

Lisa Little

# Heritage Gansey Knitting Network Project

A gansey is a fisherman's wool sweater, also known as a guernsey, or a knit-frock, which is traditionally handknitted in the round. Each knitter designed their own motifs, which were not always recorded at the time. These 19th and 20th century garments were made for fishermen who required hardwearing clothing that was resistant to sea-spray and the weather.

Sheringham Museum has had an active informal textile group with 35 members for five years who have been working on a long-term project charting gansey patterns using the museum's collection of 83 items. These include 30 examples of knitted ganseys, images of fishermen wearing ganseys, articles, books, press cuttings plus a representative collection of knitting tools, such as knitting needles and sheaths. They have been enthusiastically knitting swatches to chart the various gansey patterns, the results of which are available on the textile and gansey page on the museum's website: <http://www.sheringhammuseum.co.uk/textile.html>. The museum has now received funding from the Art Fund to establish the Heritage Gansey Knitting Network (HGKN), and work began in 2019 to develop a scoping project for gathering research material and developing expertise about this unique textile tradition.

The terms *knit-frock* and *jersey-frock*, as used in Cornwall, have fallen out of common parlance, as has *froak* in Shetland. Depending on the location in the British Isles, this style of knitted garment is still known as a guernsey or a gansey, although at one point, the term *jersey* became interchangeable with a variety of names such as jumper, pullover and sweater. As yet, no definite date has been identified for this.

Sheringham Museum's textile collection has recently expanded with the bequest of Michael Harvey's

archive in 2019. He was a textile researcher who focused on ganseys as his contribution to the field of early 20th century knitting. His forensic approach has given the museum a wealth of valuable scientific material. Harvey was the 'go-to' expert in his field, contributing and working with the original gansey pattern collectors such as Gladys Thompson in the 1950s and 1960s, Rae Compton in the 1970s, and Michael Pearson in the 1980s, who all published their findings.

Harvey bequeathed his lifetime's research and object collection to Sheringham Museum, so that his archive remains in Norfolk. Interest in the ganseys significantly heightened thanks to the success of two previous highly acclaimed exhibitions at the museum; *Shoal of Ganseys* during 2014 and *Traditional Dutch Ganseys* in 2017. Having already established a good working relationship with Harvey through his loans to the exhibitions, the museum was well placed to accommodate the collection and was delighted when his family agreed to donate it.

The museum accepted 80 folders of research material and more than 100 objects, including six early, very fine hand-knitted ganseys, 43 knitting sheaths and 50 examples of knitwear dating from the 1930s to 2000 comprising a lifetime's research. Harvey's archive contains his original photographic, postcard and slide images, manuscripts and publications on knitting, crochet and textiles, film footage, articles as well as correspondence he wrote and replies he received. Harvey had catalogued all of this material according to location and type for ease of reference.

The museum textile team and the curator's enthusiasm for mapping other relevant collections has inspired a plan for a scientific approach to the material. It has



begun by recording and charting knitted ganseys, including photographic records of the wearers and makers throughout England and Wales, starting with those nearest to Sheringham and building on connections made through the previous gansey exhibitions held at the museum.

The knitted workwear of fishing communities was made between the mid-1850s and the mid-1970s, after which clothing technology changed, and the skills needed for making these sweaters began to disappear. Everyday apparel such as workwear is simply not valued or kept making the physical evidence rare and difficult to recognise. The recent resurgence of interest and appreciation in handcrafted textiles, combined with the loss of generations of knitters has added urgency to the current project. Very few expert gansey knitters are still alive, and others are known only through unrecorded recollection.

Previous projects were aware of the need to record this vanishing textile knowledge: for example, The Moray Firth Gansey Project, which ran from 2007 to 2010 with funding from UK Heritage Lottery Fund, the Scottish Government and the European Community Rural Aberdeenshire, Highland and Moray LEADER Programmes (<http://www.gansey-mf.co.uk/index.html>). This project has been revitalised in Scotland; more funding was announced in May 2020. HGKN has offered to share its recording template and methodology with Anstruther Museum (Scotland) and its knitting project.

