



Knit and Matter

material meaning making with amateur fibre craft



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Photo by Philippa Larkam

Textiles have always played a part in how we explore and express what's important to us. Although 'text' and 'textile' share a common root in the Latin *texere* (to weave), over time, the written word has gained prominence in many aspects of our everyday lives. More recently, rapid developments in communication technology have allowed us to explore the world and keep in touch more quickly and across greater distances. As these technologies have developed, knitting and crochet have continued to be popular creative activities; alongside the digital worlds we increasingly inhabit, people still value physical threads and what they can connect us to. Material factors are a significant part of the meaning of fibre craft: where yarn comes from, where we keep it, how it looks, feels, smells, and behaves are all entwined in what matters to knitters and crocheters.

The Knit and Matter research project explored how material factors contribute to what knitting and crochet means to makers. It was led by Dr Susan Jones at the University of Nottingham and funded by The British Academy. The project involved a series of four textile workshops facilitated by professional textile artists and educators: Philippa Larkam, Sarah Wheatley and Ishrat Khawja.

The workshops focused on different stages of making with yarn, from working with flece through spinning, to dyeing, designing and making. Our theme for the workshops was 'landscape'. This reflects the way we were exploring connections with materials that take us back to land, as well as the ways in which the meanings associated with our making become part of the landscape of our own lives.

At each workshop, we reflected on the material process of making. This included:

- how the material looks, smells, feels, and what this might mean
- how the material works and behaves and why that might be
- how the choices we make shape the material, but also how the material shapes us in the process
- how a close focus on a material we commonly use might influence what knitting and crochet means to us

You can find out more about the research at www.knitandmatter.com

This book celebrates the work produced by participants of the project.



The Workshops



Workshop 1: Working with fleece

The experience of working with fleece at the first Knit and Matter workshop took many of us back to our relationship with what we make and why. The workshop was led by Sarah Wheatley of Weaveknitit. We explored the textures and smells of raw fleece and the evidence it held of its life in the field. In its washed and carded form, we learnt to spin it, playing with its twists and turns, working through tension and frustration, celebrating the nobbles and bobbles of the yarn that emerged from the process.



Photo by Philippa Larkam

Workshop 2: Dyeing

Colour is an important factor in what knitters and crocheters make and why it matters. At the second Knit and Matter workshop, led by Ishrat Khawja from Fruitful Fusion, we started to explore how colour works when we're making with yarn, and how we might work with colour through dyeing. Some participants chose to dye their handspun yarn, while others decided to use it in their finished objects in its undyed state, alongside the yarn they would dye as part of Ishrat's workshop. Although the choice of dyes to apply was ours, including their combination and placement, the interaction of chemicals, water and heat were also part of the process. How the colours work would also depend on how thread would become a surface as we started to knit and crochet with our dyed yarn.



Workshop 3: Design

At the third workshop, led by textile artist and educator Philippa Larkam, we turned to how the threads we had produced through spinning and dyeing would become surfaces. As our dyed yarn was wound into balls, we began to see the colours we had carefully considered in Workshop 2 take on different dimensions. Our theme of ‘landscape’ inspired participants in different ways, from meaningful places to the landscapes of our lives. Some participants developed ideas in sketchbooks, while others drew on favourite holiday snaps, or online images. Just as we had been encouraged to play with fleece in Workshop 1, and with colour in Workshop 2, designing and starting to make our knitted and crocheted objects involved exploring and experimenting with forms and textures, as well as how combining other yarns, or even other yarn crafts, can create different effects.



Workshop 4: Making

At the final workshop, Philippa Larkam worked with participants as they brought together the materials and ideas from previous workshops in their knitted and crocheted work. The finished pieces shown in this book reflect various interpretations of landscape. As well as physical places that hold meaning, there are internal and emotional landscapes, personal journeys through knitting, and other aspects of our own stories. The pieces include pictorial as well as abstract depictions, and range from two-dimensional representations to freeform and sculptural structures, and items for wearing. The materials we worked with shaped our pieces and our thinking about making, from the textures of spun fleece to the interactions of colour. With many pieces also including yarn and other materials from previous projects, or from places or times that mattered to their makers, the product of the Knit and Matter workshops also knitted together with other threads and stories.



