

Women and Needlework in Britain, 1920-1970

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in History

2012

Declaration of Authorship

I, Elizabeth Margaret Robinson, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

This thesis addresses needlework between 1920 and 1970 as a window into women's broader experiences, and also asserts it as a valid topic of historical analysis in its own right. Needlecraft was a ubiquitous part of women's lives which has until recently been largely neglected by historians. The growing historiography of needlework has relied heavily on fashion and design history perspectives, focusing on the products of needlework and examples of creative needlewomen. Moving beyond this model, this thesis establishes the importance of process as well as product in studying needlework, revealing the meanings women found in, attached to, and created through the ephemeral moment of making. Searching for the ordinary and typical, it eschews previous preoccupations with creation, affirming re-creation and recreation as more central to amateur needlework.

Drawing upon diverse sources including oral history research, objects, Mass Observation archives, and specialist needlework magazines, this thesis examines five key aspects of women's engagement with needlework: definitions of 'leisure' and 'work'; motivations of thrift in peacetime and war; emotions; the modern and the traditional and finally, the gendering of needlework. It explores needlework through three central themes of identity, obligation and pleasure. Whilst asserting the validity and importance of needlework as a subject of research in its own right, it also contributes to larger debates within women's history. It sheds light on the chronology and significance of domestic thrift, the meanings of feminised activities, the emotional context of home front life, women's engagement with modern design and concepts of 'leisure' and 'work' within women's history.

Acknowledgements

My thanks must go first and foremost to my joint supervisors, Amanda Vickery and Jane Hamlett. Without Amanda's boundless energy, enthusiasm and drive this thesis would certainly never have been finished. Without Jane's calm understanding, reassurance and support, it may well have finished me.

I must thank all of my oral history narrators: Audrey Ringrose, Doreen Maynard, Ghillian Potts, Jeanne, Margaret Lowry, Molly Bartlett, Muriel Bingham, Pat Fawcett, Susan Cushen and Tony Fawcett. They gave their time generously, made me feel welcome in their homes, and were hugely patient with me through this last difficult year. Thanks also go to Joyce Meader, who generously allowed me to photograph sections of her extensive private collection of Second World War knitting patterns.

I am indebted to Royal Holloway for their financial assistance through the Thomas Holloway studentship. This work was also generously supported by the London Pensions Fund. Thanks go to my mother, Jacky Robinson, for her financial and emotional support over the last year, her endless patient proofreading, and her enthusiasm for my work.

I am deeply grateful for the support, friendship and enthusiasm of fellow PhD students, especially Polly Bull, Sally Holloway, Ya-Lei Yen, Antonia Brodie, Mia Jackson, Tul Israngura Na Ayudhya, and Alice Dolan. Special thanks go to Sally, Antonia and Mia for providing feedback on individual chapters. I am also grateful to Ben Hollingham for casting his editor's eye over one chapter of this thesis, and for putting my troubles into perspective. My limit of 100,000 words is indeed 'an ocean of words' compared with his brief to write a complete history of the Russian Revolution in only 450. Thanks to Marie-Christine Ockenden, for all her practical assistance. And finally, to Mathieu Pendergast, who over the past year has cheered me up, calmed me down, consoled me and provided wonderful support.

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Abbreviations and Conventions

Organisations and Government Bodies:

BoT	The Board of Trade
RAF	Royal Air Force
WAAF	Women's Auxiliary Air Force
WI	Women's Institute
WRNS	Women's Royal Naval Service
WVS	Women's Voluntary Service

Archives:

IWM	The Imperial War Museum
MO	Mass Observation
TNA:PRO	The National Archives, formerly the Public Records Office

Periodicals:

FNI	Fancy Needlework Illustrated
K&S	Knit & Sew
NPJ	Needlecraft Practical Journal
N&N	Needlewoman and Needlecraft
NFA	Needlework For All
NI	Needlework Illustrated

Place of publication is London unless otherwise stated.

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Introduction

Throughout most of the twentieth century, textile crafts were ubiquitous amongst women, yet in the field of women's history they remain disproportionately neglected. A 1953 study by Mass Observation concluded that a third of British women were regular knitters, and another third knitted occasionally. Perhaps surprisingly it found that knitting was more popular amongst the young and 'the better-off', although there was little geographical variation across the country.¹ It is highly likely that some proportion of the third of women who were non-knitters carried out some other stitching within the home. Needlework was a mainstream female activity, not a niche one. This thesis aims to examine the 'ordinary' forms of needlework carried out at home by women across the country, focusing on knitting, crochet, embroidery and, to a lesser extent, sewing.² Whereas a limited existing historiography has tended to focus on the *products* of needlework, that is to say the handmade object, this study will foreground the *process*, the making. This is done not from a technical standpoint, but from a social and cultural one, discovering meanings and motivations in the moment of making. Through chapters on 'leisure' and 'work', thrift, emotions in the Second World War, modernity and tradition, and gender it will explore three key themes within women's lives: pleasure, obligation and identity.

The history of needlewomen lies at a cross roads between a number of historiographies. Often carried out within and for the home or family, much needlework has been closely linked to ideas of the domestic in this period, and therefore histories of domesticity and housewifery are relevant. Needlework has a complex relationship with ideas of work and leisure, and this will be briefly introduced here, before a more in-depth analysis is given in chapter one. The burgeoning field of needlework history,

¹ MO Bulletin No. 52, March 1955, 'Smoking and Knitting', p. 15. As Barbara Burman has shown, ascertaining growth or decline in needlework can be highly problematic. Barbara Burman, 'Introduction', in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 6–7. However, as this is fundamentally a history of women who *did* stitch, such fluctuations are not the central concern.

² Whilst 'needlework' is often taken to mean embroidery exclusively or primarily, for the purposes of this thesis it is taken to represent a range of popular crafts, principally knitting, crochet, embroidery, needlepoint tapestry, and some light household sewing and dressmaking. This is not an arbitrary or artificial grouping of crafts, but is based on the activities commonly grouped together within the pages of magazines such as *Stitchcraft* and *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* which are used in this study. Dressmaking was less frequently featured in these titles, and has also been explored to a greater extent by existing literature including Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999). As such it forms a peripheral element of this study. This grouping also echoes the definition used by Goggin. Maureen Daly Goggin, 'Introduction: Threading Women', in Beth Fowkes Tobin and Maureen Daly Goggin (eds), *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles: 1750-1950* (Farnham, 2009), p. 2. The term 'needlewoman' is throughout used to indicate women who engaged with such crafts, to a range of degrees.

written from a range of perspectives including art history, design history, archaeology, biography, fashion history and women's history will be outlined, exploring the strengths of current research, and the developing historiographical paradigms which this thesis challenges. This chapter will then briefly illustrate omissions and distortions introduced to women's history through the neglect of needlework history, before finally outlining the aims and methods of this thesis.

Domesticity has been a contentious issue within women's history, reflecting ambivalent attitudes towards women's role in the home within wider feminist thought. As Judy Giles has argued:

feminist historians of the 1970s and 1980s claimed that women were forced 'back home' after operating successfully in the public world of work during both world wars, and critiques of consumer culture condemned popular images that, it was claimed, bombarded women with 'false' desires for 'ideal homes'. Such histories were written in a cultural framework that envisioned domesticity as something that must be left behind if women were to become 'modern' emancipated subjects.³

However, through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, some historians came to challenge this perspective. Giles has argued that for working-class women 'both the cultural ideal of the housewife and the physical space of the home were emancipatory' compared to the poor domestic environment of their mothers' generations, and that female domesticity was 'as much a manifestation of modernity as the consciousness that sees domesticity as suffocating, and for millions of women in the West it offered opportunities for a "better" life.'⁴ Joanna Bourke has demonstrated that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, withdrawing from paid employment could be a positive decision for working-class women. In many cases a wife's domestic labour could potentially improve the material circumstances of the household more than her earning capacity, and the role of housewife could improve a woman's status within the home and the community.⁵ She also acknowledges the potential pleasures for women to

³ Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004), p. 142. Deirdre Beddoe's work is a key example of this anti-domestic perspective. Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: women between the wars 1918-1939* (1989).

⁴ Judy Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900-50* (Basingstoke, 1995), p. 68; Giles, *Parlour*, p. 3. See also Judy Giles, 'A Home of One's Own: Women and Domesticity in England 1918-1950', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 6:3 (1993), pp. 239-253; Judy Giles, 'Help for Housewives: domestic service and the reconstruction of domesticity in Britain, 1940-50', *Women's History Review*, 10:2 (2001), pp. 299-323.

