

by Felicity Ford

*Watching clouds drift over the surface of a perfectly round pond, stumbling upon the quietly crumbling bricks of an old hut or chancing on a curiously fashioned iron railing are the sorts of scenic moments you commonly experience walking in the English countryside. If you knit outdoors, you may take up your knitting for a moment and complete a few rows while taking in the splendid sights. What you may not have noticed before, however, are the connections between the yarn in your fingers and the shape and feel of those surroundings.*

Sheep-rearing is so deeply embedded in the landscape of Sussex and Kent that -- to the novice -- its visible effects become almost naturalized and are hard to distinguish from other topographical influences. It isn't always clear how odd, neglected, or unsigned landmarks relate to the history of wool production and it isn't always easy to see how regional shepherding traditions have left their subtle traces along your trail, but a little exploration of the local history sections of libraries, a patient perusal of [Ordnance Survey](#) maps, and the willingness to explore a few internet sites and muddy fields can prove very rewarding.



Along the southeast coast of Britain, a circular pond may indeed be a dewpond dug out by shepherds many years ago and lined with clay to provide a flock of Southdown sheep with a drinking spot. A hut leaning oddly to one side with a charred black chimney stack may once have warmed a shepherd -- or 'looker' -- by his fire on the Romney Marshes during the long nights of

many lambing seasons. A wrought iron gate with a peculiar design may have been hammered into shape on the same anvil as the distinctive crooks now associated with Pyecombe in Sussex.



While these particular landmarks are unique to Sussex and Kent, the method for gathering local woollen lore is the same wherever you go. Reading, walking, thinking, talking to local people, scrutinising place-names on a map, following your hunches, and getting curious while out exploring all help you to connect knitting to the landscape. Fostering a deep appreciation for the history and provenance of region-specific yarns, do-it-yourself knitting tours put you in touch with the places, people, and animals that lie at the heart of your craft, and this process can be really inspiring.



It doesn't take much time to gather enough basic knowledge to 'read' the landscape. Before you visit the Romney marshes in Kent, googling phrases like 'Wool Romney' in advance of your trip would reveal several articles about wool smuggling in this region. Internet searches may also lead you to the strangely anonymous but fascinating website of the [Looker's Heritage Project](#), or point you to sites of interest like [The Woolpack Inn](#) (a pub with a history richly entwined with wool-smuggling), and Cuckmere Haven (an area of floodplain historically once used by wool smugglers and grazed by sheep today).





In The Woolpack Inn, the re-purposed spinning wheel that was used to divide smuggled booty up after successful ventures is still stationed in one of the bars, and a large print hangs in the porch featuring 'the badge of the worshipful company of woolmen.' Wool smugglers used to be known as 'owlers' because of the owl-calls they used to communicate at night, and the rich, fertile marshlands through which they smuggled wool have contributed to the distinctive fleece of the Romney Sheep that still graze there. Shepherds used a different sort of crook to that employed by the shepherds of neighbouring Sussex. If you come across a lone elder tree at the edge of a crumbling wall in the marshes, it was probably planted deliberately for its fly-repelling properties. Knitting takes on a new meaning when connected to all this history; you start speculating about the sheep and landscape where your project yarn hails from, and pondering the practicalities of dividing up contraband with your spinning wheel.



Scattered throughout Sussex and the Romney marshes in Kent are places with names indicating shepherding activities in the area; Sheep Combe, Sheeplands, Sheepwash, Sheffield Park, Shepham, Shepherds, Shipbourne, Shipley, Shipreed, Shopwkye, Lampham and Lampool are all places named because of aspects of flock-keeping, and this kind of information can be found in any book about local dialect or regional place names. Personal, historic accounts are also plentiful in libraries, and can give you new insights about specific places on maps:

*Sheep were brought inland from the marshes for winter grazing. It is thought that Sheepsetting Lane gets its name from the fact that at one time there were resting rights there... I can recall accompanying the drover as a small child for part of the return journey.*

--Frances Foord in the book *Cross in Hand*, held at Uckfield Library and published in 1980

Museums are also useful for revealing local, knitterly lore. Since wool has been used for centuries

for clothing, most country life museums feature some reference to it. Nestled in a valley in Sussex is Ditchling, the village where Ethel Mairet led the revival of hand woven textiles and vegetable dyes throughout the early and mid 1900s. The sign from Mairet's natural dye workshop hangs proudly inside the museum and in a cabinet you can see artefacts from this workshop, as well as an essay she wrote about 'the serious and fundamental necessity of handwork.'

The museum also displays a shepherd's smock made from a single square of linen (to save on waste) and worn by William Slater – a local shepherd born in 1796. You can read about how teasels were used for carding wool, and about the plants in the locale that were used for dyeing. Stepping outside into the surrounding landscape, you can see these plants growing today and if you climb the local hills, you can see two beautiful examples of dewponds.



There are also large gaps in history that sadly cannot be closed. The dwindling number of lookers huts on the Romney Marshes are increasingly derelict or vandalized. Wool is no longer smuggled



from the coast, and the old forge at Pyecombe where shepherds' crooks were made has been turned into a private home. But uncertain encounters with chimney stacks falling to pieces, spinning wheels hanging in bars, and unusual gates found along the way, allow us to touch history in its raw and continuous state. Through your ink-marked notepads, scribbled instructions, printed Internet searches, and muddied boots, you can sometimes experience how the landscape of today is connected to the wool of yesterday in unexpected and inspiring ways. Becoming a Knitting Tourist is about getting your hands stuck into the messy, rich, and tangled stuff of history, and seeing what you can make of it. And that's something knitters understand.



*Felicity Ford is a sound-artist and knitter living in Berkshire, England. When not studying for her PhD on *The Domestic Soundscape*, she likes walking and knitting -- preferably together -- in escapades including wool and craft-related landmarks. Her adventures are chronicled [on her blog](#).*