

## INTERVIEW WITH JULIETTE CURRY

[MF]

This is Mary Franklin at 65 Wolf Green on the 10th of December and I'm interviewing Juliet Currie. Thank you Juliet. So let me start by asking you how you came to live in Whitley.

[JC]

Well we were living in Chalbury very happily and we had a little girl and it was a tiny cottage. We wanted something quite a lot bigger. Roger wanted an office at home.

We used to come into Whitley to do the shopping. We always loved Whitley so we decided we'd just have to sell Chalbury and move to Whitley, which we did in 1988 when the little girl was about a year old. Prices in Whitley were a lot cheaper than Chalbury.

We fell utterly in love with this house because it had plenty of room for Roger's office and work rooms and a big garden. We loved Whitley from the day we moved in. It only had one cafe in those days and of course 28 pubs.

But from the year that we moved here it got better and better. The number of cafes, the number of pubs, the restaurants, the shops, everything. It's got a fantastic library, doctor's service.

Everything you can think of is in Whitley except for the railway of course. But Whitley has everything you could possibly want. We absolutely love it.

We'd never dream of moving anywhere else. We do hope that the High Street remains pedestrian only because we just love it like that. The green spaces in Whitley are just amazing.

No other town I can think of has as many green spaces open to the public. And the river running through and the common are so special. So it's a perfect town in our eyes and the fact that it has had a wonderful industry means that people living here are interesting.

Because lots of them have worked in the business here and that's their experience. It isn't a town full of tourists, thank goodness. It's a working town and that's why we love it.

[MF]

Okay, that sounds great. Do you have a favourite place where you like to go if you're going out for coffee or to meet friends?

[JC]

Delice in the High Street run by Nicky Well. We just love him. We go at least twice a week.

He's so friendly and the coffee's very good. Excellent.

[MF]

Do you think Whitley has a real sense of community?

[JC]

Oh yes. Oh very much so. Yes I do.

I think the people here are really homogeneous and very friendly and there's an awful lot going on in the town. Arts if you like and music and community groups and U3A is enormous. And it's a pub culture.

People meet in pubs. We've only got 26 pubs now but we all meet in pubs. Do you have a favourite one of those?

Well we've got two. There's the elm tree in West End and there's the plough in the High Street. So yes, those are the two favourites.

[MF]

So you came here in 88. Were you already involved in knitting machines and things to do with knitting at that point?

[JC]

Yes, Roger had developed the machine in about 1981-82. We were living in London at that time, just he and I really. Now Roger is an engineer and an inventor and we were manufacturing in Birmingham.

And in 82 he had won the Innovator of the Year Award in the Serbo newspaper. He got first prize and that set us on the road to manufacturing. He had spent two years prior to that at the drawing board in our tiny flat thinking how he could invent something with much more modern materials than solid steel which is very heavy.

It took him just about two years to invent the bond. It was called the bond because he was walking down Bond Street to his lawyers and said to me I've got five minutes before I get there and I've got to think of a name. He'd been thinking of a name for about six months and I said oh bond, bond, bond.

We were going down Bond Street and he said okay that's the word. So it became the bond knitting machine.

[MF]

What about the first knitting machine?

[JC]

Yes, that's that one there.

[MF]

So what knitting machines were available on the market?

[JC]

Well they were all made in Japan. Brother, Empasal, some other names I can't remember now. But they were very, very special.

They were sold in specialist knitting machine shops. They were about 200 to 800 pounds. They were incredibly complicated with all sorts of mechanisms for separating the yarn when it was fed into the machine.

You could only do two, three, four ply and maybe double knitting. There were not yarns that were fashionable at that time in the 80s. We were wearing double knit Icelandic yarns, chunky, chenille, mohair.

None of those things could be knitted on the Japanese machines. You couldn't even lift them, they were so heavy. So the popular yarns were these and I'd always hand knitted, Roger can hand knit.

And he decided that he could do a whole lot better by having a modern material that was called acetal, which is a really nice foam plastic. And so he invented a machine which would knit the yarns we're using in Europe. And he entered this for the competition of the German newspaper and he had to do a demonstration, which of course he could do easily, and it knits an inch a minute.