⁵ Joanna Bourke, 'Housewifery in Working-Class England 1860-1914', *Past and Present*, 143:1 (1994), pp. 167-197.

be found in childrearing and homemaking.⁶ This reappraisal has also produced a range of narrower related studies.⁷

The period under study in this thesis is a particularly interesting one in the history of domesticity. In 1851 one-quarter of married women were not employed, rising to 90 per cent by 1911.⁸ In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, working-class wives who participated in low-paid, part-time or casual work were increasingly defining themselves by their domestic roles rather than as workers.⁹ The position of housewife was seen by many as desirable, and economic changes made it increasingly attainable.¹⁰ Giles claims that, despite high levels of unemployment, rising real wages for those still in work combined with smaller family sizes and affordable housing meant that the trend towards working-class housewifery continued in the interwar years.¹¹ According to Alison Light, in Britain the interwar years saw a new cultural focus on middle-class domesticity.¹² Giles has argued that the decades following the First World War saw the creation of the ‘ordinary housewife’, encompassing both the newly servantless or

⁶ Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity* (1994), p. 66.

⁷ e.g. Deborah S. Ryan, ‘“All the World and Her Husband”: The Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition, 1908-1939’, in Maggie Andrews and Mary M Talbot (eds), *All the World and Her Husband: Women in the Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture* (2000), pp. 10–22; Lisa Hirst, ‘Dressing the part: Workwear for the home 1953-1965’, *Things*, 9:Winter (1998), pp. 25–49; Jessamyn Neuhaus, ‘The Way to a Man’s Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology and Cook Books in the 1950s’, *Journal of Social History*, 32:3 (1999), pp. 529–555; Maggie Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity* (2012). A similar reassessment of the feminine can be seen in Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism* (2010).

⁸ Bourke, ‘Housewifery’, p. 168. This varied considerably by location. In 1911 35 per cent of married women in Preston were in full-time employment, predominantly in textile production. Elizabeth Roberts, ‘Women and the Domestic Economy, 1890-1970: the oral evidence’, in Michael Drake (ed.), *Time, Family and Community: Perspectives on Family and Community History* (Oxford, 1994), p. 131.

⁹ Bourke, ‘Housewifery’, p. 168.

¹⁰ Bourke, ‘Housewifery’, pp. 172–173, 175–176.

¹¹ Giles, ‘Home’, pp. 241–242. On the changes in family size in the twentieth century see Pat Thane, ‘The Social, Economic and Political Status of Women’, in Paul Johnson (ed.), *20th Century Britain: Economic, Social & Cultural Change* (1994), pp. 94–95; Pat Thane, ‘Women since 1945’, in Paul Johnson (ed.), *20th Century Britain: Economic, Social & Cultural Change* (1994), p. 392.

¹² Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991). Beddoe also argues that domesticity loomed especially large in the interwar years, although in her analysis this extends only to women. Beddoe, *Back*. However, Graham Crow and Graham Allan warn against overstating the shift towards the domestic in British society, pointing out that for women the home had long been central and even amongst so-called ‘traditional’ working-class men much of their daily life revolved around the home. Graham Crow and Graham Allan, ‘Constructing the Domestic Sphere: The Emergence of the Modern Home in Post-War Britain’, in Helen Corr and Lynn Jamieson (eds), *Politics of Everyday Life: Continuity and Change in Work and the Family* (1990), p. 17. Selina Todd stresses that for young women in employment between the wars it was work, rather than the home, which dominated their lives. Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England 1918-1950* (Oxford, 2005).

servant-poor middle class and those in the working class who increasingly had a 'home of one's own' to manage.¹³

Although the dominant narrative of histories of women in the Second World War has been of women taken out of the home and into the factories, the services and on to the land, even at the height of mobilisation the majority of British women remained full-time housewives. Their domestic work was given new national importance through the demands of food and clothing rationing, the billeting of evacuees, metal and paper salvage, and a host of other wartime changes.¹⁴ Claire Langhamer has argued that once post-war shortages began to recede British culture again saw an increased emphasis on the domestic, as more people were able to attain the kind of private home and home life that had been idealised in the 1930s.¹⁵ There was also a post-war rise of home-based leisure, exemplified by the television.¹⁶ However, on-going housing shortages meant that many continued to live in poor quality homes lacking modern amenities and in shared housing with limited privacy.¹⁷ Additionally, after an initial post-war drop in women's employment as the women's services shrank and women eagerly pursued the domestic lives denied to many by the war, formal, part-time employment outside of the home became increasingly normal for married women in what Pat Thane has described as the 'two phase work pattern'. Between the wars women generally worked from the end of their education until marriage, and then left employment. Working-class mothers might return to work as finances demanded, but once their children were old enough to supplement the family's income, they ceased. After the war, women typically left work on marriage, or from the 1950s at the birth of their first child, and then returned to work part-time after childbearing. In the 1960s this pattern became increasingly normal for middle as well as working-class women.¹⁸

¹³ For Giles 'a home of one's own' is not a matter of owner occupation but of privacy. Working-class families in this era were less likely to live in cramped or shared housing than previously. Giles, 'Home', pp. 239, 240, 243. At this time a new breed of working-class women's weekly magazines were adopting similar content to middle-class women's monthlies. Marjorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (1983), pp. 17–18.

¹⁴ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 99–103; Alison Oram, 'Bombs don't discriminate!' Women's political activism in the Second World War', in Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (eds), *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester, 1996), p. 58.

¹⁵ Claire Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40:2 (2005), pp. 341–362.

¹⁶ Langhamer, 'Meanings', pp. 352–353.

¹⁷ Langhamer, 'Meanings', pp. 349–350; Christine Zmroczek, 'Dirty linen: Women, class, and washing machines, 1920s–1960s', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 15:2 (1992), pp. 173–174.

¹⁸ Thane, 'Women', pp. 394–395, 401; Roberts, 'Domestic', pp. 132–135.

For the purpose of this study the importance of the reappraisal of the domestic within women's history is twofold. Firstly, women's amateur needlework was predominantly carried out within the home and therefore recent histories of domesticity provide a valuable background to this study, and a field to which it can contribute. Secondly, this reappraisal and interest is indicative of an atmosphere open to histories of ordinary women on their own terms, starting with what was important and common to them as historical subjects, rather than focusing solely on exceptional women or behaviour and the history of the struggles which have given modern women such a relatively large degree of freedom. From this perspective it is clear that such a ubiquitous female pursuit as needlework warrants historical analysis.

The nature of this domestic activity has rarely been clear, combining elements of both 'work' and 'leisure'. It is possible that this complex position as at once both and neither 'work' and 'leisure' has contributed to the neglect as a subject within women's history until recent years, as it fails to fit neatly within either of these areas for broader study.

Women's leisure history has been shown to be complex and sometimes problematic. Joyce Kay argues that women's leisure history has been relatively understudied, with historians focusing instead on areas such as education, paid work, and politics.¹⁹ As Langhamer has stated, leisure history has traditionally focused on working-class male leisure, examining 'the relationship between social class and the destruction or development, use and "control" of particular leisure forms'.²⁰ As these histories have focused on the activities most relevant to this standpoint, such as pub use and sport, 'our knowledge of the specific leisure experiences of women has consequently been limited to an assessment of their engagement in, or exclusion from, pre-defined leisure forms'.²¹ Leisure historians have conceptualised leisure in terms of spare time, or freely chosen activities, and have emphasised "institutional", commercial, or organised out-of-doors, leisure "activity".²² This tendency to concentrate on activities singled out by researchers as valid because they fit this model, or as interesting because they strike the historian as unusual can be seen in more general works such as Kay's study of leisure among suffrage campaigners. Examining entries in *The Suffrage Annual and Women's*

¹⁹ Joyce Kay, 'No Time for Recreations till the Vote is Won'? Suffrage Activists and Leisure in Edwardian Britain', *Women's History Review*, 16:4 (2007), p. 539.

²⁰ Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England, 1920-60* (Manchester, 2000), p. 1.

²¹ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, p. 1.

²² Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, p. 1.

