

Shetland Designer



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WHO

Wilma Malcolmson is the owner and director of Shetland Designer. She is a skilled, opportunistic, economically shrewd and adaptable Shetlander. Like most young women, Wilma was taught *Fair Isle* hand knitting at an early age and has an intrinsic ability to blend colour and pattern using the traditional palette. Initially, she worked as an outworker for other local companies, becoming skilled in the use of domestic knitting machines.

Wilma saw the potential to increase production without sacrificing quality using the domestic punch card knitting machine, which had the capacity to produce the complex patterning of Fair Isle. She began to experiment with technique, incorporating technology to support what had hitherto been an exclusively hand-made, labour-intensive product. She also created her own knitting designs, gradually increasing sales while still working from home and being self employed.

In 1982, Shetland Designer was established using Wilma's own capital. Overheads were kept low by using outworkers with their own machines to produce the garments Wilma had designed. The use of outworkers is, after all, well established amongst the Shetland knitwear firms. Wilma used her local contacts and built on well established relationships to employ knitters who identified with and had pride in the product. Production was in relation to perceived demand so there was little outlay or financial risk in the limited stock held.

Since then, Wilma has established a stable product for which there continues to be consistent demand. However, she recognises the need for continuous innovation and the potential of Computer Aided Design and Computer Aided Manufacturing (CAD/CAM) to diversify her range to include less labour-intensive, and therefore cheaper, garments. She develops prototypes and pays for the associated program to be made on the industrial Shima Seiki CAD/CAM system at the Shetland College Textile Facilitation Unit.

WHAT



Fair Isle Knitwear exemplifies a world and ethos which we look back on with nostalgia and want at some level to buy into; a talisman to ward off the evils and stresses of modern life. The patterns and colours used are based on unique traditional designs and associated with the kind of indigenous craft activity valued in an increasingly virtual world. It is produced by a Shetlander in a beautiful and remote archipelago and remains popular as a fashion classic.



The unique Shetland pattern is recognised throughout the world: it enjoys a niche identity and an enduring association with top quality. The textile industry in Britain has been decimated by competition from the East producing often inferior but cheaper goods. Survival of Shetland Designer has depended on the capacity to capture a consumer prepared to pay extra for the authentic, hand crafted, locally produced original garment. The *Shetland Lady* branding ensures its authenticity as a genuine product of the island and is subject to a rigorous quality control system operated through Shetland College. This guarantees high and consistent standards of manufacture and finish. The identity of the product makes it an evocative memento of the Shetland experience; it is a product that is easily shipped or, better still, carried off the island by visiting tourists.



The wool for the traditional jerseys comes from the Island's ancient breed of sheep, which has a range of fleece colours, from white through various shades of brown, to black. Dyed yarn is also used to produce a range of subtly coloured designs. Traditionally, there has always been a plentiful supply of local wool. In the past, the sheep were 'rooed' or plucked to remove the fibre which is soft and fine but strong and hard wearing. The local wool broker still supplies the traditional yarn.

Wilma has placed emphasis on designing a product which has its roots in the tradition but which has contemporary appeal. She recognises the importance of fashion and colour forecasting in market led design and consults design intelligence in order to maintain a fashionable image for her product.

WHERE



Although there are around 15 other firms producing knitwear on the Shetland Islands, Shetland Designer has maintained a steady turnover and retained its share of the market. The firm currently exports to 7 overseas countries with 17 regular clients. Retail outlets absorb the costs of export. Exports represent approximately one third of total annual turnover. The bulk of the remaining sales are to tourists visiting Shetlands. Wilma attributes her success in retaining customers to the consistently high quality of the product and the unswerving commitment to meeting the requirements of the client and doing so on time.



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The value of face to face selling is an important aspect of the success of the business. Wilma has a workshop and retail outlet next to her house in Cunningsburgh, from which the knitwear collection is sold directly to the customer, giving a higher return on the product. Promoted by the local Tourist Office, the shop has become a regular 'stop-over' point for craft bus tours helping to boost sales in the summer months. With the increasing development of infrastructure to support tourism and the collective marketing and branding of the Shetland Islands, it is anticipated that visitor numbers will increase. Meanwhile, Wilma uses design intelligence to maintain a fashionable range of garments. Hers is a strategic approach to market identification.

INTERNAL SUPPORTS

Production of the traditional hand framed garments has relied on maintaining a skilled and loyal complement of around 30 subcontracted out-workers. Knitting has been a steady form of employment for Shetlanders for the past 200 years and it is this knowledge and expertise that Shetland Designer has utilised. The company runs on informal structures and although Wilma would recognise many of the features of 'best practice' such as team work, setting and monitoring targets, rewarding performance there are no formal structures in place and the company relies on Wilma's reputation as a fair employer to sustain her outworkers in a climate of shortage of skilled workers such as finishers and linkers.





In an economy where knitting as employment is a reminder of the 'old days' of subsistence living and where far more lucrative work can be obtained in fish processing, the oil industry and secure, local authority jobs, the challenge for the future will be the recruitment and training of young people. So far, the bulk of Wilma's outworkers are now middle aged and the uptake among youths for jobs in the knitwear industry is low.

EXTERNAL SUPPORTS

Wilma started small and the business was built up very gradually. The initial set up of the business was totally self-financed and home based. With the expansion of the company, Wilma obtained business advice from Shetland Islands Council and sponsorship to attend a design seminar and subsequently marketing trips to Trade shows. The Development Department has also provided funding for promotional literature. The most significant local authority support was a contribution towards the capital costs for a workshop and retail outlet which gave the business a higher profile and allowed for expansion. Indirect support was also obtained by Shetland College through funding by the European Social Fund (ESF), which was used to invest in CAD/CAM sophisticated technology.

Wilma is a good example of financial incrementalism. She practised her sense of enterprise quite effectively within the constraints of her own budget before embarking on expansion and the risks to capital that such a move can entail. She used the expertise and experience available through the local authority to extend her business, design and marketing skills and to build up her client profile. Once the potential of the market had been assured, she sought external sources of capital available at advantageous rates.



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Activity: Fair Isle Knitwear

Employees: Nil (30
outworkers)

Established: 1982

Contact: Wilma Malcolmson
(Managing Director)

Shetland Designer is a shrewd combination of traditional skill and modern, computer-assisted technology. While the products are inspired by old family patterns, they maintain a careful association with current fashion trends. Tourism is a crucial and inexpensive link to foreign clients.