Participants

With special thanks to the participants of the Knit and Matter project:

Alison Shaw
Andrea Simpson
Blaise Ingram
Catherine Pritchard
Claire Chambers
Claire Coates
Denise Greany
Gillian Peck
Gill Turner
Helen Burrows
Klaudia Mody
Liz Sanderson
Lucy Jones
Merri Fors
Nicola Gray
Oksana Holbrook
Teresa Sample
Yvonne Hood

Alison Shaw

Dukes Drive Viaduct, Buxton

Built in 1892 as part of the Buxton and High Peak Junction Railway, it is still in use for freight, serving local quarries. The viaduct has been the backdrop to many happy family holidays over the years and I hope will be for many years to come with a new generation of our family.



Andrea Simpson

My peaceful place

This is based on the Idwal slabs at Ogwen in North Wales and also Tenby harbour in South Wales. I have grown up in these places and love them. They are in my soul. I made it using the fleece I spun and dyed. The remainder of the fleece is used for stuffing the hills and undulations in the piece.



Blaise Ingram

A Freeform Garden

A dreamscape garden, inspired by the gardens cultivated through generations - by my grandparents, my parents and myself, as a mother. The piece is intended to evoke playfulness and a magical quality, driven by childhood nostalgia. The child, represented by the sunflower, is immersed in the garden space, presented here via the literal enveloping of the dress.

The frame is constructed using copper wire and repurposed items, including a wooden mug tree destined for landfill and an old school jumper my son once wore. The main body of the work is crocheted using a mixture of wool and acrylic yarns, some of which were spun and dyed by hand during the Knit and Matter workshops. Amigurumi and freeform crochet techniques were predominantly used to make individual pieces, such as leaves and flowers. These pieces were then layered over the frame and sewn or crocheted together.



Claire Coates

A Morning Walk

I decided to learn to crochet in the summer of 2020 as a lockdown project. My morning walk took me past Ashby Castle. I loved the dappled sunlight against the castle. For me, my love of crochet and this scene are linked together.



Denise Greany

Shadows on the Sea Wall

My favourite landscapes are the ones with my family's shadow on them, as we walk together with our dog, especially on holiday. This piece was inspired by a photograph of the sea at Banff in Scotland on our family holiday in August 2022. We stood on the sea wall enjoying the view and feeling grateful that we were in breezy Scotland during the heatwave. Now that my oldest children are growing up and moving away, those times together are so precious. This piece incorporates fair isle 'shadows' knitted from yarn I spun and dyed during the workshops and a hand dyed green sea, as well as some of my scraps from previous projects and incorporates found objects. It is a knitted memory, not just of this holiday, but many other treasured family times together.



Gill Turner

Grandes Rocques beach

My inspiration for the colours of my skein of yarn come from a place I have loved for many years - the island of Guernsey. I was fortunate to work and live there for 3 years and Grandes Rocques beach was one of my favourites! The shades of turquoise and green against the blue sky and the white clouds. The pale gold of the beach contrasted with the granite rocks. Definitely my 'happy place'!



Gillian Peck

The Oak Tree

The oak tree supports more life than any other UK native tree.

Research published by the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology in 2019 revealed that the oak had a huge significance for biodiversity.

2,300 species supported by oak

326 species depend on oak for survival

229 species rarely found on trees other than oak

The true numbers are likely to be larger as these do not include bacteria and other micro-organisms.

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk> Accessed 29/03/23

The design of this oak tree came from my need for strength after the recent loss of my dear husband. He loved our woodland, spending many hours there feeding the birds and being ‘at one’ with the natural environment and peace around oak trees.

In England, the oak is a national symbol of strength.



Helen Burrows

Heartland

This represents a silhouette of Whitby Abbey against a sky full of the Northern Lights. In the foreground is the North Yorkshire moors, redolent of moss, peat and heather. A sheep lies down (because as usual, it's going to rain) and beyond it lies a sandy beach with waves lapping the shore. Against this is an ammonite, common in Whitby, in the auroral colours. The textured panel on the right of the sky shows 3 patterns from fisher ganseys – a double moss stitch represents the cobbles of Whitby's streets; the zig-zag is the steep and winding roads, and the triangles are the steep waves the fishing boats battle through.