Who's Who, Kay seeks to challenge notions of 'the single-minded, worthy suffrage supporter', demonstrating that many maintained separate leisure interests.²³ However, she fails to recognise that the ubiquity of activities such as reading and needlework would likely have resulted in few women thinking them sufficiently notable to include in their entries. Combined with her own bias towards more unusual activities this means that activities with fewer mentions in the *Who's Who*, such as golf (32 references) and animal breeding (8 references) receive considerably more coverage in her work than needlework, which had 34 references and would almost certainly have been more common than this statistic suggests.²⁴

Having identified significant issues in the field as it stood Langhamer has turned to a framework based upon the work of feminists within leisure studies from the 1980s onwards, who challenged 'malestream' definitions of leisure.²⁵ This is outlined in chapter one.²⁶

The past two decades in particular have seen a slowly growing historiography of women and textile crafts.²⁷ Some, such as Mary C. Beaudry, A. Mary Murphy, V. R. Geuter, Elizabeth Wayland Barber, Bernice Archer and Alan Jeffreys have sought to use textile crafts as a window onto the relatively hidden histories of women, rather than a subject in their own right.²⁸ Reading textiles as historical sources, Rozsika Parker and Geuter have examined the history of embroidery, seeing the creation and choice of embroidery motifs by women as revealing much about their attitudes to their roles as

²³ Kay, 'Recreations', p. 536.

²⁴ Kay, 'Recreations', pp. 539–543. This neglect of needlework also results in the significant omission of Suffragette prison embroidery from her discussion of leisure within prison. Kay, 'Recreations', p. 543; Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1996), pp. 200–201; Maureen Daly Goggin, 'Fabricating Identity: Janie Terrero's 1912 Embroidered English Suffrage Signature Handkerchief', in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and Things, 1750-1950: Gendered Material Strategies* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 17–42.

²⁵ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, p. 16.

²⁶ Below, pp. 40–43.

²⁷ It should be noted that in addition to the largely academic works discussed here, other histories have been produced for a crafting audience, e.g. Richard Rutt, *A History of Hand Knitting* (1987); Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (New York, 1988); Heather Nicholson, *The Loving Stitch: A History of Knitting and Spinning in New Zealand* (Auckland, 1998); Rosemary McLeod, *Thrift to Fantasy: Home Textile Crafts of the 1930s-1950s* (Auckland, 2005); Jane Waller, *Knitting Fashions of the 1940s: Styles, Patterns and History* (Wiltshire, 2006).

²⁸ Mary C. Beaudry, *Findings: the Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing* (2006), pp. 1–2; A. Mary Murphy, 'The Theory and Practice of Counting Stitches as Stories: Material Evidences of Autobiography in Needlework', *Women's Studies*, 32:5 (2003), p. 642; V. R. Geuter, 'Women and Embroidery in Seventeenth-Century Britain: the Social, Religious and Political Meanings of Domestic Needlework' (unpublished PhD thesis, Aberystwyth, 1996); Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: the First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (1995); Bernice Archer and Alan Jeffreys, 'The Women's Embroideries of Internment in the Far East 1942-1945', in Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum (eds), *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire* (New York, 2012), pp. 244–260.

women in society.²⁹ Murphy takes this idea significantly further, arguing that non-pictorial, more utilitarian, textile work can also reveal much about the tastes, personality and priorities of the needlewoman, although she relates this to an individualised, biographical approach rather than as part of a broader history of women or ideas of gender.³⁰ Mara Witzling has described quilting as ‘a visual language and culture indigenous to women’, and argued that quilts can be read as historical sources.³¹ Heather Pristash, Inez Schaechterle and Sue Carter Wood have also argued that needlework of all varieties needs to be understood as a form of discourse, and further, that the very act of making must be seen as ‘just as rhetorically meaningful as the end product itself.’³²

There has been a comparatively large amount of work on needlework in the nineteenth century and before, leaving the twentieth century relatively understudied. Zena Forster has examined embroidery and geographies of home in the nineteenth century, focusing on the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell, demonstrating how stitchery was used to create, reinforce and negotiate identities, ideals and even morality based on gender and class.³³ Laurie Yager Lieb has written on contradictory attitudes towards needlework (and by extension, women) in the eighteenth century, admired as industrious and virtuous, yet denigrated as frivolous.³⁴ Others, including Patricia Zakreski, Lynn M. Alexander, Christina Walkley and Helen Rogers, looked at women participating in paid needlework in the nineteenth century.³⁵ Clive Edwards has researched women and crafts from 1750 to 1900, although this work is limited (and possibly distorted) by its attempt to find in needlework a ‘prehistory of DIY’.³⁶

²⁹ Parker, *Subversive*; Geuter, ‘Embroidery’, pp. 264–352.

³⁰ Murphy, ‘Counting’, pp. 642–643, 646–648.

³¹ Mara Witzling, ‘Quilt Language: towards a poetics of quilting’, *Women’s History Review*, 18:4 (2009), pp. 619–637.

³² Heather Pristash, Inez Schaechterle, and Sue Carter Wood, ‘The Needle as the Pen: Intentionality, Needlework, and the Production of Alternate Discourses of Power’, in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles: 1750-1950* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 13–30.

³³ Zena Forster, ‘The Home-Makers: Needlework, Homes and Domestic Femininities in Middle Class, Mid-Nineteenth Century England with Particular Reference to Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Nottingham, 1995).

³⁴ Laurie Yager Lieb, ‘“The Works of Women are Symbolical”: Needlework in the Eighteenth Century’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 10:2 (1986), pp. 28–44.

³⁵ Patricia Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman* (Aldershot, 2006); Lynn M. Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens, Ohio, 2003); Christina Walkley, *The Ghost in the Looking Glass: The Victorian Seamstress* (1981); Helen Rogers, ‘“The Good Are Not Always Powerful, nor the Powerful Always Good”: The Politics of Women’s Needlework in Mid-Victorian London’, *Victorian Studies*, 40:4 (1997), pp. 589–623.

³⁶ Clive Edwards, ‘“Home is Where the Art is”: Women, Handicrafts and Home Improvements 1750-1900’, *Journal of Design History*, 19:1 (2006), pp. 11–21.

The twentieth century has been included in two key studies of embroidery across the centuries, Rozsika Parker's ground-breaking feminist work *The Subversive Stitch* and Thomasina Beck's more populist *The Embroiderer's Story: Needlework from the Renaissance to the Present Day*. However, the treatment of twentieth-century embroidery in these works is problematic, displaying a disinterest in more recent 'ordinary' stitching. Whilst Beck claims that her study 'is concerned mainly with domestic needlework', this focus veers abruptly at the twentieth century. In the chapter dealing with Victorian needlework much attention is paid to trends in popular needlework, but the following chapter on the twentieth century focuses on individual designers and artists, and those who encouraged readers of their books to develop their own designs. There is little on commercial patterns or on casual domestic embroiderers. Here Beck shows no interest in the activities of ordinary women, or general trends outside of art schools, the Embroiderers' Guild and the magazine it produced for its members.³⁷ Parker, having explored domestic and also paid needlework from the thirteenth century to the end of the Victorian era, similarly switches focus when coming to the twentieth century, devoting her final chapter to embroidery in art and design, with a particular focus on debates around the definition of 'craft' and 'art'. Whilst important to Parker's own interest as an art historian, and her political project to establish a place in the art world for women's craft, this is quite alien to embroidery as practiced by ordinary women.³⁸

This abandonment of commercialized, ordinary and domestic needlework by these histories has some troubling implications. In neither case is it the logical progression of the study, and so this diversion must be explained. Perhaps this is simply a result of a desire to avoid telling a story of decline. Both Beck and Parker have positive views of embroidery, and, unlike many of the other texts discussed here, these are books aimed at least in part at needlewomen. By focusing on the blossoming of embroidery in twentieth-century art schools Beck and Parker are able to end their works on a relatively

³⁷ Thomasina Beck, *The Embroiderer's Story: Needlework from the Renaissance to the Present Day* (Newton Abbot, 1995), pp. 8, 98–127, 128–156.

³⁸ Parker, *Subversive*, pp. 189–215. In a similar vein, the first volume of Constance Howard's series of *Twentieth-Century Embroidery* books opens with a brief discussion of prevailing trends in early twentieth-century needlework. The remainder of this book, and the subsequent volumes devote themselves almost entirely to the work of individual artists and designers, trends and developments within embroidery at art schools, in fashion, exhibitions, and organizations, commenting occasionally on school needlework education in terms of its adherence to or convergence from the art school ideal, and rarely mentioning embroidery as it was practiced by ordinary women across the country. Constance Howard, *Twentieth-Century Embroidery in Great Britain to 1939* (1981), pp. 9–18; Constance Howard, *Twentieth-Century Embroidery in Great Britain, 1940-1963* (1983); Constance Howard, *Twentieth-Century Embroidery in Great Britain, 1964-1977* (1984).

optimistic note. It may also be a result of a frustration with the lack of known provenance when looking at earlier examples, with the historians enthusiastically embracing twentieth-century work which can be tied not only to a name, but to an ‘important’ name, an artist. However a third, more problematic, explanation seems more likely. Domestic needlework from the nineteenth century and before can be seen as being legitimized as a subject of study through antiquity, and the lack of other creative, occupational and recreational avenues open to women in these times. Twentieth-century domestic needlework, in contrast, with its supposedly ‘naff’ antimacassars and crinoline ladies, was produced in an age when some women could gain a level of recognition as artists and designers. With such avenues (partially) open to women, the art school and the design studio are presented as the pinnacle of needlework by Beck and Parker. This suggests that needlework was always a potential ‘art form’, constrained by its association with oppressed women, and that ideally it transcends its role in ordinary women’s domestic lives and homecraft. The implication is that without the legitimization of age and oppression the crinoline lady tray cloth is not to be taken seriously. Such an approach devalues needlework that was ‘only’ recreational and domestic.

