

# THE WOOLLY WAULKERS

(\*not a *Game of Thrones* reference!)

Waulking is the necessary process of fulling or felting woolen fabric after it's taken off the loom, so it doesn't fall apart when cut into pieces, and so that it is rain and wind resistant. Nowadays that task is performed by machines, but hundreds of years ago, it had to be done by hand.



It was a community activity, much like a barn raising or a quilting bee. Many hands make light work, as the saying goes. And waulking is heavy work!

They used songs to lighten the mood and to keep everyone in time, much like sea shanties, sung in a call-and-response style. There is a whole canon of songs created just for waulking woolen fabric.

In this photo, the woman standing at the right is leading the group in a call-and-response song, as the waulkers pound the fabric back and forth and then pass it on.

If you ever get a chance to attend a waulking demonstration, don't miss it! The group pictured here is from *Slighe nan Gàidheal*, ([www.slighe.org](http://www.slighe.org)) a nonprofit educational society that teaches and promotes the Scottish Gaelic language and culture in the Pacific Northwest.

One of the best ways to learn a new language is through song. There were a few weavers in their group, so they got the idea to learn some waulking songs, so they could share this ancient practice with the world, while shining a light on Scottish history. But in order to perform this historical reenactment, they first had to weave around 24 feet of cloth!



First, the woolen cloth is soaked in a mordant (a chemical that causes the woolen fibers to open up so they can accept dye or lock together in the felting process). In Ye Olden Days, the mordant of choice was urine. Urine was so much in demand by the wool industry that villagers would collect the stuff to sell to the weavers. Ever heard the expression, “They’re so poor they don’t have a pot to pee in?” If you couldn’t afford an extra pot for collection throughout the year, you were destitute indeed.

The cloth is sewn together from end to end, so it forms a ring that can be passed around the table. Click the link below for a short video of the waulking process:  
<https://cdn.shopify.com/videos/c/o/v/ad65253fa1c9434596f7ec775c1f830d.mp4>



After one to one and a half hours, the cloth will be checked to see if it has shrunk enough. Using the old method, they measure the cloth by knuckle (roughly one inch!).

When the cloth is finished, they sing a final song, patting and smoothing out the cloth, and folding it into a bolt.

Click on the link below to see a video of the finishing of the process:  
<https://cdn.shopify.com/videos/c/o/v/abeac13f8eeb40c5acd1a8b8ef8ecf31.mp4>

## WAULKING SONG

White the sheep that gave the wool  
Green the pastures where they fed  
Blue the skies above the pool  
Where at noon they made their bed

Sing the garden of the sea  
From whose flowers we won the dye  
Sing of sea-tang wild and free  
From our misty Isle of Skye

Light the hearts that love the sea  
Brown the face that seeks the sun  
Brown and happy, here we are  
Singing till our task is done

Move the web towards the sun  
Round the table, thump and rub  
Stretch and clap till all is done  
Stretch and clap and thump and rub

Now is waulked the web we spun  
Winter storms may rave in vain  
Bless the work by which we won  
Comfort from the wind and rain

printed in Sam Henry's Sons of the People  
collected from D.E.M. Smith on Skye in 1934