

Our woolly WONDERS

Find out how the nation's sheep have shaped our regional knitwear

Think of our beautiful countryside and you'll probably picture sheep dotted among rolling green hills. Across our valleys, hills, plains and mountains, Britain is home to more than 33 million sheep, because while our landscapes are undeniably beautiful, the weather often leaves much to

be desired. So as far back as the Stone Age, these islands' inhabitants were wearing sheep fleece to keep warm. And in the past few centuries, immigration and industry have further shaped our knitted heritage, leading to different areas of Britain producing their own distinctive knitwear.



The Channel Islands

Guernsey and Jersey have been associated with quality knitting since Tudor times. Mary, Queen of Scots is believed to have worn a pair of white Guernsey stockings for her execution in 1587. On receiving a fine pair of Jersey stockings from Sir Walter Raleigh, Queen Elizabeth I granted a licence to the islanders to trade freely in knitted woollen goods.



Croft originals:
Native Shetland sheep

The Shetland Islands

Shetland's various sheep breeds, alongside natural dyes made from madder and lichens, enabled different colours of wool to be spun, resulting in the region's iconic colourwork knitting. According to legend, stranded sailors from the Spanish Armada taught people on Fair Isle how to create the horizontal bands of motifs, which the island's knitting is famed for. It's perhaps more likely, though, that the island's proximity to Scandinavia influenced the celebrated style.



Lichens are a source of dye, used to great effect in Fair Isle designs

Lace knits

Unst, Shetland's most northerly island, was famed for its delicate lace knitting. Using the soft wool from the neck area of the sheep, islanders spun a very fine yarn to knit 'wedding ring' shawls – 6ft square lace wraps, painstakingly crafted from over a million stitches – that could pass through a wedding ring!



WORDS: MICHELLE ROWLEY. PHOTOS: ALAMY



Manx Loaghtans – now very much at home in Jersey

Today we associate the term 'jersey' with the knitted fabric that takes its name from the island, but jersey was originally a wool. While the multi-horned Jersey sheep died out long ago, its closest living relative, the Isle of Man's Manx Loaghtan, was introduced to the island in 2009. And the fisherman's guernsey (often called a gansey) is a garment widely worn in fishing communities all around the UK – although there's actually little, if any, evidence that it originally came from the island whose name it bears.

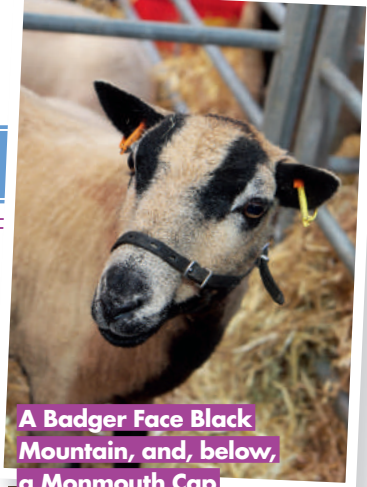
Cornwall

The large curly fleeces of the Devon and Cornwall Longwools are thought to produce more wool per sheep than any other British breed, but its coarseness makes it suitable for carpets, not clothes – even today, Axminster in Devon is synonymous with carpets.

In common with many fishing communities around our coastline, Cornwall's knitting heritage lies in the gansey: the fisherman's sweater. Knitted from wool with the sheep's oil retained to aid waterproofing, ganseys first provided vital warmth to Britain's fishermen

Wales

Balwens, Badger Face Black Mountains and The Welsh Mountain sheep – one of the oldest breeds in the world and a source of durable wool – are just some of the many sheep breeds that have shaped Wales' economy and knitting. Thanks to local high-quality wool, the town of Monmouth gave Britain The Monmouth Cap, a predecessor to the beanie hat, that was essential for sailors, soldiers and labourers historically.



A Badger Face Black Mountain, and, below, a Monmouth Cap



Devon and Cornwall Longwool – not suitable for a gansey



and sailors in the 18th century.

Ganseys were traditionally hand-knitted in dark blue using combinations of stitches to create a variety of raised patterns, and Cornish ganseys can differ noticeably in design, depending on where in the

county they came from. But admired patterns would also spread around the UK, often taken along the coast by 'herring girls', travelling from port to port looking for work gutting fish, and knitting in their spare time.

The Yorkshire Dales

The Swaledale sheep is so prevalent in the region that its iconic, curly-horned head is the emblem for the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Sheep and wool knitted communities together here long after the rural knitting trade ended in

other areas of mainland Britain. With the work in progress secured at the waist with a sheath, people knitted – and sang! – while going about their daily lives. Popular items to knit were stockings, gloves and caps, with intricate patterns formed from two different coloured strands of wool.



Herring girls in Scarborough, and, right, a herd of Swaledales