Others have criticized the art history approach to needlework. Coming from a more sociological perspective, Joanne Turney has demonstrated the flaws in this perspective which ‘elevates the extraordinary at the expense of the ordinary’:

Applying an institutional set of values to objects outside of its remit, trivialises the objects’ original intent, or the intent of the objects’ maker/s. The object, therefore, becomes something else in terms of meaning, and in the case of the exhibition of home craft, strips it of utility and meanings such as relationship bonding, familial ties and the desire, hope and aspirations of the maker, turning it into an object of spectacle within the public domain. This type of institutionalisation of home craft silences the voice of the maker/amateur, and thus negates the experience and process of making.³⁹

However, Turney’s published work, *The Culture of Knitting*, focuses heavily on the use of knitting in art and fashion.⁴⁰

Several studies have focused on needlework and sewing from a design perspective which, whilst providing a rationale for researching this area of women’s history, has its

³⁹ Joanne Turney, ‘Home Craft in Britain 1975-2002’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Southampton, 2002), p. 37. Despite defining this work as covering the period 1975-2002 it is largely a contemporary study.

⁴⁰ Joanne Turney, *The Culture of Knitting* (Oxford, 2009).

own flaws. These histories tend to celebrate and highlight acts of original ‘creation’, often underrepresenting or dismissing the ‘re-creation’ from commercial patterns more common in domestic needlework. Taking a top-down approach, some historians have focused on the lives and works of individual designers.⁴¹ Cally Blackman broadens this approach, tracing a number of changes in knitwear fashion and the products and industry related to domestic knitting in her examination of the life and career of knitting pattern designer Marjory Tillotson.⁴² This work demonstrates the important distinction between the value of needlework within design history and its value within women’s history. Blackman makes clear that, for her, only good design validates knitting as a subject for study:

For many people ‘knitting’ still tends to imply old ladies and maiden aunts making ill-fitting garments to give to their relatives at Christmas, and it continues to be the butt of innumerable jokes. While it is certainly true that some knitting deserves the bad reputation that it gets, much handknitting is, and has always been, of a very high standard.⁴³

Others have focused on broad trends within needlework design, distancing the history of *needlework* from that of *needlewomen*.⁴⁴ In contrast, Cheryl Buckley’s work has sought to affirm the place of individual domestic needlewomen within design history, and as designers, emphasizing the agency of women in choosing, altering and adapting, and even abandoning altogether the commercial patterns available to them.⁴⁵ Also coming from a design history perspective, Fiona Hackney’s work on home craft in women’s magazines in the 1920s and 1930s provides interesting insights into the integration of the feminine into ‘modern’ design in this era, but (quite reasonably) leaves many questions unanswered, particularly due to its emphasis on the products rather than the processes of craft.⁴⁶ Despite her insistence that ‘In terms of pleasure and satisfaction, amateur handicrafts need to be looked at from the points of view of those who undertook them – and oral history interviews leave one in little doubt about the rich

⁴¹ e.g. Beryl Dean and Pamela Pavitt, *Rebecca Crompton and Elizabeth Grace Thomson: Pioneers of Stitchery in the 1930s* (1996).

⁴² Cally Blackman, ‘Handknitting in Britain from 1908–39: the Work of Marjory Tillotson’, *Textile History*, 29:2 (1998), pp. 177–200.

⁴³ Blackman, ‘Handknitting’, p. 198.

⁴⁴ Jennie Atkinson, ‘Unravelling the Knitting Pattern’, *Text: For the Study of Textile Art, Design and History*, 36 (2008), pp. 21–25; Marilyn Willis, ‘Hidden skills of an English housewife: an examination of the marginalisation of domestic hand-knitting in the 1930s’, *Text: For the Study of Textile Art, Design and History*, 36 (2008), pp. 50–55.

⁴⁵ Cheryl Buckley, ‘On the Margins: Theorizing the History and Significance of Making and Designing Clothes at Home’, *Journal of Design History*, 11:2 (1998), pp. 157–171.

⁴⁶ Fiona Hackney, ‘“Use Your Hands for Happiness”: Home Craft and Make-do-and-Mend in British Women’s Magazines in the 1920s and 1930s’, *Journal of Design History*, 19:1 (2006), pp. 23–38.

rewards they brought many people', Pat Kirkham's work focuses on self-consciously defined 'handicrafts', craft philosophy, the art vs. craft debate, education, design and the most rarefied and skilled end of craft practice.⁴⁷ Although interesting and important in its own right, this can tell us little about the more commonplace activities of women in these years.

The generally understudied field of textile craft history was given a boost in 1999 with the publication of Barbara Burman's edited collection *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*. Burman relates her collection to wider historical debates, arguing that the continuation of dressmaking in western societies can undermine views that the Industrial Revolution 'transformed the previously productive home into a haven of leisured consumption'.⁴⁸ *The Culture of Sewing* was written primarily by historians of dress and design and, as Burman explains:

The authors of this book share the belief that the common and everyday character of their subject is precisely what makes it significant. Collectively they are claiming a proper place for it within our understandings of the material culture, and consumer culture, of the modern age.⁴⁹

The focus on material and consumer culture are key, and these are fields which have been greatly impoverished by the exclusion of the domestically produced. Redressing this, the book seeks to 'explore changing modes and experiences in relation to the production and consumption of clothing'.⁵⁰ With this focus in mind, many chapters in this collection focus heavily on non-elite fashion, women's wider clothing needs, finished items and dressmakers as designers.⁵¹ This collection often focuses on women's involvement in the culture of fashion, emphasising their roles as consumer/producers, purchasers of fabric, magazines, sewing machines and paper patterns. Where the

⁴⁷ Pat Kirkham, 'Women and the Inter-War Handicrafts Revival', in Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (eds), *A View From the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design* (1989), pp. 174–183.

⁴⁸ Burman, 'Introduction', p. 3.

⁴⁹ Burman, 'Introduction', p. 3.

⁵⁰ Burman, 'Introduction', p. 4.

⁵¹ Christopher Breward, 'Patterns of Respectability: Publishing, Home Sewing and the Dynamics of Class and Gender 1870-1914', in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 21–31; Barbara Burman, 'Made at Home by Clever Fingers: Home Dressmaking in Edwardian England', in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 33–53; Fiona Hackney, 'Making Modern Women, Stitch by Stitch': Dressmaking and Women's Magazines in Britain 1919-39', in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 73–95; Carol Tulloch, 'There's No Place Like Home: Home Dressmaking and Creativity in the Jamaican Community of the 1940s to the 1960s', in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 111–125; Mary M Brooks, 'Patterns of Choice: Women's and Children's Clothing in the Wallis Archive, York Castle Museum', in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 169–192.

process of sewing is discussed it is primarily as a strategy for obtaining the *product* of a finished garment. Some contributions become histories of *wearing* and *marketing* homemade clothes, not of making them, of the homemade dress rather than the dressmaker. Examining the economic and social conditions of historical dressmaking, and the purposes and uses of the finished items, this collective work could be said to be emphasising the wanting/need of clothing, and the implications of having/wearing it, with relatively little coverage of the intermediary process of making/doing. This thesis, in contrast, seeks to highlight making/doing.