The HGKN has begun to work with other groups to highlight gansey recording and aims to become the one-stop centre for sharing information by formalising existing loose networks and groups, such as the Lowestoft Gansey Project, Ravelry Gansey group, the North Norfolk Branch of the Knitting and Crochet Guild, Propagansey (in Robin Hood's Bay) as well as working alongside The Moray Firth-Anstruther 2020-21 project.

Other museums hold ganseys in their collections and a principal objective is to scope the extent of the gansey collections through direct contact and personal visits to develop a specialist network. The aim is to record and chart all the relevant information in a standardised template for future reference to be shared by all. HGKN has already contacted networks across the country, sharing work on charting patterns and knitting examples found in the Sheringham collection and that of Norfolk Museum Service. This has produced reference swatches and charts which have helped demystify incorrect charting of the past which was copied repeatedly (for example, Thompson 1955).



Fig. 1: Trialling an early version of the Gansey Recording Template on a gansey already in the Sheringham Museum collection (Image: Sheringham Museum)

Mapping the knitted ganseys requires an appropriate framework or template to ensure all the relevant details are recorded. A basic template was trialled using two ganseys from the Harvey bequest. These were found to be lacking in rigour and consistency, and so a second version was developed and tested (fig. 1). This was found to have significant improvements in the way the material was recorded. However, it became obvious that this template assumes the recorder has a basic knowledge of knitting and textile analysis, and that they can identify a gansey among a collection of garments. Therefore, a toolkit for using the recording template is needed which will include a glossary of terms. This toolkit and template will also include a diagnostic flow chart, allowing a non-knitter, non-expert and/or volunteer working on a collection to identify what is and is not a gansey, and then assist them to record it. Much more work needs to be completed before a workable toolkit can be presented but it will include the basic method and template for recording and a glossary for reference.

First, it is necessary to ascertain that the participant recorder is aware that there are knitted ganseys in a

collection. It is possible they have been overlooked and their value is unrecognised. A navy blue sweater is, after all, just a sweater. The skill with which a gansey was made does not automatically imbue it with value, nor does apparent knitting skill make the knitted garment a gansey.

Knitting suffers, as does all craft, by being considered of a lesser value and therefore lesser importance than the 'higher' art forms, such as painting. This value is measured in monetary terms as well as in significance and importance. This may be partly because of the association that knitted garments and workwear have with the everyday and the working class. There is also the challenge of helping others recognise the value of the ganseys which have repairs or areas which were re-knitted. A 'museum-quality' gansey need not be a pristine example: those of lesser quality or with damage are just as worthy of consideration for their value in providing a socially historical narrative which can be read in the wear, tear and repair.

To complicate matters further, not all ganseys were blue (although most of them were). Some ganseys were machine knitted and may or may not have been hand finished. There are many variables to be considered, which the recording toolkit and template will need to evolve to accommodate. It is also necessary for the nomenclature to be defined, which necessitates a study of the origins of the name *gansey*.

The fishermen's Guernsey began life in the Channel Islands before becoming popular across all English ports. The general assumption is the *gansey* was derived from the *Guernsey* or *Jersey*, Dutch ganseys are referred to as *ganser*, yet another derivation of the word. The plainer knitted versions from Guernsey were traded as far afield as Newfoundland in Canada. All are variations of names ostensibly applied to a sweater made without seams of a finer wool and was usual based on patterns in squares and rectangles. Regional differences aside, these all refer to everyday practical workwear, which goes some way to explaining the popularity of the gansey.

There are fewer variables in recording a gansey than in recording knitted fragments. As wearable garments, they have all that is needed to cover a body: a front, back and two sleeves. This allows us to assume the completeness of the garment and by doing so focus only on the variables within the range of the gansey: the fineness of the wool and thereby the loop, the depth of the yoke, the length of the sleeve, the complexity of the patterning. These are a few of the fields included in the current recording template. More fields will be added as the database increases with the number of ganseys