So you could do about five rows in a minute. You just go across leisurely like this with your right arm, knitting and knitting. He had 100 needles, so he could do quite a decent work.

And the judges were frighteningly impressed and gave him the first prize. And the first prize, it doesn't sound much now, but it was £10,000 and it paid for the worldwide patents, which was incredibly important in those days because the Japanese, they knew, were going to try and copy. They didn't, as it happens, because their technology was based in steel.

Steel needles, steel beds, and Rogers was totally innovative. And the fact that he invented this key plate system where you could change the size of the stitches so easily was an absolute winner. The instruction books were all written in pictures, very few words, so it meant that translation to foreign languages was jolly easy.

And a friend of ours did all the illustrations, so it's mainly me knitting away, sitting there smiling, and the instructions, drawings, and then the patterns we got going. The yarn spinners loved the machine because it knitted yarn very quickly and we could get through a lot of yarn. They were very happy to do joint promotions with us where we were in magazines, women's magazines, knitting magazines, we would do a joint promotion.

They would supply the yarn kit, we would supply the bond, and then we would write the pattern with the bond instructions. And that was very, very successful, those promotions and competitions. And they would sell kits of yarn with the machines.

Because we found it very demonstratable, so easy, once you looked at it, you could really get going quickly. The first sale we made was to Woolco, which at that time had 100 of those big super stores. And they bought the first order, I think it was 1,000 machines, the first order.

And Roger and I were practically assembling them with the manufacturers in the West Midlands who were plastic moulders. So we used to drive the van, and I used to be in the van, we used to drive up to the nearest, whether it was Southampton, Portsmouth, Hampshire, these were the first sales in the South. And you used to go in with your brown warehouse coat into the van and say, I've parked at the back, then change into your suit and go to the front and say, I'm the manager of Bond Knitting, I've come to talk about your next order.

And I would have my smart suit on and I would go in and I'd say, I'm the marketing director, I want to train some of your staff, have you got them in the interview room? Go in and interview these girls who already had a bond, they were people who were enthusiastic about it. And we trained them and they would demonstrate on a Saturday, all day, for commission.

And it just took off. And so we did our first trade exhibition, knitting and stitching show, I think after about three months. And we got mobbed by independent wool shops who said, we love it, all we're selling is yarn at 89 pence a ball, 1.99, 3.99, this sells for 69 pounds and we can make, you know, a 40% markup. Because Roger had no middlemen, they were making it for us and we sold direct to the shops, so the margins were very good. And the shops loved it because they had to demonstrate. It caused a bit of a fuss on a Saturday morning, you know.

The girls were earning, what did they get, 10% commission, 20% commission or something. They loved it. And we had tremendous success in that first year.

Tremendous success. So we quickly got secretary, typist, sales clerk, so we had to move from Chiswick and we came up to Wynyard for an office and we were in Bridge Street Mill, where Jill Stew Dance Studio is now, it's still there. And we had our warehouse there and ran the sales force, which was all over the country.

And my background was in merchant banking, marketing, in merchant banking. And so I was very able to go to the stores and train people. And within about five years, we had 120 staff all around the country.

And they were a whole mixture of salesmen, regional managers, in-store demonstrators, knitwear designers, sample knitters, graphic designers, advertising and promotional staff, almost all of them freelance. But in Wynyard we had 21 staff, didn't we, and that was really just sales. And from Bridge Street Mill, we outgrew that and we moved to an office, 69 High Street.

We had a nice office there, incredibly old, old furniture, old rooms, weren't they? And we loved it there, right in the centre of town, of course. By then we'd moved from Charlbury into Wynyard, so we were very happy working and living here.

And we began the export business, I think by the end of the first year. And our first exports really were to America. And we hadn't realised that American women, and still are, the biggest hobbyists in the world, they all do a lot of hobby work.

They're into, you know, patchwork, tapestries, knitting, crochet, everything you can think of. And in fact the bond is still sold in America. So we went to American trade shows and we did four a year, didn't we?