A number of works have been published in the wake of *The Culture of Sewing*, and many of these new works also emphasise product over process, and creation over recreation.⁵² Although Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin's edited collection *Women and Things, 1750-1950* argues that 'women in the process of making and manipulating things were not only engaged in self-definition and identity performance, but were actively engaged in meaning-making practices that involved the construction, circulation, and maintenance of knowledge', Goggin's chapter on Janie Terrero's suffrage prison embroidery examines the context and meaning of the finished handkerchief, but not the process of its making.⁵³ Their earlier *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles: 1750-1950* aims to re-focus the study of needlework, looking at 'material strategies related to needlework and textiles rather than solely the material objects themselves', examining the processes as well as the products of needlework.⁵⁴ A wide-ranging collection, it focuses on nineteenth-century America, also taking in such diverse subjects as lace making in Puerto Rico and needlework in Venetian Convents. However, the chapter closest thematically and chronologically to this thesis, Marcia McLean's oral history investigation into home dressmaking in 1940s Canada, nonetheless focuses on attitudes towards finished objects rather than the

⁵² Linda Connell has produced a book on textiles owned (and predominantly, though not exclusively, made) by the Women's Institute. Based on a touring exhibition, this consists mostly of images of surviving objects used to tell the history of the activities and development of the Women's Institute. This is largely an organisational history of the WI and privileges product over process. Linda Connell (ed.), *Textile Treasures of the WI* (Southampton, 2007). Rachel Moseley's work on dressmaking also emphasises the dress rather than the making. Rachel Moseley, 'Respectability Sewn Up: Dressmaking and Film Star Style in the 50s and 60s', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4:4 (2001), pp. 473–490. In her wider history of textiles and textile production in the Second World War, Suzanne Griffith examines domestic needlework, but draws heavily on *Embroidery*, the magazine of the Embroiderer's Guild, which was not available to non-members until 1950. Thus she could not be said to be studying 'ordinary' women. Suzanne Griffith, *Stitching for Victory* (Stroud, 2009).

⁵³ Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, 'Introduction: Materializing Women', in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and Things, 1750-1950: Gendered Material Strategies* (Farnham, 2009), p. 4; Goggin, 'Fabricating'.

⁵⁴ Goggin, 'Threading', pp. 3–4.

process of making, with the exception of an examination of women's attitudes towards their sewing machines.⁵⁵

The work of Sarah Gordon is perhaps most in tune with the aims of this research, examining women sewing for themselves and their families in America, and goes the furthest towards highlighting process alongside product.⁵⁶ Looking exclusively at the sewing of clothes, she argues that during the early twentieth century 'As mass-produced clothing became more accessible and desirable and more women had money of their own to spend, the symbolic meanings of sewing became apparent', as books, companies and magazines increasingly had to convince women not only to continue to buy their products for sewing, but to continue to sew at all. To this end, she claims, advertisers in particular linked sewing to the ideals of the attractively dressed, economical wife and doting mother, and presented sewing as an easy and enjoyably creative activity.⁵⁷ She also points to the implication of sewing in the dynamics of family economy, stating that in 'a family in which a woman did not earn wages, whether to sew was often a question of a man's money versus a woman's time', a struggle which the husband's finances usually won.⁵⁸ Whilst a general focus on the homemade dress rather than the act of dressmaking is sometimes problematic in Gordon's work (she, for instance, fails to acknowledge any distinction between pride and enjoyment in a finished dress and enjoyment of the process of making, assuming that the former was inextricably linked to the latter), she does at times go beyond this, for example looking at the importance of the time and effort involved in the meaning of mothers sewing clothes for their children.⁵⁹

Despite increased interest in recent years, domestic needlework in twentieth-century Britain remains understudied. Research into this area offers to throw light not only directly onto needlework, but also onto the wider area of domesticity and the debates around women's leisure. Related studies have suffered from a lack of available research in this area and, in some cases, from a hostility to needlework.

⁵⁵ Marcia McLean, 'I Dearly Loved That Machine': Women and the Objects of Home Sewing in the 1940s', in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles: 1750-1950* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 69–89.

⁵⁶ Sarah A. Gordon, 'Boundless Possibilities': Home Sewing and the Meanings of Women's Domestic Work in the United States, 1890-1930', *Journal of Women's History*, 16:2 (2004), pp. 68–91; Sarah Gordon, *Make It Yourself: Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930* (New York, 2009).

⁵⁷ Gordon, *Make*, pp. x, 79–80, 90–93.

⁵⁸ Gordon, 'Boundless', p. 71.

⁵⁹ Gordon, *Make*, pp. 16–18, 31–34.

Neglecting needlework, the history of labour-saving devices has been distorted by the omission of the sewing machine. Avner Offer and Sue Bowden have studied the spread of household appliances, but the sewing machine is conspicuously absent from their work. Yet Marcia McLean has noted that amongst her Canadian oral history interviewees it was not uncommon to own a sewing machine in the 1940s in the absence of any other labour saving device or even an electricity supply. In Britain, Elizabeth Roberts has commented that sewing machines were common in working-class homes before the First World War. Thus the exclusion of sewing threatens to undermine Offer and Bowden's influential thesis that in the early to mid-twentieth century appliances which reduced women's work were a low priority in consumer spending.⁶⁰

This oversight is mild compared with the antipathy towards needlework shown in histories of girls' education written in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶¹ Plain needlework for making and mending clothing was an important part of girls' education in the charitable, dame and other schools that comprised the working-class educational sector before the 1870 Education Act, and was seen as sufficiently important to be made compulsory for all girls attending government grant maintained schools from 1862.⁶² After the 1870 Act the domestic content of girls' education continued to expand.⁶³ For middle-class girls education in small establishments or in the home did often include sewing in the form of fine decorative work, seen as one of the 'accomplishments' necessary to display middle-class femininity and attract a husband.⁶⁴ However, the newer 'day' or 'high' schools, emerging from the 1850s, generally prepared girls for domesticity through a liberal academic education, and needlework lessons were often infrequent and informal.⁶⁵

It is clear that needlework is significant in the history of girls' education, but the field has often been hampered by an essential lack of interest in or even hostility towards

⁶⁰ Sue Bowden, 'The New Consumerism', in Paul Johnson (ed.), *20th Century Britain: Economic, Social & Cultural Change* (1994), pp. 242–262; Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, 'The Technological Revolution that Never Was: Gender, Class and the Diffusion of Household Appliances in Interwar England', in Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough (eds), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 244–274; McLean, 'Dearly'; Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984), p. 161.

⁶¹ Although not directly countering these trends in education history, Carol Dyhouse's 1981 account of girlhood and education presents a more nuanced perspective, seeing education in the context of wider societal forces and socialisation in the home. Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (1981).

⁶² June Purvis, 'Domestic Subjects Since 1870', in Ivor Goodson (ed.), *Social Histories of The Secondary Curriculum* (1985), p. 148.

⁶³ Annmarie Turnbull, 'Learning Her Womanly Work: the Elementary School Curriculum, 1870-1914', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women 1850-1950* (Oxford, 1987), p. 90.

⁶⁴ Purvis, 'Domestic', p. 156.

⁶⁵ Purvis, 'Domestic', pp. 156–157.

domestic subjects. June Purvis groups together a great number of subjects in the term 'domestic', showing little interest in examining the content of each.⁶⁶ Annmarie Turnbull has argued that working-class domestic education was designed to teach girls that their role in life was to serve others, within their households and in the homes of others as servants.⁶⁷ She suggests that needlework lessons became valued almost as much for their calming influence and ability to develop feminine qualities as for their practical usefulness.⁶⁸ Jane Martin calls girls 'victims' of domestic education and Dena Attar associates domestic subjects with 'suffering' and a denial to girls of the male educational norm.⁶⁹ Bourke has criticised these views, highlighting instead the utility and popularity of these lessons amongst working-class girls and women.⁷⁰ In other histories, girls' responses have been noted only to champion examples of rebellion, as when Turnbull relates the tale of a girl running out of a needlework lesson, and Purvis tells of girls who, unsupervised in a housewifery centre 'jumped on the bed, threw pillows, drowned the doll and swept dirt under the mats.'⁷¹ However, these are not shown to be specific to domestic subjects, or anything other than a normal reaction to repetitive or unsupervised lessons. In contrast, Blackman, looking at knitting in the early twentieth century, has criticised the teaching of needlework using repetitive drills and specimen pieces as dull and uninspiring, but does not see the teaching of needlework in schools as inherently problematic.⁷² Beryl Dean and Pamela Pavitt have portrayed a youthful Rebecca Crompton, later a renowned embroiderer, being reprimanded at school for sewing in the back of class during a scripture lesson.⁷³ Historians in this field have often accepted male, middle-class education as the norm, or ideal to which girls should aspire, with any sex differentiation assumed to handicap girls. It is not seen that needlework may have value and could be considered something of which boys were 'deprived'. Attar notes that whilst girls did needlework 'boys were taught more advanced mathematics, a foreign language or other subjects which were denied to the girls'.⁷⁴ She assumes that foreign languages or advanced mathematics are

⁶⁶ Purvis, 'Domestic', pp. 146, 151.