Klaudia Mody

Sweet love of great-grandmother Zosia

The knitted child's vest is a piece created in memory of my great-grandmother, who knitted a cream and green vest for me when I was a child. Unfortunately, I did not appreciate it at that time, but since I learnt how to knit in 2020, I realised that knitting is our shared hobby that makes me feel connected to her. This year marks her death's 15th anniversary, and I would like to dedicate this piece to her.



Liz Sanderson

Internal Landscape

Colour and texture represent emotions for me. This work is a cathartic response to mental illness (depression). Reading from the top of the work, the red, gold and green orderly crochet stitches is life as it was. Three devastating events are shown in red; anger and unexpected shapes worked in freeform crochet, that descend into the blackness of depression. The freeform crochet describes a rough fabric with a multitude of ‘voids’, illustrating the feelings of loss of self, emptiness and missing life elements. From the blackness of depression, there are strands of life returning (red, gold, green), growing stronger and breaking out into elements of yarn crafts. Yarn craft is my saviour, safety, order amongst confusion. Stuttering, it emerges from the black work. Suspended within the work, a black and red pom-pom describes what is within me. Suspended time, wrapped with almost invisible thread is my experience of how time is bound into stillness; others cannot see the bonds, but I know they are there. Work in progress emerges from the blackness.



Lucy Jones

The Landscape of Home

My piece is inspired by the landscape of my home and my journey through knitting. Home is the place I feel most comfortable, and the materials and colours used reflect that feeling of comfort and security - soft, natural textures and a harmonious palette of pinks and greens. A few years ago, I had to take time away from work because I was struggling with my mental health. Retreating into the safety of my home and needing a way to occupy my hands and soothe my mind, I returned to knitting, a tradition passed down through the women in my family, a skill which I learnt when I was young but had passed by the wayside as life got in the way. This piece reflects the process of learning to knit again, beginning with simple stitches and patterns, becoming bolder with colour and yarn until the work is freer, more creative and unique. Through our workshops I have realised that my knitting journey is the reverse of the journey of fibre which begins with the sheep, free and natural, whose fleece is tamed, spun and processed into the skeins of yarn we find in shops – neat, regular and consistent. My journey has allowed me to reconnect with this process, with nature, tradition, raw materials and natural instincts. It feels to me like returning home.



Merri Foros

Λιμάνι The Harbour at Molyvos

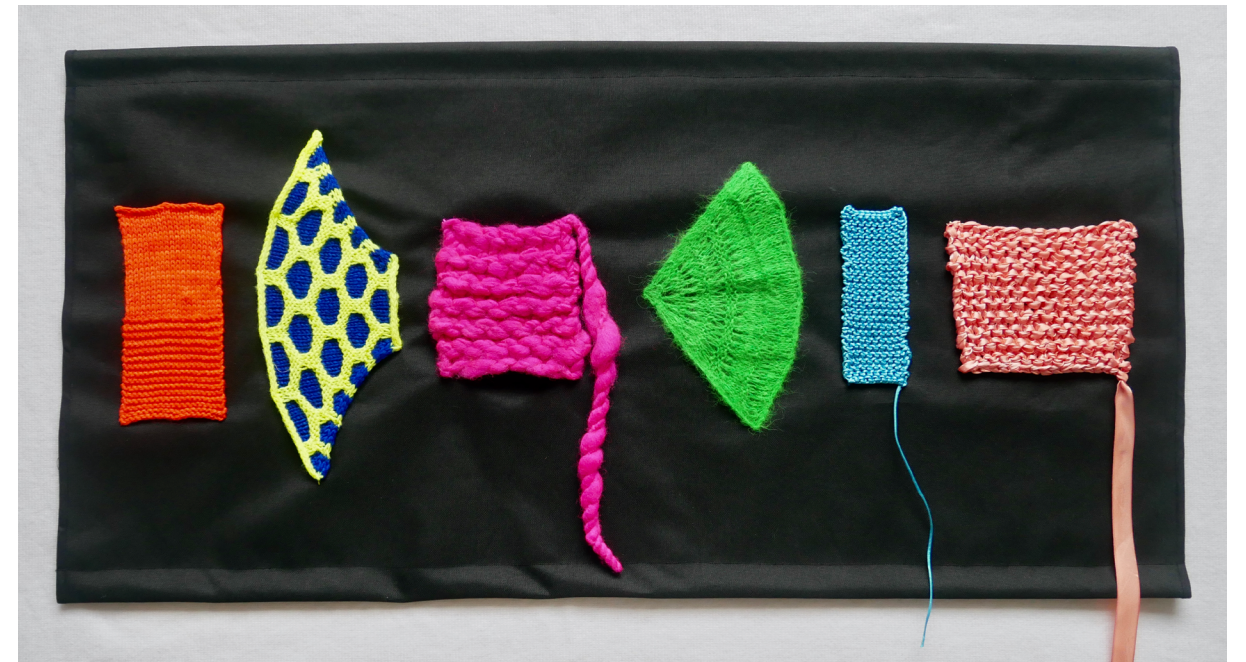
My pieces are inspired by a village that I visit each year in Greece, where my husband's family come from. The colours remind me of the olive trees and cobbled streets leading from the castle, down to the harbour and pebbled beach.



