 24,219 in 1890 to 86,143 by 1905.

[49] Old Haa', Burravoe, Yell. Invoices from Arnott & Co., 19 Jamaica Street, Glasgow and John W. Black, 25 North Bridge, Edinburgh dated 21/9/1902 and 25/9/1908 respectively.

[50] *Peace's Orkney and Shetland Almanac* 1884, p. 192.

[51] *The Shetland Times*17/10/1885 - Advertisement for MacNaughton's, Pitlochry.

[52] Cowie, R., *Shetland*, (Edinburgh 1874), p.126.

[53] S.R.O., (W.R.H.), AF42/263.

[54] *The Scotsman* 21/1/1909.

[55] P.P., Cd. 4978, (1910), Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, p. 567, q. 66310.

[56] Collins, Brenda, 'Sewing and Social Structure: The Flowerers of Scotland and Ireland', *Economy and Society in Scotland and Ireland*, p. 243.

[57] S.R.O., (W.R.H.), H1/848, evidence of Wm. Pole, merchant at Mossbank.

[58] *The Scotsman*, 24/12/1918.

[59] *The Scotsman*, 26/12/1914.

[60] *The Shetland Times*, 4/9/1909. This is fully covered later in the chapter, along with the S.H.I.A.

[61] P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home industries

in the Highlands and Islands, P. 92.

[62] Black, C., 'A Shetland Industry', *Womanhood*, Vol. 1, no.4, p. 286; 'A Lady Resident', *The Poor Knitters of Shetland*, (Paisley 1861), p.7.

[63] Spenceley, G., 'The Lace Associations:Philanthropic Movements to preserve the production of hand-made lace in late Victorian and Edwardian England', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 16, (June 1973), p. 436.

[64] P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, p. 87.

[65] Op. cit. p. 91.

[66] By the time Dr. W.R.Scott had completed his report to the Congested Districts Board, he had been promoted to professor and the duties of the C.D.B. had been taken over by the Board of Agriculture for Scotland.

[67] Op. cit. , p. 141.

[68] Op. cit. , p. 33.

[69] See chapter 1, p. 6 and 7.

[70] P.P., Cd., 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, p. 49.

[71] Op. cit. p. 50.

[72] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), AF42/9702.

[73] Munro, Lewis, *Scottish Home Industries*, (Dingwall 1895), p. 65-67.

[74] *The Shetland Times*, 4/9/1909.

[75] P. P., Cd. 7899,(1915), Third Report of the Board of Agriculture for Scotland, p.xciv.

[76] P.P., Cd., 7564 (1914), Home Industries Report, p. 84. Professor Scott visited Shetland in 1912 and had seen this carding mill. Therefore it can be assumed that it was set up c. 1912.

[77] *The Scotsman* , 26/12/1914.

[78] The reduction in the number of knitters being employed by merchants, is summed up by Mr James Kirkland Galloway, Procurator Fiscal, in his evidence before the 1908 Truck Inquiry: "As a rule the work is performed by the knitters and given for sale". Cd. 4444, p. 293.

[79] *The Shetland News* 30/9/1937; Robertson, M., *Sons and Daughters of Shetland*, (Lerwick, 1991), p. 179.

[80] Manson, T., *Lerwick during the last half century* (first edition, Lerwick 1924), p. 85.

[81] O'Dell, A.C., *Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands*, (Lerwick 1939), p. 161; Interview with Mrs W. Blaikie, Edinburgh, Oct. 1987.

[82] *The Scotsman* , 21/1/1909.

[83] *Manson's Shetland Almanac and Directory1892.*

[84] Bennett, Helen, 'The Shetland Hand Knitting Industry', in *Scottish Textile History*, (Aberdeen 1987), p. 60.

[85] Munro, Lewis, *Scottish Home Industries*, (Dingwall 1895), p. 120.

[86] Op. cit., p.173

[87] Ibid.

[88] P.P., Cd., 4443 (1908), Minutes of Evidence taken before the Truck Committee (days 1 - 37), q. 3448, p. 137 & 138, evidence of Mr A. Newlands.

[89] *The Shetland Times*, 4/9/1909.

[90] See chapter 3, p. 70.

[91] P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, p. 42.

[92] P.P., Cd. 7564 (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries, p. 42 and 43. The S.H.I.A. was registered in 1896 as a limited liability company with a nominal capital of £10,000 on which dividends were limited to 3%. The Board of Directors was made up of eight members under the presidency of the Duchess of Sutherland and had its headquarters in London.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Munro, Lewis, *Scottish Home Industries*, (Dingwall 1895), p. 123.

[95] Op. cit., p. 119.

[96] S.R.O. (W.R.H.) , DD16/26. The S.H.I.A. was wound up in 1914 due to lack of interest by the directorate And went into liquidation in June 1915.

[97] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), HH1/848, letter from Miss J. Cochrane to Mrs. Tenant, dated 6/1/1909.

[98] *The Shetland Times*, 4/9/1909. These proposals have been dealt with earlier in this chapter.

[99] By 1900 a considerable number of small home industries had been formed by voluntary workers, and it began to be felt that there were at least two limitations to the activities of those societies - difficulties in finding markets and an overlap in some districts, whilst other were overlooked. From these beginnings, the Co-operative Council of the Highland Home Industries was formed in 1909. In 1921 it became "Highland Home Industries Ltd.", a limited liability non-profit making company, continuing the work of the H.H.I. The company went into voluntary liquidation in 1975 [S.R.O. (W.R.H.), GD.318, file T/907].

[100] P.P., Cd. 8282, (1916), Fourth Report of the Board of Agriculture for Scotland, p. lviii.

[101] Op. cit., p. lix.

[102] The demand for Shetland hosiery was seasonal. The hosiery merchants peak time for selling to retailers and wholesalers in the south ran from July to December.

[103] S.A. Commissary Records, SC12/36/6, Vol. 7, Robert Linklater; SC12/36/15, Vol. 16, Arthur Laurenson.

[104] Robertson, Margaret, *Sons and Daughters of Shetland,* (Lerwick 1991), p. 116 and 117.

[105] P.P., Cd., 555-1 , 1872 Truck Inquiry, evidence of Robert Linklater and Robert Anderson p. 67 & 68, q..3120, q.. 3074.

[106] Op. cit., p. 219, q. 9056.

[107] Op. cit. p.. 68

[108] Op. cit., p. 60, q. 2765.

[109] Op. cit. p. 59 q. 2677.

[110] S.A., SC12/36/6, Commissary Records Vol. 7, Robert Linklater.

[111] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 68 & 69.

[112] S.A., SC12/36/6, Commissary Records Vol. 7, Robert Linklater.

[113] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 69, q. 3120.

[114] S.A., SC12/36/6, Commissary Records, Vol. 7, Robert Linklater.

[115] S.A., D6/292/24, Advertisement for Knox, Samuel and Dickson, April 1876.

[116] *Edinburgh and Leith Post Office Directory,* The last entry for the firm of Robert Linklater & Co., appears in the 1874 - 75 edition.

[117] Manson, T., *Lerwick during the last half century,* (1991 edition, Lerwick), p. 13.

[118] P.P., Cd., 555, 1872 Truck Inquiry, (Thule Print edition 1978), p. 46.

[119] P.P., Cd., 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 46.

[120] Robertson, M.S., *Sons and Daughters of Shetland 1800 - 1900,* (Lerwick 1991), p. 179.

[121] Op. cit., p. 150.

[122] P.P., Cd., 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 146, q. 5928.

[123] Op. cit., p. 70, q.3187.

[124] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), HH1/848, Delting Truck Inquiry, evidence of Wm. Pole.

[125] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p.142, q. 5742; S.R.O. (W.R.H.), HH1/848 evidence of T.M.Adie of Voe.

[126] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), HH1/848, evidence of William Pole.

[127] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), HH1/848, evidence of Ann Blance and Mrs Ridlon.

[128] Balneaves, E., *The Windswept Isles,* (London 1977), P. 192.

[129] P.P., Cd. 4444, (1908), Minutes of Evidence taken before the Truck Committee (days 38 - 66), p 292.

[130] Op. cit., p. 293.

[131] Old Haa' , Burravoe, Yell. Letter to James Clerk, Comb, Mid Yell.

[132] S.A., SC12/36/15, Vol. XVI, William Pole.

[133] Kjorskin Schie, L., & Moberg, G., *The Story of Shetland,* (1988), p. 142.

[134] Flinn, D., *Travellers in a bygone Shetland - an anthology,* (Edinburgh 1989), p. 236.

[135] S.A. D25/89. Account book with details of lace shawls etc. 1876-1883.

[136] P.P., Cd., 4978 (1910), Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, p. 769, evidence of Andrew MacLennan, medical officer for Lerwick.

[137] *Scotland of To-day and Edinburgh its capital,* (London and Edinburgh 1890), p. 81.

[138] Smith, Mary, and Bunyan, Chris, *A Shetland Knitter's Notebook* (Lerwick 1991), p. 4. Correspondence with Mary Smith revealed that she had been shown this catalogue by an old lady whilst visiting Unst in the 80s. Since then, the lady has died and the catalogue vanished. Despite extensive inquiries, I have been unable to locate it.

[139] *Scotland of To-day and Edinburgh its capital,* (London and Edinburgh 1890), p. 81.

[140] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 79, q. 3506 and 3513.

[141] Op. cit., p. 79, q. 3514.

[142] Ibid.

[143] P.P., Cd. 555-1, 1872 Truck Inquiry, p. 79, q. 3501 and p. 31, q. 1564..

[144] *Scotland of To-day and Edinburgh its capital,* (London and Edinburgh 1890), p. 81.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Oliver and Boyd's *Edinburgh Almanac*, 1904, inside front cover.

[149] All the information quoted about John White's 1908 mail order catalogue is taken from Mary Smith's *A Shetland Knitter's Hand book*, p. 4 - 10.

[150] *Scotland of To-day and Edinburgh its capital,* (London and Edinburgh 1890), p. 81.

[151] *Edinburgh and Leith Post Office Directory,* 1932 - 33.

[152] John Smith & Co. (Wools) Ltd. had branches in Glasgow (Sauciehall Street) and Ayr as well as Edinburgh.

[153] Coull, J., (editor), *The Third Statistical Account - County of Shetland* , (Edinburgh 1985), p. 58.

[154] Op. cit., p. 68.

[155] Spenceley, G., 'The Lace Associations: philanthropic movements to preserve the production of hand-made lace in late Victorian and Edwardian England', *Victorian Studies,* (1973), Vol. 16, p. 448.

[156] P.P., Cd., 4443, (1908), Minutes of Evidence taken before the Truck Committee (days 1 - 37),p. 168, evidence of the Duchess of Sutherland.

[157] Day, J.P., *Public Administration in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland,* (London 1918), p. 294 and 295.

Occupations in the inter-War years given as
% of total industries.

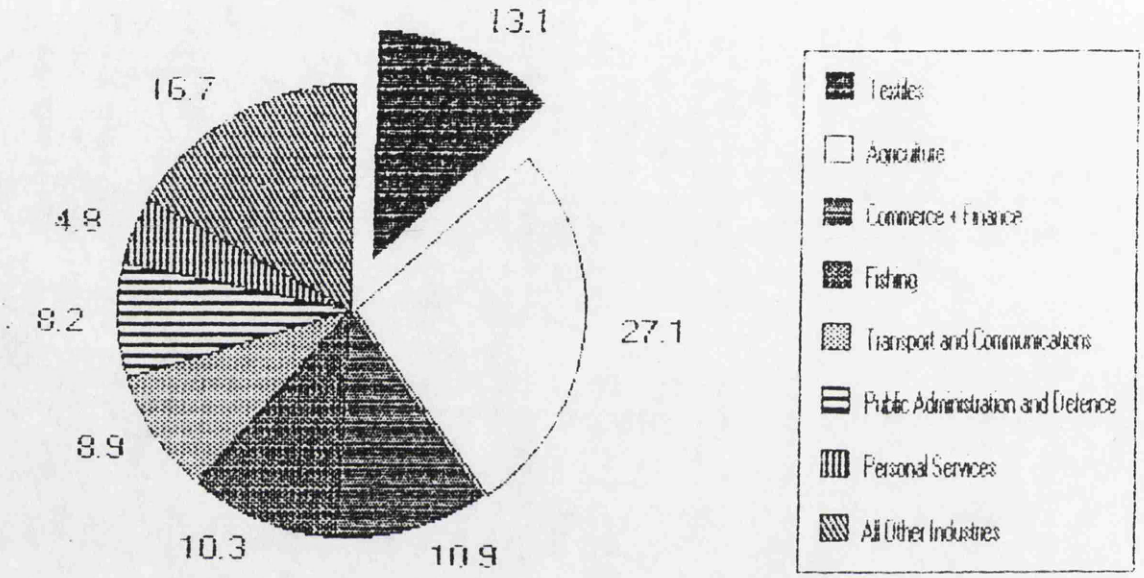



Fig. 6.1.
(Source: Goodlad, C.A. - 1971)

Chapter 6 1918 -1950.

## Modernisation.

During this period Shetland experienced the high unemployment and economic depression common to the rest of Britain, as well as further extensions in the field of communications, a restructuring of traditional Shetland life, an overall rise in the standard of living brought about by the Crofters' Commission and a rise in public spending. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Shetland, a virtually forgotten backwater in the United Kingdom, was rediscovered by London and became the northern base of the war effort, playing a vital role in the North Sea blockade. The influx of servicemen, with troops possibly outnumbering civilians, led to a welcome increase in well paid full- and part-time local employment, and thereby to an increased standard of living; even in rural areas, basic amenities like water, electricity and roads - taken for granted almost everywhere else in Great Britain - were gradually installed. In short Shetland continued to develop into a modern society in line with other Highland and Island regions.

**Socio-economic conditions in Shetland during the inter-war years.**
Until the outbreak of the First World War, the majority of the islands' active man-power had been involved in fishing. Shetland's position of supremacy in the herring industry was finally toppled by the increased use of steam drifters which few Shetlanders could afford[1], and by the trade disruptions caused during the First World War. The fishing industry never recovered fully after the War. And as fishing, traditionally regarded as the cornerstone of the Shetland economy, declined in economic importance after the First World War, and the unpredictable returns, together with the long hours and hard labour of crofting, compared unfavourably with waged employment, Shetland economic life went through a considerable upheaval. With the move from a barter to cash economy, great advances in communications, and a general rise in the standard of living, other forms of employment, particularly the service industries, presented themselves. Fig. 6.1 shows the fishing industry becoming subordinate to the textile and the service industries, although agriculture still remained Shetland's largest primary employer.

Nor did agriculture remain unscathed by twentieth century developments. The croft, still the home base for many, had changed from essential subsistence food production to the spare-time occupation of those who chose to continue this way of life, which in the words of the first report by the Highlands and Islands Board "appears to be a form of living and working which gives deep satisfaction to those who follow it"[2]. The crofter-fisherman's dual way of life tended to become separated into two distinct occupations; this separation was generally felt to be marked by the passing of the heyday of the Shetland sail drifter, with the number of sail drifters falling from 2,263 in 1911 to 938 by 1931[3]. Those with large enough crofts concentrated on the land whilst many fishermen-crofters joined the merchant navy or emigrated. The Shetland croft was too small to provide more than a mere subsistence living - a legacy from the splitting of outsets in the days of the fishing-tenures, and a system perpetuated by the security provided by the 1886 Crofters Holding (Scotland) Act, and encouraged by the Smallholders (Scotland) Act of 1911, and the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act passed eight years later. The crofter who was able to make a living from the land, did so generally by acquiring several crofts and, in addition, by reclaiming hill land.

The herring boom of the 1880s, the general expansion of trade with Britain and her Colonies, and full wartime employment, were responsible for a much needed cash injection into the Shetland economy, and as the imports of staple foods rose, the land was used less for subsistence agriculture and more for the rearing of livestock. As crofting declined the number of acres given over to arable farming fell, whilst those devoted to sheep farming rose, as is for example shown in the Parish of Delting. This rise was typical of other Shetland parishes.

| | Acres used for arable farming | Acres under permanent grass for sheep |
|---|---|---|
| 1910 | 919 | 9,454 |
| 1930 | 642 | 16,995 |

Fig. 6.2.

(Source: *Third Statistical Account of Scotland - County of Shetland*)

As the number of acres given over to sheep pasture increased, sheep numbers rose from 140,150 in 1920 to 168,209 by 1936[4]. This increase in wool production aided further expansion in the textile sector, and gave

fresh impetus to the expansion of wool marketing, the continuing expansion of internal and external communications greatly helping both sectors.

And it was this continuing progress in communications which arguably had the greatest overall impact on island life. Road travel within the islands was greatly improved under the Crofters Counties Scheme, which gave 100% grants for the building and upgrading of existing roads. This scheme, which ran from 1935-1942, was responsible for no less than 63 miles of class 1 roads and led to an increase in the number of motor vehicles in the islands. From a dozen or so cars in pre-First World War Shetland, the number had risen to 1,146 by 1938[5]. Shetland, so dependent on the sea for its main lines of communication, continued to enjoy a 3 runs a week steamer service in the summer time, with 2 a week in winter. This route which was subsidised, was operated by the North of Scotland, Orkney and Shetland Steam Navigation Company which, from 1931, gradually replaced all its steam ships with motor vessels. Travel to the smaller islands was made easier by the inter-island overland ferry service to Unst and the North Isles, started in 1932. Even remote Fair Isle at last enjoyed a regular ferry service provided by the 'Good Shepherd' - twice weekly in summer and once a week in the winter. Despite these improvements in modern communications, not all islands could rely on rapid contact with the outside world - for instance, the people of Fetlar celebrated Edward VIII's coronation in 1936![6]

Aviation pioneers, Cramer and Pacquette, landed in Shetland in 1931 in their quest to find a North Atlantic air route. A regular air service was not far behind. In 1936, a regular air service between Aberdeen and Shetland, via Orkney, was established and flew an incredible 3 return flights a day until the outbreak of the Second World War (an erratic air service had in fact started in 1934). Gradually air services were extended to many of the more remote islands. Alternative means of transport provided a safety net in times of emergencies, but also helped accelerate emigration.

Postal, telegraphic and telephone communications developed markedly. By 1937, Shetland enjoyed a daily airmail service in the summer, reduced to 3 flights per week in the winter, although during the war

postal deliveries were upped to two a day. The regularity of the postal service boosted trade and led to the expansion of mail order firms - an ideal way to market goods, particularly hosiery, in a remote community. The basic telephone and telegraph network provided by the G.P.O. during the early part of the century, steadily expanded. Radio-telephone links were established with Out Skerries, Papa Stour, and Foula[7] in the mid 1930s. However, it was not until after the War, that Shetland was fully incorporated into the national telephone circuit.

Great improvements were made in housing conditions after the First World War. In 1919 the Town Planning (Scotland) Act concerned with housing, became law and the formidable task of improving living conditions started. Except in Lerwick and Scalloway, there were no drainage facilities or public water supplies. Wells - often little more than shallow holes collecting surface water - were covered and their walls lined with concrete. Despite local opposition, water closets were gradually erected throughout the islands. House walls were heightened and lined, windows enlarged and designed to open, earthen floors covered over, porches built and other improvements made. Health facilities steadily improved. The Gilbert Bain Hospital, built in 1902, was extended in 1921. In 1924 Shetland's first resident surgeon was appointed, and greatly reduced the number of severely ill people having to undertake the hazardous sea voyage to Edinburgh for treatment. Further improvements were carried out after the War and plans drawn up for a new hospital.

These improvements were not without their repercussions. Many people left the islands, as for instance, between 1921 and 1931, no less than 2,500 people emigrated[8], that is 23.5% of the population; census figures for 1931 and 1951, show this trend continuing but at a reduced rate (appendix 2). Many emigrated to seaports like Leith within Scotland or the north east of England, as well as to the Dominions. Heavy losses during World War I left some of the smaller islands so short of young manpower that essential services like ferries could not be operated and caused the removal of whole communities. Within this period, the smaller islands of Havera, Hildasay, Papa, Ling, Oxna and Langa were all abandoned[9]. Appendix 9 shows the increase in the number of uninhabited islands.

The loss of young people by emigration and war, led to a low marriage and birth rate in Shetland and in turn to an ever increasing proportion of elderly people and a high death rate. Fig. 6.3 compares the Shetland situation with that of Scotland as a whole for the years 1921 and 1931. The numbers are based on the average per 1,000 population.

| | Shetland | Scotland |
|---|---|---|
| marriage rates | | |
| 1921 | 3.8 | 6.4 |
| 1931 | 5.1 | 8.0 |
| birth rates | | |
| 1921 | 15.0 | 25.2 |
| 1931 | 12.1 | 19.0 |
| death rate | | |
| 1921 | 16.0 | 13.6 |
| 1931 | 17.2 | 13.6 |

Fig. 6.3

(Source: Nicolson, J.R. -1972)

War casualties did little to help Shetland's troublesome sex imbalance. During the years 1921 to 1951, females averaged a 19.8% surplus over men. This disparity, with its underlying consequences of lowering the status of females in the community, also gave rise to a lower marriage and birth rate than Scotland as a whole, and to a subsequently higher death rate. This social imbalance tended to contribute to rural depopulation, particularly of some of the smaller islands, and to the withdrawal of services like schools, mobile shops, and buses, and to a downward spiral which inevitably caused an acceleration in the number of people leaving rural areas. Population changes in Shetland have in the post-war period continued the trends started two generations earlier when many migrated from isolated rural areas to Lerwick or emigrated to Scotland and the Dominions. Appendix 8 shows Lerwick's population temporarily peaking in 1911, falling in 1921 because of wartime casualties and emigration, but there after steadily rising with a corresponding decrease in rural areas.

**Role of women.**

All too often, the contribution of women has gone unrecorded. An oral history project started in during the 1980s and funded by the Manpower Services and Shetland Island Council, has done much to remedy this omission by the publication of two local history books[10] compiled from many hours of recording the memories of the older generation. Such oral history studies show how little the role of women had changed since the last century.

Women's role in society was usually a double one - being frequently mothers and workers. Motherhood and work left little time for much else; as one old woman put it when asked during the 1986 Oral History Project in Shetland what she did with her free moments replied: "Spare time?...I hed none"[11]. The demands of motherhood were invariably accompanied by the constant financial and physical struggle to keep the house going whilst working on the croft or paid employment. Girls helped out at an earlier age than boys with domestic affairs, and in fact many boys escaped entirely from such mundane chores. Even in rural areas where there was more equality in the division of labour between the sexes, job-sharing rarely encroached on the boundaries of the kitchen:

> ...we'd be working in the fields maybe...on a fine day I'd be sent in to make something to eat while they [the boys] went off and had a quick dip"[12].