⁶⁷ Turnbull, 'Womanly', p. 87.

⁶⁸ Turnbull, 'Womanly', pp. 88–89.

⁶⁹ Jane Martin, *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England* (1999), pp. 83–84; Dena Attar, *Wasting Girls' Time: The History and Politics of Home Economics* (1990), pp. xi, 20, 38.

⁷⁰ Bourke, 'Housewifery', pp. 184–187.

⁷¹ Grace Foakes, *My Part of the River* (1976), p. 47 cited in Purvis, 'Domestic', p. 152; Turnbull, 'Womanly', p. 91.

⁷² Blackman, 'Handknitting', p. 179.

⁷³ Dean and Pavitt, *Crompton* unnumbered pages. For more on 'naughty' needlework, see below, pp.227–228.

⁷⁴ Attar, *Wasting*, p. 38.

inherently desirable, despite the fact that they may not be utilised in later life, whilst needlework, which could later be practiced for thrift, as a pastime, or for employment, is assumed to be fundamentally undesirable. It might be equally said that boys were the ones 'wasting their time' on abstract and unpractical education.

In contrast to such negativity, this thesis will be informed by my own practice of and appreciation for a variety of needlework. Interestingly, Turnbull, whose published views of needlework education as an instrument for teaching oppressive forms of femininity are outlined above, is herself also a needlewoman, being both a quilter and embroiderer. However, elsewhere she has expressed ambivalence towards these passions, and explained how the negative reactions of other academics to her hobbies led her to conceal them.⁷⁵

This study seeks first and foremost to discover the ordinary and the amateur. As with other areas of social and leisure history, needlework history is distorted if it focuses largely or solely on those most immersed or proficient in the activity. A history of pub culture would be deeply flawed if it concentrated on those pub-drinkers who drank the most or the best, as would a history of popular cinema audiences that focused on film goers who were the most discerning or voracious. Thus, this thesis attempts, wherever possible, to resist the lure of prominent, professional or formally trained needlewomen. Although the term 'needlewoman' is used throughout, this is not an identity that would have been adopted by most women researched here. They were women, and women stitched: this was not extraordinary or noteworthy. However, the history of the un-noteworthy can be particularly hard to access, and the research process has involved many promising leads towards museum objects, personal papers and potential oral history narrators, that have had to be abandoned, pointing as they did towards examples of excellence and professional work.

Defining professional needlework can be difficult. As shown above, both design and art history perspectives tend to focus on an elite, which as sociologist of American quilting Marybeth Stalp indicates, often tells us little about more ordinary practice: 'The majority of quilt research is centered on finished quilts, and not quilters. Research that does center on quilters often highlights professional or artistic quilters, and not the creative processes that everyday quilters face.'⁷⁶ Whilst avoiding professional artists is relatively straightforward, other forms of textile work blur boundaries. A woman

⁷⁵ Parker, *Subversive*, p. 214.

⁷⁶ Marybeth C Stalp, *Quilting: The Fabric of Everyday Life* (Oxford, 2007), p. 24.

stitching on behalf of others may be doing so as a gift, a reciprocal favour, or for pay. The difficulty of separating women's professional or gainful textile work from that carried out for themselves, friends and family has been a recurring issue in the history of women and needlework, with some, such as Parker, integrating paid and unpaid work. Others such as Burman and Gordon have sought to focus on unpaid work whilst also acknowledging that this distinction is precarious and not always clear from the sources.⁷⁷ In an attempt to access ordinary, unpaid amateur needlework this study has, where possible, excluded women who stitched professionally, were needlework teachers, studied art at university or were members of the Embroiderers' Guild.

Design and art history perspectives have valued the act of original creation above all others, prioritising the unique object over the re-created or ubiquitous, and this has served to exclude the vast numbers of women who relied on commercial patterns for their stitching from needlework history. In my work, in contrast, I seek to shed light also on re-creation and recreation. Re-creation values women's activities as historically significant and valuable when they involve following commercial patterns to replicate the designs of others, not only when they deviate from them. Recreation highlights the possibility of women finding enjoyment in needlework, and asserts this enjoyment as a valid subject for historical research. Connected with this, I also seek to foreground process rather than product, inverting the more dominant priority within needlework history, switching the emphasis from the tangible, archivable and exhibitable end result to the moment of making.

This approach brings with it its own methodological hurdles. Examining creation and product leads one logically to completed objects in museums and private hands and to records of prominent designers and associated companies.⁷⁸ Moving away from these approaches, this study has examined a wide range of sources, including oral histories, needlework magazines, objects, letters and diaries from the Imperial War Museum archive and data from Mass Observation.

Focusing on re-creation, needlework magazines provide vital insights. Magazines were only one of many sources of needlework patterns. Individually sold knitting, sewing and embroidery patterns were popular throughout this period, and collections

⁷⁷ Parker, *Subversive*; Burman, 'Introduction', p. 11; Burman, 'Clever', p. 33; Gordon, 'Boundless', p. 69.

⁷⁸ It should be noted that some recent creativity-focused research has focused on the adaptations and inventions of more ordinary needlework, and in these cases oral history in particular has been used to great effect, e.g. Tulloch, 'Place'; Buckley, 'Margins'; McLean, 'Dearly'.

are held by a number of institutions including the National Art Library and the Winchester School of Art's Knitting Reference Library. However, they rarely include detailed publication information and as such can be difficult to date, and frequently provide little information of use to the historian seeking cultural meaning. Intended primarily as technical documents, they typically offer only an image or two along with instructions written as concisely as possible.⁷⁹ Magazines, on the other hand, sometimes included a short preamble with each pattern explaining its appeal to the reader, articles, letters from editors and advertisements. They were produced throughout the period under study, allowing for comparison across time, and have also, unlike loose patterns, been systematically archived within the British Library. Whilst selected needlework books have also been consulted in the course of research these have not been used as extensively as magazines. Through much of this period their prohibitive cost narrowed considerably the number and range of women who consumed them.

Whilst women's magazines have been studied by other historians, their needlework content has largely been neglected.⁸⁰ Specialist magazines such as *Stitchcraft* are even more marginalised. However, needlework was an important aspect of women's magazine consumption. Mary Grieve, editor of *Woman* magazine, wrote of her early work in women's magazines: 'it had not yet dawned on me that for many years knitting would be one of my main editorial preoccupations . . . it continued to be the biggest single circulation raiser in the women's press.'⁸¹ Giles found that women claimed needlework was an important part of their magazine purchasing:

In interviews, lower-middle and working-class women have consistently reported that they bought magazines for the knitting and sewing patterns, the

⁷⁹ For a brief history of late-Victorian and Edwardian knitting patterns see Atkinson, 'Unravelling'.

⁸⁰ Ferguson, *Forever*. Other studies make only brief reference to needlework. Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine 1800-1914* (1996), pp. 67–68, 78; Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer, and Sandra Hebron, *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine* (1991), pp. 94, 145; Cynthia L. White, *Women's Magazines 1693-1968* (1970), pp. 31, 45, 56, 160, 162. David Reed appears to absorb needlework into the large and vague category of 'domestic' magazine content. In the case of women's magazines between around 10 to 37 per cent of content fell into this category, significantly limiting the nuance of his analysis of the women's press. David Reed, *The Popular Magazine in Britain and the United States 1880-1960* (1997), pp. 207, 236–262. Fiona Hackney, Jane Waller and Michael Vaughan-Rees have been unusual in their focus on needlework within women's magazines. Hackney, 'Making'; Hackney, 'Happiness'; Jane Waller and Michael Vaughan-Rees, *Women in Wartime: The Role of Women's Magazines 1939-1945* (1987), pp. 42, 84–92, 97–99.