Anaheim, Chicago, Florida somewhere, Houston. And Roger and I were working together all this time, selling. Very successful.

Roger got approached by QVC in California, who did a test of the bond in California. They ordered 100,000 units. Roger had to swallow twice to think, can I actually make 100,000 just for the American market?

Well, he did, of course, because our supplier, the plastic machines in West Midlands, was very happy to double, triple. Our staff kept growing and growing. Then we began exporting the next year.

We did the continents, so we were doing... France were never interested because they didn't have department stores. But Roger was selling to South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, a bit of, not completely to Russia, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, obviously, and Germany, and where else?

Spain, Switzerland. So that was very exciting. And we had to get translators, of course, for the instruction books.

Did the machine change at all for a different country? No. The instruction books changed, but that was it.

Then Roger, by about year three, produced another machine, which was called the Elite, and that did four-ply and double knitting. For those people who just wanted to make children's things and baby things. And that also was a great success.

And because he's an inventor, he was always inventing other things. It would be counters to go on the machine to count the rows, or it would be sewing up gadgets, or it would be... What else did you invent?

All sorts of things to go with the machine. So it was just such an exciting time. And then, of course, fashions change.

And by about 1994, five, China was producing most of the knitwear in this country. And that wasn't chunky and beautiful and expensive. It was cheap, and people stopped knitting quite so much, and they were buying ready-made knitwear.

And so our sales tailed off, and Roger made the decision that we would sell the company to an American firm, who were really gung-ho, because American sales had outstripped every other country in the world. We were doing 60% export, but American sales outstripped us. And he decided that over the next few years, we would sell to an American firm.

So we did. We got past the peak by then, and people were... We did have three...

365 independent wool shops had our machine, including the one in Whitney, the wool shop. Then the lighting shop, and now it's empty. We had all the department stores.

We had John Lewis throughout the country, all the House of Raison stores, which I sold to. The Lewis Chain. Who else was there?

Debenhams, obviously. Then all the mail-order catalogues we sold to. So...

And we didn't see Japanese machines after that. I think, in fact, they withdrew from the market, because simply, unless they were selling to small industries, we had a monopoly. And that was in America, Britain, and I'm not sure what happened in Europe, but we certainly...

The Japanese did try and copy. They used to raid our stand early in the morning and try and take a machine away, but they didn't succeed. And they never produced a machine in our price range.

I mean, 69 pounds, you know, it's not much for a very, very useful thing to have in the house. It's what the price of a food mixer or something. So women were really keen to have one, here and elsewhere.

So it was, as I say, incredibly exciting times. I mean, we were so glad that we were in Whitney. Staff loved working for us, because it was still innovative.

It was exciting. They loved working with new yarns, and they loved working with the yarn companies, and we had a magazine with 25,000 circulation, which I wrote most of it, I think. And we did patterns, and editorials, and interviews, and letters page, and problem page.

And that was very successful, too.

[MF]

Did you write the patterns as well?

[JC]

No, no, no, no, no, no. Did you design anything? No, no, no, no, no, no.

That's not what I thought. No, just sales, really. And I could write.

So I wrote lots of the magazine bits and bobs. And we just loved that magazine, didn't we? It was very successful.

And that was taken on by the Americans, and then they got their own patterns and designers to write patterns for them.

[MF]

What was the magazine called?

[JC]

The Bond Magazine. Cool. Quite simple.

[MF]

Yeah, yeah.

[JC]

I haven't got a copy to show. I didn't think about that. But yes, it was a fun thing to do for all those years.

We started, I think, about the third year we got going. We realised that people wanted to have a follow-up, you know. And then, in the last years that we had the company, Roger was taken up by Martha Stewart.

Is that a name that you know? She's a guru in America. She's like a Delia Smith and a sewing expert all rolled into one.

And she was on TV an awful lot. And she wanted a Martha Stewart knitting machine. So Roger designed one for her.

Horrible bright pink. Anyway. And it was mainly because of teenagers that she wanted it.

And it was sold in Walmart. And she's still got it in Walmart now, this year.

