



Fishermen's Dress

The navy blue fishermen's 'geansaidh' was one of the most distinctive and widely used articles of clothing worn by the fishermen of yesteryear. It was worn by fishermen all round the coasts of Scotland and England and it is generally agreed that it got its name, and probably its origin, from the Island of Guernsey in the English Channel, where a similar garment was made for centuries.

A geansaidh was part of a fisherman's everyday life, and he wore it from boyhood days. He wore it at work and he kept a special one for Sunday best and special occasions. The fisherman's geansaidh was always made of 5-ply navy blue wool, almost black. In some places the wool was referred to as worsted wool or Guernsey wool but in Lewis it was referred to as Seafield wool.

On the west coast of Scotland and other places the geansaidh was always worn along with a kersey-tweed trouser 'bridgais-clo-bucadh agus geansaidh'. These two garments were complementary and were always regarded as a natural combination that fitted well together.

Because of the absence of buttons down the front, the geansaidh was particularly suitable for working with herring nets. The fishermen at work used a protective brown cotton over garment called a fisherman's smock or 'barker' in England, 'shumpar ruadh' in Gaelic. There is an unconfirmed tradition that the fisherman's smock originated in the Lochs district of Lewis and to begin with it was made from pieces of canvas left over after making a light sail. It was customary to bark the smock at the time of barking the nets.

Geansaidhs are most interesting for their wide range of patterns, which is the outcome and expression of the knitter's skill. Geansaidh knitters were always on the lookout for new ideas and new patterns as well as trying new variations of old patterns. Some areas had their own favourite designs and sometimes variations of designs that were unique to a region or even village.

In the Pentland-Firth for instance the pattern was confined to the yoke of the geansaidh and the top half of the sleeves. The body was plain. In the Western Isles the pattern was all over the geansaidh, both the front and back, and the two sleeves were always knitted plain. Because of the insularity of many fishing communities it was sometimes possible to identify a fisherman's origin by the pattern on his geansaidh. Geansaidhs were knitted shorter than a sweater is today, and the sleeves were also shorter and tighter fitting so that the cuffs were tidy and well away from hooks etc. Every aspect of the making of a fisherman's geansaidh has practical applications because they were designed as a working garment.

Stitches or loops were usually counted by the score in the same way as herring and hooks and almost everything was reckoned by the fishing communities. A feature of a fisherman's geansaidh was that it was seamless. There was large diamond shaped gusset under the armpits for freedom of arm movement. The arms were knitted from the shoulder down and cast off at the cuff. That would enable a worn sleeve to be repaired by undoing the sleeve back past the hole and knitting a new half sleeve again. The geansaidh was usually knitted with a set of five no. 11 or 12 steel knitting needles or wires as they were sometimes called. There were four or five decorative buttons at the neck, and again, regional variations might be noticed, as some regions had the buttons in front of the neck, whereas other regions had the buttons on the side of the neck, on top of the shoulder. A shoulder strap was knitted in by some knitters; the shoulder strap might be plain or patterned.

Various names were given to the geansaidh patterns and naturally the names often reflected the world of the fishermen or the crofter/fishermen, some resembling the waves of the sea or the ferns etc. The following are some of the names given to the knitting designs; cable stitch and double cable stitch, net stitch, moss stitch and double moss stitch, hen's claw stitch, diamond stitch, ladder stitch, herring-bone, anchor stitch, rope stitch, swan stitch, tree-of-life, and many others as well as many variations and combinations of variations that were worked out by the inventive minds of the most skilled and artistic of the knitters.

The geansaidh patterns were never written down, they were part of the folk tradition, and all that a good knitter needed was a glimpse of a new or good pattern while she was away or at the gutting in some other area and she could soon pick it up, or perhaps a variation of it, in order to adorn the back of her boyfriend back home with an unusual newly designed geansaidh. Some fascinating patterns came from distant areas. Patterns were taught by mothers to daughters and by grandmothers or even by neighbours to the young girls.

All the women were accomplished knitters and they never sat down idle or walked anywhere without their knitting. Even at the gutting if they went for a walk along the quay their hands were busy knitting socks or something.

Money was very scarce and some knitters made geansaith on a commercial basis. The customer provided the wool and the knitter provided the labour. In the 1930s Anna 'Ruadh' Mackenzie, 12 Calbost, knitted a geansaith for us (probably our first and only geansaith) for 10s/-(50p) which was the going rate at the time.