Nicola Gray

Not Just For Nans

Depicting the landscape of my knitting evolution so far, this piece captures the journey from first learning to knit, through to the exploration of materials and how they can bring meaning to my work.



Oksana Holbrook

My Heritage

Being proud of my Ukrainian heritage, I wanted to do something in honour of my late father. The Ukrainian flag is blue and yellow. The blue for the sky and the yellow for the wheatfields and sunflowers. Poppies are always found in wheatfields and are symbolic of the blood of conflict. This is so important in view of the current situation in Ukraine.



Teresa Sample

I Came From Norway

I had driven from Portsmouth with the hope that I would get to Knit and Matter on time.

My spun yarn, when I wove it through my knitting and crochet, reminded me of the crashing waves seen from the Norwegian cruise. I then began mixing pairs of yarns to create the blues of the sea and moss stitch for texture. Equally, grey for the fjords.

The yellow square (and white and blue) represents the ship on tours of towns and as we turned towards the docks, we could often see the ship's chimney.

My dyed yarn represents the colours in the carpet in the corridor outside my cabin, with blue and white diagonals to represent the pattern.



Yvonne Hood

Not lost

My landscape features a landmark called Penshaw Monument which is close to where I was born and grew up. It is located on a hill near the village of Penshaw, on the outskirts of Sunderland in the north east of England, and it dominates the landscape and can be seen for miles around. It's a place that holds a special place in my heart. My Dad was born in Penshaw, and the family watched the sun rise from the monument on the first anniversary of his death.

From the top of the hill, there are stunning views of the surrounding area. Looking towards Sunderland, you can see the sea in the distance, looking in another direction you can see the unmistakable shape of Durham Cathedral on the horizon.

Whenever we are out and about in the area and we spot the monument in the distance, someone will always joke that we're not lost. I also love that whether I'm traveling home on the A1 or the A19, the monument always comes into sight just before I turn off for home.

I chose to include a field of poppies because it is one of my (and my Mam's) favourite flowers. I love the contrast in colour and the perspective you get as they fade into the distance.





Knit and Matter Project Contributors

Susan Jones

Susan is a researcher at the School of Education, University of Nottingham, UK, where she researches arts, creativity and literacy in everyday life. In particular, she is interested in how people engage in creative practices to explore and express what matters to them. She is an enthusiastic (though far from expert!) knitter. In recent years, her research and personal interests have come together and she became interested in what we could learn about fibre crafts as a way of making and sharing meanings in everyday life. This work has included the Crafting Literacy project, which was funded by The Leverhulme Trust, and Knit and Matter, funded by The British Academy.

Philippa Larkam

A qualified Adult Tutor and Creative Arts workshop leader with over 30 years' experience, Philippa specialises in supporting learners on an individual basis to develop their skills and confidence. A talented creative practitioner, she is passionate about the preservation of traditional textile skills and currently runs 'Sew Together', a creative business dedicated to inspiring and teaching textile crafts through courses, workshops and kits. Philippa's first background is in business management, her second background is in textiles, teaching and a holistic approach to using textiles to maintain wellbeing.