Traditionally young women, particularly the youngest girl in the family, stayed at home to help the old folks, only leaving to get married. The prospect of meeting a suitable partner in these circumstances was limited because of Shetland's continuing unbalanced sex ratio, and for this reason, despite the hard work entailed, many young women looked forward to the fishing season, as it was at the curing stations that many found a marital partner.

Arguably it was the two wars which did most to improve the quality of life for many Shetland women. The increased job opportunities offered by wartime conditions in the First World War, were greatly extended during the Second World War. Not only were they outnumbered by men but the unique opportunity of well paid full- or part-time employment in ancillary services was available without leaving the islands or, sometimes in rural areas, even their local township. Emancipation from truck, from

immobility, from domestic drudgery suddenly presented itself when knitters found this ready market on their doorstep anxious to buy virtually all the hosiery they could produce, and pay cash for it.

**The Shetland hand knitting industry during the inter-War years.**

For several years after the War, hosiery prices remained artificially high as shortages continued in Britain and the Empire. Keen to ensure their survival, Shetland merchants competed against each other buying up all the available Shetland wool. Competition between merchants forced up the price of wool, so that wool, which in pre-war days would have cost 1/5d. per lb., was now costing 3/- a lb, making it very difficult for the Shetland knitter who did not have her own source of wool, to purchase wool and then sell her hosiery profitably[13]. It was felt that even allowing for the increase in the price paid for knitted articles, knitters did not receive sufficient for their work[14]. The poor returns to knitters were of greater consequence than formerly as the collapse of the fishing industry led many families to rely on knitting as their main means of support. For example, in Unst the effects of the post-war recession were felt so severely, that the men of Unst sent in a petition to the Scottish Office in 1927 asking for government help. The petition ran: "Owing to lack of employment many men find it impossible to obtain anything like sufficient means to maintain a reasonable standard of living"[15]. Whilst appearing to show concern, but being unwilling and financially unable to help, the Scottish Office felt that any kind of state-funded industry would not succeed due to lack of incentive by local people. The knitters' champion, Mrs Jessie Saxby, seems to have been a thorn in the Scottish Office's flesh as the following extract shows:

> I rather think that Miss Jessie Saxby's residence in Unst and the facility with which she used her pen on behalf of all sorts of schemes has given the Unst people much faith in the written word. I cannot otherwise account for the appeal that now seems to emerge annually from this island, which probably has more natural advantages than any other part of Shetland. The island is not over-populous, the soil - for Shetland - is good, and the fishing better around Unst than in many other parts of the coast. Probably Unst has less cause than any other part of Shetland to send in such a petition. Fishing and poultry-farming might be developed; more land could be put under crop; the knitting could be pursued with old-time

> vigour. There are ever so many ways by which the Unst people could help themselves. But they cannot forget the easy money that came to them during the war, and they seem to cherish a hope that if only they cry loudly enough some suggestion of those conditions may return...What the people of Unst really need is some straight talk - some brutally straight talk...[16]

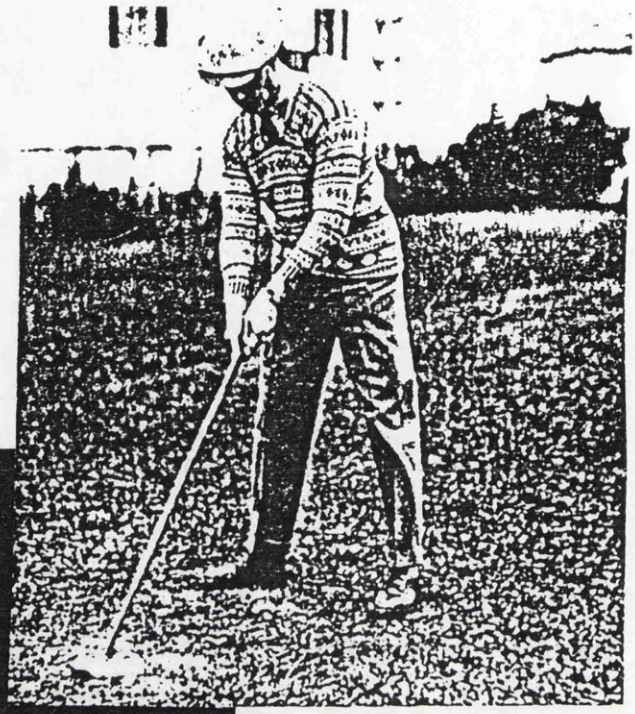
From their damning comments on 'old-time vigour' it is obvious that the Board was unaware of the difficulties facing the hand knitting industry. Shetland women, never noted for their laziness, still had their old-time vigour but the old-time returns for their labour, had been further diminished by rising wool prices, competition from machines and from Shetland imitations.

However, despite the lack of action taken to help the men of Unst, the creation of new and the development and resurgence of existing rural industries, was recognised by the Government as a vital ingredient to the success of its post-war reconstruction schemes in the Highlands and Islands. Conscious of the difficulties arising from these times of change, the Scottish Office, although greatly hampered by under funding, endeavoured to aid cottage and rural industries with a view to creating employment and economic stability to prevent rural depopulation. To this end, many small inquiries were commissioned, much advice given, but little action taken[17].

Each of these reports recognised the importance of the hand knitting industry and the vital role it played in both providing and supplementing the domestic economy as fishing and agriculture declined, and where the War, or death from other causes, and rising unemployment, had left rural areas with many families dependent on the earnings of its women, and not on its traditional male breadwinner. And it was during this period of change that the hand knitting industry in Shetland, so often under valued by historians and economists , was at last recognised as one of the strengths and mainstays of the Shetland economy. This situation was aptly summed up in the *New Shetlander:*

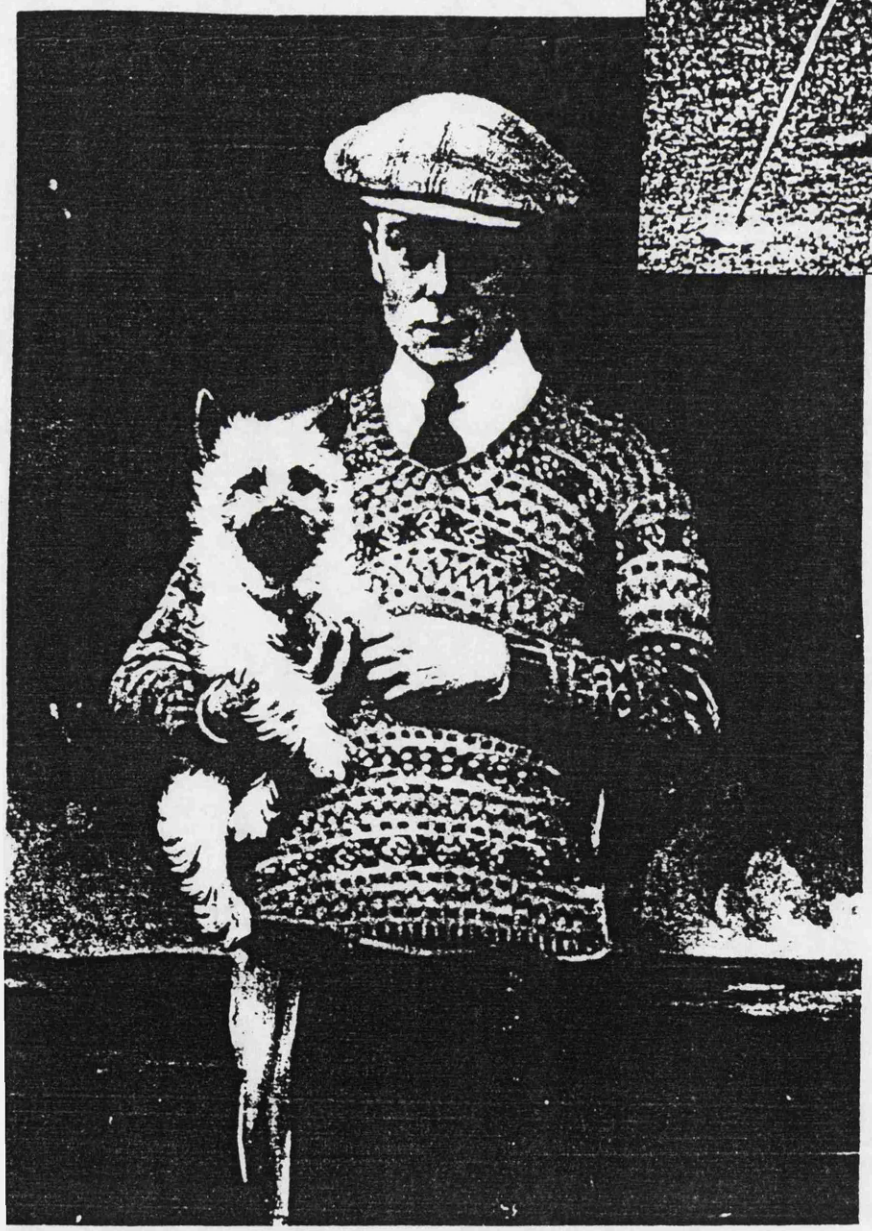
> Take the hosiery industry from the islands and her life blood will ebb, her crofts will be deserted, her islands depopulated, for crofting and fishing are industries of a season providing a background for a home, but in themselves inadequate for a reasonable amount of

The Prince of Wales wearing a Fair Isle pullover.



The Duke of Windsor, then Prince of Wales, wearing a Fair Isle pullover for golf at Biarritz in 1924.

(Source: *Wool Knowledge,* 1959).



Portrait of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales by John St. Helier Lander, 1925.

(Source: Bennett, H. - 1987)

Fig. 6.4.

comfort and leisure[18].

Scanning the Scottish Office files dealing with rural textile industries, four weaknesses in the Shetland hosiery industry become apparent . Firstly, the deterioration in the native breed of Shetland sheep; secondly, the difficulties crofters experienced in marketing their products; thirdly, the harm done to these industries by careless, shoddy workmanship; and fourthly, the serious nature of the increased competition from machines. In addition, it was felt that Shetland would be better able to safeguard the future of its woollen industry by establishing its own spinning mill - this was at the time when the Lewis branch of the Hebridean tweed industry was experiencing marketing problems through their use of machine, and not, hand spun yarn. In an attempt to overcome these difficulties the Shetland Woollen Industries Association was to be formed in 1922, the Shetland Flock Book Society in 1926, and in the 1940s, a knitter's co-operative, the Shetland Hand Knitter's Association, was to be started, followed by a local spinning mill in 1947.

After a brief period of post-war prosperity due to continuing shortages, Shetland hand knitters were to find their world irrevocably changed as competition from mass produced machine-made articles undermined their way of life. There was virtually no demand for Shetland lace on a commercial scale, whilst hand knitted underwear had been replaced by the cheaper machine knitted goods, and if it hadn't been for the 'discovery' of Fair Isle knitting by the outside world - which knitting machines could not copy - the Shetland hand knitting industry would not have survived. This distinctive method of colour-stranded knitting which used native wool dyed from local natural dye stuffs, and had originated in Fair Isle possibly sometime during the seventeenth century (Gunnister Man's purse was worked in colour-stranded knitting - fig. 1.6), was suddenly in great demand as a fashion garment. The covers of fashion magazines such as Vogue, showed Fair Isle golfing outfits, pullovers, cardigans etc, in an infinite variety of designs and colours. This craze enjoyed the prestige of royal acclaim, and the subsequent boost to its sales, when the Prince of Wales allowed himself to be photographed playing golf at St. Andrews in 1922 and later at Biarritz, wearing a Fair Isle pullover, and in 1925, had his portrait painted wearing a Fair Isle pullover (fig. 6.4).

In the years that followed, the regional specialisation of the hosiery was largely discontinued in favour of an almost exclusive production of Fair Isle knitting. Many Shetland knitters quickly adapted to this form of knitting by copying patterns from Fair Isle pullovers, and for the first time in the history of Shetland knitting, some knitters resorted to the use of pattern designs charted on graph paper[19], although many used the traditional Shetland method of copying from other knitters[20]. An interesting measure of this rapid change over to Fair Isle knitting was mentioned by Dr. Bennett in a paper on the Shetland hand knitting industry[21]. A Mrs Henry who had come to Shetland to learn the art of Shetland lace knitting from the women of Unst, was unable to do so, as in response to unprecedented orders from American and British buyers for thousands, rather than the usual dozens, every available knitter had been urged to abandon her usual style of knitting in favour of Fair Isle work. Quick to see the marketing potential of this exclusive form of hand knitting, an enterprising Lerwick man produced a pattern book to help knitters learn the basic Fair Isle designs[22].

At the same time the industry was changing from what had been a wholly home-based cottage industry into an more organised and structured one. This long overdue change had been precipitated by the need for protection against spurious, cheaply produced machine-made 'Shetlands'; as whilst the demand for Shetland hand knits was high, so too were prices. Cost wise, hand knitting compared unfavourably with machine-made articles which could be mass produced at a fraction of the cost. The time consuming nature of the hand knitted goods meant that the prices for them were high, yet represented a poor return to the worker for the many hours spent knitting and finishing. It was this vulnerable position that prompted all concerned in securing the future of the Shetland woollen industry, to come together in 1922 to form the Shetland Woollen Industries Association.

**Shetland Woollen Industries Association.**

The S.W.I.A. was the first voluntary co-operative scheme to attempt to organise and protect the future of the woollen industry in Shetland. The initial idea for such an association was instigated by a group of merchants and other interested parties, led by Provost James Smith[23].

The objectives of the Association, which specifically excluded the buying or selling of Shetland hosiery, were as follows: Firstly, to encourage the growth of pure Shetland wool in the Shetland Islands; secondly, to revive and encourage the hand-loom weaving of Shetland tweed cloth and Shetland rugs, and thirdly, to protect, improve, and promote the interests of the hand knitting and woollen industries in the Shetland Islands[24]. The latter (which is of greatest concern to this study) the Association hoped to achieve by the acquisition of a trade mark which would be applied to all goods of approved quality after inspection.

The story of the S.W.I.A. is largely one of the islands' fight against 'Shetland' imitations and its unsuccessful struggle to have the word 'Shetland' exclusively kept for articles manufactured in the Shetland Islands. Professor Scott, in his 1914 Home Industries Report, had advocated the use of a distinctive mark for various classes of hosiery and suggested a trade mark be applied for and the marking of goods carried out by local inspectors appointed by the Board of Agriculture for Scotland (see appendix 7). However, the War intervened and the scheme was shelved. In 1925, the S.W.I.A. applied for and was granted, its trade mark in August 1925, registered number 437482. This mark depicted a Norse galley, and as well as the Association's name, bore the words "Shetland hand knit", and for Fair Isle knitting "Fair Isle - Made in Shetland" .


Fig. 6.5.
(Source: O'Dell, A.C. -1939)

In 1926 - 27 the S.W.I.A. was given a grant of £400 by the Board of Agriculture for Scotland towards the cost of advertising its trade mark[25]

and a Shetland Flockbook Society formed (see below); it looked as if the future of the islands' knitwear industry was at last on a sound and secure footing. However, despite efforts by the Association to help and protect the Shetland woollen industry, it was clear by the early 1930s that a new threat lay at their doorstep - competition from machine-made articles produced in Shetland itself. Moreover, these articles were apparently being passed as hand knitted ones. This disturbing situation led to the S.W.I.A., backed by the Zetland County Council (Z.C.C.), endeavouring to enlist the Government's help to force Shetland machine-made hosiery to bear a label to that effect and to exclude it from using a plain 'Made in Shetland' label. A very full account of the S.W.I.A.'s unsuccessful struggle to this end is recorded in the Highland Development Files[26].

The story started with the secretary of the S.W.I.A., J.R. White, writing on the 29 March 1932, following the Association's A.G.M., to the Secretary of the Board of Trade, London, requesting an inquiry into:

> ...the present condition of the Shetland hand-knit industry and its vital relation to the life of the people of the islands... petition is being made because the hand-knit industry is now seriously threatened by the introduction into the islands of machines operated by hand and that these machines are increasing in number year by year[27].

White further stated that the Association's trade mark had done much to combat successfully spurious imitations of Shetland hosiery in the south, but that the introduction of machines to the islands constituted a much graver danger. The Association set out their reasons as follows:

1. Every article made by machines here can be labelled, ..., "hand-knit" or "hand -finished" and also "made in Shetland from Shetland wool", and this so nearly approximates to the Association's trade marks in its descriptive matter that it makes the latter ineffectual as distinguishing marks.

2. When hand-knit and machine-knit garments from Shetland are put on the market the advantage lies in favour of the latter owing chiefly to lower costs of production, regularity of texture and uniformity in designs etc.

3. The industry in a normal year has an export value of approximately £80,000. Under the hand-knit regime every home

> in the islands gets a share of this sum which considerably supplements the earnings of crofters and cottars alike. In fact it is doubtful if crofting agriculture can exist in Shetland apart from the support of the hand-knitting of the crofter's wife and daughter, and herein lies the threatened danger to the islands from the mass production of knitting machines.[28]

The request led to a Government inquiry, conducted by Mr John C. Russell of the Scottish Department of Agriculture. Russell travelled all over the mainland and islands, interviewing numerous representatives, merchants and knitters, in order to obtain first-hand information regarding the present state of the industry and its prospects, as well as inspecting the new hand-driven knitting machines[29]. Reporting on Russell's visit the *Daily Express* wrote:

> The object of Mr Russell's visit is to ascertain whether any steps can be taken to restore the prosperity to this important cottage industry, in which more than ten thousand women and girls are engaged[30].

This report was concluded early in 1933. It was brief but concise. Russell recognised that with the decreased earnings from agriculture and the fisheries, the majority of the households in the country districts had become more and more dependent on the earnings of the women and girls from knitting. Russell estimated that there were more than 9,000 knitters in Shetland, which accounted for 75% of the total female population. He did however, point out that only 3,049 of these knitters were members of the S.W.I.A. and stressed that:

> ...all concerned in the Industry should recognize the value of the Association's work and the urgent necessity for supporting their efforts to organise the industry on a sound basis[31].

He also pointed out that only ten years ago, all hosiery exported was done by hand, but now in 1932 - 3 there were 13 knitting machines on the islands turning out good uniform work at relatively low prices, and were selling well in America, where a strong demand existed for correct shaping, standard sizes and an even, regular texture. Poor quality goods, lacking the uniformity to make up set orders were telling against hand knits, and led to a diminished demand. Russell felt that co-operation with the Women's Rural Institute in teaching knitters to remedy

faults would help, and that knitters should be prepared to change their styles to meet fashion demands.

Moving to the question of the trade mark, Russell rightly pointed out that two-thirds of the knitters did not use the existing trade-mark, and that less than one-third of the total production of Shetland hosiery was trade-marked with the Association's sewn-on label, many bearing no label at all, whilst others bore a manufacturer's label. In other words, a total lack of uniformity, which he felt prejudiced the marketing of Shetland hosiery. Russell emphasised that the hand knitting industry must protect itself from machine imitations by fostering a distinctive differentiation between its own characteristic product and the machine-made article, "...whether the latter is produced in Shetland or outside Shetland". He strongly advocated the use of the existing trade mark to this end, as the Galley mark had the virtue of being already registered. The effective utilisation of the trade mark depended on good workman-ship, adequate inspection and on the power of the Association to defend its trade mark by taking up cases of infringement. These requirements necessitated a large increase in the Association's membership to strengthen its resources and organisation, to enable it to carry out inspection of work and if need be, defend its trade mark in the Courts. Finally Russell touched on the industry's Achilles' heel:

> ...real co-operation and a united effort by all concerned in the industry to remedy existing defects of workmanship, organisation and marketing and to prevent a decline from which all would suffer[32]

Accurate as it was, this report was not well received by the Shetland people, who had set much store on the Government's ability to solve their problems. In essence all concerned were furious with the Government for not, in effect, sending out an edict enforcing all machine knitted articles to carry a 'machine made in Shetland' label or even forbid the use of machines in the islands! An extraordinary meeting of the S.W.I.A. was called to consider the report. Great disappointment was expressed at the Department's "throwing all the work of differentiating hand-knit from machine-made goods on to the Association, while requiring nothing from the owners of the machines", who could legally but ambiguously, label their articles to the detriment of hand knitted

ones. The S.W.I.A. was insulted at the suggestion of there being a decrease in demand for hand knits due to carelessness and pointed out that as far as help from the Shetland Women's Rural Institutes was concerned, the Rural was composed almost entirely of knitters. The meeting ended with the S.W.I.A. curtly thanking the Department of Agriculture for the inquiry and report, but stating that:

> ...they were greatly disappointed at the Department's failure to deal effectively with or supply any solution for the problem of knitting machines in Shetland, and they pressed for further consideration of this matter[33].

It is fascinating to read the 'behind the scenes' version of this story from the Highland Development files. The Government's basic stand point was that it was not illegal for hand-frame machine knits to use a 'hand knitted in Shetland' label unless so determined by the Courts under section 2 of the Merchandise Marks Act which dealt with "false trade descriptions". And secondly, that self-help, that is, improvement of standards, and the expansion of the S.W.I.A. membership should be sufficient to nullify the detrimental competition from machines. They were also aware that the Shetland hand knitting industry was the only hand knitting industry left in Britain in 1933, and that as a means of providing subsidiary employment, it played an important part in the domestic economy, fitting in with the rhythm of the crofting seasons, as well as helping to stave off rural depopulation, and that knitting machines, which employed far fewer people, were indeed a real threat to life in country districts, but were adamant that they couldn't, and wouldn't, intervene to stop the march of progress. In a letter from the Board of Trade to the Scottish Office, dated 28/3/1932, regarding the introduction of knitting machines to the Shetland Isles:

> ...the Board would point out that the industry in Shetland is undergoing a normal process of industrial evolution under which machinery is being introduced to assist hand labour, and while the result, as in other instances, may be a temporary diminution in the volume of employment, it is difficult to see how this process can be retarded ...or should be"[34].

Although unwilling to intervene over the question of the labelling of knitwear, the Government was not unsympathetic to the Shetlander's plight but wary of creating a precedent by making Shetland a special

case, when most other crofting counties were also experiencing economic difficulties. The Scottish Office, whilst spending more per head of population on the crofting counties[35], represented Scotland as a whole, and could not ignore the repercussions of State interference which might well adversely affect the Scottish hosiery industry in general.