[MF]  
It's still selling.

[JC]  
It's still selling. And she wanted Roger to invent a weaving loom, which he did. And that was inexpensive in pink plastic.

So his inventions went on long after he'd sold the company, actually. And the Yarn Company bought it in America, in the centre of America, in North Carolina. And they tied Roger in for three years.

It was quite cruel, but essential for our income to invent more products for them. And so he would spend a week every month in North Carolina thinking of new things and yarn ideas. And we had an American partner, Carrie Clement, who was very inventive.

And she and he used to spend a lot of time with the new owner in America. So it didn't die. It just sort of transformed into another company.

So Roger eventually was able to leave the whole thing behind, about 20 years ago, I guess. So he had a second life, which was very happy.

[MF]  
Why was it that Roger decided to invent a knitting machine? Because it's clearly been hugely successful, but of course he didn't know that it was going to have that degree of success, perhaps, at the time.

[JC]  
Or did he?

[MF]  
Yes. Okay.

[JC]  
When he entered the competition of the New Perceiver Newspaper Award, they said, it's so sexy because you can demonstrate it. And yarn you're using is very tactile. The whole thing is sexy.

And we thought, yep, it is. But Roger had just been working as managing director of a company. He was in merchant banking as well, a different company from me.

And he was the managing director of one of the client companies who were importing knitting machines from Japan and selling machines. And when he saw the knitting machine, he thought, hmm, interesting. Totally wrong for Europe.

It will never, never work. And so, as I said, I kept on with my bank. Roger spent two years at home on a drawing board working it out, getting samples made, getting tooling made, getting things that did work, didn't work.

It was a very difficult time for us financially. It was very, very risky. We had to spend money on getting tooling made and we weren't sure it was going to work.

But after two years, he had this product, just the one, showed it to the Observer Newspaper Innovator team, and that was it. That was it. The publicity was amazing in the Observer.

And with that in our hand, we went to Wilco, the buyer there, and he just loved it. And having gotten to Wilco, we then were set because John Lewis and Houser Fraser were interested in seeing it and talking to us. But they'd all seen us at the trade shows, working away, wearing the sweaters, talking about it, knitting an inch a minute, using all these gorgeous fluffy yarns, and they were sold immediately.

[MF]  
The other thing is that it's a good idea. Anyway, it's there.

[JC]  
Well, they didn't. No, they were taking photographs.

[MF]  
Yes. They knew it was a good idea when they saw it.

[JC]  
They didn't know why it was successful. They kept saying, but it's not steel, it won't last. Well, mine's 48 years old and I'm still using it.

They're tough, but they're very lightweight. It's only weighed, what, four pounds. You can carry it around.

[MF]

Can you describe the size of the machine a little bit more?

[JC]

Yes. How many inches is it? No, it's just there.

It's got 100 needles. The needles are steel. The base is made of acetyl, which is slightly, I thought I wanted, it doesn't feel liquid.

It's just very incredibly smooth. And you have a handle which you push left and right and it lifts an inch a minute. It's very easy to set up.

You've got clamps, you can put it onto a table, so it's very strong. It comes with instruction books, it comes with key plates for different stitch sizes. It comes with a pattern book, so you can make basic shapes, v-neck, round neck, sleeves, non-sleeves for men, women and children to get you started.

And after that, you can send away the patterns. Or they had patterns in all the women's magazines over the years, didn't they? They were very happy to print them.

And the yarn spinners, as I say, loved it because it knitted a lot of yarn. You could make a quick sweater in an evening and sew it up the next day and wear it at the weekend, which you can't do with hand knitting, but it would look like hand knitting. And you could do feral, as he is wearing, cable, all sorts of clever stitches.

[MF]

And then you'd see the thing, and they'd all stop, and you'd see patterns spinning around in the field, and the whole store would be locked up. They thought it was fascinating.

[JC]

It was amazing.

[MF]

And I said, I've got an idea.

[JC]

You'd block the aisle. Yes. You can imagine, if you've got 30 minutes, you can make the whole back of a sweater in 30 minutes.