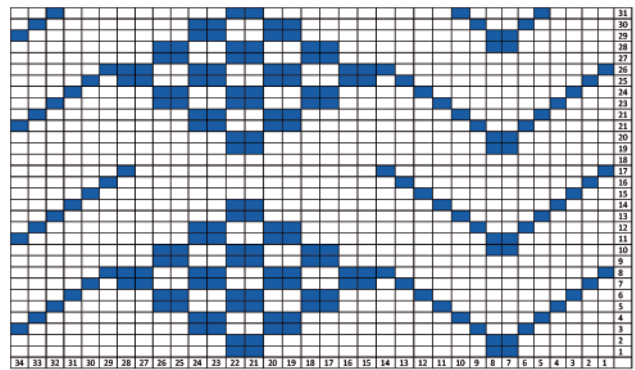


Fig. 2: A chart of Mrs Bishop's knitting for Robert 'Tarr' Bishop's gansey now in the Michael Harvey collection (inventory number SHMMT: 2019.1.2) (Image: Sheringham Museum)

recorded: for example, Dutch ganseys have drawstring closures at the neck, sometimes with pompom ends, and others have button fastenings at the neckline. As the project progresses, there will be a need to record all the neck fastenings, including the pompom measurements. The basic shape is reminiscent of shapes and constructions of early knitted and linen undergarments such as shirts and shifts, even down to the inclusion of an underarm diamond-shaped gusset. Although some ganseys are knitted without the inclusion of the gusset, this scoping project will reveal the extent of the use of underarm gussets and perhaps define their shapes: square, diamond or none.

Patterning was used in different areas of the gansey. A glossary with images of patterns and suggestions for charting (fig. 2) the motifs is an essential element for the template, which will facilitate the systematic recording of new variations and the many names of stitch combinations (for example, the 'hailstones' pattern type is sometimes called double moss stitch or seed stitch). Gansey knitters did not use written or published patterns. Instead, they used those worn and made by others as inspiration for their own work. Anecdotally, a Sheringham grandmother of the Chesney family was said to take a trip to Great Yarmouth to 'look at the knitting the fisher-lasses were making because they would make lovely ganseys'. She decided what the pattern would be later, after she had been inspired. Another Sheringham gansey knitter recalled that she would measure people and say 'I think I will cast on five score and five'; the neck was so tight that the grandfather for whom it was made had a job to get it over his ears (Childs and Sampson 2004, 15). To learn about the knitters is an interesting aspect of the work. Theirs were the unseen hands tirelessly



<b>GANSEY RECORDING TEMPLATE</b>	
<b>Accession number or organisational identifier</b>	SHMMT : 2019.1.2
<b>SHIC classification</b>	4.151.721
<b>Organisation name</b>	Sheringham Museum at the Mo
<b>Organisation address</b>	Sheringham Museum Lifeboat Plain, Sheringham NR26 8BD
<b>Website/email address</b>	<a href="http://www.sheringhammuseum.co.uk">www.sheringhammuseum.co.uk</a>
<b>Telephone number</b>	01263 824482
<b>Simple name of object</b> e.g: Sweater, Jumper, Pullover	Sweater, Jumper, Pullover Fishermen's jumper
<b>Other names (e.g. alternative names or local nomenclature)</b>	Gansey
<b>Brief Description (one sentence overview)</b>	Gansey; fisherman's sweater hand-knitted in navy blue worsted wool.
<b>Date of manufacture and when worn</b>	C. 1900
<b>Production including place made</b>	Hand knitted, Sheringham, Norfolk
<b>Label inscription (if any)</b>	None
<b>Colour: dyed before or after knitting</b>	Navy blue
<b>Material: Yarn</b>	Wool
<b>: Fibre</b>	Worsted spun
<b>Ply (if known)</b>	Fine, 4 ply
<b>Ply twist: Z, S (if known)</b>	Z
<b>Name of knitter (if known)</b>	Mrs Bishop
<b>Full Description (continue on extra sheet if needed)</b>	Gansey: fisherman's hand knitted sweater made on 5 needles (in the round) by Mrs Bishop of Sheringham. Navy blue fine wool with 12 repeats of pattern on the yoke above welts, same pattern repeat used on sleeves. Rib welts on body, cuff and neck are worked in 2&2 rib, 3 rows of 2/2 rigs to front (recto) and back (verso) of garment, this trio of rigs are repeated twice on each sleeve. The shoulder band is worked in 2/2 rigs.  See photographs attached and image of knitter and wearer at end of report.
<b>Place name of knitter (if different to place of production)</b>	Sheringham, Norfolk
<b>Owner of Gansey</b>	Mr Robert 'Tarr' Bishop
<b>Wearer of Gansey</b>	Mr Robert 'Tarr' Bishop
<b>Knitted 'in the round' or on 2 needles</b>	In the round on 5 needles
<b>Cast on edge details (if known)</b>	