The outcome of this bid for survival, amounted to offers of ineffectual help from the Department, who suggested trying to obtain help for the islanders through the Rural Industries Bureau to enable an assistant from the Highland Home Industries Ltd. to make a short tour in Shetland and advise the knitters about the defects in their way of making garments - of little help when the Scottish sub-committee of the Rural Industries Bureau had been abolished early in 1932[36]! In true Civil Service style, the next move was to suggest taking a little money from an already allocated roads grant to help the hand knitting industry. In the letter containing this proposal, Rose, the Scottish Office official dealing with Shetland affairs, referred to the disappointment the Shetlanders felt in having "...to work out their own salvation in this matter. Apparently some of them would have liked a dictator to prohibit machines"[37].

The Government felt strongly and rightly, that it was only by producing a quality article, that hand knitting could compete with knitting machines. And it was at this unsatisfactory, stale-mate situation that the whole matter was left. The *Shetland Times* devoted much space to this issue, but apart from a lot of heated talk by a lot of people, the S.W.I.A. moaned and groaned about the Government's unhelpful response and rather than turn their anger to action, failed to follow up the sound suggestions put forward by Russell's report. The S.W.I.A. was obsessed to the point of blindness by the iniquity of hand-flat knitting machine users labelling their products as 'hand knits', whilst the knitters were still smarting at the Government having had the temerity to criticise the standard of Shetland hand knitting. Poorly knitted, and particularly poorly finished hand knitted hosiery, looked extremely unprofessional beside even the most inexpensive mass-produced knitwear. At the heart of the whole issued lay a violent antagonism, based on fear, to the introduction of hand-flat knitting machines and it was felt that under the corrupting influence of these machines the Shetland hand knitting industry would collapse. Knitters, and many merchants, failed to realise

that hand knitting and knitting machines could, and should, complement rather than compete with each other to transform this valuable but outdated industry into the new cornerstone of the Shetland economy.

The S.W.I.A., did not increase its membership, and thereby, the use of its trade mark, nor did knitters change their old ways - a perfect recipe for self-destruction in a changing world. And from the mid 1930s, the Association appeared moribund and its trade mark suspended in 1937[38]. From a strong position of unity in the 1920s, the Shetland woollen industry, represented by the S.W.I.A., backed by Government support, and further strengthened by a Board of Trade registered trade mark, let this advantage slip through its fingers by failing to sustain unity. Many dealers were not in this voluntary organisation, others allowed their allegiance to dwindle, feeling they were not reaping any marked benefits from belonging to the S.W.I.A., whilst many knitters were disinclined to pay a membership subscription and 1d. label fee for their hosiery if they could obtain sales elsewhere. A lot of hand knitted hosiery was leaving Shetland labelless and unpromoted, exposing it to the vulnerability of market change. Both parties were short sighted in their neglect of the Association; neither bothering to look to the future so that in the bad times they would be able to batten down the hatches and pull together. This weakness of grabbing what the present had to offer - a legacy of hard times and isolation - rather than planning for an assured future, was nearly the downfall of the Shetland woollen industry.

Interestingly, during this period of struggle against progress, the Scottish National Development Council (S.N.D.C.) published a report in 1934 on rural industries in Scotland[39]. Rural industries were defined as small rural factories employing no more than 100 people, and domestic or cottage industries. This enlightened and perceptive Report, reiterated much of what had been said by Professor Scott in his 1914 Home Industries Report, but where it differed from this and other predecessors, was that it compared Scottish rural industries with those of England and Wales. In the Report's preface, the working committee stated their optimism in hoping that the report would be widely read, and urged that recommendations be translated into practice as soon as possible. It took the committee no more than two sentences to sum up the difficulties experienced by rural workers. Firstly, workers were scattered and found

it difficult to combine; secondly, their resources were too slender to allow for advertising and/or high pressure salesmanship; thirdly, craftsmen were out of touch with prices etc. being long distances from markets; and lastly, and of paramount importance "In conditions of hard competition rural industry encounters the almost irresistible temptation to lower its quality and thus wreck itself"[40].

The S.N.D.C. committee, reporting in 1934, felt that there were three recognised bodies in Scotland dealing with the organisation and marketing of rural industries:- the Department of Agriculture, the Women's Rural Institute, and the Highland Home Industries Ltd. Since the Department of Agriculture's Rural Industries Committee, which had been acting as a sub-committee of the Rural Industries Bureau, had come to an end in 1932 and its grant of £300 withdrawn, the Department had not been able to give assistance to rural industries in Scotland, although its obligation to do so had been laid down by statute. This scandalous situation compared very unfavourably with England "...where public funds are spent on the development of rural industry with some liberality"[41]. In England, a Rural Industries Bureau had been set up in 1921 with a grant from the Development Commissions of £2,500. It was a non-trading organisation to assist the development of rural industries in the following ways: by giving information and advice, which it did by acting as an information bureau; by putting craftsmen in touch with buyers; by supplying craftsmen at nominal charges for designs prepared; by designers whom it employed; by employing a staff of technical instructors who visited workers in their homes and gave advice and criticism; by holding exhibitions and sales of the very best specimens of their craft workers; and by publishing a quarterly magazine entitled *Rural Industries*[42].

Thanks to state help and intervention, rural industries in England and Wales were much more favourably situated than their Scottish counterparts. The Scottish Office's main contribution to aiding rural industries, rarely went beyond an inquiry and subsequent report when applications for help were requested, with the occasional, small grant for a specific purpose as for example, the £400 given to the S.W.I.A. to help them advertise their new trade mark[43]. It was over forty years before many of the advantages of the Rural Industries Bureau enjoyed by England and Wales, were to come to Shetland, when in the mid sixties,

the Highlands and Islands Board, came to the aid of the, by then ailing, Shetland hand knitting industry. This similar, but by no means parallel situation, illustrates the advantages which real help from the State could make to rural industries. As the 1934 Report pointed out, "We have a Department charged with the duty of assisting rural industry, but unable to do so"[44]. The committee suggested that a Scottish Rural Industries Bureau be created with representatives from Government Departments, from the Highland Home Industries Ltd., the Scottish Women's Rural Institutes, with the addition of three or four men and women interested in the subject[45].

No action was taken by the Scottish Office. This succinct and excellent report was presumably filed away and its recommendations forgotten. If all the money which had been spent on producing these reports had been channelled into grants to cottage industries, or to funding the discontinued Rural Industries Bureau, the tax payer would have had better value for money through the consolidation of rural industries. In the crofting counties, rural industries were imperative to supplement agricultural or fishing returns. This was particularly important in the changing times of the twentieth century when many crofts had become too small to be economically self-supporting, and depended on ancillary employment to make ends meet. As people moved from the land to towns and cities gaining an enhanced standard of living, it was important that those left behind did not feel themselves too disadvantaged when compared with their migrant friends and relations, as this in itself, would have further encouraged rural depopulation. Logistically, crofting life lent itself to the utilisation of spare time being turned to profit through home industries. Rural industries were of paramount importance to sustain rural life.

**The Shetland Flock Book Society.**

Of greater and more lasting success than the S.W.I.A. was the Shetland Flock Book Society formed in 1926 by Dr. Bowie, a medical practitioner, and some progressively minded stockmasters, notably Mr Andrew Tait. This group of men set about the long overdue task of saving the Shetland breed of sheep from extinction[46]. The purity of native Shetland wool which had given cause for concern as far back as the days of Sir John Sinclair, continued to do so, as constant cross-breeding and the

breeding of cross-bred sheep with Shetland 'types' diminished the purity of the native Shetland breed, threatening to make it extinct. As the average fleece from a Shetland sheep was considerably lighter than that of the black face or Cheviot sheep[47], it was not surprising that many wool growers were turning their backs on the native breed in favour of the more lucrative non-native breeds. The price of Shetland wool was higher than for other breeds, but pound for pound per sheep, the heavier fleeces of the non-native breeds gave a better overall financial return, which understandably was more attractive to the wool grower, especially those with small flocks. The Flock Book Society endeavoured to protect the Shetland breed from extinction by breeding flocks of rare purity of conformation, colour and quality of fleece[48]. Premiums given by the Department of Agriculture for Scotland for the breeding of high quality tups, which along with help from the Flock Book Society, led to an increase in the number of pedigree tups being used for breeding. Prophet Smith, Convener of Zetland in 1958, felt that in addition to the work of the Flock Book Society, the holding of agricultural shows, as for example, in the Walls and Sandness district, had helped raise standards as they were an ideal opportunity for displaying high quality breeds and provided a forum for discussion amongst wool growers[49]. This Society, so necessary with the ever-increasing numbers of sheep being bred on the islands, did much valuable work, and is still in existence to date.

Attempts to establish a local spinning mill, first advocated by the S.W.I.A. and encouraged by the Board of Agriculture in 1924[50], failed to come to fruition. In 1939, Dr. T. Manson, Chairman of the S.W.I.A., proposed that hand spinning sets which teased, carded and spun wool, be established at small co-operative units dispersed throughout the islands - co-operation was essential as the basic cost of each set was £700[51]. This attempt to establish local machine spinning came to nothing as the War intervened. During the inter-war years it was customary for crofter-knitters to send their wool for spinning through a local agent. For example, R.& I. Henderson, hotelier, shopkeeper and post master at Spiggie, Scousburgh, Dunrossness, acted as agents for Hunter Bros., collecting raw wool and sending it to Brora by post. The worsted was returned cash on delivery; 37 c.o.d. parcels were returned to the Hendersons between the 25th May and 9th October 1928 from Hunter Bros., Brora[52].

**The Shetland hand knitting industry during "the knitting years" (1939-45).**

> Wartime knitting wis good because da prices went up again. Hit wis only in wartime dat we started to get whit looked like money for our hosiery. Because quite honestly, before that it wis such a mere pittance dat you got, an you wir havin ta live on[53].

The 1940s were regarded as the 'knitting years', as during the Second World War, hosiery was sold at realistic prices, rather than exchanged for goods at local shops. The Second World War marked a watershed in the organisation of the Shetland hand knitting industry, and it was during these War years that the Shetland hosiery trade was catapulted into the twentieth century. The majority of hand knitters finally broke away from marketing hosiery through their local merchant by forming their own protective organisation, the Shetland Hand Knitters Association - subsequently changed to a marketing organisation - whilst merchants, in the absence of sufficient hand knitted hosiery to fill their orders, were forced to rely more heavily on hand-flat knitting machines. As has been shown, the Shetland hand knitting industry had failed to capitalise on its strong position created by the First World War, and it was only by consolidating the unique marketing conditions created artificially during this period, that the hand knitter and the hosiery industry in general, could modernise sufficiently to compete with the mass-production market. Thousands of servicemen were based on the islands, and despite shortages and austerity, this captive market needed services and supplies and was prepared to pay for them, so that hand knitters enjoyed an unprecedented boom created by wartime shortages doubling, and even trebling, the prices paid to knitters[54]. This situation was summed up by *The Shetland News* in its annual review:

> The outstanding feature of the Shetland hosiery trade in 1941 was a very marked switch-over of sales from the regular dealers to men in the Services in the county and also a further increase in the direct trade between knitter and wearer. The demand was more than maintained, but on account of this transition, which of course is a war-time development, the dealers in town and country were able to get only a comparatively small percentage of their requirements. The keen demand coupled with the enhanced prices, greatly

benefited knitters, even although they had less time for knitting owing to having to do more work on the crofts because of their men folk being away on service. This applied in varying degrees and according to the labour and time available from crofting duties[55].

Knitting had become so lucrative that some knitters found it paid better to stay at home and knit rather than to go into the ancillary services[56].

Shetland hand knitters got off to an apparently good start at the beginning of the War when it was announced on the 26th October that Shetland wool, along with native wool from Orkney and the Hebrides, was to be exempt from the Wool Order issued on the 12th October 1939[57] - decontrolled wool did however, lead to a steady rise in wool prices throughout the war years. All went well for knitters and merchants until June 1940 when it was made known that the Government was about to control Shetland hosiery. Representation by the Z.C.C. to the Board of Trade for exemption from the system of wool control was made on the grounds that hand knitting was the main means of livelihood for a large proportion of the population[58]. The outcome was satisfactory. In a letter to the Z.C.C., dated the 5th August 1940, the Board of Trade stated that the independent knitter would not fall under the Limitation of Supplies (Miscellaneous) Order 1940, as she was exempted under the provisions which excluded small manufacturers[59].

For Shetland hosiery merchants, the outbreak of war brought increased steamer freights - as high as 20% in some cases - and the new 'war risk insurance' placing a 10% tax on goods owned by retailers, which in addition to the normal insurance required for goods being exported to the south, added considerably to their overheads[60]. This resulted in higher prices being charged for hosiery with, understandably, no increase being passed on to the hand knitter. Wool prices rose but wartime conditions meant that many brokers found themselves with large quantities of valuable wool which they were unable to turn into yarn. Spinning mills had been forced to curtail their output of Shetland worsted as priority was given to fulfilling army orders. Government work commandeered up to 75% of the machinery in the mills, leaving only one quarter of the spinning mill able to execute orders for yarn for both merchant and knitter[61]. This shortage of yarn led to merchants being unable to match their supply of knitwear with demand - a situation marginally alleviated by

the wartime trade disruption in overseas trade cutting off the supply of continental machine-made goods, thereby increasing the demand for hand knitted hosiery. For example, in 1940 *The Shetland News* stated that "due to war conditions, the supplies of practically all kinds of goods were increasingly insufficient for the demand" with pre-war stocks exhausted. Although there was still great difficulty in obtaining yarn, interestingly, the main reason for merchants having difficulty supplying their orders was attributed to the women lacking time to knit, as in the absence of their menfolk, they had much more crofting and other work to attend to. One hosiery dealer bemoaned the fact that:

> The majority of the knitters are knitting for the Forces in the islands, and the tax on the goods and the question of coupons are not affecting sales at all. I have never had such a sustained demand for hosiery in all my experience, and just now not more than 50% is going through the usual channels - the merchants. I am afraid that there will not be any change until the war is over. I am not getting more than 25% of the goods I got before[62].

Not all locally knitted hosiery was offered for sale. Both the Z.C.C. Minutes and *Shetland Times* record many generous gifts of knitting to the services[63].

The next hurdle for the industry to overcome - that of Board of Trade coupons issued by the Crofter Wool Committee of the Department of Agriculture for Scotland's Wool Control Board[64] - led to untold complications with knitters making illicit, but welcome, sales to servicemen, profiteers selling coupons on the 'black market', and hosiery merchants withholding coupons due to knitters for their hosiery. The collection and distribution of coupons had got so out of hand by the autumn of 1941, that the Board of Trade intervened with the loan of coupons to allow the coupon scheme to get off the ground and all concerned to extricate themselves from this muddle[65]. However, after representation to the Board of Trade by the Shetland Chamber of Commerce, it was proposed that a central distribution point for coupons be established in Lerwick and managed by a full-time official paid for by the whole trade, or alternatively, coupons could accompany wool sent to the spinning mills, the mill acting as a collecting agency.[66] This ultra-complicated situation was never wholly resolved in a manner acceptable to the Government but did not affect, in fact positively helped, knitters in

The front cover of an old copy of the
Shetland Hand Knitters' Association's constitution.

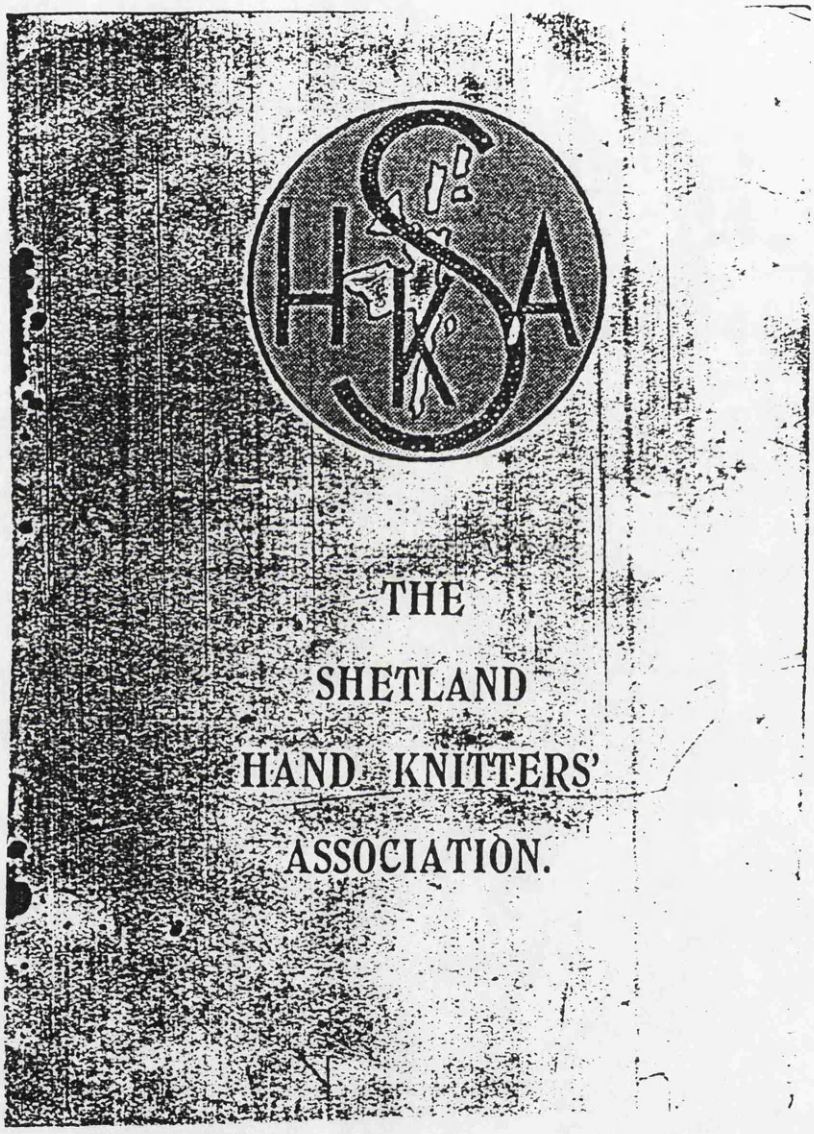



Fig. 6.6.
(Source: B. A. Black)

their sales. Illicit sales to the public were difficult to trace when knitters had their own supply of worsted.

Later the same year, the introduction of Purchase Tax caused problems for dealers with a turnover in excess of £2,000, as those dealers were required to register with the Board of Trade[67]. Again representation was made by the Shetland Chamber of Commerce to the Board of Trade, very lengthy debates followed, but no exemption of Purchase Tax allowed for registered dealers. Meantime hand knitters were flourishing. Freed at last from trucking, thanks to their direct sales with servicemen, they found themselves in an enforced semi-organised position brought about by the distribution of coupons. Backed by the National Farmer's Union, knitters started to organise their own sales independent of local merchants, realising that a great opportunity had been missed after the First World War when the S.W.I.A. had failed through lack of proper support. The high hopes accompanying the formation of the S.W.I.A. in 1922 had long since evaporated. Lack of support meant, that in real terms, the S.W.I.A. had had a minimal impact on the woollen industry, plus marketing, the most crucial aspect of the industry, had not been included in the Association's remit. The Shetland Hand Knitter's Association would surely heed the many warnings for the need for a trade mark, the need for unity and for a structured marketing policy.

**Shetland Hand Knitters Association.**

The Hon. Robert Bruce, in his report entitled "Some impressions of the Shetland Woollen Industry" and published during the war, made the following suggestions:

> It is possible that a scheme might be formulated whereby the population taking part in the industry, an organised system of collecting, grading and pricing, together with facilities for offering immediate cash payments on a scale which adequately approximates to market values, appears to be absolutely necessary; although participation in the scheme should be on a voluntary basis[68].

It was on similar principles to these, that the S.H.K.A. was established in 1943. It was initially set up as a protective organisation to campaign for the removal of the coupons from Shetland hand knits, to maintain high standards and to lobby for set realistic prices for hosiery. The

An old S.H.K.A. share certificate.

№ 993

SHARE CERTIFICATE

SHETLAND HAND KNITTERS' ASSOCIATION LIMITED

(Registered under the Industrial & Provident Societies Acts 1893 to 1913)

This is to Certify that Miss Joan Leslie
of Northhouse Unst.
is the Registered Proprietor of One shares
of One Pound Sterling each fully paid numbered 1963
inclusive, in the above-named Association,
subject to the Rules thereof.

Given under the Common Seal of the said Association the
Twenty-third day of August 1946

Chairman

Secretary

Note - No transfer of any of the Shares comprised in this Certificate is valid without the consent of the Committee & until the Certificate has been delivered at the Office of the Association, Commercial Road, Lerwick.

Fig. 6.7.
(Source: B.A.Black)

membership fee was 2/6d.; members were issued with a copy of the S.H.K.A.'s constitution (see fig. 6.6 and appendix 6). In December 1943 the S.H.K.A.'s members voted unanimously to change the Association to that of a marketing organisation, selling direct to the retailer through agents appointed by the Association. It was hoped that this development would "put the whole Shetland hosiery trade into the hands of knitters"[69]. This move necessitated changing the Association's constitution and registering it under the Industrial and Provident Act.

The S.H.K.A. was registered on 7th February 1944, and had its headquarters at 58 Commercial Street, Lerwick[70]. It operated as a non-profit making workers' co-operative with members purchasing shares costing £1each (fig. 6.7). In its first year the Association had 36 branches scattered throughout the islands - each branch sending a representative to the Association's meetings at the Lerwick headquarters[71]. The Association's turnover for the year 1944 - 45 was £43,634, rising to £55,678 the following year[72]. When it is remembered that the entire Shetland woollen industry had been valued at £80,000 in 1932[73] , this was a very encouraging start. A Sales Committee was appointed and it was decided to sell hosiery on a 10% commission basis to cover running costs, any surplus being paid out in dividends.

The S.H.K.A. had four main objectives. Firstly, to protect the interests of the knitters and others engaged in the woollen and hosiery industry in Shetland; secondly, to negotiate fair prices for all classes of knitwear, and to improve the methods of marketing such goods; thirdly to encourage, secure and maintain the adoption of distinctive marks for all classes of woollen goods reaching the standards of quality, design, manufacture and finish approved by the committee of management of the Association; and lastly, for the aforementioned purposes, to carry on business as agents for, and buyers and sellers of yarn, woollen and hosiery goods used or manufactured by members and others in Shetland and such other products and/or requirements as the Committee may direct[74]. In conjunction with the Association's third objective, the Association encouraged innovation and design, a point felt strongly by 'Kays of Shetland Ltd.' to be lacking in the industry; a point which had been voiced by many in the past. Fig. 6.8 shows Kays message to the S.H.K.A. Interestingly, the points made by Kays, formed the basis of the

# A MESSAGE TO SHETLAND KNITTERS.

KAYS OF SHETLAND, LTD., welcome the SHETLAND HAND KNITTERS' ASSOCIATION. In it we see an instrument which, if handled wisely and with vision, could in the course of time ensure the prosperity of these Islands.

