Imagine a life without shops.

Imagine if before going out in the morning you'd had to make your own clothes. Imagine if before dinner, you'd had to form pots, bowls and cutlery. And imagine if before you could sit and relax, you'd had to construct your own chair with your own hand-made tools.

These craft skills were once a part of everyday life in Shetland. Home was a family workshop. People used the natural resources around them to make everything they needed.

Home remains a workshop for many craft-makers today. Skills have been passed from generation to generation, and many traditional techniques are still alive.

In this leaflet we go behind closed doors to reveal what is being made by Shetland's heritage craftsmakers today.
Wool

Knitting
Shetland knitted wear has been popular with royalty, and nowadays appears on countless catwalks. Today it is Shetland’s best selling craft product.

Before industrialisation, a century ago Shetland women knitted whenever their hands were idle. They knitted socks, vests and jumpers for all the family. Women also produced large quantities of plain, patterned and fine lace garments to sell, to earn extra income.

Today’s knitters draw on generations of skill in using stitch, colour and pattern. There are many contemporary designers working in Shetland, using wool and yarns to make garments and accessories that complement the global Shetland knitwear industry.

Weaving
People have woven yarns to make cloth and blankets for thousands of years. Families kept a loom at home to make clothes and blankets. From 1920 to 1970 Shetland tweed was a high quality export, to international fashion houses in America, Japan and Europe.

Today craft-makers create woven fabrics to incorporate into artworks, or to sell as products.

And the secret to success? Shetland sheep. Their soft fleece is of the finest quality, and has led to the world-wide popularity of Shetland knits. The silvery feel of their wool is due to the sheep’s ability to survive Shetland’s harsh climate on a diet of heather and seaweed.

Wood

Carpentry
Shetland has a number of furniture-makers producing classic and contemporary ranges, and one-off pieces. Traditional furniture was simple in style, with discreet detailing, and this is still characteristic in modern designs today.

Smaller scale wooden items are crafted by many wood turners and carpenters, such as toy, domestic items and decorative boat models.

Boat building
Before 1850 there were no roads in Shetland. Instead, every family owned a small boat to move from place to place. The fourteen footed (four-oared) boat was the most common, and was based on Norwegian boat types. Nowadays similar boats are used locally for competitive rowing. Various kinds of locally made boats are sailed during the summer months. Not surprisingly, boatbuilders’ skills are in heavy demand, and not only from Shetland customers.

Instruments
Shetland’s musical heritage is world renowned. At the core of that tradition is the fiddle (or violin). Acoustic and electric fidelles are designed and made locally, drawing on generations of local knowledge and experience.

Plants

Basketry
Just as we use plastic carrier bags for so many purposes today, our forebears used woven baskets to transport or store just about everything around the house or on the move. They made them from different plants, and in a variety of shapes and sizes, depending on the purpose.

Hide, horn and bone

Leather-working
Hide has long been used to make items such as kilts (shoes) or grain sacks. Later, leatherworking became more common, for making sea boots and harnesses. Contemporary products include sheepskin rugs, and leather-knitted belts.

Horn and bone carving
Shetlanders used horn to make cups and spoons, and bone to make small items like needles and buttons. Today there is a revival in using horn and bone as a creative material. Craft-makers are re-creating these ancient skills.

Metal

Blacksmithing
At one time each village had a local blacksmith who made everything from horseshoes to anchors. The blacksmith was essential to each community. Today, blacksmiths are increasingly called upon to undertake decorative work.

Jewellery making
For 2000 years Shetlanders have made metal jewellery. Today there are a number of jewellers working in Shetland, often preserving the island’s Pictish, Celtic and Norse motifs.

Stone

Stone is plentiful in Shetland. Throughout the islands you can see thousands of stone dykes and buildings. Stone wasn’t wasted – domestic buildings were rebuilt into modern structures. Today rubble is often used to build modern dry-stone dykes, or even to create public art!

Islanders also carved stone to make spinning whorls, wheatsheaves, moulds and equestrian. Stonemasons today still carve decorative architectural work, as well as small one-offs pieces.

Heritage for the future

A range of quality craft products has been developed by Shetland Archaeology Trust as part of the Heritage Crafts Initiative. The range of distinctive goods is inspired by, and reflects, Shetland’s heritage and culture.

The aim of the project is to celebrate local craftsmanship, and to produce a range of outstanding branded goods that demonstrate good design, quality workmanship and effective use of materials. The work of the project enables the heritage to be part of an ongoing process for the future.

Look out for the branded range at Shetland Museum and Archives.