Table 1: First page of the completed five-page template (devised by Heritage Gansey Knitting Network) recording the Bishop gansey



Fig. 3: Recto of the Bishop gansey (inventory number SHMMT: 2019.1.2) (Image: Sheringham Museum)

working away rarely recorded or remembered. The stories and reminiscences are evocative and provide insights into the sharing of patterns and designs.

The toolkit and recording template will be comprehensively tested before being used for mapping other collections of ganseys. This template will be available for others to use and record their collections, and, where possible, the project team will assist the participants in identifying and recording their own collections. A representative sample of collections with which to work has already been identified and their data are being collected. When all have been recorded as fully as possible, there will be a further evaluation of the template and recording procedure before rolling it out across a wider pool of contributors.

The template used the recording fields listed in on Modes, the museum documentation and collections management software, with the aim of ensuring that the recording was as standardised as possible. As the template was tested, extra fields were added. Later versions have benefited from those used in the tables *Summary of proposed key terms for basic description of knitwork* and *Protocol for recording early knitwork* (Malcolm-Davies et al, 2018, 12-15).

One gansey from the Michael Harvey bequest was selected to trial the most complex template so far, which was the fifth version of it (table 1). This gansey was knitted by Mrs Bishop of Sheringham about 1900 for her husband Robert 'Tarr' Bishop (fig. 3). It had been previously recorded with some technical details and its social context. The knitter and wearer were identified and a chart for the gansey was already published (Compton 1985, 41) and family recollections

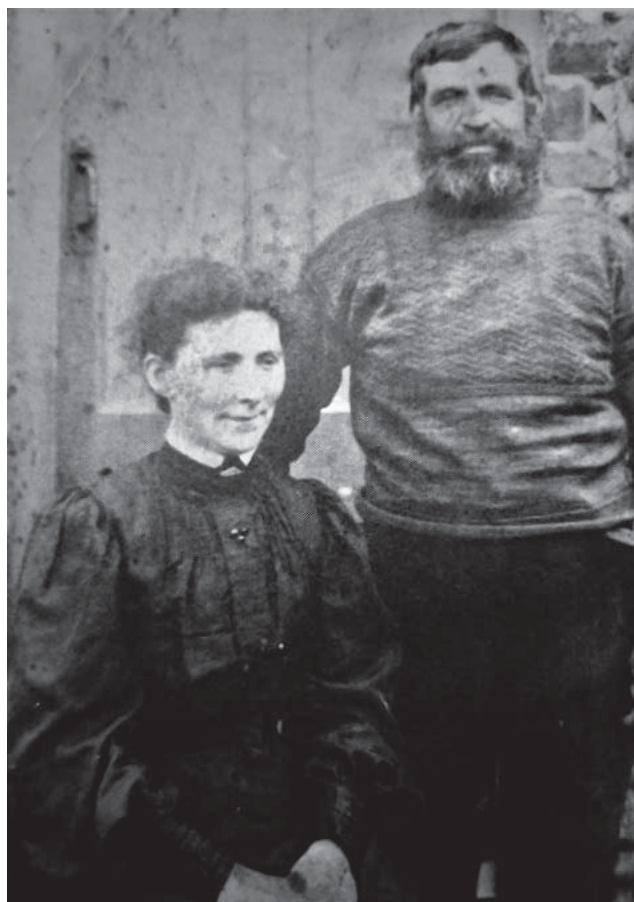


Fig. 4: Mr and Mrs Robert 'Tarr' Bishop. Mrs Bishop knitted the gansey worn by her husband pictured here in 1906 (Image: Sheringham Museum)