With the exaggerated demand for Shetland hosiery during war time, the immediate problem is probably justice in prices and coupons for the individual knitter. Here we would suggest that the Association take definite steps to ascertain from the Board of Trade the highest permissible prices that can be paid, and to advertise these. This would give a square deal to every knitter.

But what about after the war ? During the war, of course, it is so easy for the knitter to sell her hosiery, but surely every knitter in Shetland can remember those tremendous slumps in Shetland hosiery when little or no hosiery was sold. What caused these slumps, and can the Shetland Hand Knitters' Association do anything to avoid these in the future?

The main point about these lean years in the sale of Shetland goods was the dependence of the Shetland knitter on a certain and particular type of knitting. When this was unfashionable the knitter, or rather the majority of the knitters, could not get away from the type of hosiery they had been educated to knit. They found it impossible to break out and to knit in accordance with the fashion of the time.

> IT IS ALL A MATTER OF EDUCATION. IF WE HAD IN SHETLAND TRAINED FASHION DESIGNERS TO DESIGN SPECIAL GARMENTS FOR EACH SEASON, AND IF WE HAD KNITTERS WHO COULD FAITHFULLY AND QUICKLY COPY THESE DESIGNS, THEN EVERY YEAR THE NEW SHETLAND MODELS WOULD STORM THE FASHION WORLD, AND THE SHETLAND KNITTER COULD DEMAND SUCH A PRICE AS NEVER BEFORE HAS BEEN ANTICIPATED.

These things, unfortunately, cannot be done at present, but the Shetland knitter should look into the future for the sake of her daughter or even her grand-daughter. For instance, is it possible for such a revolution to happen, say even in twenty years' time ? We definitely say "Yes."

> EVERY GIRL SHOULD BE TAUGHT KNITTING AT SCHOOL FROM THE VERY EARLIEST TO THE VERY LATEST AGE. COMPETENT TEACHERS, DESIGNERS AND SPECIALISTS SHOULD SO CONDUCT THESE CLASSES THAT WHEN A SHETLAND GIRL LEAVES SCHOOL SHE IS MISTRESS OF A TRADE THAT WILL ENSURE HER LIVELIHOOD THE REST OF HER LIFE. A TECHNICAL COLLEGE OR CLASSES SHOULD BE OPENED IN THE ISLANDS TO ENSURE THIS. GIRLS SHOWING A SPECIAL FLAIR FOR DESIGN, COLOUR, ETC., SHOULD BE SENT ON A SPECIAL COURSE OF STUDY. THESE GIRLS, WHEN THEIR EDUCATION HAS BEEN COMPLETED, WILL, IN TIME, BE THE FASHION DESIGNERS, IN FACT, THE FASHION DICTATORS, OF SHETLAND HOSIERY.

Fig. 6.8.
(Source: *The Shetland News* 12/8/1943)

Z.C.C.'s Post-war reconstruction committees' report to the Crofters' Woollen Industry (given in full in appendix 10) the following year and is dealt with later in this chapter .

The Association was particularly concerned about the threat posed by locally based knitting machines. It realised that although the pre-war demand for Shetland machine knits had been mainly from America, in peace time Shetland machine made hosiery might very well be in demand in Britain and that highly priced hand knits would compare unfavourably with Shetland machine knitted hosiery. In a bid to protect the hand knitting industry, knitters voted to establish their own spinning mill, advocated by Prophet Smith, Secretary of the S.H.K.A. and a trade union leader, and supported by the N.F.U. and Shetland Flockbook Society, which would be run by the Association for the exclusive use of knitters and weavers the worsted being available exclusively to members[75]. The Association was equally determined to obtain their own protective trade mark, exclusively for hand knits which would be a guarantee of workmanship and quality. To this end they intended to petition the Board of Trade for the exclusive use of the word 'Shetland' as a mark on hand knitted goods[76] to be used only on hosiery produced in Shetland[77]. Neither of these ambitious schemes were successful, although by 1947 the S.H.K.A. did have an 'approved house mark' but not a Board of Trade registered trade mark[78] . Shetland did obtain its own spinning mill in 1947[79] but despite the combined efforts of the Z.C.C., N.F.U, S.W.I.A., S.H.K.A. and Joe Grimond M.P., the Board of Trade was not prepared to grant the industry the exclusive use of the word Shetland, as under present statute it was inadmissible to register a geographical name as a trade mark[80].

By 1948 the S.H.K.A. had 4,000 members[81] and judging from a 1947 S.H.K.A. advertisement (fig. 6.9), the Association's members seem to have realised at last that it was only by uniting and acting as a corporate body, that they would be able to strengthen their position, stabilise prices, and finally rid themselves of the remnants of truck and merchant domination. The Association laid down set, realistic piece work rates for knitwear, although it would be misleading to paint a rosy picture of fair prices being paid to knitters, that is, fair in terms of workers being paid on an hourly rate economically commensurate with the work involved to

A 1947 advertisement for the S.H.K.A.

# Four and a Half Years!

**OBJECTS.**

(a) To protect the interests of handknitters and others engaged in the woollen and hosiery industry in Shetland.

(a) Since it was founded the S.H.K.A. has represented knitters on all Committees formed to aid the Industry, and has been recognised by Government departments as the competent body to speak collectively for the knitters.

(b) To negotiate fair prices for all classes of knitwear and to improve the methods of marketing of such goods.

(b) We have continuously campaigned for stabilised prices and took the leading part in negotiations that resulted in fixing minimum prices to knitters.

(c) To encourage, secure, and maintain the adoption of distinctive marks for all classes of woollen goods manufactured in Shetland and their application to all goods reaching the standard of quality, design, manufacture and finish approved by the Committee of Management of the Association, and

(c) The S.H.K.A. has been in the forefront of the fight for a Trade Mark, which should be in operation soon.

(d) for these purposes to carry on business as agents for and buyers and sellers of yarn, woollen and hosiery goods used or manufactured by members and others in Shetland and such other products and/or requirements as the Committee may direct. The Association shall also, subject to the approval of members in General Meeting, carry on any kindred forms of trading or other activity likely to protect, improve or promote the interests of all engaged in the woollen and hosiery industry in the Shetland Islands.

(d) The S.H.K.A. formed the first trading business owned and controlled by the knitters themselves.

*We have done our bit.*

*It is up to YOU to Support us.*

WHEN YOU SEND YOUR HOSIERY, REMEMBER WE HAVE A REPUTATION TO UPHOLD

*THE SHETLAND HAND KNITTERS' ASSOCIATION LTD*

58 COMMERCIAL STREET · LERWICK · SHETLAND

'PHONE 46. 'PHONE 46.

Fig. 6.9.
(Source: *The New Shetlander*)

producing a garment. This stability in turn gave the knitter some leeway to try out new designs, styles, shapes, all of which were encouraged by the Association. In the past there had been little point in spending precious time on innovation and raising standards, when this effort was not financially rewarded. Trucking, low rates of pay, and price fluctuation all acted against the hosiery industry to stifle enterprise and the raising of standards.

Oral history sources suggest that some knitters felt that they gained little benefit from the Association[82]. Problems had arisen with members who had regular customers in the south. The Association felt that all hosiery had to be channelled through their depot in order to stabilise prices. Prophet Smith believed that if the Association did not control the industry after the war it would cease to exist. However, like the S.W.I.A., the continuing story of the S.H.K.A. becomes one of its struggle to compete with 'Shetland imitations' and their subsequent action to try to have the word 'Shetland' kept for exclusive use of the indigenous woollen industry[83].

**Z.C.C. post-war reconstruction committee and Calder Report.**

As early as the summer of 1942 the Z.C.C., in a forward-looking move, appointed a post-war reconstruction committee to draw up plans to ensure employment and prosperity in peace time. A woollen industries sub-committee was appointed with representatives from knitters, the Flockbook Society, small holders, and dealers, to look into the state of the Shetland hosiery industry and plan a strategy to ensure its post-war survival[84]. The central committee regarded the hosiery industry as the most important of Shetland's three traditional industries "...as there is hardly a household in the Islands which does not depend, to a greater or lesser extent, upon the sale of hand knit and hand woven goods"[85]. The woollen industries sub-committee felt that the crux of the industry's survival lay in establishing a national mark to be allocated for use on all woollen or tweed goods manufactured in the islands - hand knitted or otherwise. From this the committee felt that the establishment of a local spinning mill and the development of cottage industries would follow as a natural consequence[86]. The committee, advertising in the local press, invited all those interested in these schemes to submit their ideas in writing.

The sub-committee looked into the feasibility of establishing a dispersed system of spinning using the hand sets suggested by Dr. Manson in 1939, and into the cost of establishing a central spinning mill. Each small mill required for spinning sets was reckoned by the committee to require a capital outlay of £700 per unit, whilst a central mill would require an initial outlay of £63,000[87]. Meantime, the Crofter Woollen Industry Committee - set up by the Scottish Council of Industry - was conducting an inquiry "into the present position of all branches of the woollen industry in the Highlands and Islands with reference to wool production and manufacture both of factory and home-made origin"[88]. This inquiry was published in 1945 and is generally referred to as the Calder Report, so named after the secretary of the Crofters' Woollen Committee. Anxious to protect the future of rural industries and rural employment after the war, the committee recognised that the woollen industry in the Highlands and Islands depended on a distinctive trade mark, local spinning mills, improvement in design and technique, and a structured system of marketing. In response to the request from the Crofters' Woollen Committee for suggestions which would foster progress in the Shetland woollen industry, the Z.C.C. post-War reconstruction committee's woollen industries sub-committee compiled a lengthy memorandum outlining their suggestions[89] - see appendix 10. In essence, the committee suggested the use of a distinctive trade mark, the establishment of a local spinning mill, instruction in design and technique and the formation of a Protection and Development Board to look after the marketing of wool and hosiery.

The only positive outcome from the many utopian and over-ambitious suggestions put forward by the Z.C.C. sub-committee representing the woollen industries, was the establishment of a local spinning mill. As is shown later in this chapter, even this outcome was of limited value as the mill quickly proved itself incapable of producing quality worsted. The proposals put forward by the sub-committee amounted to no more than a reiteration of those points proposed by Professor Scott thirty years earlier. Sadly, post-Second World War Shetlanders followed the same course as their First World War predecessors.

Initially after the War, the boom in the hosiery industry bred complacency. Few knitters or dealers were prepared to look to the future when the inevitable post-war depression would place expensive hand knits out of the reach of many of their traditional purchasers. Shetland hand knits had enjoyed a prolonged wartime boom largely because of the lack of competition from machine made goods. When the cheaper machine made goods reappeared on the market, Shetland knitters were unprepared. The unity in the Shetland woollen industry noted by the editor of *The Shetland News* ' "Shetland in 1948", was dashed by the post-War fragmentation of all concerned in the Shetland woollen industry. Had the S.W.I.A. - no longer moribund - the S.H.K.A., and the Flock Book Society been prepared to stick together and follow a common policy, adhering to at least some of the less costly proposals which they, as members of the Post-War Reconstruction Committee, had put to the Crofters' Woollen Committee, instead of waiting for the Government to come up with funding, they could have assured a future for the Shetland woollen industry by providing local employment for their young people, and thereby helped prevent the steady flow of emigrants from the islands.

**The Shetland hand knitting industry 1945-50.**

The Shetland hand knitting industry enjoyed a prolonged post-war boom. By1947 the Shetland hosiery trade, along with the wool clip, was estimated at having a gross annual value of nearly a million pounds[90]. However, some large firms felt that the industry had reached and probably passed its peak, as reports from selling agents in the south suggested that many southern merchants felt that Shetland hand knitted hosiery was too highly priced. This situation was brought to a head by the exceptionally severe winter of 1947, which devastated sheep flocks and substantially depleted wool stocks, with the result that the price of wool rocketed from 3/- a lb. in 1940 to 9/- per lb in 1947[91]. Despite this post-war slump, the Shetland woollen industry was still regarded as:

> ... the sheet anchor of the islands... bringing in very much more money to the country than any other industry, and brings it in in a manner which gives the maximum benefit to those engaged in it. It is a great cottage industry and entirely the opposite of a huge factory employing a similar number of workers, with its endless overhead expenses and management, deterioration of machinery and plant,

> 42 to 45 hour week and wages of 60/- to 70/- per week. The houses in Shetland where the knitters work have no additional "overheads", no plant to maintain, no restrictions of working hours, and almost no limit to what may be earned[92].

This extract from the 1948 annual review in the *The Shetland News* went on to state how gratifying it was that all concerned with the industry, that is, the S.H.K.A., resuscitated S.W.I.A.[93], the National Farmers Union, the Flock Book Society, merchants, dealers and knitters, were more unanimous in their drive to consolidate the industry on a sure and safe foundation. *The Shetland News* felt that such unity would lead to price stability, the formation of a wool marketing board and the constant use of a distinctive trade mark, all aided by the new spinning mill recently opened in Unst.

The use of decentralised spinning sets, suggested before the outbreak of the War, was again pursued, but after trials to process Shetland wool using spinning sets were made in Leeds, the resultant yarn was found to be inferior, and the project abandoned[94]. However, a local spinning mill was established in 1946 and the company of "Shetland Spinners and Weavers" registered on 7/9/1946, with Charles G.D.Sandison of Haamar, Baltasound, Unst as director. In December 1946, the majority of the shares were held by 5 members of the Sandison family[95]. Old War Department buildings left over from the Second World War were chosen for the site, which unfortunately being at Baltasound, Unst, Shetland's most northerly inhabited island, put it at an immediate disadvantage, as the cost of freight from Lerwick to Baltasound, was exactly the same as that from Lerwick to Aberdeen[96]. It was also hoped that the mill would help relieve post-war unemployment on the islands. Whilst in operation, the mill had employed a maximum of 60 people[97].

Owing to the delay in the provision of machinery and the post-war difficulties of obtaining wood, the mill did not start production until 1948, which coincided with a depression in the wool trade. One misfortune followed the next. Initially there had insufficient Shetland wool coming in to keep the mill going, and they had been compelled to mix it with other wools. This factor, coupled with some low standard work when workers were learning, led to a lack of confidence in the mill on the part of the Shetland wool trade who were, understandably, reluctant to lose their

existing connections with outside firms unless the Shetland mill could produce equally good work[98]. The fineness of Shetland wool made it difficult to spin by machine, and other types of wool were often added to it to overcome technical problems[99]. In essence the workforce did not have the technical expertise nor its management the business acumen to compete with long established Scottish spinners. Despite attempts to have experts from the Wool College at Galashiels visit, and even offers of help from a small rural mill in Wales, the company went into voluntary liquidation in August 1950[100].

**Structural changes in the Shetland hand knitting industry 1918 - 1950.**

The traditional framework on which Shetland merchants had run their hosiery businesses during the last hundred years, changed during this period because of the effects of war-time marketing and increased communications both within and outwith the islands. The Lerwick merchant specialising in hosiery and the general merchant in country districts dealing in hosiery, suffered a nasty jolt when First World War knitters sold much of their hosiery independently, and later during the Second World War, when knitters formed their own co-operative, which taken with the increase in direct selling by knitters to Shetland based servicemen, finally brought the last remnants of merchant dominance of the hand knitting industry to an end. Merchants responded by purchasing more hand-flat knitting machines, setting up factory units and, unrestricted by the limitations of the hand knitter, branched out into manufacturing a wider range of fashion knitwear. For example, Pole Hoseseasons, T.M. Adie and Wm. Tulloch, diversified into machine knitting and set up factory units employing both knitters and non-knitters in these factories. In addition, many knitters were employed as outworkers with hosiery producers organising this workforce on the factory putting-out system. Worsted and orders were delivered by van on set days to outlying workers; hosiery was collected and payment made for the previous week's knitting. By 1938 six knitting units had been established on the islands - Urafirth, Voe, Aith, Lerwick, Scalloway and Hoswick - in which a total of 90 - 100 women had full-time employment[101]. This expansion continued after the War so that by 1949 three more knitwear units had been set up in Lerwick[102].

With the arrival of hand-flat knitting machines, came division of labour. Knitters were employed to finish garments by hand knitting Fair Isle yokes and cuffs on to machine knitted jumpers and cardigans. Hosiery was finished or dressed in the merchants' factory units, some merchants even sending out cars to collect workers living in remote areas. Flat, piece-rates were paid by employers, and represented a more formal and progressive approach to the employment of workers. The knitting machine, regarded by pessimists as the downfall of the Shetland knitting industry, enabled this traditional industry to be transformed in to a modern industry, able to keep knitting alive by having the ability to compete on an equal basis with the cheaper mass-produced hosiery of the south. Successful operations in the post-war years were based on factories and marketing units where merchants had invested in buildings and equipment, and competed for sales with a realistically priced product backed by a professional management organisation. The hand knitting industry was still very much alive in 1950 and although threatened by machine knitting, was not displaced by them until well into the sixties.

Fig. 6.10, shown on the next page, outlines the basic structure of the Shetland knitting industry by 1950 when hand knitting in Shetland was still an important form of supplementary employment, being complemented by full-time and part-time employment in, or as outworkers for, factory units run by merchants such as Tullochs of Urafirth and T.M.Adie of Voe.

**The structure of the Shetland knitting industry by 1950.**

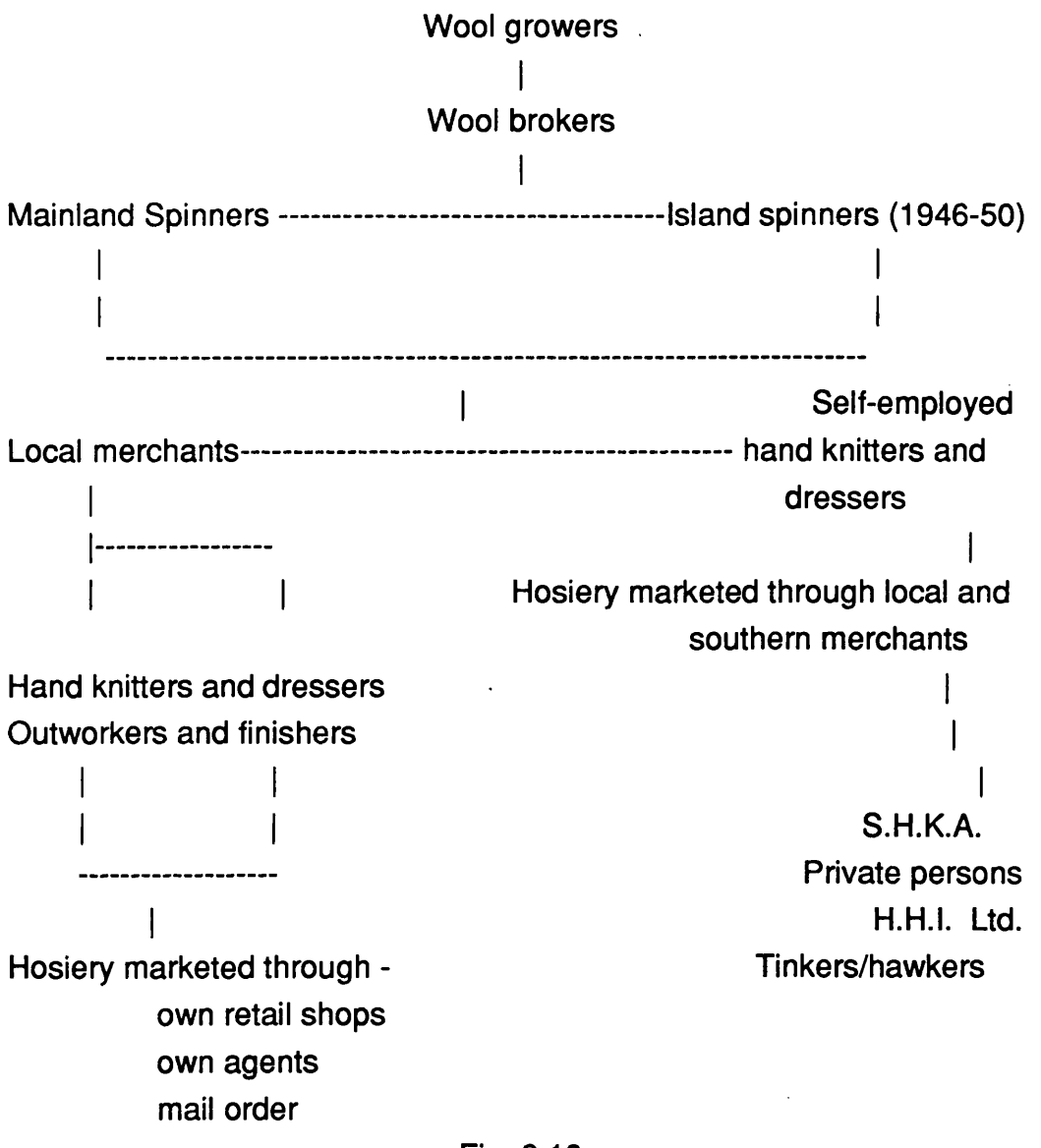
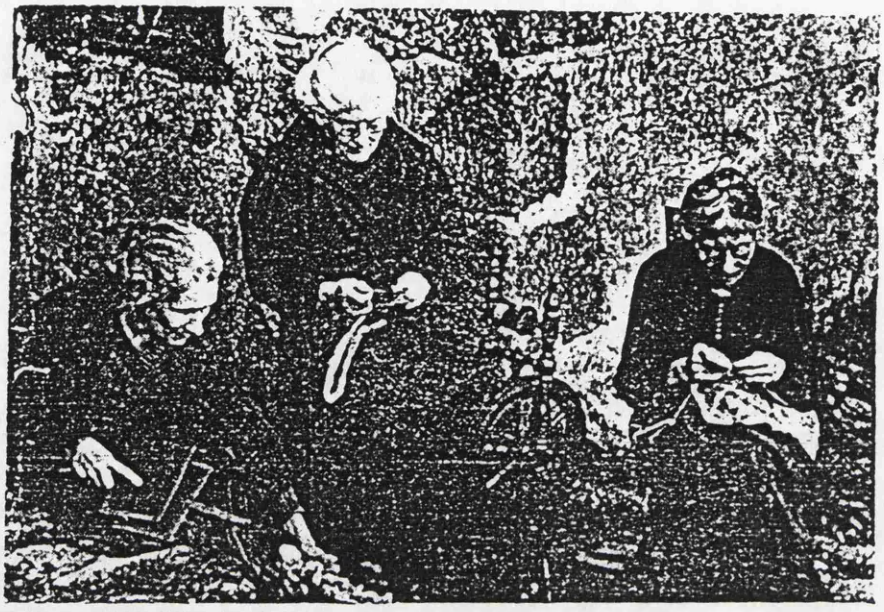



Fig. 6.10

**Wool Brokers.**

Not all the wool grown in Shetland passed through brokers' hands; much was still kept by the crofter-knitter for her own use. The small crofter-knitter could sell her wool to her local merchant of exchange it for ready-made goods such as blankets etc.[103] By 1937, wool brokers had started selling pure Shetland wool in the south - a practice traditionally frowned on. An article in *The Shetland News,* stated that: "it is rumoured that certain firms in the south have started to manufacture Shetland hosiery in Shetland yarn, and this is regarded locally as a 'sinister

The Sutherland Family.