And then the front, and then the two sleeves. So you could make the sweater pieces, a plain one, in two or three hours, and then, as I say, sew it up the next day.

[MF]

Was it easy to use if you hadn't done hand knitting?

[JC]

Oh, yes. People were buying it who'd never hand knitted. They'd always liked Galgerio, but you could never get the hang of hand knitting.

Oh, yes, yes, absolutely. That's why they bought it, probably, yes.

[MF]

Could you remember what the first thing, or the early things were that you made on that machine?

[JC]

Well, these two. I made this, probably, the first two months. I made that in about the first three or four months.

Because he was quite focused. Well, Roger's wearing a very complicated Fair Isles sweater, which I made for him. And on one of our trade shows, the stand next to us was Yorkshire Woollen Mills, or Yorkshire, whatever it was called.

And so that one is Swaledale Herdwick, and I think it's got a bit of black Welsh in there. So I made it and said to the chaperone company, which I think is, he said, oh, that's amazing, how long did that take you? Three months?

I said, no, it only took me about three days. I think it's quite complicated. And then I was always wearing something that was heavily patterned or with cable or something.

And I had obviously been rehearsing on Roger's early machines how to make things and how to knit quickly and cleverly and do different stitches. So by the time we got going with the real machines, I was quite good at it. And I was teaching all these demonstrators.

We had how many demonstrators? Oh, mad. Every town in the country had them.

So it must have had 70 or 80, I suppose, over the years. It must have been all the department stores. And I taught most of them, or I taught the regional managers who then taught them.

We spent our early days in a car driving all over the country, either selling to the department store managers or the demonstrators who had to teach in the evening, and they were on the shop floor the next Saturday.

[MF]

Can you describe the jumper you're wearing?

[JC]

Well, it's Icelandic yarn, which I just love. Again, we met somebody from Iceland on a trade show, and she was selling very sturdy Icelandic yarn, which was so warm. And I'm wearing a pink one, which is covered in cables.

And it was quite tricky to knit, because it is such a firm yarn. But I absolutely love it, and I'm still wearing it, and I made it in 1982, 83. So it shows you how well I knitted.

[MF]

And the yarn, of course, would be very strong and durable as well, wouldn't it?

[JC]

It is.

[MF]

And the way it knitted.

[JC]

Yes. We sold to Iceland quite a lot of machines, because Victor Stefandotti and her husband, Joseph, loved coming to England with an excuse, really, and they were buying machines. And everybody in Iceland, of course, knits like mad, because it's terribly cold for nine months of the year.

And Victor became really expert at knitting on the bond, and they were selling it. They had a shop, and she sold it to her neighbours and so on. So Iceland was always a good little market for us.

We never went there to see them, but it was a good little market. In fact, Scandinavia was a good market for us too. I remember going to Oslo, didn't we, and sold a lot to the Norwegians, and they loved it because they have thick, thick yarn as well, knitted beautifully.

Old, old people.

[MF]

Which require a well-knit jumper.

[JC]

Of course.

[MF]

Were there any countries where you hoped you might have failed, but you weren't able to sell there for whatever reason?

[JC]

Well, Russia, because they got Roger there on false pretences. They really just wanted, they had probably given handouts for trade commissions of some sort, and so Roger was a single-handed trade commissioner. He went out there.

All they wanted to do was to wine and dine, and they hadn't had any employees, actually. They only came in to the factory to have lunch and then go home again. So that was a pretty false pretence.

We never sold any odd thing, did we, in Russia?

[MF]

No, no, no. Yeah.

[JC]

He went to Yugoslavia, which was very, the country was interested, and it was the year that their war broke out. So he came back and he said, I just got out of Belgrade in time, it's been bombed. So that was a failure.

Africa was hit and miss. Kenya, Zimbabwe, they all wanted enormous backhanders. The president's brother-in-law or the president's cousin would insist that he would have another 30%.

And in the end, it became too expensive to sell, really, and Roger was hoping to sell it to small female work, small work companies, work cooperatives, where six or ten women were making knitwear, because it's very cold at night, of course, in Africa. It's hot in the day but cold at night. And they were really keen to have thick knitwear they could get up in and walk to work or walk to school with their children and so on.