Fishermen were conservative in their dress and the fashions did not change very often. Nevertheless they dressed distinctively and anyone who dressed out of line in the community was frowned upon, hence our inherent difficulty in accepting the explosion in fashions in recent years.

Before our time the older generation spoke of moleskin trousers and beaver vests. In our youth we recall a few of the older generation wearing a garment called 'peitein-mor'. In design it was fashioned like a soldier's tunic. At that time it was usually made from kersey tweed and there was a Sunday best which was made from better quality kersey tweed. The peitein mor went out of fashion after the First World War but some of them survived into the 1930s. A peitein mor had buttons down the front and it was said that on occasion the herring nets caught in the buttons and the fishermen were dragged overboard and drowned. A kersey tweed fisherman's trousers and a peitein mor may be seen in the Calbost collection of artefacts.

Ordinary worsted three piece suits were worn in the Hebrides before the turn of the century and thereafter everybody had at least one Sunday best three piece worsted suit for Church-going. Working clothes consisted of a navy blue fisherman's geansaith, kersey tweed trouser and a shumpair ruadh sometimes. There were no dungarees until the deep-sea sailors brought them home. Worsteds three-piece suits were almost always navy blue. It was not until the 1930s that people became fashion conscious and easily accepted colours of every kind.

In the early 1930s our generation as emerging teenagers took to lightly coloured sports jackets and very lightly coloured flannel trousers. Very often we did our shopping by catalogue, Oxendale, J. D. Williams etc. where consumer durables were attractively set out before us. Burton's the multiple tailors came to Stornoway about 1930 and sold their worsted suits at about £2. Very soon there was a revolution in fashion and the navy blue suit began to go out of favour, and in its place came suits and casual wear of every colour. The next real revolution in clothing came in the 1960s when the young people asserted themselves, and it took us a long time to accept their right to dress the way they wanted.

Reluctantly the older generation began to follow the trend and acknowledge that both male and female dress changes from time to time as the saying goes, 'Sfeair bhi dhith a choinn, na dhith an fhassoin'. To a very large extent the cap and the hat are gone, even many of the most conservative Ministers have dropped the hat and some even the dog collar, which after all was not generally worn until comparatively recently. Although some talk as if the wearing of the collar was one of the binding principles of the Law of Moses.

We were fortunate in the small rural fishing community in which we grew up. One of the crofters, Roderick Finlayson, was also a professional tailor and cutter, and he set up in business as a tailor and grocer on his croft. He made worsted suits of all kinds to measure after you selected a pattern from a bunch. In the early 1930s one could get a made-to-measure suit that would last almost a lifetime for about £5.00. The general run was less than that. He made kersey tweed fisherman's trousers in three qualities. First quality, which was a finer cloth for Sunday best and came in at about 24s/- (£1.20). Second quality which was the cloth generally used by almost everybody and came in at about 22s/-. The third class did not look so good and was seldom ordered, I think it came in at 19s/- (95p) for the complete trouser. He also provided a service of fitting a new seat and new knees in order to give the trousers a new lease of life. Now-a-days a man would be highly offended if you suggested fitting a patch on the seat or knees of his trousers. Our Calbost tailor catered for a wide clientele and at one time he employed two other tailors along with himself.

Leather sea boots, both knee and thigh high was another manufacturing service carried out at Calbost up to the late 1930s. There were two shoe making businesses in the village, Kenneth Macleod croft no.1 and Donald Kennedy croft no.2, and their thigh leather sea boots were supplied to customers as far away as the east coast of Scotland. Rubber sea boots came in the 1920s and, although some fishermen wore leather sea boots for a while longer, rubber had completely replaced leather sea boots by the mid-1930s. In the 1920s almost everybody in our community wore shoemaker's hand-made working boots and even dress boots as well, but the 1930s changed all that in favour of the inferior shop product.

Stockings were all homemade, even the women's stockings. Ladies skirts were down to their boots. The working skirt was made of druggat sometimes known as linsey cloth. There is an example of the 'Cota Drogaid' in the Calbost collection as well.

Much more could be written about dress and changing fashions over the years. Old photographs are interesting for the evidence they provide of changing fashions. In the past all clothes were used until they were worn through and often patched up. Now-a-days, we are the victims or slaves to the seasonal fashions and the leading designers persuade us to throw away good clothes while they are still almost new.

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