Three members of the Sutherland family, carding, knitting and spinning. The Sutherlands have on many occasions, knitted fine lace shawls for presentation to members of the Royal Family.

## THE WONDERFUL KNITTERS OF SHETLAND

IN the Shetland Isles, Britain's most northerly part, live the world's finest knitters. Hand knitting is one of the main industries of the islands, where between six and eight thousand women earn their living by it. They never use a written pattern, the exquisite and intricate lace stitches being handed down from mother to daughter. Never, unless requested, do they make two garments alike ; always their artistry introduces some variation of lace stitch or colouring.

The industry is over four centuries old, dating back to the time when knitting was first invented on the mainland of Scotland. No one knows who first started looping wool on needles to form fabric, some time during the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. But the fashion quickly spread all over Europe, especially to Spain. Knitted silk stockings, in particular, were popular at the Tudor courts. It is said that many Fair Isle and Lace patterns were copied by the talented local women from motifs on the knitted silk clothing of Spanish noblemen, wrecked off Fair Isle in their Armada galleon, the *El Gran Griffon*. Such patterns as the " Cross of Castile," the " Star of Granada," the " Basque Lily," and the " Moorish Arrow " are traditional in Fair Isle to this day.

Different isles became famous for different types of knitting, as Yell for its brilliant colourings and Fair Isle for fancy socks. But it is in Unst, the farthest north of the Islands, that knitting as an art reaches its highest level. The marvellous gossamer shawls and scarves of Unst are knitted from wool hand spun almost to the fineness of human hair. A shawl six feet square, knitted from a mile and a half of wool, may weigh only two and a half ounces. However large a shawl, it can be drawn through a wedding ring, and many times these shawls have been worn as wedding veils. Only the wool from behind the sheep's ears and round its neck, being the silkiest and finest part of the fleece, is used for this gossamer spinning. The women who spin it do no housework, but keep their hands soft, lest they catch on the fine threads. Although so light and fragile that they look as if they would break like sea foam at a touch, these scarves and shawls are surprisingly warm, as indeed, is all wool lace. It is a scientific fact that open textured, airy fabrics hold more warmth than closely knit ones.

Beautiful Unst shawls, lovingly spun and knitted, have frequently been presented to members of the Royal Family, on such occasions as weddings and twenty-first birthdays. Royal letters are treasured by such famous knitters as the Sutherland family, the Jamieson sisters, Mrs. Hunter and Mrs. Johnston, of Unst. Queen Victoria accepted and frequently wore a fine Unst shawl, and started a great fashion for them. The lace stole-scarves are equally beautiful and becoming with present-day clothes.

Unfortunately, these exquisite shawls and scarves are rapidly becoming museum pieces, for the art of spinning and knitting them is now practised by fewer than half a dozen women. The younger ones do not take it up, as the time spent in spinning is not economic. We are therefore very proud to present simple written instructions for three authentic Unst scarves (photographed on the cover and pages 5, 6, and 7), designed in traditional stitches and published by kind permission of the designer-knitters. Unfortunately the very fine hand spun wool is unobtainable. But 1-ply and cobweb wools, fine enough for the average amateur knitter, and very suitable for knitting the scarves, are easily obtainable.

2

Fig. 6.11.
(Source: *Bestway Knitting Book*)

development"[104]. To have Shetland 'imitations' manufactured outwith the islands in Shetland wool meant that they were not imitations in their fibre content, nor impostors by name, as the term 'Shetland' was not protected by the Board of Trade for exclusive use by products made in the islands. Moreover, this new type of 'Shetland' hosiery, being machine-produced, could be sold more cheaply than hand knitted garments and would therefore pose a very serious threat to the Shetland hosiery industry.

The War acted as a stimulus and temporary salvation to the Shetland wool trade; brokers being in the favourable position of enjoying inflated prices in times of national scarcity. The Shetland wool clip was entirely taken up by the local woollen industry, with for example, Shetland's largest wool brokers, Jameson and Smith, North Road, Lerwick, starting in business during the War[105]. Shetland wool was also not covered by the British Wool Marketing Scheme, which had been promoted by the N.F.U. under the Agricultural Marketing Acts and came into operation for the 1951 clip. Shetland stockmasters, crofters, and wool brokers had decided to remain aloof from this scheme, favouring their own proposed scheme which although designed primarily to safeguard their woollen industry was not in the desired form admissible under the Act[106]. Shetlanders had intended setting up their own wool marketing board, but failing to agree amongst themselves as to the form it should take, this never took place and Shetland was left in isolation, and the only area not in the British Wool Marketing Scheme[107].

**Spinning.**

Hand spinning had ceased to be economically viable, except for the production of the gossamer yarn used in very fine Shetland lace knitting - itself a dying art. This type of hand spinning was still prosecuted by a few of the older generation, the most notable being the Sutherland family (fig. 6.11). The vast bulk of the wool clip was sent to the Scottish mainland for spinning - Hunter Bros., Brora, Pringles of Inverness and in the Borders, Munro's, were the main spinning mills used by Shetlanders.

**Knitters.**

The geographical distribution of hand knitters had both weakened and strengthened the Shetland hand knitting industry. On the negative side,

the isolation of many knitters contributed to their continued lack of organisation and acted against unity, whilst on the positive side, it is most likely that in a more densely populated area, hand knitting would have been usurped by machine knitting, and would have become centralised on a factory basis, as had happened with the Aberdeenshire hosiery industry at the end of the eighteenth century. Knitters who were scattered in sparsely populated rural and island communities, found that distance and the difficulties, cost and time taken to travel to centres like Lerwick, made it unlikely that they could meet up to discuss common grievances, marketing policies and other issues. Where the knitter was a crofter-knitter, the demands of the croft and the tie of farm animals, coupled with the old and ubiquitous problem of lack of capital, all acted as deterrents to this possible squandering of precious time. It must also be recognised, that although many knitters grumbled about the poor prices they received for their hosiery, they were partly to blame as they were not prepared to change their ways and knit the new designs or styles which both the hosiery merchants and the public desired; particularly where knitting was a part-time occupation, being fitted in between times, knitters often could not be bothered or just were not prepared to spend the relatively small amount of extra time it would have taken, to become familiar with a different style. If it is remembered that Shetland knitters, did not use knitting patterns, but knitted the pattern 'out of their heads', it partly explains their reluctance to change, as it is easier to change from one style to another if written instructions are being followed. The Shetland knitter knitted so fast that it would have been a terrible frustration and waste of time to have to translate written instructions into stitches; the nearest she came to following a pattern was in the charting of Fair Isle designs. This reluctance to change to new styles was a serious shortcoming common to most hand knitters. For example, the S.W.I.A. held a knitting competition with prizes for new designs and fashions[108]; very few knitters entered the competition, and fewer still were prepared to change to knitting the prize winning designs, or as one dealer found, rushed up the work, spoiling the design:

> Most knitters and districts stick to conventional patterns. I am always looking for new and better ones. The trouble is that when I find an acceptable one and want more, the next supply is too hurriedly done, or others copy and spoil it[109].

The Shetland hand knitter obviously did not realise that in a modern world where machines were displacing workers, this cussed approach was a sure recipe for extinction. People, including non-knitters, could be trained to work machines to produce a desired design and then churn the same pattern out uniformly and indefinitely.

**Marketing 1918-1950.**

Self-employed knitters continued to market their hosiery through the H.H.I.Ltd, private persons at home and abroad, local merchants, tinkers/hawkers and latterly through the S.H.K.A. The work of the H.H.I. was praised by many, including the Scottish Office[110], for its work in alleviating distress in rural areas, by providing practical assistance on a sound business, rather than charitable basis, and by helping to stamp out truck by setting up purchasing depots through which knitters could market their hosiery at guaranteed prices, independent of their local merchant, totally free of truck[111]. The H.H.I. had its headquarters at 34 Charlotte Square, Edinburgh, with purchasing depots strategically placed in rural areas to serve different parts of the Highlands and Islands[112] with Shetlanders dealing through the Strathpeffer depot. Unfortunately only snippets of information of the H.H.I.'s dealings with Shetland hosiery are to be found in the Scottish Office files. One interesting entry for 1933/34 refers to an order having been received from the 1/4th Gurkha Rifles in the Punjab, for Shetland jerseys specially designed for their officers[113].

An H.H.I. report, compiled by Miss Sutherland of the H.H.I.'s Strathpeffer depot, concerning Shetland hosiery in 1935 bears out, that as fishing was declining, knitting was taking its place as a major contributor to the family income, not just to supplement it:

> Last year (i.e. 1935), we had a considerable increase in the number workers, especially in Shetland, and since my tour of these islands in the early summer, we had of necessity to increase our purchases, in order to meet to some extent, the economic situation, where the last few bad years fishing seasons had deprived the Shetlanders of their means of support. This fact impressed itself on me again and again during my visit, and the need of giving as much individual employment as we could... [114].

During that year Shetland knitters sold £4,310 -14/6d. worth of hosiery through the H.H.I.[115] Only the very highest standard of hosiery was

accepted by the H.H.I., so that although "Almost every woman in Shetland can knit, only a limited number can knit really well"[116]. Personal visits were paid regularly to ensure that work was of a high standard. As well as this, conscious of the need to progress and compete in the world of fashion, the H.H.I. were constantly working out new designs and sending them to their workers, which were scattered all over the islands. 120 knitters were dealt with directly and about the same number through collectors. This structured approach, with its high standards, ensured fair prices to skilled knitters, and was a great benefit in stabilising prices and taking the uncertainty out of marketing.

The greater mobility of the Shetlander, the steady influx of tourists (except during the war years when servicemen replaced tourists) and the greatly improved parcel post, enabled knitters to sell to private persons. Many emigrant Shetlanders and relations in the merchant navy, sent orders back home for Shetland hosiery. Christmas was a particularly busy time for such sales. With much of the dire economic pressures of life alleviated by pensions, allowances and subsidies from the public sector, knitters could establish their own markets and many had developed a clientele of regulars. Advertisements in local newspapers asked endlessly for a large variety of hosiery, with for example, hosiery dealers from as far afield as Cornwall advertising in *The Shetland Times*[117]. The knitter was still at the basic disadvantage that the merchant set the price for the work to be done. It was the knitter of poorer quality hosiery that mainly used her local merchant, as by this time there was an increase in more profitable outlets for hand knitters and organisation like the H.H.I. only dealt with high quality work.

A large proportion of hand knitted goods were still sold through retail merchants or hosiery dealers; from 17 hosiery dealers in 1938 the number of dealers rose to 31 by 1966[118]. The hosiery industry became more dispersed as factory units and retail shops were set up throughout the islands, although Lerwick continued to remain the centre of the hosiery industry in Shetland.

Merchants sold their hosiery in three main ways - through their own retail shops or to wholesalers through their own agents, and by mail order direct to the public. This latter gained in importance after the First World

War with many merchants sending knitwear 'on approval' to customers throughout the British Isles[119]. During the inter-War years, many merchants were exporting their knitwear to America, Italy and France; the increase in orders from America was one of the main reasons for the decline in demand for hand knitted goods. Not only did the American market demand the very best quality of knitwear to a stated design and uniformity, but they ordered it in large quantities with specific delivery dates. If the completed order could not be fulfilled on time, buyers were not interested. Shetland hand knitters it will be remembered, were not good at being told what to knit and using knitting as a supplementary form of employment, did little knitting during the crofting season - the time of year when American dealers wanted to take delivery of their orders for the autumn/winter. Managers of hosiery factory units did have problems with their workforce, but on the whole it was possible for them to plan their orders when using machine produced hosiery rather than hand knitted hosiery.

**Stewarts of Shetland.**

An interesting and amusing episode in the saga of the marketing of Shetland hosiery is that of 'Stewarts of Shetland', hosiery dealers. Mr. E.C. Stewart, a journalist by trade, came to Shetland in February 1943 to edit the *Shetland Times*, but unwisely started a hosiery business in August 1944, at the same time as editing the *Shetland Times,* and was sacked 2 months later! The Stewarts had no experience of the hosiery trade, but anxious to capitalise on Shetland's lucrative war-time hosiery trade, decided to start up with a capital of £100[120]. During their first year's trading they had a turnover of £11,000 which dropped to £4,795 the following year, and finally plummeted during the terrible winter of 1947 when Shetland lost half its sheep and lambs and there was practically no trading for the first 5 months of the year. By this time the Stewarts were in deep trouble with purchase tax payments and in a mess with their coupons, owing traders and knitters 1,601 coupons[121]. In an attempt to extricate themselves from this financial mess, E.C. Stewart hit on the idea of a propaganda magazine, *The Shetland Monthly,*and in March 1947, launched his new socialist magazine, aimed at winning over the Shetland worker.

Stewart started by proclaiming himself champion of the people, particularly the knitter, eager and willing to create a new post-war Shetland full of opportunity for its working people. The first edition, which was also to be the penultimate, opened with a flourish - "With the publication of the first issue of *The Shetland Monthly* a new era of journalism starts in Shetland"[122]. Knitters were to have fair and stable prices for their hosiery, fishermen were to be guaranteed reasonable prices seasonally in advance, and

> ...those who create the wealth of Shetland shall benefit in direct proportion to their efforts. In the past, as most Shetlanders know to their cost, the exact opposite has applied - the wealth of the community has gone into the pockets of those who produced nothing. It will be the privilege of *The Shetland Monthly* to keep a watchful eye on industry with these points in view[123].

The magazine continued in this tone and was full of grandiose but facile statements. However, knitters may have felt some concern when the April edition of *The Shetland Monthly* failed to appear. The May edition was the last in this "new era of journalism"!

In his first edition, Stewart informed his readers that he was a fully trained journalist with a lifetimes experience in Glasgow, London and elsewhere. This edition also carried a long and reasonably informed article on the Shetland hand knitting industry. In this, he explained how he and his wife had started a knitting business whilst waiting for the Ministry of Supply to relax the paper restrictions. Stewart analysed the buying and selling of hosiery and came to the conclusion that knitters should be paid an hourly rate for their work, that prices for both buying and selling of hosiery should be fixed and that hosiery buyers should always be prepared to buy hosiery - all very utopian and impracticable. The little business acumen which he did possess made him realise that it was useless to try and compete with mass-produced hosiery and that it was only by selling hand knitted Shetland hosiery as a luxury item that sales could be maintained and that to obtain satisfactory prices, he had to by-pass wholesalers and sell direct to the retailer through his agents. He claimed that by a policy of carefully selecting the right shop in a certain area, and by giving it the sole rights for his hosiery, prices could be maintained as there was no danger of another shop undercutting it. Marketing in this way, Stewart claimed that although he was selling in

# STEWARTS OF SHETLAND

FREEFIELD, LERWICK

| *Inches* | *A.O.F.I* Jumpers | *A.O.F.I* Cardigans | *F.I.B* Jumpers | *F.I.B* Cardigans | *LACE* Jumpers | *LACE* Cardigans |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 22 ... | 42/6 | 45/- | 25/- | 27/6 | 22/- | 24/6 |
| 24 ... | 45/- | 47/6 | 27/6 | 30/- | 24/- | 26/6 |
| 26 ... | 47/6 | 50/- | 30/- | 32/6 | 26/- | 28/6 |
| 28 ... | 50/- | 52/6 | 32/6 | 35/- | 28/- | 30/6 |
| 30 ... | 55/- | 57 6 | 35/- | 37/6 | 30/- | 32/6 |
| 32 ... | 60/- | 62/6 | 40/- | 42/6 | 32/- | 35/- |
| 34 ... | 90/- | 95/- | 50/- | 55/- | 45/- | 52/6 |
| 36 ... | 95/- | 100/- | 52/6 | 57/6 | 50/- | 55/- |
| 38 ... | 95/- | 100/- | 52/6 | 57/6 | 52/6 | 57/6 |
| 40 ... | 100/- | 105/- | 55/- | 60/- | 55/- | 60/- |

Twin Sets only

PRICES ARE FOR LONG SLEEVES, WELL-SHAPED SHOULDERS, BUTTONS TO NECK

SPECIAL PRICES FOR WORK OF SPECIAL MERIT

*A.O.F.I. PULLOVERS*

| *Inches* | *Sleeveless* | *Sleeved* |
|---|---|---|
| 22 ... ... | 35/- | 42/6 |
| 24 ... ... | 37/6 | 45/- |
| 26 ... ... | 40/- | 47/6 |
| 28 ... ... | 42/6 | 50/- |
| 30 ... ... | 45/- | 52/6 |
| 32 ... ... | 47/6 | 55/- |
| 34 ... ... | 60/- | 90/- |
| 36 ... ... | 60/- | 95/- |
| 38 ... ... | 65/- | 100/- |
| 40 ... ... | 70/- | 100/- |
| 42 ... ... | 70/- | 105/- |

*FAIR ISLE*

| *Inches* | *Gloves* | *Mitts* |
|---|---|---|
| 6½ ... | 6/6 | 4/6 |
| 7 ... | 7/- | 5/- |
| 7½ ... | 7/6 | 5/6 |
| 8 ... | 8/- | 6/- |
| 8½ ... | 8/6 | 6/6 |
| 9 ... | 9/- | 7/- |
| W ... | 11/6 | 10/6 |

BERETS (over 8½"), 11/6
Sets as Prices Above Combined

WHITE HAPS, 56", 40/- ; 60", 45/-

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Equally good prices for anything else you knit. Please send it on or bring it in .

We can sell any quantity of good handknit at these prices. They will not go down

Every parcel is acknowledged at once, with prices Please address them as above.

# CASH & COUPONS IN 14 DAYS

**Support the Firm which Advertises—and Pays—Firm, Fair, Prices**

Fig. 6.12.
(Source: *The Shetland Monthly*, March 1947)

300 cities and towns in England, he had never lost a customer. E.C. Stewart, who traded under the name of "Stewarts of Shetland" promised to pay knitters within 14 days, although he allowed his retailers the usual one month's credit - this unusual promise was based on his "certain arrangements" and was topped by an even bigger and better promise, that of guaranteeing to sell "the whole output of Shetland at our present prices" (Fig. 6.12).

In the second, and final, edition of *The Shetland Monthly* , E.C. Stewart indulges in nauseating sycophantic messages of thanks to the Shetland knitters for their support, not only to *The Shetland Monthly*, but to his personal view as well. He seemed to revel in his new found, but much encouraged, role of the Shetland knitters' 'agony aunt', by personally answering knitters' letters. However, further down the same page there is an apology "but not on bended knees" to knitters. The inevitable had happened - knitters had not been paid within the 14 days advertised. Excuses of distance from markets and the time it took for parcels to reach London and cheques to be sent back etc. were given - quite feasible explanations but ones which any competent Shetland merchant was well aware had to be taken into the overall marketing picture.

E.C.Stewart does make some valid points, for instance, that knitters must be prepared to knit what the public want and not just what they themselves have always knitted, that knitters must put sleeves in pullovers as buyers have to part with the same number of coupons for sweaters and so forth. However, the bulk of the space is devoted to chatty drivel basically advertising to Shetland what wonderful people the Stewarts were, ending with a compliment from one of their knitters which they were thinking of adopting as their new motto - "The Stewarts dinna cheat"[124].

However, the Stewarts disappeared off the face of Shetland some time later the same year, seeking refuge in Orpington, Kent[125] . No more copies of the *Shetland Monthly* appeared and the Glasgow printing firm, of Kirkwood (Printers)Ltd., were left with unpaid bills amounting to £243-11/- for 6,000 copies of the *Shetland Monthly*[126], whilst 136 Shetland knitters were owed £2,509-1/2d by them. The estates of Edward C. Stewart and Mrs. L. Stewart were sequestered on 22nd.

December, 1947. They failed to attend the Public Examination held at Lerwick Sheriff Court on 30th January 1948, but were finally brought to trial at the High Court of Justice (or bankruptcy) in March 1948, where it was disclosed that after the realisation of assets, they owed £2,194-19/10d.[127]

Realising the vastly increased demand for Shetland hosiery which had arisen due to war-time shortages, the Stewarts had ensured a steady supply of hosiery by paying their knitters in cash - an astute move when other Shetland merchants were failing to meet orders through lack of supplies. Shetland, exempt as it was from the national wool quota (this continued until 1951), and whose knitters were released from the Limitation of Supplies (Miscellaneous) Order 1940, were free to sell as they chose. Working on a profit margin of 17%[128] , all went well until the beginnings of the post-war slump made itself felt. The severe weather conditions of the winter of 1947, with heavy falls of snow well into the spring, not only destroyed half the Shetland flock but also played havoc with postal services, on which 'Stewarts of Shetland' so heavily relied. Lack of working capital and withdrawals greater than profits warranted soon caught up on their business during this lean patch, and the Stewarts found themselves inextricably financially embarrassed.

The inability of the Stewarts to weather a lean patch in the hosiery trade highlights the underlying problems which Shetland hosiery merchants faced. On the whole, these merchants were not grasping capitalists, but seasoned dealers with years of experience in this unpredictable and volatile trade. They were well aware, that in order to remain in business, it was necessary to have sufficient capital to survive trade slumps. This they could accumulate only by charging hosiery at prices which the public would pay, but which represented a poor return to the knitter for her hours of labour. Competition from machines had rendered all but top quality hand knitted goods, uneconomic for the middleman-merchant to handle. Hand knitters were better off selling their hosiery privately or through the S.H.K.A. However, if they sold through middle-men-merchants, like Stewarts of Shetland, many knitters found that it was prudent to accept the smaller, but reliable, sum paid by established merchants, than to risk no payment at all[129].