Sarah Wheatley

While studying fashion and textiles at UWE, Sarah realised her love was in creating materials rather than the finished product. She won a Royal Society of Arts award that led to a Masters in Constructed Textiles, Knit at the Royal College of Art. Weaveknitit was created in partnership with her mum. They created the materials they wanted to work with and couldn't find at the time. Sarah now has a shop, gallery and workshop unit set within the historic mills at Cromford, Derbyshire. Alongside selling her own work, hand dyed yarn and fibre, handspun yarn and finished products such as hats, scarves and clothing, she also sells the work of around 50 local artists and makers. Her creative workshops reflect her strong belief in sharing traditional skills but with a twist and allowing people the time and space to create what they want with assistance.

www.weaveknitit.co.uk

Ishrat Khawja

Ishrat is a dyer and the owner of Fruitful Fusion. She fell in love with dyeing while living in North Africa, where she discovered that a good way to ensure she always had access to nice, hand dyed yarn was to dye her own! Having moved back to the UK and set up an Etsy shop, in April 2019, Ishrat set up Fruitful Fusion, running her dyeing business alongside a busy family life. Ishrat's colourways are inspired by all sorts, from her extensive travels around the world to childhood memories.

www.fruitfulfusion.co.uk

With thanks to

University of Nottingham
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Jo McIntyre
James Fox
Kerryn Dixon





I have loved being part of the Knit and Matter project and was delighted to show and share my passion for wool and fibre. It's a lovely part of my job, starting with a quiet and sometimes intimidated group and then my passion slowly starts to infect others. It's then not long until people are on the floor touching and smelling fleece and spinning and creating. I think having an understanding of what and how things work/come from allows you to experiment, play and create. I always ask questions and encourage others to do so.

Sarah Wheatley

Working on the Knit and Matter project and leading the dyeing workshop has been so much fun. I have been dyeing yarn and expressing myself through my yarn colourways for years now. But working with participants and guiding them in creating their beautiful yarns was very insightful. It was interesting to see how we interpret colours and colour combinations each in our own way. And then to go on and see what the participants had created was simply amazing and incredibly inspiring!

Ishrat Khawja

As a small child, I loved to watch my mother wrapping the wool going around the crossed needles and the tip pulling the yarn through the loop as each stitch was made, and then another and another. When I learned how to knit, it became a peaceful place to be, a repetitive place to be, a safe place to be, a creative place to be, right up until now.

The Knit and Matter project has been marvellous. We have shared the process of how a sheep can provide their coat and how it can be spun and dyed and then used to make a piece of work which reflects our own ‘landscape’. In the process, a group has been formed, our stories have been told and our connection with the past generations has been remembered.

Thank you to the group for fully engaging in the project and creating such a beautiful and emotional body of work. May the fleece always be with you!

Thank you to Susan for envisaging the project, for documenting our voices and creativity for next generations.

Philippa Larkam

Knit and crochet are crafts which matter to many people. Makers everywhere also use their knitting and crochet to explore and express what matters to them in their everyday lives. The Knit and Matter project aimed to explore how different material factors contribute to what matters when we make with yarn.

Working with the Knit and Matter participants has been wonderful. They have given their time, thought and care with such generosity and kindness. They have shown the passion and expertise that crafters bring to their work, and the openness with which they share and learn from each other. It has been a real privilege to see the story of each piece emerge, as the materials with which participants worked connected to threads from other parts of the landscape of their lives.

Through a focus on making with materials, Knit and Matter explored not only what happens when we’re making, but also the significance of ‘making with’: this of course suggests making with fibres of different kinds, but the workshops also showed the power of making with each other.

Thank you to everyone who made the beautiful pieces in this book, which show how knitting and crochet matter.

Susan Jones

Film and Image

Doug Smith and Finbar Lillis

Doug Smith has been a commercial photographer and documentary film maker all his working life – everything from directing Roxy Music’s first promo video to docs for the Bank of England.

Dr Finbar Lillis is a researcher in learning and career progression, these days mostly for the NHS. He also makes music, writes, takes photos and makes films - working with Doug for the last 20 years – linking film-making and research together. Knit and Matter has been a joy, connecting our mutual interests - different ways of learning and making, telling stories through photography and documentary film – and all with a committed and talented team.

Book text

Susan Jones, with contributions from all the Knit and Matter participants.

Book Design

Beatrice Tailby Hardstaff

Beatrice Tailby Hardstaff is an artist/researcher/facilitator/designer/printer whose work explores creative interpretation and documentation of collaborative community projects, and is underpinned by research into the role of printed matter in conserving cultural practices.

Photography

Finbar Lillis, unless otherwise stated.

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