So we sold a few, but really it was never going to be a proper industry because they just could not stop asking for extra money for backhanders, totally corrupt. So sadly, South Africa was a bit different. You did sell quite, you had a very good agent there, didn't you?

But the other countries in Africa, no, it didn't work. Australia and New Zealand, we didn't go to New Zealand, but Roger spent a lot of time going to Australia, selling there. The difficulty with them is that they've only got those big cities which are 1,000 or 2,000 miles apart, so you can't go from city to city selling.

It's just too vast a country. And the agent we had was really only in Sydney. So Australia tried, but really it didn't work well, did it, because of the difficulty of getting to big enough shops and department stores over vast distances.

So sadly, despite your trying to make that work, it didn't. But the big success story really was America, where there are fanatical hobbyists. I've never known a country like them at all, being so keen on every kind of hobby.

They don't watch much TV in America. They're just doing things. They're tatting, they're knitting, they're flowering, they're sticking bits of paper on stone.

They're doing felting. They're extraordinarily active still.

[MF]

Is that all ages of women?

[JC]

Yes, yes. You were selling knitting kits for teenage girls in Walmart, which I think girls have always been too busy doing something else. But in America they get bought, don't they?

Martha Stewart knew there was a good market for teenage girls over there.

[MF]

Did it have the same name?

[JC]

It was called Incredible Sweater Machine. It was Bond Beginnery, but they didn't know what Bond was. Incredible Sweater Machine.

And the later one was called the Ultimate Sweater Machine, Bond America. There we are.

[MF]

Can you just explain again the difference between the two machines?

[JC]

We had about three. The first one was for double knitting to chunky, chenille, mohair, Icelandic yarn. The second one, called the Elite, was for three-ply, four-ply double knitting.

And then, because some of the stores didn't like the length of the bond, he then cut it in half so that they could snap one half onto the other and make it when they got home. It was dead easy. It wasn't a difficult thing to do.

It was fully assembled, except it was cut in half to make a box half the size. He didn't change anything about it for that model. It was just the name on it and the size was different.

The box was different. So, no, he really stuck to that same format because it worked and it was lightweight.

[MF]

So how did he market it?

[JC]

Well, we had, as I said before, we had a lot of help from the yarn companies. They loved it because it knitted a lot of yarn. So from the very first, I was the one doing all the magazine, touring around the magazines, selling the idea of it because we placed ads.

So, of course, we were spending money on advertising. And they would do promotions with us, which was marvellous. All the magazines, I mean, Seaming World was a good one, Knitting and Stitching, Women's Zone, all those women's magazines and the hobby magazines, obviously.

And they would feature patterns of ours or they'd do promotions of giving away a kit to go with a machine or there were prizes, weren't there? We had TV placement. Once or twice a BBC, I used to get on Broadcasting House and take a machine and that would be a placement in a programme.

I'd teach somebody how to knit, an actor how to knit. So we had a national advertising campaign. We spent quite a lot of money on national advertising.

You'd get quite good deals with some small TV companies sometimes to see how that went. In America, we did QVC, which was wonderful. We'd have half an hour with Roger's partner, Carrie, and she'd be there demonstrating on a stage with an enormous audience watching.

And she would knit an inch a minute and she'd not stop talking while she was demonstrating. So she'd make something wonderful in half an hour, you see, something with glittering or something. And completely unprovoked.

Anyway, someone in the audience would stand up and she'd say, I made this last night. Look at me and my top. You'd think, wow.

And then somebody else would get up and they'd say, I made this for my little girl. And you'd think, wow. And these people were just, it wasn't actually, they weren't, what was it I wanted?

They weren't planted. They weren't planted. And Carrie would say, great, where are you from?

And she'd say, I'm from Ohio. It was just amazing. We saw these films and we just couldn't believe it.

I think Roger was crying. It was wonderful. So the advertising from QVC in America was sensational.

We didn't really do anything like that here. It was just the advertising in the press, a bit of TV. But because it was an interesting product that made things that looked lovely, people were happy to do promotions with us.