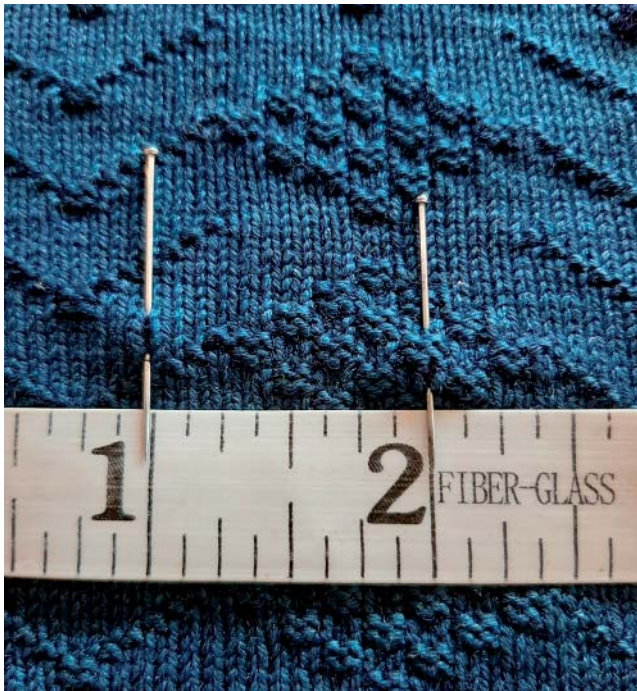


Fig. 5: Measuring loops per inch (2.5 cm) in the pattern of the gansey (Image: Sheringham Museum)

had been collected (Thompson 1969): ‘She [Mrs Bishop] had always insisted on a tight fit, and when ganseys knitted for the children were pulled over their heads, they sometimes made the lobes of their ears bleed! She gave them family fittings, the first just before the pattern to adjust for correct width, the next for gussets, and then the arms. The gansey could be re-knitted when worn thin, from practically any part, and made as new. She used five needles. It is wonderfully even in tension and has worn to a lovely grey-blue through the action of the sun, sea water, and time, and is really a museum piece of fine knitting’ (Thompson 1969, 84). The published chart and pattern description contained errors which were repeated in subsequent gansey knitting publications. As a result, documenting Mrs Bishop’s gansey thoroughly, correctly and logically was a necessary step. It was also the start of in-depth research into the collection using Harvey’s research and local knowledge to piece the relevant information together. With his collection, the portrait (fig. 4) and information on ‘Tarr’ Bishop, the gansey’s owner and wearer, and more importantly, on Mrs Bishop, the gansey’s knitter, can now be placed accurately alongside its measurements (fig. 5) and recorded

details within the gansey scoping project and on the Modes database.

The main aims of the project are to become a fully developed gansey study network and to identify the whereabouts of ganseys held in public and private collections around the coast and inland waterways of the United Kingdom. Further aims are to give advice, share resources, including the toolkit and template, for recording ganseys. In doing so, HGKN will continue by establishing this outward-facing project to clearly define the relevant professional communities. The collections with which HGKN collaborates will benefit by producing improved records of the ganseys in their own collections.

The network members will help each other through reciprocal learning and research.

Eventually, the aim is to publish the findings online making the information accessible to all. The project will do this by compiling a searchable database. Any research leads from sharing the scoping project results will be used by the network to inform the future direction of gansey research and propose a model for it to be rolled out across the United Kingdom and Europe. When there is a significant data set, it is hoped that the information may be extrapolated to identify regional differences and techniques.

Often overlooked, commonplace items are hugely significant records of social history. Harvey’s pioneering work elevated the gansey’s status to a garment worthy of scientific study. The HGKN project aims to build on his legacy and address this issue further by analysing the ‘lowly’ sweater and recording its sophisticated complexities via the framework of the toolkit and template.

After the first phase of the project as described here, all templates are now live on the museum website, see: <https://www.sheringhammuseum.co.uk/textile.html>

## Bibliography

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- Thompson, G. (1969) *Patterns for Guernseys, Jerseys & Arans; Fishermen’s sweaters from the British Isles*, London: Batsford & Dover Press.
- Malcolm-Davies, J., Gilbert, R. & Lervad, S. (2018) Unravelling the confusions: Defining concepts to record archaeological and Historical evidence for knitting. *Archaeological Textiles Review* 60, 10-24.

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