⁸¹ Mary Grieve, *Millions Made My Story* (1964), pp. 80-81, cited Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (2008).

recipes or the advice on health and childcare. In other words the ostensible purpose of magazine consumption was to acquire information and advice.⁸²

Hackney has claimed that sewing patterns in particular were important for magazine circulation as women could see the value of the 'free' pattern as justifying the otherwise slightly indulgent purchase of a magazine for entertainment.⁸³

Although knitting, sewing and embroidery featured in general titles aimed at women readers, this research has focused on specialist needlework magazines. As women's magazines featured stitching alongside a range of other interests and features the information to be gleaned from them on the subject of needlework is sparser than in specialist titles. Having identified some one hundred and sixteen twentieth-century needlework magazine titles in The British Library's newspaper catalogue, it was clear that only a small section of these could be studied. *Stitchcraft* was an iconic and obvious choice, selling over a quarter of a million copies a month in the 1930s.⁸⁴ Given the difficulties of ascertaining circulation figures for much of this period, further titles were chosen on the basis of longevity, taken as an indicator of enduring appeal and enabling comparison across time.⁸⁵ *Stitchcraft* is a straightforward example, first published in 1932 and continuing under the same name for fifty years until 1982, and *Needlework for All* was published from 1910 to 1937. In contrast *Fancy Needlework Illustrated* was launched in 1907, changing its name to *Needlework Illustrated* in 1940, *Needlework* in 1956, *Needlework and Home* in 1959 and ending trading in 1960 under the name *Knit & Sew*. *Needlecraft Practical Journal*, which had been in print under that name since 1907, and previously as *Needlecraft* since 1904, merged with *The Needlewoman* (itself launched in 1919) in 1940, forming *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*. This title continued until 1970, when it was relaunched as *Needlewoman*, and was amalgamated with *Stitchcraft* in 1977. These are the titles which form the core of the research on needlework magazines. They were sampled on a 5-yearly basis from 1920 to 1965. In order to track the impact of the Second World War on needlework and needlework publishing issues were read from 1939-1945 and 1947. This sample was augmented by my own collection of the same titles, from which many of the images in this thesis were drawn.

⁸² Giles, *Parlour*, p. 128.

⁸³ Hackney, 'Making', p. 77.

⁸⁴ Blackman, 'Handknitting', p. 196.

⁸⁵ Reed, *Popular*.

In this study needlework magazines are used to some extent as a window on to their readers, rather than a subject of study in their own right. However, the use of magazines in this way can be problematic. Existing histories of women's magazine reading have stressed the role of readers as active subjects, not defined by or necessarily moulded by magazines, and as capable of resisting meanings presented to them in these texts and reading 'against the grain'.⁸⁶ Hackney has demonstrated that women reading needlework content thought of themselves as active readers:

While enthusiastically recounting how they used and collected dress and knitting patterns, they were reluctant to represent themselves as passive receivers of magazine messages; the word 'influence', in particular, was loudly rejected. Madge, who lived with her mother in Chatham in Kent and worked in London as a civil servant, stressed that magazines provided ideas which she would try out if she felt they were attractive, and realistic.⁸⁷

Therefore, whilst the longevity of the magazines studied here is taken as a marker of enduring appeal, findings from magazines are also balanced with other sources, including oral history interviews where narrators were provided with examples of needlework magazines from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. With all magazines it is important to keep in mind the business interests of the magazine, written as much for the benefit of advertisers as readers. This is especially true for needlework titles, which were often run by companies which also marketed their own knitting wools, embroidery threads or transfers.

It can also be unclear what the purposes of buying such magazines were, whether to make the projects they contained, or to fantasise about making them. In relation to the magazines *Bella* and *Best* in the late 1980s and early 1990s Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer and Hebron have suggested: 'It may be that the elaborate multiplication of homecare material is as much a work of fantasy as the romantic fiction that remains a staple feature of other magazines. Readers read about these tasks (be it romance or knitting) when they have neither time nor opportunity to undertake them.'⁸⁸ Nicola Humble has suggested that recipes can be read as entertainment, citing the example of a 1940s magazine which accidentally featured instructions that included a potentially fatal combination of ingredients. Recalling as many copies as possible and informing the police, they nonetheless fully anticipated news of the worst. However, this never came,

⁸⁶ Beetham, *Magazine*, p. 11; Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer, and Hebron, *Worlds*, pp. 29, 40.

⁸⁷ Hackney, 'Making', p. 85.

⁸⁸ Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer, and Hebron, *Worlds*, pp. 145–146.

and it appears that, thankfully, nobody attempted this recipe.⁸⁹ Whilst the wide array of inventive and often frankly unappealing dishes brought forth by rationing and shortages in the Second World War may have contributed to the fortuitous unpopularity of this particular recipe, it is clear that cookery reading (and in more recent years watching televised food programmes) can be undertaken for pleasure as well as instruction. With or without appetising photography, the description of the cooking process can be mouth-wateringly evocative. However, it would be a mistake to imagine that all written needlework instructions function in an identical way. Knitting patterns, with their lists of K. 1, P. 1 are relatively dry documents, and embroidery patterns were often merely lists of shade numbers and stitch types, with directions to send away for an embroidery transfer. Magazines also rarely featured in-depth articles, and many if not most issues were made up entirely of patterns. Whilst it is possible that pleasure could be derived from these without making them, this would likely be in the form of a more heartfelt intent to try. Furthermore, the business model of needlework magazines, where many advertisers were stitching-related, and parent companies also sold needlework supplies, relied on a large number of readers being consumers of transfers, fabrics, threads and yarns.

Historians have previously used oral history in investigating women's relationship with needlework, and it is an approach well suited to this subject.⁹⁰ As Alessandro Portelli has written: 'The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about *events* and more about their *meaning*. [...] Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think that they did.'⁹¹ Marcia McLean has argued that oral history is the most accessible source for historical information on women's relationship with the needle: 'While there may be entries in personal diaries relating to clothing and home sewing, the majority of information regarding individual women's experiences of dressmaking and homemade clothes is stored in their memories and accessible only through oral history interviews.'⁹² Furthermore, women so rarely go into detail about

⁸⁹ Nicola Humble, *Culinary Pleasures: Cookbooks and the Transformation of British Food* (2006), p. 4.

⁹⁰ Buckley, 'Margins'; McLean, 'Dearly'; Willis, 'Hidden'. Others have used similar interview-based techniques when looking at contemporary practice. Turney, 'Craft'; Stalp, *Quilting*; Marybeth C Stalp, 'Negotiating Time and Space for Serious Leisure: Quilting in the Modern U.S. Home', *Journal of Leisure Research*, 38:1 (2006), pp. 104–132.

⁹¹ Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', *The Oral History Reader, Second Edition* (1998), p. 36.

⁹² McLean, 'Dearly', p. 69.

their stitching in letters and diaries that those who did should be treated as atypical, and we should be cautious about generalising from their accounts.⁹³

Some historians have treated oral history with scepticism, considering it inherently unreliable. Valarie Raleigh Yow has noted concerns that narrators may bias their testimony in their own favour. She counters that the same is true even within private diaries, where the writer may tend to present their preferred memory or interpretation of events. In her experience the distance from events and possible repercussions from disclosure often mean that participants become *more* and not *less* candid over time.⁹⁴ Furthermore, such criticisms apply most to the use of oral history in the attempt to discover events, facts and objective reality. In contrast, this research often explicitly seeks to find the subjective, how women *felt* about their needlework.

With oral history participant selection is an important consideration. Stalp's sociological study focused on 'self-identified quilters (those who would say "I am a quilter")'.⁹⁵ However, within the broader category of needlework, and looking at a period of time in which needlework was ubiquitous, the act of self-identification as a needlewoman could be seen as characterising oneself as exceptional. Thus care was taken to reassure potential narrators that this level of identification or involvement was not a prerequisite for contributing (see appendix one). This position often had to be restated in correspondence and conversation, as women dismissed their own level of experience with needlework, sometimes offering to refer me to women they supposed to be experts, and thus of more use to me, including professionals, artists and teachers. This is related to a similar issue endemic to oral history that has been noted by Yow: 'A second limitation – one related to the ability to generalize from the testimonies – lies in the selectivity of narrators: it is the articulate who come forward to be participants.'⁹⁶ Thus for this project sampling was complicated by the near universal truth that those who feel most comfortable and able to speak put themselves forward for oral history projects, and the more specific issue that women who felt proud of their own needlework would be most likely to volunteer. Whilst the exclusion of certain groups of

⁹³ This thesis will, however, utilise the published Mass Observation diaries of Nella Last. As her prolific diaries record many aspects of her life in minute detail, it is assumed that it is her diary writing, rather than her stitching, which was unusual. Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (eds), *Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2006); Patricia Malcolmson and Robert Malcolmson (eds), *Nella Last's Peace: The Post-War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2008); Patricia Malcolmson and Robert Malcolmson (eds), *Nella Last in the 1950s: Further diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2010).

⁹⁴ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 19–20.

⁹⁵ Stalp, *Quilting*, p. 29.

⁹⁶ Yow, *Recording*, p. 18.

women from the sample reduced the effect of the latter, this was still in evidence to some extent, and the former must be acknowledged as an issue, especially with respondents coming from organisations including The University of the Third Age. However, there were some exceptions. Audrey, for example, initially contacted me regarding the project in order to point me in the direction of other women, not at first imagining that her own needlework warranted a role as a narrator in the research. Doreen needed considerable reassurance that her memories would be of value and use. Hers proved to be one of the most rewarding and useful sessions of the project.