We would do competitions, wouldn't we, as well. Give away a bond, give machines competition prizes and things. So we did a lot of publicity.

I'd worked in advertising and I enjoyed that bit very much indeed. While Roger was concentrating on getting the production flowing, he's an accountant as well. So he did the accounts.

All the production was organised by him. He spent a lot of time in the West Midlands doing that. He did the foreign sales.

When I had two children, he had to do all the foreign sales and I had to take a back seat. So we were a really good partnership and engaged people who were doing the things that we couldn't do.

[MF]

And a significant employer.

[JC]

Well, yes. 21 in Whitney and then freelancers. Yes, 120 people.

And we did make good profits after about four years and plans just straight back into new product development. So it was a very tightly run ship. Very tightly run.

We didn't spend money on... We always had a second or a third-hand car. Second-hand furniture from the Army supply shop.

So we didn't flash money around, but we had loyalty from the staff in Whitney.

[MF]

That's great. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about related to knitting? Well, I've talked about the stores.

[JC]

The importance of your shops become stores. You've made all the catalogues. Markets are climbing.

No. I can't think of anything else.

[MF]

Just one more question. What do you think about knitting now? How do you view knitting today?

[JC]

Well, the Chinese manufacturers of knitwear killed it. Staying dead. I mean, Whitney had a knitting shop until last year.

Has Oxford got one? Yes, it's got one. Two, actually.

I think it's got one. So there were 10,000 wool shops in Britain when we launched in 1981. We did a survey of them.

10,000. And now maybe there are 200. It's just a little.

And if you're making a sweater now, it would probably cost you £120 in yarn to make something. Whereas then it was affordable, and you could make it for less than it would cost to buy something comparable. And nowadays, of course, you can't.

All the wool is probably £8 to £15, and that's only 50 grammes. So it's an expensive hobby now, really. And, of course, it's still time-consuming.

The number of patterns aren't around, really. He did at one point in about 1985. Do you know the name Kaye Fassett, the knitwear designer?

American. Does it ring bells? He did multicoloured, exquisite knitwear, mainly by hand.

And we met him because Rowan Yarns was always a friend of ours. And we did trade shows together, and he used to give us lots of yarn into joint promotions. And his yarn is still going strong.

It's sold in Liberties and John Lewis. And it's beautiful. They do a whole range of beautifully spun, incutely, wonderful colours.

And Kaye Fassett, the knitwear designer, used to do all their colour ranges for them. And about 1984, we decided, Roger and I, that we would like to see how a wool

shop works and how we could integrate our selling techniques and selling ideas better. So we rented a shop in Notting Hill, and we got one of our staff to set up.

And Kaye and Simon from Rowan Yarns came, and we painted it some fabulous mushroom colour. And we filled it totally with Rowan Yarns. And one of our girls worked there, and I worked there on a Saturday, and on the train we worked there every Saturday, just to see how the bond would work.

And we did lessons in the basement, and we had a coffee machine going all the time, thinking we were all buying wool and so on. And it was a fabulous experiment to see what happens in an independent wool shop. And we were doing well, but I just couldn't go on.

I had a baby by then, and I couldn't go on coming down every Saturday to work there. And I think the girl we employed wanted to work somewhere else, and she left. And so we let the lease go after three years.

But it was a very interesting experiment to see how wool yarn is sold, how you can make it do better by doing kits and lessons and promotions. And it was a very interesting experiment. A sideshow, if you like, but something that proved we didn't know everything about how a yarn shop worked.

And then we did. It was fascinating. And the link with Rowan Yarns and with Keith is just wonderful, because he was in a different level.

He has exhibitions at the V&A, and he's just an amazing man.

[MF]

Is there anything in particular that you remember thinking, oh, I haven't appreciated that, that they're selling this, it's a yarn, and they're independent of that?

[JC]

Well, yes. They could do so much more. I mean, we were doing demonstrations in the shop all the time.

Let's say we had the coffee machine going. The smell of coffee. Someone's buying 20 pounds worth of yarn.

