

# KNITTING NEAR THE NEEDLES

Within the walls of a coastal shop on the Isle of Wight, a new creative project is reviving the art of the gansey as groups of women learn how to knit these traditional jumpers to their own updated design

WORDS AMBER BEARD PHOTOGRAPHS CHRISTINE TAYLOR



The women of  
the Gansey  
Knitting Group in  
Freshwater model  
some of their  
creations



Twice a week at Whistle & Hound, an artisan crafts shop and creative hub in Freshwater on West Wight, a group of eight women gather to form the Gansey Knitting Group. Here, in convivial warmth, they smile and chat as they learn how to make ganseys, the traditional jumpers worn by fishermen in times past. The women are under the wing of the shop's owner, Marianne Su Yin, and taught by knitwear designer-cum-book shop owner, islander Gail Middleton. A year ago, inspired by the Isle of Wight's seafaring history and the vital work of the busy lifeboat station at Freshwater, Marianne and Gail decided to resurrect the old craft of gansey knitting and to teach the technique to other island women.

The history of the gansey is a fascinating one and goes back several centuries, when fishermen's wives sat together to knit jumpers for their menfolk, enjoying the commonality of what they were making. The phrase 'pin money' derives from these women knitting on their 'pins' during the day to make ganseys to sell to bring in extra income. They would also knit family ganseys, each sporting a different pattern of stitches along the yoke (the patterned part of the gansey), with the bottom part being plain knit.

Gail takes up the story: 'Because many people couldn't read or write in those times, everything was handed on through word of mouth, which is exactly what we have decided to do here, at Whistle & Hound. The patterns in the original ganseys were unique to that jumper, so if a fisherman drowned, he could be identified by the individual stitches. All of our knitters get a little book to help decide how they want their gansey to look and we record their pattern as they go along. In the end, they all have their own individual gansey to take home.'

## WOOLLY THINKING

Marianne opened Whistle & Hound early in 2019, to build on her business of making vintage-style dresses. 'I wanted somewhere that I could display my work but also to support other makers' ➡➡➡





because I know how hard it is to get your work out into retail and I also know how much time and effort goes into creating. Having sewn all of my life, knitting was a craft workshop that I wanted to offer, and I was lucky to have Gail just next door, running the independent bookshop, Mrs Middleton's Shop, so it seemed very obvious to team up with her to teach a course on gansey knitting.'

## COUTURE FASHION


For Gail, the gansey project has dovetailed seamlessly with her love of knitting, which she learnt as a child at her grandmother's knee and progressed into a professional calling when she was a model in the 1970s on the books of Select. 'My granny knitted for a designer called Patricia Roberts and her designs had things like bobbles and cats knitted into them. I used to look at the jumpers and think "that'd be nice without that on it or with that added" and that was where my knitwear designing began,' explains Gail. She started knitting during her modelling assignments to alleviate the boredom of sitting around, and her cable-knit fishermen's jumpers quickly became a favourite with other models.

Soon, she was getting orders and began a cottage industry employing local knitters to produce her designs.

'I was knitting one of these jumpers while I was doing a shoot for Katharine Hamnett with a photographer who shared a studio with the couture designer John Galliano. John admired my jumper and several months later

phoned me to order some for his next show.' At that, Gail gave up modelling, started designing for Galliano, and went on to set up her own knitwear label, Weardowney, with model Amy Wear.

## SHARING SKILLS

'I've always loved traditional knitwear and had studied ganseys, Arans and 



ABOVE Gansey designs TOP The original prototype gansey that Gail designed and made has been donated to the Freshwater Independent Lifeboat team, who will use it to raise funds

Fair Isle knits in the early 1980s, elements of which crept into my designs for Galliano. My late husband Peter was coxswain on the D-Class lifeboat with the Freshwater Independent Lifeboat and so designing a gansey, and then teaching other women how to do it too, seemed like a very natural step. The original prototype gansey that I designed and made has been donated to the lifeboat team and they will be using it to raise much-needed funds.'

The Gansey Knitting Group has, in Marianne's words, created an important new community in Freshwater. 'It's an exciting project because we are sharing a traditional skill and a way of learning which isn't done any more,' she says. 'We're connecting women who are inspiring each other through individual pieces of work, created in groups, as women used to do.' The knitters use Rowan yarn, a British wool label for their ganseys – either Cocoon, a blend of wool merino and kid mohair, or Denim Revive, which is made from recycled cotton yarns. 'Rowan has been very supportive of the project, which has been in its newsletter and magazine. Our group is taking a traditional form and modernising it, using non-itchy wool and trying out new colours, such as cream.'

Sue, one of the more experienced knitters in the group, has loved being part of the workshop so much that she is on her second gansey. 'I wanted to learn to knit without a pattern and to design



Freshwater Independent Lifeboat coxswain Tony wearing his new gansey

*'The phrase PIN MONEY derives from these WOMEN KNITTING on their PINS during the day to make GANSEYS TO SELL to bring in EXTRA INCOME'*

my own jumper – it's wonderful to feel that I'm now part of this tradition,' she says. The project is ongoing and people can join at different stages and at any age. 'Ganseys can be commissioned too, if people would like to buy them,' adds Marianne. 'This has been our starting point and we hope to continue to bring

people together to knit ganseys as a collective.' The fisherfolk of yesteryear would surely approve.

**To find out more about the gansey workshops at Whistle & Hound, call 01983 718400 or browse [whistleandhound.co.uk](http://whistleandhound.co.uk).**



Marianne says knitting brings people together



A gansey-knitting class taking place at Whistle & Hound. Gail is pictured knitting (above, centre)

## MARIANNE & GAIL'S FAVOURITE ISLE OF WIGHT TRADITIONS

- Colwell Bay with its wooden beach huts (the community calls itself the Hutters) for early morning dips, stand-up paddleboarding, and sundowners at The Hut restaurant ([thehutcolwell.co.uk](http://thehutcolwell.co.uk)).
- The Freshwater Coffee House – we love the community hub it has fostered and its speciality vegan cakes and snacks ([freshwatercoffeehouse.co.uk](http://freshwatercoffeehouse.co.uk)).
- Osborne House, because it was chosen to be an intimate Royal Family home and the views across the Solent are amazing ([english-heritage.org.uk](http://english-heritage.org.uk)).
- The RhythmTree Festival is what a festival should be. It's family-friendly, kids run free, and it has great headliners, including the island's own Plastic Mermaids ([rhythmtree.co.uk](http://rhythmtree.co.uk)).
- The Mountbatten Walk the Wight in mid-May when people walk for charity for many reasons – lost loved ones, their own stories in illness and as a personal goal. It's a big, warm, friendly family ([mountbatten.org.uk](http://mountbatten.org.uk)).