

# NEWSLETTER

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*Feature article*

## THE ARAN SWEATER

Cover image:

Fisherman wearing  
Aran sweater

Image from [www.aran.com](http://www.aran.com)



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## THE ARAN SWEATER



Grace Kelly pictured in an Aran sweater in 1950 (image from www.thetimes.co.uk)

Grace Kelly helped to popularise the Aran sweater in the 1950s. But it was after the Clancy brothers performed on the Ed. Sullivan show wearing Aran sweaters in 1961, that the sale of the sweaters rose by 700 per cent. The story goes that hearing of a particularly harsh winter in New York, in late 1960, their mother sent a parcel to her sons in Manhattan – it contained four Aran sweaters.



Ed. Sullivan with the Clancy Brothers and Timmy Makem following their appearance on Ed's CBS/TV show. (image from www.stairmaheireann.net)

The Aran sweater, sometimes called a jumper, *geansaí* or fisherman's sweater, originated in the Aran Islands. Originally these sweaters were knitted by island women for the men who worked as farmers and fishermen, but they have since become a fashion statement and a global symbol of Irishness.

*What makes the Aran sweater so special?*

These sweaters were knitted in the natural colour of sheep's wool, an off-white or cream colour (*báinín*). The wool retained its natural oils making the sweaters waterproof. Interestingly, an Aran sweater can absorb 30 per cent of its weight in water before it begins to feel wet. The natural wool fibre used in the sweaters is breathable, drawing water vapour away from the skin thus helping the body to maintain an ideal temperature. A typical Aran sweater may contain approximately 100,000 stitches crafted by the skilled knitter.

It can contain any combination of stitches, depending on the particular pattern being followed. Each stitch carries its own unique meaning. The cable stitch is a depiction of a fisherman's ropes, and represents a wish for a fruitful day at sea. The diamond stitch reflects the small fields of the islands. These diamonds are sometimes filled with Irish moss stitch, depicting the seaweed that was used to produce a good harvest. Hence the diamond stitch is a wish for success and wealth.

The zig zag stitch, a half diamond, represents the twisting cliff paths on the islands. The (honeybee) honeycomb stitch symbolises hard work. The trellis stitch represents the stone-walled fields of the farming communities and the tree of life stitch reflects the importance of the clan. The many combinations of stitches (pattern) seen on the garment are not incidental. They reveal vast amounts of information to those who know how to interpret them.

Aran sweaters were a reflection of the lives of the islanders and sweater patterns were well guarded and kept within the same clan down through the generations.

Bodies of fishermen at sea were often identified by the Aran sweater which they were wearing.

Sweater exports from the west of Ireland to the United States began in the early 1950s.

Aran sweaters have become an unofficial symbol of Ireland and featured in many notable Irish movies. During the last century, women in the west of Ireland were fortunate that they could earn an income derived from knitting Aran sweaters at home.

However, as the number of hand knitters continue to decline, the sweaters are more likely to be machine made.

**References:**

- [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)
- [www.Irishcultureandcustoms.com](http://www.Irishcultureandcustoms.com)
- [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)

**BOOK OF THE WEEK**

## EXPLORING MAYO

by Bernard O'Hara

€15 (+postage)

This is a beautifully illustrated book with an excellent Ordnance Survey map. It provides a wonderful appreciation of County Mayo's rich archaeological, historical, religious and architectural heritage as well as a guide to the attractions of its various regions.

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