**The Shetland hand knitting industry in 1950.**

By 1950 the Shetland hand knitting industry was very much alive but on the brink of another attempt to have the word Shetland kept exclusively for knitwear produced in the islands[130]. The industry's application to the Board of Trade to this end, had been precipitated by the increasing competition from machine made imitations flooding the market. The trouble with the hand knitting industry was basically one of price. Hand knitted hosiery had sold very well during and immediately after the War when little else was available, customers being prepared to pay the high price charged for hand knitted goods for the sake of obtaining hosiery. With the relaxation of war-time restrictions and rationing, mass produced machine-made hosiery appeared on the market at a fraction of the price of Shetland hand knits, with the result that the market for hand knits collapsed. However, as the name 'Shetland' was regarded by the public as a symbol of quality, it followed that when the cheaper machine-made hosiery, produced within the Shetland Islands, appeared on the market, there was a good demand for it.

This preference for machine knitted Shetland hosiery also resulted from the old problem of poor quality hand knits appearing on the market and threatening the future of the hand knitting industry. Despite repeated reminders by the S.H.K.A. of the need for a united marketing policy - necessary to maintain high standards of quality and price stability - during the post-war depression in the hosiery trade, many knitters, anxious to make sales, sold their hosiery at suicidally low prices to merchants. Rather than wait until the market picked up, hosiery merchants responded by putting this hosiery on southern market at cut prices. Almost immediately firms dealing in Shetland knitwear in the south, stopped buying expecting prices to stabilise at a lower level. For a considerable time, only cut price goods could be sold[131], so that rather than the name 'Shetland' being a symbol of quality, it was in danger of becoming synonymous with bargain knitwear. And it was in this vulnerable position that the Shetland hand knitting industry entered the 1950s.

NOTES.

[1] Nicolson, J.R., *Shetland*, (London 1972), p. 136.
[2] Op. cit., p. 116.
[3] Op. cit., p. 136.
[4] O'Dell, A.C., *The Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands*, (Lerwick 1939), p. 99.
[5] Nicolson, J.R., *Shetland*, (London 1972), p. 108.
[6] Livingstone, W.P., *Shetland and the Shetlanders*, (London 1947), p.8.
[7] Less than half a century prior to radio-telephone links being established on Foula, during the harvest failures of 1885, the people of Foula had had to resort to sending a message in a bottle, thrown into the sea, asking for assistance as their food supplies were almost exhausted.
[8] Nicolson, J.R., *Shetland*, (London 1972), p. 91.
[9] Op. cit., p. 91.
[10] Mitchell, I., Johnson, A., Coghill, I., (editors), *Living Memory*, (Shetland 1986), and Mitchell, I. (ed.), *A Hint Da Daeks*, (Shetland 1987).
[11] Mitchell, I., Johnson, A., Coghill, I., (editors) *Living Memory*, (Shetland 1986), p. 20.
[12] Op. cit., p. 21.
[13] S.A., D21/3 . Scrap book containing an 1918 newspaper.
[14] *The Scotsman*, 24/12/1918.
[15] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), AF43/307.
[16] Ibid.
[17] The main reports relevant to Shetland were as follows:
Report on Social and Economic conditions in the Highlands and Islands (Congested Districts) of Scotland, 1924 (AF42/9702) ;
The Island of Unst, Shetland - economic position, 1927 (AF43/307);
Shetland Woollen Industries Report, 1934 (DD16/18);
Scottish National Development Council Report on Rural Industries in Scotland, 1934 (DD16/25).
Some impressions on the Shetland woollen industry, 1944 (SEP12/30);
Shetland woollen and other rural industries, 1946 (DD16/22,23,24);
Calder Report 1946 .
[18] *New Shetlander*, 1947, p. 16.
[19] Conversation with Mrs Blaikie, Edinburgh 1987; Smith, M. and Bunyan, C., *A Shetland Hand Knitters Notebook* (Lerwick 1991), p. 15.
[20] Mitchell, I., Johnson, A., Coghill, I., (editors), *Living Memory*, p. 22
[21] Bennett, H., 'The Shetland Handknitting Industry', in *Scottish Textile History* (Aberdeen 1987), p. 61.
[22] Op. cit. Dr. Bennett's reference to this reads: "The patterns were printed into graph exercise books by Miss Mary Johnstone and her brother for Bobby Williamson (1927-33), Lerwick; information from Miss Johnstone, 1975. During the 1920s patterns for knitting Fair Isle garments began to be produced on the mainland for domestic knitters, e.g. 'New Fair Isle Designs' presented with *The People's Friend*, 28 March 1925".
[23] Smith, P., *Wool Knowledge*, Spring 1959, p. 15.
[24] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/18.
[25] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/25.
[26] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/18.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] *Daily Express*14/7/1932.
[30] *Daily Express* 14/7/1932.
[31] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD 16/18. Russell's report was entitled "Shetland Hand-knitting Industry. Summary of position disclosed by Inquiry made by the Department of Agriculture for

Scotland" and dated 22/2/1933.

[32] Ibid.

[33] *The Scotsman* 3/4/1933.

[34] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/18 26843/53. Letter from the Board of Trade 12/4/1932 to Scottish Office passing on Zetland County Council's letter of 28/3/1932 re S.W.I.A. and trade mark.

[35] O'Dell, A.C. and Walton, K., *The Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, (London 1962), p. 212.

[36] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/18. Scottish National Development Council, Economic Series no. 11, *Report of Committee on Rural Industries of Scotland*, (1934) p. 64. A Scottish Sub-Committee of the Rural Industries Bureau was set up in 1928 and ran until early in 1932. It was composed of representatives of the Department of Agriculture, the Scottish Department of Health, the Scottish Education Department, the Forestry Commission, Highland Home Industries Ltd., and the Scottish Women's Rural Institutes. An annual grant of £300 was given by the Rural Industries Bureau.

[37] Op. cit., letter dated 28/3/1933.

[38] Jenkinson, D. *The Shetland Woollen Industry - an economic geography*, unpublished B.A.thesis, University of Liverpool, 1959, p. 29.

[39] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/25.

[40] Op. cit., p. 6.

[41] Op. cit., p. 14.

[42] Ibid.

[43] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/25.

[44] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/25, p. 14.

[45] Op. cit., p. 16.

[46] The *Scotsman*30/12/1927. This article gave 1926 as the year in which the Shetland Flock Book Society was inaugurated.

[47] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), SEP12/30, 1950 Report of the Public Inquiry into the Proposed Shetland Wool Marketing Scheme. Fleece weight of Shetland sheep averaged 1 1/2 - 2lb. and Cheviot and Blackfaces 3 1/2 - 4 to 5lb.

[48] *Wool Knowledge*, Winter 1958, p. 22.

[49] Ibid.

[50] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), AF42/9702, *Report on Social and Economic conditions in the Highlands and islands (Congested Districts) of Scotland*, 1924, p. 20.

[51] Jenkinson, D., *The Shetland Woollen Industry - an economic geography*, Unpublished B.A.thesis, University of Liverpool, 1959, p. 18

[52] S.A., D25/177, Folio entitled 'Ship wreck tales and hosiery prices'.

[53] Mitchell, I., (ed.), *Ahint Da Daeks*, (Lerwick 1987), p. 18.

[54] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/23.

[55] *The Scotsman DATE*

[56] Conversation with Angus Johnson, assistant archivist Shetland Archives - February 1992.

[57] *Shetland News* 26/10/1939.

[58] S.A., Z.C.C. Minutes, Co3 1/14, 9th May 1940.

[59] Ibid.

[60] *The Shetland News*, 28/12/1939.

[61] Ibid.

[62] *The Shetland News*, 1/1/1942.

[63] *The Shetland News*, 26/10/1939.

[64] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/21.

[65] *The Shetland News*, 9/10/1941.

[66] *The Shetland News*, 21/8/1940.

[67] *The Shetland News*, 24/10/1940.

[68] Ibid.

[69] *The Shetland News*, 9/12/1943.

[70] S.A., D1/76.
[71] *The Shetland News*, 25/10/1943.
[72] *The Shetland Times*, report on third AGM of SHKA, 1947.
[73] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/18, Letter to the Board of Trade from S.W.I.A. dated 29/3/1932.
[74] The Association, subject to the approval of members in General meeting, could carry on kindred forms of trading or other activities likely to protect, improve or promote the interests of all engaged in the woollen and hosiery industry in the Shetland Islands. *Times Weekly Review* 8/7/1954.
[75] *The Shetland News* 28/ /1943.
[76] Ibid.
[77] *The Shetland News*, 25/10/1943.
[78] *The Shetland Times*, Report of the Third Annual General Meeting of the S.H.K.A.
[79] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), SEP 12/30.
[80] Ibid; Smith, P., 'Shetland Sheep and Shetland's Wool Industries, part II in *Wool Knowledge*, Spring 1959 .
[81] *The Shetland News* , 1/1/1948.
[82] Conversation with Ann Black on her recent (March 1992) oral history questionnaire concerning the role of Shetland women during World War II.
[83] S.R.O., (W.R.H.), SEP12/30.
[84] S.A., Z.C.C. Minutes Co3 1/15. Meeting of Post-war Reconstruction Central Committee for the County of Zetland, 7/7/1942.
[85] Op. cit., 25/1/1943.
[86] Ibid.
[87] S.A., Z.C.C. Minutes Co3 1/14. Meeting of Post-war Reconstruction Central Committee for the County of Zetland, 6/1/1944.
[88] S.A., Z.C.C. Minutes, CO3 1/14. Meeting of Post-war Reconstruction Central Committee for the County of Zetland, 7/12/1943.
[89] Op. cit., 6/1/1944. Memorandum to Crofters' Woollen Industry Committee of the Scottish Council on Industry:- See appendix 10.
[90] *The Shetland News*, 1/1/1948.
[91] Ibid.
[92] *The Shetland News* "Shetland in 1948".
[93] Highland Devlopment Board Publication. 'Planning for Progress. Shetland woollen industry. Special Report no. 4. 1970.' This report described the S.W.I.A. as virtually dead by 1939 but resuscitated by 1947..
[94] *The Shetland News*, "Shetland in 1948".
[95] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), BT2/24259.
[96] Jenkinson, D. *The Shetland Woollen Industry - an economic geography*, unpublished B.A. thesis, University of Liverpool, 1959, p. 16
[97] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), SEP12/30.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), BT2/24259. This appeared to be the end of the road for a Shetland spinning mill, however, in 1980 a new spinning mill was established at Sandwick, West Mainland by Peter Jamieson - Jamieson's Spinning Shetland Ltd. - and is still in operation to date.
[101] Heinberg, H., *Changes in the economic-geographical structure of the Shetland Islands*, (1973), p. 111.
[102] Donald, Stuart, 'Economic changes since 1946', in *Shetland and the outside world 1469 - 1969*, Withrington, D. (editor), (Aberdeen 1983), p. 206
[103] *The New Shetlander*, July, August and September1950, p. 46, advertisements for P.T. Robertson, North Rd., Lerwick.
[104] *The Shetland News*, 1937 annual review.
[105] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), SEP12/30.

[106] Op. cit., letter from Steele to Martin.

[107] Donald, S. 'Economic changes since 1946' in *Shetland and the Outside World 1469 - 1969*, Withrington D. (ed.), (Aberdeen University Press 1983).

[108] S.A., D21/3. 'Shetland in 1932', from *The Scotsman*, 24/12/1932. The results of the 'Original Design Competition' were described as somewhat disappointing. "The garment which won first prize possessed certain merits, but it was found that the knitters were unwilling, or unable, to reproduce it..."

[109] Livingstone, W.P., *Shetland and the Shetlanders*, (London 1947), p. 181.

[110] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), AF42/9702.

[111] Ibid.

[112] The H.H.I.Ltd. had depots at Aberdeen, Fort Augustus, Gairloch, Glenesk, Golspie, Iona, Lochboisdale, Morar, Portree, Strathpeffer, Ullapool. (taken from an old paper carrier bag).

[113] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/26. AGM 1/5/1934.

[114] S.R.O. (W..R.H.), DD16/26. Letter from Miss Sutherland, Strathpeffer depot, 1936.

[115] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), AF43/445.

[116] Ibid.

[117] *The Shetland News*, 30/12/1944. This edition contained advertisements from local dealers in Lerwick, Elsa King from Tintagel Cornwall, an H.C. Adam who had taken rooms at the Queen's Hotel, Lerwick specifically to buy hosiery from knitters, and Mona Sogman, Argyll Arcade, Glasgow.

[118] Heinberg, H., *Changes in the economic-geographical structure of the Shetland Islands*, (1973), p. 173.

[119] S.A., D25/177 'Shipwreck tales and hosiery prices'. Conversations with Mrs M. Strang and Mrs.N. Turnbull, March 1991.

[120] S.A., Sheriff Court Records of Zetland against Edward C. Stewart and Mrs Christine L. of 'Stewart of Shetland'.

[121] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), CS 318/95/78.

[122] *The Shetland Monthly*, March 1947, p. 1. The 2 editions of this magazine which were published can be found in the Shetland Room, Shetland Museum, Lerwick.

[123] Ibid.

[124] *The Shetland Monthly* , May 1947.

[125] S.A., Sheriff Court Records of Zetland against Edward C. Stewart and Mrs Christine L. Stewart, trading as Stewarts of Shetland.

[126] Ibid. 3,000 copies of both the March and May editions of the *Shetland Monthly* were printed.

[127] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), CS 318/95/78 - Stewarts of Shetland (11/3/1948) - Bankruptcy records.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Livingstone, W., *Shetland and the Shetlanders*, (Edinburgh 1947), p. 185.

[130] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), SEP12/30.

[131] *The Shetland News* , Shetland in 1948.

# Chapter 7

## Conclusions.

From its earliest recorded beginnings in the seventeenth century to the end of the period under study, the Shetland hand knitting industry has always played an important role in the islands' economy. Initially this can be attributed to the quality of the native wool, to the dexterity of the islands' female knitters and to their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Knitting as a home-based subsistence activity was well suited to the crofting-fishing way of life, being subsidiary to, and keeping in step with, other occupations. Thus, in times of hardship, knitters were able to adapt their output to meet the needs of the domestic economy. This, knitters did so successfully, that the true value of knitting to the domestic and island economy has been obscured - spinning and knitting being regarded merely as integral parts of women's work. This fusion of domestic chores with gainful employment within the home, has been a contributory factor in rendering valuations of the Shetland hand knitting industry of little worth and in obscuring the extent of women's role in the socio-economic development of the islands. Much of the hosiery knitted was for home use, thereby making a hidden rather than a quantifiable contribution to the domestic economy, or was sold or bartered privately, leaving no record or valuation of such transactions.

The difficulties of attempting to assess the true value of the Shetland hand knitting industry are further aggravated by the failure of census returns to record secondary occupations. For example, the 1911 census listed 2,782 women as knitters - that is, 17.6% of the female population - whilst Mr Anderson, a Lerwick hosiery merchant who had been in the trade for 61 years, estimated that no less than 90% of the women knitted for sale[1]. Although Professor W.R. Scott regarded this estimate as too high[2], it does serve to emphasise the shortcomings of census returns in under-recording those engaged in seasonal and/or secondary employment. In the crofting counties, where pluralism of employment has always been an essential feature of the rural economy, this has led to an undervaluing of the importance of cottage industries and to the crucial role women played in a crofting-fishing community.

The significance of cottage and rural industries in helping to sustain rural life and curtail depopulation was stressed by Professor W.R.Scott in his Home Industries Report, published in 1914[3] - a point accepted and reinforced by subsequent Scottish Office Reports[4]. In the crofting counties with their scarcity of alternative employment, rural industries have always been necessary as a source of income to supplement the returns from agriculture and fishing, and to act as a safety net in times of harvest failures, poor fishing seasons or disasters; without this additional source of income, rural life may have been unsupportable, or only so at a very low level. Shetland knitters had always taken advantage of the abundant supply of native wool and their adeptness at knitting, to turn spare, or available, time to good use in this way - a necessary measure with the produce from the over-small crofts, created by the splitting of outsets, being insufficient to meet the needs of the family, far less provide a surplus for sale. In consequence, as the population expanded during the nineteenth century, casual occupations such as knitting became increasingly important to supplement the domestic economy, as a means of buying, or obtaining by exchange, goods not provided for by crofting or fishing.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, when rising population figures, poor fishing seasons and the failure of the potato crop, caused widespread destitution throughout the Highlands and Islands, the resilience of the Shetland hand knitting industry as a dynamic force able to adapt to changing circumstances, was highlighted by the emergence of Shetland lace. This delicate form of open-work knitting developed in response to economic pressure and was able to find a market outlet in the south, thanks to hosiery dealers taking advantage of the increase in communications with Britain. The returns from knitting, whether in cash or truck goods, were sufficient to sustain life, albeit at a subsistence level, and unlike the Western Isles with their lack of established home industries, help curtail rural depopulation and mass emigration, by allowing the land and sea to support a greater population than its natural resources would otherwise have permitted.

The vulnerability of total dependence on the land and sea for food and income, was illustrated during the first half of the nineteenth century in the Western Isles, when the collapse of the all-important kelp industry,

followed by the failure of the potato crop and poor fishing seasons, left the people of these vastly overcrowded islands starving and destitute, and dependent on Government relief or emigration for survival[5]. Similar hard times, aggravated by the collapse of Hay & Ogilvy and the Shetland Banking Co., rather than the kelp industry, were also experienced in Shetland. Government relief was necessary, but not mass emigration; unlike the Western Isles, whose population peaked at 1851, census returns show no decline in Shetland's population until the 1871 census - see appendix 2.

Many reasons for Shetland's low pre-1870 emigration rate have been postulated. Thomson suggests that it was only with the expansion of communications with the outside world from the 1830s onwards that Shetlanders became aware of the opportunities outwith the islands[6], whilst Hance Smith states that people were too poor to leave and didn't turn to emigration until the better times of the 1860s[7], when during the inter-censal period 1861 - 71, 3,556 persons emigrated[8]. Furthermore, statistics suggest that far fewer people were displaced by sheep clearances in Shetland than in the Western Isles[9].

But of greatest significance to this study is the trend for single women not to emigrate. For instance, although there had been a steady trickle of emigrants from Foula since 1800, by 1870 only one women had left, despite an average excess female population of 30.6% during this period[10]. It has already been noted that Shetland women, unlike other Scottish fish-wifes, did not follow the fishing fleets during the season, but remained within the islands. This reluctance to migrate, even temporarily, it will be remembered, was noted in 1906 by Henry Pearson Taylor, Medical Officer for the northern isles, when he failed to persuade Shetlander women to leave the islands to train as nurses; this resistance being attributable to the women being able to earn a living from fish work in the summer and knitting in the winter[11].

The isolation of, and the protracted lack of organisation in, the Shetland hand knitting industry until well into the twentieth century, have arguably, been major assets to the local, if not the islands', economy. As long as this industry remained home-based, employing knitters on a casual basis, it provided an invaluable source of employment to the islands'

widely dispersed knitters, regardless of their age, mobility, or distance from Lerwick. This type of rural industry was particularly suited to the demography of the islands. However, lack of organisation invariably led to poor or non-existent quality control, so that whilst the loose structure of this industry created employment for home-based knitters, together with the economic consequences of trucking, it was also responsible for a deterioration in standards.

Undoubtedly the trucking of knitters throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, acted as a break in preventing emigration, but, pernicious as truck may appear by modern day standards, the facility, offered by local merchants, of exchanging goods for hosiery (and other home produce) and of extending credit in times of need, were both essential features in the islands' slow transition during the nineteenth century, from a primitive to a modern economy. Even when knitters were forced to resell the 'soft goods' obtained through truck sales, some income, no matter how small, was at their disposal. Left to their own devices it is unlikely that knitters would have been able to market their goods independently - a weakness pointed out by Sheriff Guthrie, Professor Scott and others[12]. The individual knitter, particularly in isolated rural areas, had always been a weak seller, as she was out of touch with markets, current prices and trends. By marketing her hosiery through truck stores, she was able to turn spare time and available wool to some profit, and no matter how small these returns were, in economic terms they represented a net gain to the domestic economy. When the lot of the nineteenth century crofter-knitter is compared with that of her Western Isles counterpart, the appalling hardships of near starvation and destitution which the people of the Hebrides were experiencing during the 'Hungry Forties' were never as widespread or severely felt, as in Shetland. Many factors contributed to this situation, but it cannot be overlooked that the lack of a well-established cottage industry at that time, undoubtedly aggravated a desperate situation, and recognising the importance of rural industries, Lord Dunmore virtually created the Harris tweed industry c.1844 to fill this void.

It was the returns from knitting, whether in truck goods or in small amounts of cash, which made a significant, albeit small, contribution to the local economy, sufficient to sustain rural life. For example, during

the harvest failures of the 1870s and 1880s, when much of Shetland was destitute, Sheriff George Thoms pointed out in *The Shetland Times* in 1885 that there was no destitution appeal from Fair Isle thanks to the exertions of the women knitting, and interestingly as the men relieved them of their menial tasks to allow them more time to knit[13]. Whilst the trucking of hand knitters played a major part in curtailing depopulation and emigration, it was however, responsible, for much poor quality hosiery, as such a system did not encourage quality work - economic necessity dictating maximum output. Moreover, from around 1860 onwards[14], the rise in Shetland imitations, mass produced cheaply by machines, highlighted the deficiencies in this type of work; and the story of the Shetland hand knitting industry in the twentieth century is characterised by attempts to overcome these problems.

The introduction of knitting machines to the islands from 1922 onwards, posed a new threat to the industry - that of imitation Shetland 'hand knits' from within the islands. Competition from these machines became so serious - machine-knits could be produced more cheaply and uniformly - that by the early 1930s, the volume of hosiery produced locally on hand-frame knitting machines, became the subject of a concerted attempt by all involved in the hand knitting industry, to protect the future of the Shetland hand knitting industry. This move to safeguard the future of the hosiery industry, became increasingly important during the inter-War years as the returns from fishing, the traditional cornerstone of the islands' economy, fell. The main problem with machine-made Shetland knitwear was that they were often taken for hand knitted hosiery, as they could carry, not illegally, a 'Hand-knit - Made in Shetland label'. This led to the S.W.I.A., backed by the Zetland County Council, appealing to the Scottish Office in 1932, for assistance in their bid to have the term 'hand-knit' or 'hand-finished' banned from use on machine-made Shetland hosiery[15]. Despite help from the Scottish Office, this attempt failed, and in order to compete on the international market more knitting machines were imported to the islands. The cussed determination of this traditional and reactionary industry to refuse to accept that it was their responsibility, and not the Government's, to overcome this problem, and that of 'Shetland imitations', by improving standards and creating a distinctive differentiation between hand and machine knitwear, was symptomatic of the industry's fear of the future. The Scottish Office's

policy of non-intervention, although apparently harsh at the time, was the only way the industry could compete and survive in the world market. It was this external force which rid the hand knitting industry of its damaging jetsam, allowing superior hosiery, like Fair Isle knitwear, which machine could not emulate, to come to the fore and find its place in the luxury market.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Shetland hand knitters found themselves in the advantageous position of having a large ready-made market in their midst, created by the influx of servicemen and wartime shortages, willing and anxious to purchase hosiery to send home. It was from these wartime conditions that Shetland hand knitters, for the first time, organised their own protective organisation and marketing co-operative - the Shetland Hand Knitters' Association. This move established set, realistic rates for knitwear and was responsible for freeing knitters from merchant domination and trucking. Shetland knitters enjoyed record sales during the War - the Shetland wool clip being exempt for the National Control. This boom came to an end with the havoc caused to Shetland flocks by the severe and protracted winter of 1946/47. Shetland lost approximately half its flocks, which coupled with the reappearance - now that wartime trade disruptions were at an end - of cheap mass-produced hosiery from the Continent, led to the bottom falling out of the market. Desperate for sales, knitters offered their hosiery to local merchants at low rates. In turn, some merchants put this knitwear on the market at cut-prices - a short-sighted move which undermined the stability of the industry and resulted in the name 'Shetland' becoming with cut-price, and not, quality hosiery.

