

Moray knitters send the humble gansey to the catwalk at London Fashion Week

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THEY were once worn by Scots fishermen as protection against the salt water and sea spray. Now traditional gansey knitted sweaters are set to be taken up by the fashion set after they graced the catwalks at London Fashion week.

On a runway fitted out at the old fish market at Billingsgate, and in front of an audience that included the Prime Minister's wife, Samantha Cameron, models yesterday sashayed by in sweaters inspired by those once worn by men hauling in nets off Scotland's east coast.

The design house Meadham Kirchhoff have employed a team of knitters from Moray, as well as Scots knitwear expert Di Gilpin, to create the centrepiece of their new collection - which updated the designs to include images such as witches.

For weeks a team of about 35 knitters, under the guidance of Ms Gilpin, created more than 40 intricate pieces, including socks, skirts and sweaters, incorporating the complex designs that in the past helped to identify the bodies of drowned sailors as belonging to a particular village.

In the 18th and 19th century it was common for wives to knit the initials of their husbands into an overall design which differed slightly from village to village along the Scots coast.

The [designers](#), Edward Meadham and Benjamin Kirchoff were inspired by the hard-wearing form of the knitwear when Ms Gilpin, an adviser to the Moray Firth Gansey Project, which seeks to preserve the patterns and skills, briefed them on its history and sent copies of the many different designs to their London offices. As a result, the designers commissioned about 40 extremely complicated pieces, which required knitters in Edinburgh and the Moray Firth to toil through the night to meet the deadline. At one point, Ms Gilpin called in the services of Miriam Tegels, a Dutchwoman who is the fastest knitter in the world.

"We got on the train at Waverley Station and we knitted all the way down to London," said Ms Gilpin, who with another Scots knitter enjoyed a few glasses of champagne ahead of yesterday's runway show and declared the finished event: "absolutely fabulous". Ms Gilpin, who runs her own knitwear design company, said: "The [designers](#) have taken a huge risk in using traditional gansey knit stitchwork on the catwalk, believing in the importance to fashion in making things that are enduring, creative and inspirational."

- Analysis: Tradition with a twist as designers trawl the world for inspiration

The Moray Firth Gansey Project, funded by the Scottish Government, the Lottery and the European Union aims to preserve and record the different styles of Gansey knitwear found in the Moray Firth. The word "gansey" comes from Guernsey, where these hard-wearing, water-repelling, seamless woollen jumpers were first made.

The secret to their success was for the wool to be twisted particularly hard during the spinning process, so that when they were later tightly knitted, the finished garment would repel rain and sea spray. The jumper was adopted by fisherman around the coast, but in Scotland's fishing villages, highly decorative patterns were added.

As part of the project, the team have gathered as many old ganseys as possible so as to note the

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Yesterday Rona Stephen, an architect and one of the knitters who accompanied Ms Gilpin to the show, said: "I remember my grandmother sitting with friends and neighbours knitting Fair Isle sweaters and that is what we were like, we came together to knit these pieces. It was a wonderful experience.

"The staging of the fashion show was like a memorial, which was so fitting, as these jumpers were once used as a means of identifying the dead."

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