

# North Atlantic Native Sheep and Wool Conference 2016

by Helen Babbs

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7th annual  
North Atlantic  
Sheep & Wool  
Conference,  
Isle of Man,  
12-17th  
October 2017.

Sheep breeders, wool processors, textile artists, and members of the fashion industry all gathered in the Lofoten Islands in September for the sixth annual North Atlantic Native Sheep and Wool Conference. The conferences were founded in 2010 by internationally-renowned felt artist Karin Flatoy Svarstad of Norway and aim to preserve and promote the various sheep breeds of the Northern short-tailed group, which are indigenous to the countries around the North Atlantic. This group includes the British sheep breeds Manx Loaghtan, Shetland, Hebridean, Soay and North Ronaldsay, as well as some less known in the UK such as Faroese, Icelandic, or Villsau and Old Norse from Norway. These primitive breeds are all well adapted to the landscape and climate around the North Atlantic, but face considerable challenges in modern agriculture.

“The conferences aim to find creative solutions to the problems associated with the industry, and ways to develop new products and increase the value of the wool and other related products,” Pat Kelly, a textile artist and regular Isle of Man delegate, explains.

“The Lofoten conference had speakers from all the countries around the North Atlantic, and their illustrated lectures covered many important subjects such as enhancing the value of the wool and other products; the importance of branding and labelling; preservation of landscapes; the history of the breeds and woollen products such as knitted and felted garments which can have an impact on tourism, and wool collection and sorting.”

These presentations were just in the mornings. Afternoons involved visits to local sheep farms, museums and exhibitions featuring the history of sheep and wool in the islands, and the galleries of textile artists using the local fibre. “One of the farms belonged to Ragnhild Lie (an organiser of this conference) where we had a talk about, and a chance to see, her Old Norse Sheep. We also had a guided tour of the Viking museum, including a walk among the outdoor heritage site and native Villsau sheep, ending with a wonderful lamb broth in the Viking long-house.”

“One of the visits that always creates a lot of interest is a visit to a wool collecting site,” says Pat. “This time we visited Fatland Wool

Native Norwegian Villsau sheep



company, where we had a talk about wool classification.” As the conference was running alongside the Leknes food and craft festival, there was also plenty of opportunity, to purchase wool and woollen products, particularly as many of the delegates, including from the UK, had stalls of their native sheep goods.

The conference is held in a different North Atlantic country each year. As might be expected, an important part each time is networking: making new friends among those working with the same type of sheep and wool, and catching up with old ones. “It’s nice to learn about exciting new developments in countries that have previously hosted the conference,” says Pat. “One of these is Uist in the Outer Hebrides with their a new community benefit society, Uist Wool. This now operates a spinning mill and wool centre, which has had a large impact on their financial returns.”

The conference should be of particular interest to the UK sheep industry in 2017, when it is being held in the Isle of Man. As a textile artist and farmer’s wife, Pat Kelly is one of the organisers. “The local focus will be on the iconic Loaghtan sheep,” she explains, “alongside lectures from other North Atlantic delegates talking about matters con-



**Traditional Norwegian knitted garments**

cerning their local breeds.” Through a programme of talks, exhibitions, workshops and a farm visit, the conference will aim to look at improving the price obtained for raw fleeces, how to add value to the wool by better marketing of a wider diversity of woollen products, and the opportunities from sheep and wool related tourism. In addition, Pat points out, there will be the chance to explore the local heritage and beautiful countryside the native sheep help to preserve. ■

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**Shetland wool products at the conference craft festival**