Shetland hand knitters were fortunate that this partially self-inflicted slump in the hosiery market and their hostility to knitting machines, coupled with their reluctance to accept that, in a machine age, hand made goods must be of superior quality to justify the necessarily high prices charged for them, were not their downfall. The isolation of the islands, and the high reputation which Shetland hosiery had gained in the nineteenth century, combined to extend the life of this dying industry, and to halt temporarily the evolutionary process of the industry's inevitable transition to one based on the factory units. As shown overleaf (Fig. 7.1), the Shetland Hand Knitters' Association's policy of marketing

only quality knitwear made from pure Shetland yarn, and at fixed rates, provided the stability which enabled the hand knitting industry to survive well into the sixties.


Fig. 7.1.

(Source: *The New Shetlander,* Voar 1949).

By 1950, the Shetland hosiery industry, regarded as the "sheet anchor of the islands"[16] and "the country's greatest source of income and wealth"[17], had split into two distinct spheres - the hand knitting and the machine knitting industries, the latter being regarded as having "transform[ed] the Shetland knitwear industry into a powerful and priceless cornerstone of the economy"[18]. However, by this time many hand knitters had come to realise that it was possible for them to complement rather than compete with machines, as hand knitters were employed as outworkers to finish machine-made hosiery or as factory workers by local manufacturers (see below fig. 7.2).

Hand knitters employed in hosiery units.

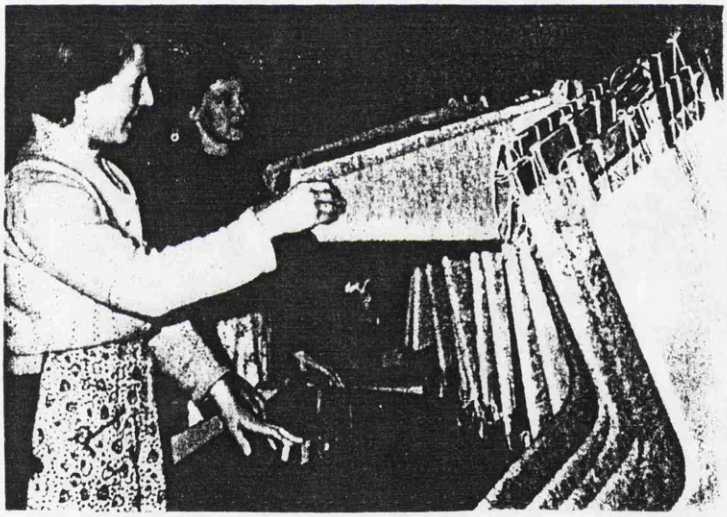


Fig. 7.2.
(Source: *Wool Knowledge* , Spring 1959)

Thus, yet again, Shetland's women, were able to adapt to changing circumstances and continue to make an important contribution to the islands' economy. Therefore, it can be said that the protracted evolutionary development of the Shetland hand knitting industry from one based on hand knitting to the use of machines, has played an invaluable part in the islands' socio-economic development, by enabling knitters to remain in their own locality; whilst competition from machines has acted as a long-overdue catalyst, purging the industry of its poor

quality hosiery, and leaving only the most skilled hand knitters to create quality products. Such quality products, whether in Fair Isle of Shetland lace knitting, ensure that the prestigious status which Shetland hand knitting undoubtedly deserves, is retained in the annals of traditional Scottish crafts and textiles.

NOTES.

[1] P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands, p 201

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), AF42/9702 Report on the social and economic conditions in the Highlands and Islands (Congested Districts) of Scotland; AF43/224 Survey of rural industries in Scotland; SEP12/30 Some impressions on the Shetland Woollen Industry, prepared by Major The Hon. Robert Bruce; DD16/18 and DD16/22 Shetland Woollen Industry; DD16/23 Home Industries; DD16/24 Rural Industries Bureau; DD16/25 Report on rural industries in Scotland.

[5] Hunter, James, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, (Edinburgh 1976), p. 34 - 72.

[6] Thomson, W.L.P., 'Population and depopulation' in *Shetland and the outside world, 1469 - 1969*, (Oxford, 1983), edited by Withrington, Donald J., p. 164.

[7] Smith, H., *Shetland Life and Trade 1550 - 1914*, (Edinburgh 1984), p. 159.

[8] Thomson, W.L.P. 'Population and depopulation' in *Shetland and the outside world, 1469 - 1969*, (Oxford 1983), edited by Withrington, Donald J., p. 164.

[9] Op. cit., p. 165.

[10] Ibid.

[11] See chapter 5, p. 115.

[12] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/25Report of the Committee on Rural Industries in Scotland, 1934, p. 6; Jenkinson, D., *The Shetland Woollen Industry*, (University of Liverpool 1959), p. 33.

[13] *The Shetland Times*, 7/11/1885.

[14] 'A Lady Resident', *The Poor Knitters of Shetland* (Paisley 1861), p. 6.

[15] S.R.O. (W.R.H.), DD16/18 The Shetland Woollen Industry, 1932 - 33.

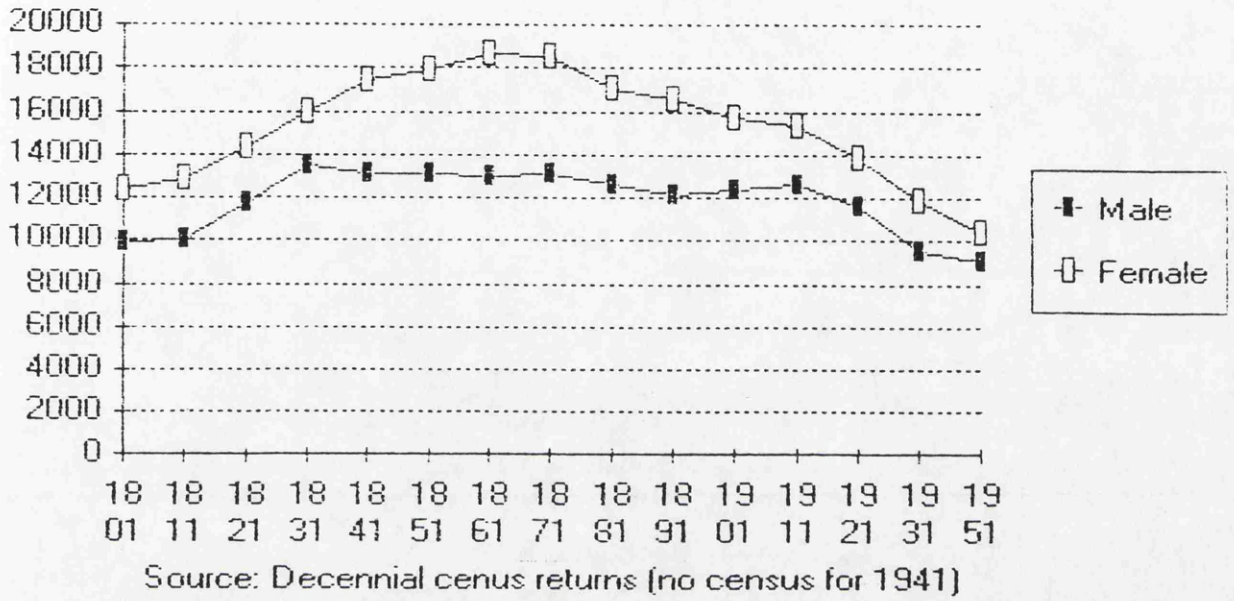
[16] *The Shetland News*, 26/12/1948.

[17] *The Shetland News*, 1/1/1948.

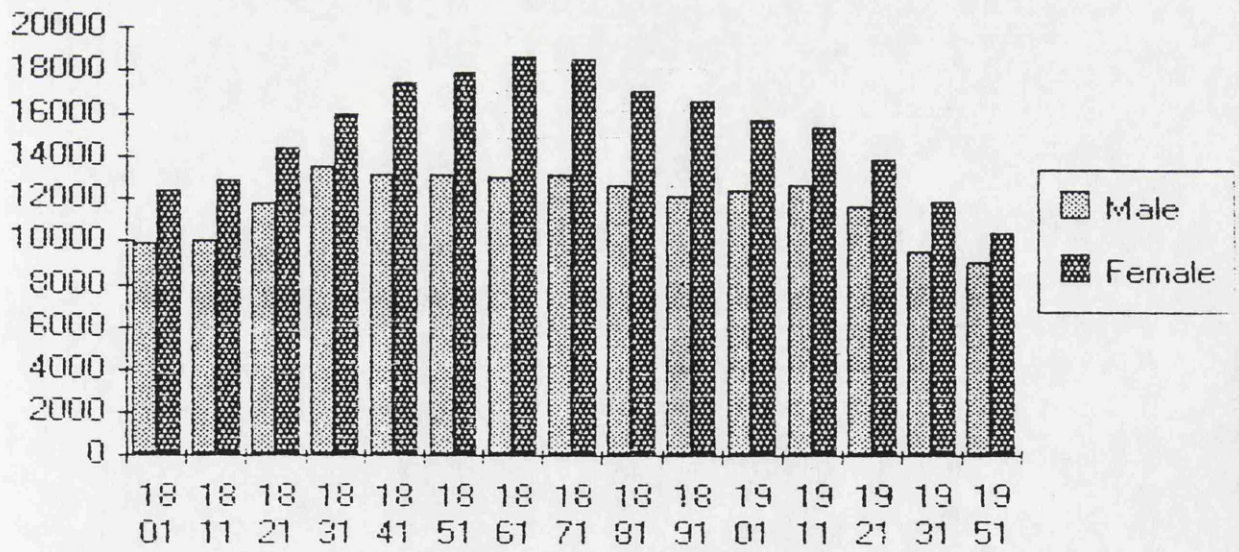
[18] Donald, Stuart, 'Economic changes since 1946', in *Shetland and the outside world 1469 - 1969*, edited by Withrington, Donald J. , (Oxford 1983), p. 210.

## Appendix 1

Shetland population statistics from 1801 - 1951 showing the marked imbalance in the sexes.




Source: Decennial cenus returns (no census for 1941)




(Source: 1951 census)

In Shetland in 1861 the number of women exceeded men by 42.6%. A small percentage of this excess may be attributable to the absence of men at sea at the time of the census, however, even if the number of males and females temporarily absent was added together, the proportion would still be 135 females for every 100 males. The greater excess of females to males may be accounted for by the greater mortality in the male sexes, which Shetland exhibits with the rest of Scotland; to the greater proportion of males in the merchant navy; and to a high superadded male mortality rate from drowning. The latter seems likely when in 1854, 56 and 57, no fewer than 1263 males were drowned from accidents in Shetland, while only 238 females died from that cause during the same period.

(Source: 1861 census)

## Appendix 2

Population statistics for Shetland.

| Year | Male | Female | Total | % excess female population |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1755* | - | - | 15 210 | - |
| 1790s* | - | - | 20 451 | - |
| 1801 | 9 945 | 12 434 | 22 379 | 25% |
| 1811 | 10 024 | 12 891 | 22 915 | 28.6% |
| 1821 | 11 801 | 14 344 | 26 145 | 21.5% |
| 1831 | 13 489 | 15 903 | 29 392 | 17.9% |
| 1841 | 13 176 | 17 382 | 30 558 | 31.9% |
| 1851 | 13 145 | 17 933 | 31 078 | 36.4% |
| 1861 | 13 053 | 18 617 | 31 670 | 42.6% |
| 1871 | 13 103 | 18 505 | 31 608 | 41.1% |
| 1881 | 12 656 | 17 049 | 29 705 | 34.7% |
| 1891 | 12 190 | 16 521 | 28 711 | 36% |
| 1901 | 12 413 | 15 753 | 28 166 | 26.9% |
| 1911 | 12 589 | 15 322 | 27 911 | 21.7% |
| 1921 | 11 604 | 13 916 | 25 520 | 19.9% |
| 1931 | 9 545 | 11 876 | 21 421 | 24.4% |
| 1941 | no census | - | - | - |
| 1951 | 9 001 | 10 351 | 19 352 | 15% |

(Source: Decennial censuses, except for the years marked by an asterisk, that is 1755 and 1790 which are taken from the OSA -1978 edition)

## Appendix 3

Truck Prosecutions

| Date | Name | Amount fined | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| 10/12/1887 | Gilbert Irvine | £2-2/- | 1908 T.I. |
| 10/12/1887 | Robert Fraser | £2-2/- | 1908 T.I. |
| 10/12/1887 | Thomas Anderson | £2-2/- | 1908 T.I. |
| 30/1/1888 | Peter Linklater | £2-2/- | 1908 T.I. |
| 2/5/1892 | John Spence | £2-10/- | 1908 T.I. |
| 2/5/1892 | Daniel Fraser | £1-10/- | 1908 T.I. |
| 1/2/1899 | C.McLaughlin | £2-2/- | 1908 T.I. |
| 28/8/1902 | William Pole | £1-0/- | 1908 T.I. |
| 15/5/1908 | C.G.Williamson | ? | S.A. AD/22 |
| 29/10/1908 | Pole Hoseason | £10-0/-[1] | S.A. AD/22 |
| 26/6/1909 | John Kennedy | ? | S.A. AD/22 |
| March 1910 | Robert Leask | £2-0/- | S.T. 5/3/1910 |
| March 1910 | James Leask | £2-0/- | S.T. 5/3/1910 |
| March 1910 | C.J.Williamson | £6-0/-[2] | S.T. 23/3/1910 |

[1] The amount of the fine was not specified in the record but as Sheriff Broun in 1910 stated that "he remembered fining one man £10 for a second offence" it would seem probable that he was referring to the case of William Pole.

[2] This higher amount was for a second offence S.T. 26/3/1910).

(Abbreviations: T.I. = Truck Inquiry
S.T. = Shetland Times
S.A. AD/22 = Records of Procurator Fiscal of Lerwick).

## Appendix 4

Valuations of the Shetland hand knitting industry.

| Date | Valuation | Source |
|---|---|---|
| 1767 | £1,625 | Cd. 7564, p. 15. |
| 1797 | £17,000 | Edmondston, Vol. I, p. 224. |
| 1809 | £5,000 | Edmondston, Vol. II, p. 3. |
| 1871 | £10 - 12,000 | Cowie, p. 186. |
| 1890 | £30,000 | O'Dell, p. 159. |
| 1910 | £50,000 | O'Dell, p. 159 |
| 1911 | £30,390 | Cd. 7564, p. 53. |
| 1920 | £100,000 | O'Dell, p. 159. |
| 1922 | £33,000 | *Scotsman* 22/12/1922 |
| 1926 | £100,000 - 40,000 | *Scotsman* 2812/1926 |
| 1929 | £46,000 | *Scotsman* 27/12/1929 |
| 1930 | £45,000 | *Scotsman* 27/12/1930 |
| 1930 | £60,000 | O'Dell, p. 159 |
| 1932 | £50,000 | *Scotsman* 24/12/1932 |
| 1932 | £80,000 | DD16/18 |
| 1934 | £80,000 | *Scotsman* 27/12/1934 |
| 1942 | £80,000 | SN 30/7/1942 |
| 1947 | £1,000,000 | SN 1/1/1948* |

* This figure represents the gross value of the Shetland woollen industry, and includes, the Shetland wool clip.

Sources in full:

Cd. 7564 = P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands.

Edmondston = Edmondston, A. *A view of the ancinet and present state of the Zetland Isles,* (Edinburgh, 1809).

O'Dell, A.C., *The historical geography of the Shetland Islands,* (Lerwick 1939)

Cowie = Cowie, R. *Shetland* (Edinburgh 1871).

DD16/18 = S.R.O. (W.R.H.), Highlands Development files. This entry is from the letter sent by the S.W.I.A. to the Board of Trade.

SN = *The Shetland News*

Problems in using valuations of the Shetland hand knitting industry.

Valuations of the Shetland hand knitting industry are no more than an indicator of the trends experienced by this sector as the problems associated with them are numerous. For example, some figures include Shetland tweed sales, which albeit small, still distort valuations; others may include the earnings of workers employed to finish hand-flat machine produced hosiery; some are based on gross figures whilsts others are net valuations, and in either case, little information is available to indicate the source material from which the valuations were compiled. Furthermore, they do not take into account the considerable quantity of hosiery sold privately. This point was made by Fordyce Clerk, Shetland columnist for *The Scotsman*, in 1934:

> The gross revenue from the hosiery industry is reckoned to be about £80,000 per annum, but owing to the fact that there is a large direct trade between knitters and customers in the South (and Colonies), it is very difficult - if not impossible - to get at the actual figures.

Nor is there any allowance made for hosiery produced for domestic use. This allowance would obviously not appear in export valuations but represent a hidden supplement to the domestic economy, and therefore overall saving. Therefore, it is only with great caution that these valuations can be used.

A comparison of the valuations of the hand knitting and fishing industries - fishing being the traditional cornerstone of the Shetland economy - would initially appear fruitful. However, fishing statistics are equally perplexing to use in a reliable way. For example, *The Shetland News* gave the value of the hosiery industry at £1,000,000 and the fishing catch as £221,921 at the end of the 1940s but as the latter figure referred to the fishing catch rather than industry as a whole, it makes such comparisons invalid.

## Appendix 5

Merchants' profit on hosiery.

**Black shawl** handled by Arthur Laurenson, senior partner in Laurenson & Co. (p. 45, q. 2259).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| worsted (4oz.) | = | 4/6 |
| knitting | = | 10/- |
| dressing | = | 6d. |
| | | 15/- total cost. |

N.B. The question of the profit made on this shawl was evaded by Arthur Laurenson (p. 55, q.2568)

**Fall** handled by Robert Sinclair of Sinclair & Co. (p. 55, q. 2568).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| worsted | = | 6d. or 7d. |
| knitting | = | 1/- |
| dyeing & freight | = | 1 1/2 |
| dressing | = | 1d. |
| | | approx. 1/9 1/2d. total cost |
| | | Sold at 2/- , therefore **profit = 2 1/2d.** |

**Shetland shawl** handled by Robert Sinclair of Sinclair & Co. (p. 58, q. 2646).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| worsted (36 cuts @ 4d. a cut) | = | 12/- |
| knitting | = | 14/- |
| dressing | = | 6d. |
| | | 26/6 total cost |
| | | Sold at 30/- , therefore **profit = 3/6** |

**Shawl** handled by Robert Linklater (p. 60, q. 2723)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| worsted (35 or 36 cuts @ 4d. a cut) | = | 12/- |
| knitting | = | 13/- |
| dressing | = | 6d. |
| | | 25/6 total cost |
| | | Sold at 30/-, therefore **profit = 4/6** |

(Source: P.P., Cd. 555-1, (1872), Second Report of the Commissioners appointed in inquire into the Truck System (Shetland)

## *Office-Bearers.*

President—
Mrs JAMES POTTINGER.

Vice-President—
Mrs JOHN HAY.

Secretary and Treasurer—
Mr PROPHET SMITH,
c/o Henderson,
4 Greenfield Place,
Lerwick.

Auditors—
Messrs R. A. Johnson and J. J. Aitken.

All communications should be addressed to the Secretary and Treasurer.

# THE SHETLAND HAND KNITTERS' ASSOCIATION. 1943

**Rule 1: Constitution.**

(a) This organisation is an association of Shetland hand knitters hereinafter referred to as "the Association."

(b) The Association shall consist of an unlimited number of people manufacturing hand knit hosiery, and of such honorary members, who will not be knitters, as may be provided for under the Rules.

(c) Every member shall have an equal voice in all the concerns of the Association, and of all the Association's property.

The rules and constitution of the Association will be binding on the members.

**Appendix 6**

An old copy of the S.H.K.A.'s constitution.

**Rule 2: Objects.**

(a) To improve the present and future conditions governing the marketing of hand knit hosiery, and to protect the interests of Shetland knitters in all matters affecting the Shetland hosiery industry.

(b) To negotiate, as the circumstances demand, a fair price for the manufactured article with hosiery merchants and any organisation acting on their behalf.

(c) To maintain a marketable distinction between hand knit and machine knit hosiery.

(d) To provide such funds as will be necessary to maintain the Association and further its aims and objects.

**Rule 3: Membership.**

(a) A member of the Association will be any person who has paid membership fees, as provided in Rule 4, and who acts strictly within the limits of the Association's constitution.

(b) Members violating the constitution will be reported by the District Branch or Branches to the Annual General Meeting, and if the violation is upheld will be expelled.

(c) An honorary member of the Association will be a person who, not being a knitter, supports the aims and objects of the Association, is nominated by District Branches as per Rule 6, and is approved by the Annual General Meeting.

(d) An honorary member of the Association can hold any office, if appointed by the Annual General Meeting.

(e) All members on admission shall be provided with a copy of the Association's Rules.

**Rule 4: Financial Obligations of Members.**

(a) To be a member of the Association the person must have paid the entrance fee of 2/6 and such yearly subscriptions of 2/6 as may have become due.

(b) The annual subscription will become due on the date of the member's admission.

(c) Any member who does not pay the yearly subscription within one month of the date of it becoming due will be considered a lapsed member, and will not be entitled to take part in the Association's activities, or benefit from its endeavours until the arrears have been paid.

(d) Honorary members shall pay an annual inclusive fee of 2/-.

**Rule 5: Government of the Association.**

(a) The Association shall be governed by an Annual General Meeting at which the Management Committee and an elected delegate from each district having a branch of the Association shall confer and decide on all questions affecting the Association.

