

York Festival of Ideas Q&A:

1) If you or someone else was writing volume 2 at some point in the future, what techniques or garments would be featured? Do you have any plans underway for another book? Is Esther tempted to research a world history of knitting? OR is there another country's knitting she'd like to explore?

No volume 2 is currently planned so I will have to leave that question for anyone who wants to write it to answer! I spent last summer in Arctic Norway so am currently researching and writing about northern European culture more broadly.

2) What role do you think knitting should play to engage people with our social and cultural history? Should it be more included in academic and museology studies?

I think knitting is a very good way to engage people with the history and culture of making, and I think everyone that knits has the potential to do so through sharing their craft and stories of knitting with others. And yes, it absolutely should be more included in academic and museology studies. The University of Glasgow have done some fantastic work on this and you can find out more here:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/humanities/research/historyresearch/researchprojects/fleece/#>

3) A rather practical/logistics related question: did you have a book deal before you left your job and stepped into the adventure of writing this book?

No. I won a Twitter competition for new writers a month after quitting my job, which got me an agent in the fantastic Jenny Brown of Jenny Brown Associates in Edinburgh. She helped me develop an overview, chapter plan and two draft chapters which she successfully sold to Granta Books at auction four months later.

4) Who were the first knitters in the British Isles and where did they live?

Unfortunately we do not know the answer to this question; extant material records are few and far between. What we do know is that by the Middle Ages (at least), knitting and knitted garments were known in parts of Britain.

5) Apparently, my habit of supporting the right needle under my arm is a Northern style of knitting. Did you encounter many different styles on your round Britain knitting journey?

I have seen this in Yorkshire in particular, where they sometimes used a wooden needle-holder known as a 'pit-stick' under their arm. Similar techniques are found in Cornwall, Shetland and the east coast, but for more detailed information on this you'll have to read the book...

6) Of all the projects you knitted for the book, of which are you most proud and why?

It's got to be the bikini – I've never knitted any underwear before. Though I'm also very proud of the gansey I made for my Dad, as it was such a big project and I gave it to him for his 70th birthday.

7) Do you knit only in natural yarns and which type do you prefer. Wool, cotton, linen, silk, cashmere, alpaca. How did the history of new yarns evolve such as alpaca? Do you have a preference for your type of wool to work with? I'm thinking of treating myself to Donegal aran wool (where I'm from). Any tips on choosing?

Personally, I try to knit as much as possible in yarns that don't contain any plastic, like acrylic, because oil-based fibres don't break down well naturally and have a long-lasting impact on the environment. There is a chapter of my book which deals specifically with the history of spinning alpaca (and includes information on cotton, linen, silk and cashmere) if you want to find out more – there's a lot to know!

For information on sourcing local, natural wool, I can recommend looking at Ravelry and using the 'advanced search' function on their Yarn tab to see what might be available near you.

8) In Michael Pearson's *Traditional Knitting* (1984) one of the knitters referred to is called Miss Esther Rutter

She absolutely is – and I was very pleased to come across her in my research! No direct relation, however.

9) Why did you decide to exclude Irish Aran Knitting Traditions in your book? Did you look into the history of knitting in Ireland?

Because Eire isn't part of Britain – and I had to draw the line somewhere on what to include/omit.

10) I knit with my right needle stuck between my knees - have you come across this before or am I an oddity!?

I have never encountered this before but it doesn't mean that it is odd – just ingenious!

11) In Bruce Chatwin's novel *On The Black Hill*, the character Hannah Jones knits her own white funeral stockings, and drags out the turning of the second heel for several chapters.

This is true, and I use this example as part of my contextualisation of funeral stockings in chapter 10 of *This Golden Fleece* which looks at Welsh knitting in some detail.

12) I think Rutter is a Swaledale surname. Is that where you come from?

No, I am from Suffolk, and have no direct family connections with the Dales. But I have seen lots of Rutters in the Yorkshire Dales (in pictures on the walls of pubs and in books about Dales history) so there must be a link somehow!

13) How do you chose what to knit and is it a historic garment or have you considered the designer Stephen West?

I chose mostly based on what was culturally or historically relevant to particular places over a period of several years – and in some instances, over centuries. My Dales gloves, Ganseys, Fair Isle scarf, Gairloch stockings, Monmouth Cap, Coppergate sock, and Shetland hap all fall into this category. However, I also chose a few items that had wider cultural resonance – bikini, cricket slipover, Pussy hat, machine-knitted socks, and football scarf – because they enabled me to tell other stories which I thought would enrich the book as a whole and give a broader picture of the UK's knitting history. I didn't use any commercial patterns that had been produced by famous designers – in part, for copyright reasons.

14) Please may you tell us a little bit about your relationship with knitting prior to writing the book?

I was an enthusiastic but very average knitter before I started researching this book – I'd learned as a child but didn't think of myself as a Knitter (with a capital K). I became a lot better through the course of writing it, I have to say!

15) Has Esther looked into the woollen industry pre the knitting stage ? Particular in West Yorkshire e.g. Bradford Wool exchange, multiple mills in this area spinning wool to generate yarn /cloth for knitting, but also for cloth used in suits, carpets etc (including Salts Mill - which recently had an exhibiton on the area's woollen history).

Yes – there is an entire chapter on this in my book (which includes information on Salts Mill and Saltaire in particular).

16) Do you know when technical stitches like tuck and slip developed?

I am afraid I don't have any information on those particular stitches.

17) Wonderful talk! Is your book available in the US?

Yes. You can order through The Woolly Thistle:

<https://thewoollythistle.com/collections/books-mags/products/this-golden-fleece-by-esther-rutter>

18) In historical dramas, I often see fine knitwear worn by upper classes, eg in early 20th C. Would these be handknit, perhaps bespoke, or manufactured? Or would this be a home craft?

Knitting machines were first invented at the end of the 16th century, so it is possible that people from any of the centuries you mention above could have been wearing machine-knits or hand-knits, as both were sold commercially.

19) How does washing influence what you want to work with? How robust are things with the more sustainable materials?

The great thing about wool is that it doesn't often need washing – it just doesn't get smelly like synthetic fibres do. For most of my handknits, I spot-clean any patches as needed, and avoid washing for as long as possible – and then I machine wash on a cold wool wash setting. My machine-knit woollens get a similar treatment – pure wool socks can be worn for weeks (even months) and not get whiffy. Cotton yarn is really robust and can go in the washing machine, though I would handwash any silk/wool blends.

20) You answered a question about the history of knitting, but wonder whether crochet might have preceded it? And I vaguely remember a technique called [I think] French knitting/crochet, which used a long needle with hook [like an oversized crochet hook] and worked by adding stitches to the hook, and then working along to create rows. Also regional patterns of knitting [not colours] – I came across the Shetland “catspaw”, but there are probably many others.

I am not a crocheter so unfortunately I don't have any information about that particular craft's history, but I can tell you that the word *crochet* doesn't appear in the English language before the 1840s, so it's unlikely to have been widespread in Anglophone countries before then.

There is a much older fibre technique called *sprangwork*, which dates to at least Roman times and sounds a bit like what you are describing. I address this, and nalbinding, in detail in a chapter of my book.

There certainly are lots of other patterns beside 'Fair Isle' colourwork; as you say, Shetland has a rich heritage of its 'open work' or lace patterns, and ganseys/Guernseys both feature textured patterns. There is a chapter on each of these techniques in my book – enjoy!