You could see they were there for a bit, because they were just tuning in. Can I have a cup of coffee? Oh, yes.

I'd love one. Thanks. I'll have a cup of coffee.

And then they'd get the yarn, and then you'd say, have you seen this latest colour? And it was really selling them a whole idea, and then saying, yes, with the barn, we

have lessons every Saturday afternoon, I think it was, in the basement. Did we charge for them?

I'm not sure we did, actually. But it was selling a package. And some wool shops are really quite dreary and mainly sell acrylic.

Of course, we don't sneer at the acrylic, but it wasn't our favourite yarn. It doesn't wear well, you see, does it? It pills, and it doesn't.

And so, yes, we prided ourselves on being able to do something a bit special, and it was Notting Hill. And it was called Colourway, and it was a smashing shop. But it was a good thing to try out.

[MF]

Do you have a favourite wool that you like to work with? Favourite type of wool?

[JC]

Well, Roman Yarns is absolutely the tops. And they do tweeds and silk and cotton and a chunky and... Oh, they do just a wonderful range, Roman Yarns.

And you can still find them in all the better wool shops, and the department stores still stock Roman. So their range is superb, and the colour range is wonderful. You can still get them in John Lewis in Oxford.

[MF]

And do you do them at night, by hand or by machine?

[JC]

Well, yes, both. And I'm just about to start a new sweater. It's Icelandic yarn, again, because you can get them direct from Iceland.

And it's in white and royal blue stripes. I can't wait to start. I thought I'd do it in the dark days of January, by hand, with big wooden needles.

Because it's something you can do when you're watching television or something. The last thing I made on the Bond was this sweater two winters ago, didn't I? It's an Italian yarn, which was space-dyed.

Space-dyed is when it's got every sort of ten feet, is the colour changes. So when you knit it up, it looks as if it's terribly clever, and you've changed the yarn every five rows or something. Or you've done a bearer, and it's called space-dyed.

And it's a space-dyed sweater, which I've got. I just love it to bits. So yes, I haven't used it in the last two years, but it doesn't mean to say I couldn't, because I've still got about five machines in the house.

Those decrepitudes. Because Roger spent some years taking them apart and rejigging them, so most of my machines have got bits missing, and I can't use them.

[MF]

And could people buy replacement parts?

[JC]

Oh yes, oh yes, yes. But they didn't much, did they? Because nothing really...

If they were large, they could buy an add-on piece. They could buy another ten or twenty needles and snap them onto one end. That was jolly useful, because when, in the late 80s, fashion got quite big, you wanted to wear something quite big, you could snap on an extra ten or twenty needles onto the end and make something huge.

That was great. But we didn't sell that many replacement things, did we? I'm saying it was made of plastic, but it was a jolly durable plastic.

I think the accessories sold more than the bits that you could buy added on. They sold more.

[MF]

So you bought the machine and made it into knit, and then, I know you mentioned, Roger invented additional things. So what were the accessories that you could find to go with it?

[JC]

Well, we had a counter to count the rows automatically. We had a stitching-up gadget, which was very clever for stitching up. I can't really describe it, but it was for sewing up, a quick gadget that you could catch both sides on teeth and then sew up.

Very clever. You had, what else? You had added sections of the machine that you could add on to make a wider garment.

We used to make a lot of blankets and things, and they wanted a great width, you know. We had the magazine, of course, which was always popular. What other accessories did we have?

Pattern books. Endless pattern books. Endless pattern books.

And then, as I say, in America, they wanted other things like a weaving machine and all sorts of other things. And Carrie invented some things, didn't she? She invented a...

Do you know what a French knitter is? It's sort of like a bobbin with nails on the top. She invented a super-duper kind of that.

She's got the habit of inventing things from Roger, and she invented something from Martha Stewart, which was a much bigger, clever... And it was a wind-up one, so you wound it, and this French knitter would come out the bottom. You could make all sorts of wonderful things with it.

So that wasn't... Or did you invent it and pass it on to Carrie? I thought Carrie invented it.

[MF]

That's quite a story. Thank you very much.