(b) The Annual General Meeting shall be held on the first Saturday of each July, at a time and place to be decided by the Management Committee.

(c) The day to day government of the Association shall be performed by the Management Committee, which shall consist of President, Vice-President, 12 members, and Secretary and Treasurer, of which an attendance of seven members shall be considered a quorum to conduct business.

(d) The Management Committee shall hold office for one year. The Annual General Meeting shall have for the first business on its yearly Agenda the election of a Management Committee. Any member of the retiring Management Committee shall be eligible for re-election.

**Rule 6: District Branches.**

(a) The knitters in each district shall annually appoint a District Committee on lines similar to that of the Management Committee.

(b) These district Branches shall be responsible for the conduct of the Association's affairs in their district.

(c) They shall collect all entrance fees and annual subscriptions from the members within their district, and after paying district expenses shall forward the balance to the Secretary-Treasurer.

(d) The Secretary of the Branch shall keep minutes of all meetings of knitters held in their district, and shall keep a proper record of all money transactions the branch contracts.

(e) The Branches shall have Committee meetings periodically, and shall call a meeting of members at least twice a year.

(f) During the last week of June each year a Branch meeting shall be convened to elect a Committee for the ensuing year, and to elect a delegate to attend the Annual General Meeting of the Association.

(g) A copy of the Association's yearly accounts shall be available for inspection by Branch members once every year.

**Rule 7: President's Duties.**

(a) The President of the Association shall preside over all Committee meetings at which she/he attends, and over the Annual General Meeting. In her/his absence the Vice-President shall preside.

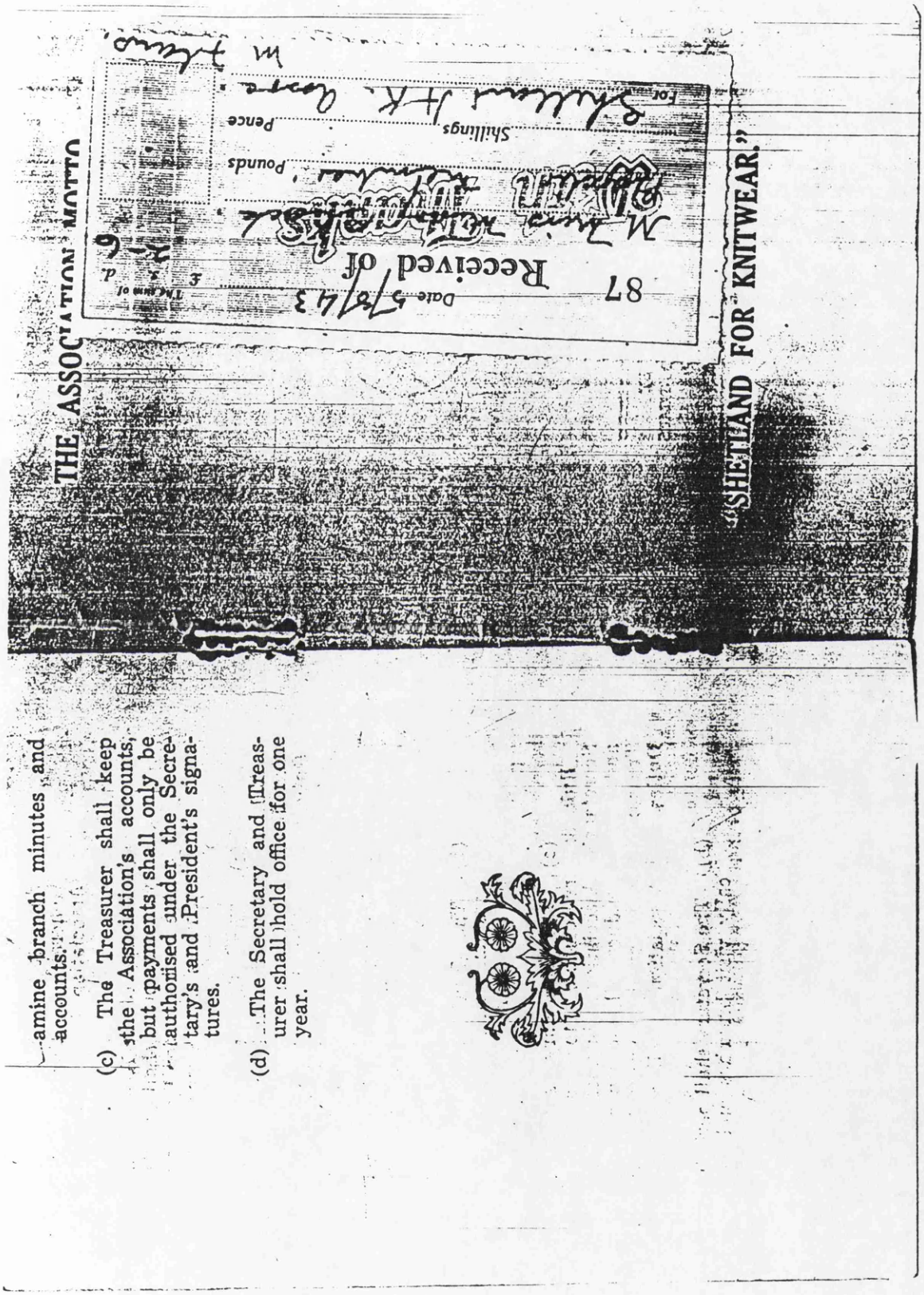
(b) The President and Vice-President shall hold office for one year.

**Rule 8: Secretary's and Treasurer's Duties.**

(a) The Secretary shall be responsible for all the Association's business, shall conduct all correspondence, and shall represent the Association on all occasions.

(b) The Secretary shall periodically visit branches and ex-

**Appendix 6** (cont.)




(Source: Ann Black)

## Appendix 7

Proposals put forward by Professor W.R.Scott for the marking of Shetland hosiery. He suggested that the scheme be undertaken by the Board of Agriculture of Scotland, that each label be numbered so that a record could be kept of the name of the worker, and that a fee equal to 1 1/2% of the value of the article be charged. This rather complicated scheme was never adopted.

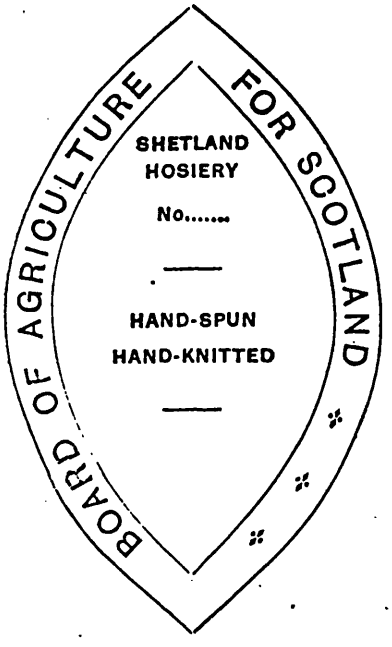



Fig. 1.

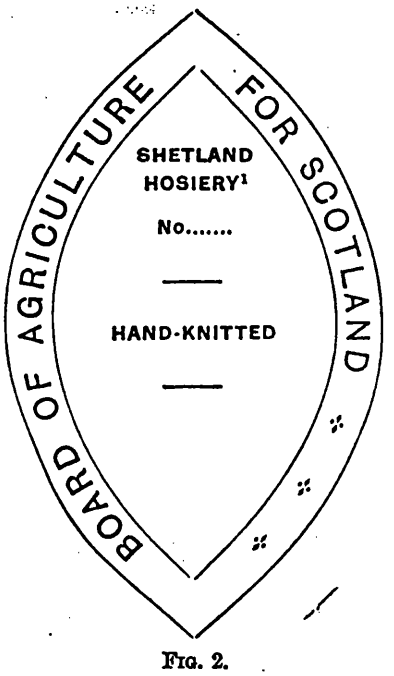



Fig. 2.

(About twice actual size.)

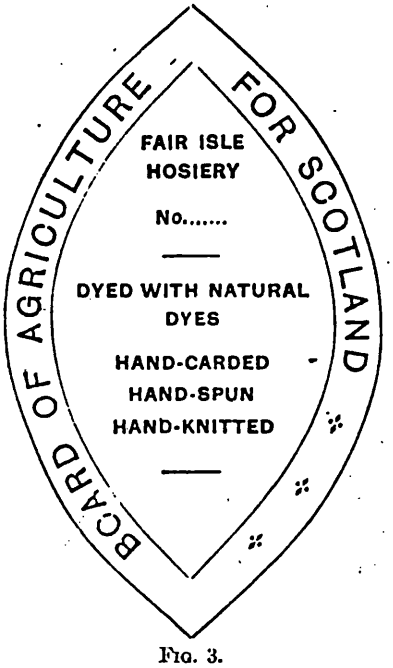



Fig. 3.

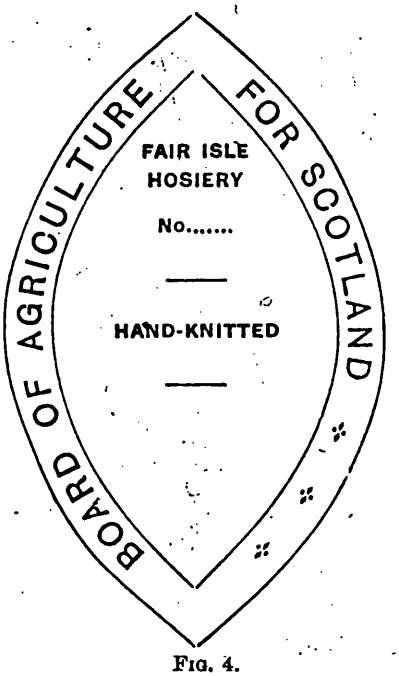



Fig. 4.

## Appendix 7 (cont.)

A. Various Coloured Papers for Different Processes.


Fig. 7. (On blue paper.)


Fig. 8. (On red paper.)

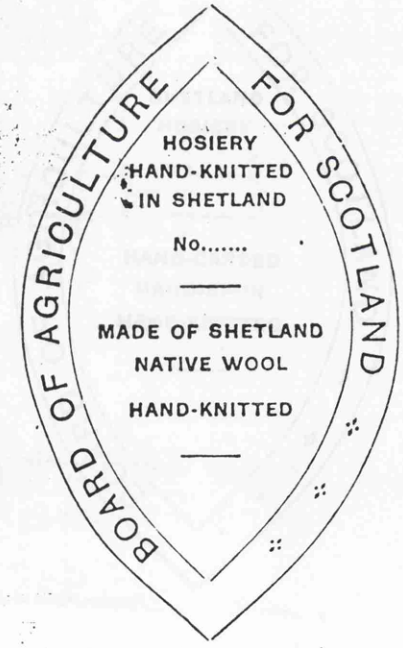



Fig. 9. (On white paper.)

[1] Or "Shetland hosiery" on the analogy of Harris tweed.

60

99

**Appendix 7** (cont.)

B. Labels with Coloured Inks.

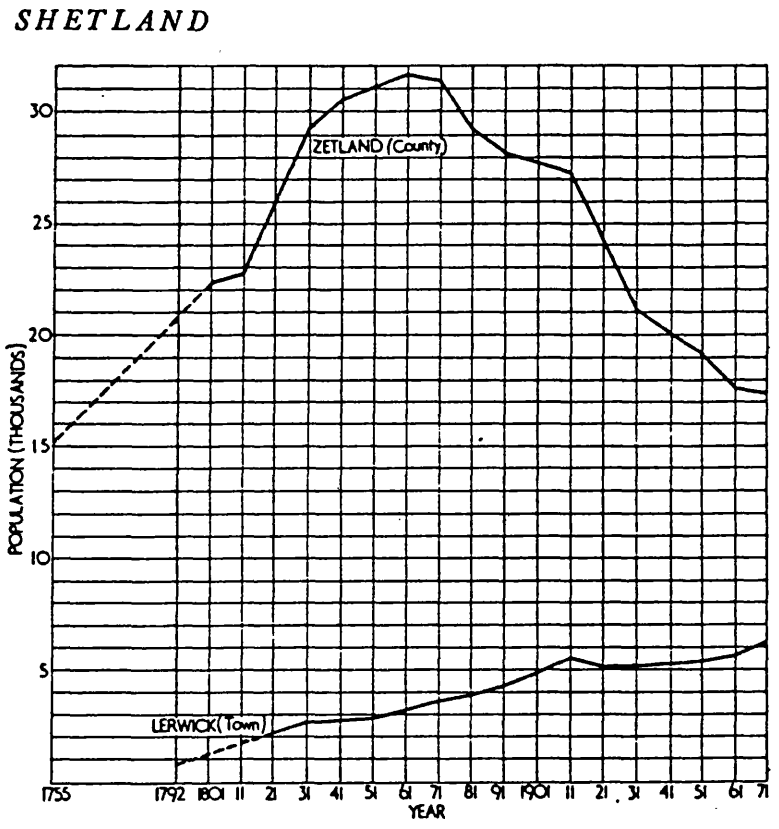

Fig. 10. (Printed in coloured inks.)


Fig. 11. (Printed in black ink.)


(Source: P.P., Cd. 7564, (1914), Report to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland on Home Industries in the Highlands and Islands.)

## Appendix 8

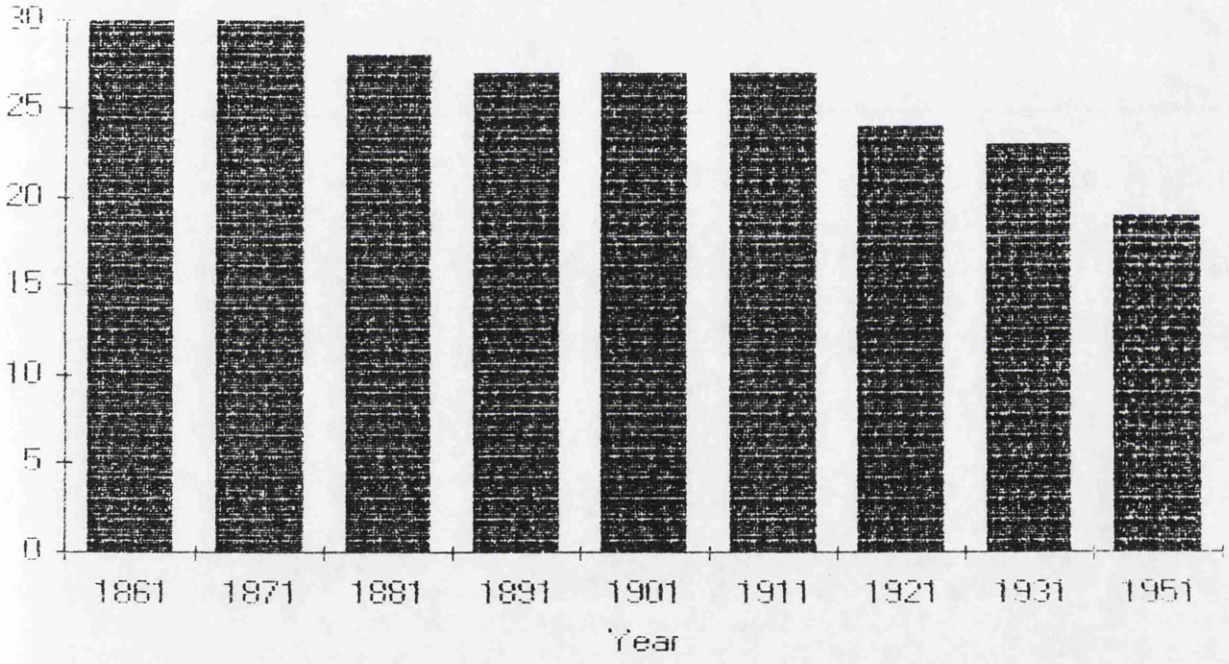
Population trends 1755 - 1971 for the whole county and for Lerwick.




(Source: Nicolson, J.R. - 1972)

## Appendix 9

The inhabited islands of Shetland.




(Source: O'Dell, A.C. and Watson, K. *The Highlands and Islands of Scotland,* (London 1962)

## Appendix 10

Memorandum compiled by the Woollen Industries Committee of the County of Zetland Post-war Reconstruction Committee, submitted to the Crofters' Woollen Industry Committee of the Scottish Council on Industry. 6/1/1944.

The Committee are gravely concerned at the alarming decline in the population of the islands, due almost entirely to the steady drift of young people to the cities and towns on the mainland in quest of employment, and are conscious that unless urgent steps are taken immediately to arrest that drift by developing and improving the Shetland Woollen Industry, extinction can only be a matter of years, as the population has decreased from 31,670 in 1861 to less than 20,000 to-day. The Committee have, therefore, considered carefully the steps necessary to stop this drift of the population and to ensure the promotion and prosperity of the Industry on which the Islanders primarily depend; and desire to submit the following recommendations under the headings set out in the terms of reference to the Crofter Woollen Industry Committee, viz.,:

1/ The adoption of distinctive trade marks and certificates of quality for genuine hand-made and factory products, that a trade mark, embodying the exclusive use of the word "Shetland" be granted by the Board of Trade for adoption by the Industry as applicable to all goods of satisfactory standard and quality wholly manufactured in the Islands, the trade mark to be administered by or under the direction of a Protection and Development Board to which each section of the Industry shall elect an equal quota of representatives, the said Board to work in close liaison with the management
of the spinning mill, hereinafter referred to, and to be entrusted inter alia with the duties of:

i/ protecting the industry by prohibiting the indiscriminate use of the word "Shetland" by firms or individuals outside the islands; and

ii/ taking legal action to ensure the punishment of an irregular use of the trade mark.

In the matter of development, the Board should take in view the fact that, owing to the remote geographical position of Shetland, the high cost of transport to and from the Islands has always formed an obvious and

insurmountable barrier to any contemplated development and should press the Government for a flat-rate trading arrangement or alternatively, for a substantial subsidy after the War to enable the Island outposts to compete successfully with areas more centrally situated and where there is a greater concentration of population.

2/ Methods of obtaining and preparing yarn for the crofitng communities by the establishment of small scale carding and spinning mills or otherwise.

The present method of obtaining yarn is to have the wool spun on commission by firms on the mainland, which has the serious defect that it affords no guarantee that the yarn obtained is composed wholly of native Shetland wool, consequently an assurance cannot be given that a genuine Shetland article is being placed on the market. It is essential that all stages of manufacture should be carried out entirely within the islands, and for this purpose it is necessary that carding, spinning and dyeing factories should be provided in Shetland.

The total wool crop is estimated at 240 tons per annum, of which 80/100 tons are native wool, the remainder being fine crossbred with a proportion of Cheviot and Blackface wools which, because of the our peculiar climatic conditions, possess a unique softness of texture when compared with the wool of these breeds on the mainland. The fine quality of the native wool is carefully preserved under the supervision of the shetland Flock Book Society.

Alternative proposals for the establishment a) of small scale-spinning mills, equipped with H.F. textile machines and suitable for dispersal throughout the Islands and b) of a central mill, equipped with standard carding, spinning, dyeing and scouring machinery, have been carefully examined. It is a prime requirement that both systems should be capable of treating the delicate wool fibres without imparing their fine characteristics, and samples of wool spun on both types of machinery have been obtained, together with estimates of the cost of installing both systems, viz: £80,000 and £63,000 respectively.

The samples of yarn spun on standard machinery are the most satisfactory, and it is considered therefore that a central mill, capable of processing

annually a minimum of 100 tons of wool, and designed for expansion should be constructed at a suitable site.

As the financial responsibility for the establishment of a central mill will be beyond the capacity of the inhabitants of these islands, the majority of whom are crofters of limited means, a substantial part of the capital cost will have to be met from Government sources and, to ensure the success of the undertaking over an initial period when it will be subject to economic pressure from competing wool manufacturers, a Government guarantee against unforseen difficulties should be given. It has been ascertained that, when properly estalished, a local wool mill can be operated successfully without further Government assistance.

3/ Improvement in design and technique in the Industry including Shetland knitting.

Regular instruction in all schools should be given under competent instructors, the pupils being graded according to their capabilities for knitting and design. Prizes, and certificates of proficiency should be given to those reaching a high standard, and regular competions and exhibitions should be arranged.

Full advantage should be taken of the trend of fashion as shown in fashion journals and of advisory organisatiions and the British Colour Council's range of colour forecasts, which are issued twice yearly. In addition, lecture courses for the adult knitters should be organised throughout the County, either under the Education Authority, the Shetland Hand Knitters Association or Women's Rural Institutes, particular attention being given to reviving old Shetland lace and other patterns before these are lost. Exhibitions and competitions might also be arranged, with a special section and prizes for original design. A technical college or department should be set up in Lerwick, where design could ne studied and taught under expert instruction to those who desire to take up knitting or weaving for a livelihood from it.

The development of the Shetland Woollen Industry purely as an Island concern will bring a greater realisation of the value of design and technique, and by giving due regard to both, the Industry could meet the constant demands of fashion and place on the market stylish and up-to-date articles.

4/ The system of marketing.

Marketing at present is carried out through ordinary trade channells and by individual knitters with the user. This system although decidely competitive and tending to lower prices has the advantage of introducing goods to the more remote areas thereby increasing demand, and of allowing the individual knitter to seek out private markets for herself. To prevent undue competition, and also competition between hand and machine knit goods, the Protection and Development Board to be set up in conjunction with the management of the mill would be charged with the duty of :

a) fixing for the farmer and crofter a minimum price which would ensure a reasonable return for the raw wool;

b) Adding thereto an adequate increase and guaranteeing her an economic return for performing the best class of work; and

c) fixing a minimum price below which no article or garment may be sold by knitter or dealer to:

i/wholesale warehouses

ii/ retail stores

iii/ the private wearer.

The Board should not have authority to interpose in any selling arrangement, but would leave the farmer, crofter, knitter and dealer free to sell in the market of their own choice, providing that the minimum prices were observed. Such an agreement would allow full advantage to be taken of the long experience of markets and the business connections of private enterprise to take part in and develop industry, and permit the knitter to retain and extend her private markets.

The provision of a spinning mill envisages an expansion of the industry, and during this period of expansion extensive advertising will be necessary particularly in regard to Shetland Tweed and other woven goods. Government assistance towards such expenses will be required in the early stages.

5/ The possibilities of other lines of manufacture.

To make use of wool at present exported from the islands the spinning mill should be equipped with power machinery for the manufcture of travelling rugs, knee rugs, pram rugs, cot and sofa covers, and Shetland blankets....

Source: S.A., Z.C.C. Minutes, Co3 1/14.

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