A total of ten interviews were conducted, and details of the narrators can be found in appendix two. This included a brief interview with Tony, the husband of another narrator, Pat. Other than Tony all narrators were female, and the interview recordings range from one hour to two and a half hours. Participants were located through a number of local groups. The letter shown in appendix one was circulated by the Blackheath Second Chance Choir, and members put me in contact with Molly and Doreen. The Eltham Society emailed this letter to their members, prompting Muriel and Susan to come forward, and a local University of the Third Age group did the same, after which Audrey, Ghillian and Jeanne contacted me to take part. Audrey then introduced me to the group who had worked on the Millennium Embroideries, a set of hangings celebrating the history of the Borough of Greenwich, including Pat and Tony who agreed to participate. Margaret heard of the project from letters I left at the Reminiscence Centre, an Age Exchange project in Blackheath. Some women who volunteered or were suggested by others had to be turned down. Some were too young, some had been professional needlewomen and others had not lived in the London Boroughs of Greenwich or Lewisham before 1970, an important consideration as the local Greenwich Heritage Centre had agreed to house the recordings. Narrators were born between 1924 and 1938. Whilst some oral history research has given anonymity to narrators, it is also thought that where individuals wish to be named, they should be.⁹⁷ Thus, in line with guidance from the Oral History Society, narrators were given the option to be identified. Nine chose to be fully identified, and the tenth wished to withhold only her surname and to have her address sealed in the archive where recordings were deposited. Interviews were not closely structured, but were conducted with the aid of a diagram of topics to include, as shown in appendix four.⁹⁸ Narrators

⁹⁷ Yow, *Recording*, p. 135.

⁹⁸ Tony's interview was brief and based around specific experiences of needlework that had already been mentioned to me by him and Pat. Therefore in this case the interview guide was not followed. Whilst it is

were not expected to be able to tie their needlework experiences to specific dates, and instead events, projects and attitudes were anchored to periods meaningful in their own lives, where possible. Each interview began with questions about how they came to start needlework, which prompted responses about childhood, school and family. Throughout the sessions, feelings, projects and memories were tied to teenage years, young adulthood, early marriage, jobs, the ages of their children at the time, and so forth. At the end of each interview narrators were asked whether there was anything else they had wanted to talk about which we had not already covered. As in McLean's work narrators were encouraged to show and discuss surviving items that they had made, sometimes revealing their motivations for making and keeping those objects.⁹⁹

With such a small sample there are obvious limitations when it comes to generalising from this group. The sample is London-centric, with narrators having spent some or all of their lives before 1970 within the London boroughs of Greenwich and Lewisham. This is somewhat offset in the study as a whole by Mass Observation records and Imperial War Museum archive material from around the country, the diaries of Cumbrian housewife Nella Last, objects from the York Castle Museum, Whitworth Gallery in Manchester and the Imperial War Museum as well as the Museum of London, and an extensive use of national needlework magazines, including *Fancy Needlework Illustrated* and the various incarnations of *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, published in Manchester.¹⁰⁰

Whilst none of the sample identified themselves as currently working class and the majority considered themselves middle class, the sample included women with diverse class trajectories. The teaching profession was particularly over-represented, as Audrey, Ghillian, Muriel and Pat had all worked as teachers. However, whilst the sample skews significantly towards the middle class, recollections from working-class youth and family history are included. All of the women interviewed for this research identified as white British or English. Furthermore, printed sources used in this study ignored non-white readers, and occasionally featured projects that would now be considered racist,

best practice to conduct oral history interviews alone with the narrator in Tony's case problems with his health meant that Pat was present and helping in his interview, and also that Tony was present for Pat's interview. In all other cases the narrator and I were alone.

⁹⁹ McLean, 'Dearly', p. 70.

¹⁰⁰ The edited published versions of Last's diaries have been used, as the original is estimated to total around 10 million words. It is thought that no single person has read them in their entirety. Malcolmson and Malcolmson (eds), *1950s*, p. ix.

and may have offended non-white readers at the time.¹⁰¹ As such, this thesis can say little on the subject of non-white needlewomen in Britain, a subject which has begun to be explored by Parminder Bhachu, Carol Tulloch and Rose Sinclair.¹⁰²

As I myself knit, embroider and sew I needed to decide how much to reveal to narrators about my own relationship with craft. Gluck has argued that ‘the complex and shifting relationship between interviewer and narrator cannot be captured in simplistic assumptions about “insider-ness.” In fact, sometimes the insider is severely disadvantaged, both by the assumptions she makes of shared meaning and by the assumptions that the narrator makes about her.’¹⁰³ Whilst my own assumptions would not have been changed by *revealing* my own love of stitching, it could have significantly changed how narrators spoke to me. They may not have explained fully things that it is assumed needlewomen know or feel. However, Elizabeth Roberts has noted that in her research narrators were often surprised ‘that anyone should be interested in their “uneventful” lives.’¹⁰⁴ Society at large is not expected to have a great interest in women’s domestic needlework, and therefore knowing the reason for my involvement served to reassure narrators of my interest, and also of my respect for their stitching. Given perceptions of academics and feminists as hostile to the domestic in general, my position as a needlewoman as well as a feminist academic helped to dispel concerns that the women or their needlework would be portrayed in a negative light. For similar reasons Stalp found that: ‘Overall, quilters were more likely to talk with me once they found out that I was a quilter – the fact that I was a researcher was rather secondary. The potential bias of being a quilter, then, became an advantage and a point of entrée into the social world of quilting.’¹⁰⁵ Whilst concealing my own crafting may have helped to create a sense of objective distance, as Yow has argued within oral history practice this is an illusion: ‘In striving to see the world as the narrator sees it, we

¹⁰¹ Children were invited to make a bag depicting ‘Piccaninnies in the Cotton Fields’. *Needlework Illustrated*, No. 157 (1940), p. 14. A 1946 book of gifts to make included a ‘Black Mammy’ doll nightdress case, listed on the paper pattern pull-out as ‘Nigger Nightdress Case’ Unknown, *Gifts You Can Make Yourself* (1946), p. 180. For Christmas 1955 women might make a ‘Nigger Twins Bookmark’, *Needlework Illustrated*, No. 233 (1955), p. 19. In 1960 readers of one magazine were encouraged to make a whole ‘golly’ family, including ‘Pappy’, ‘Mammy’, ‘Sambo’, and the less loadedly named ‘Mandy’ and ‘Timmy’. *Knit & Sew*, April 1960, p. 12.

¹⁰² Parminder Bhachu, *Dangerous Designs: Asian Women Fashion the Diaspora Economies* (New York, 2004); Tulloch, ‘Place’. Rose Sinclair is working on a PhD thesis at Goldsmiths, University of London on Dorcas sewing clubs in the Windrush generation. See also Michael McMillan, *The Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics in the Home* (2009), pp. 49–50.

¹⁰³ Susan Armitage and Sherna Berger Gluck, ‘Reflections on Women’s Oral History: An Exchange’, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, 19:3 (1998), p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, *Place*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Stalp, *Quilting*, p. 24.

realize that this stance compels some degree of compassion for the narrator. We cannot – and do not wish to – pretend to complete objectivity.’¹⁰⁶ Instead, my choice to share details of my own craft work was informed by a desire to foster a warm and relaxed atmosphere between myself and narrators, one well suited to eliciting the kind of emotional responses that have enriched this study.¹⁰⁷

As explained above, oral history narrators were encouraged to bring out and discuss objects they had made. This study also draws on items from my own collection and from museums. As Ruth Gilbert has argued: ‘artefact evidence can highlight gaps in written documents and is important particularly for the study of those aspects of life taken for granted at the time, the things that “go without saying” and leave no other record.’¹⁰⁸ Both Burman and Buckley have noted that until recently standard museological practice focused on collecting supposedly ‘important’ garments, from prestigious designers or related to significant moments of change, and not the ordinary garments women made at home.¹⁰⁹ This study has benefited greatly from recent changes in these attitudes. However, difficulties were still encountered as some members of museum staff were eager to show me their ‘best’ examples, sometimes created by prominent designers, rather than the more ordinary items I sought. Nonetheless, this thesis has drawn upon the stores of the York Castle Museum, the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, and the Museum of London, Victoria and Albert Museum, and Imperial War Museum in London. These have been used to verify practices shown in written and oral sources, as evidence for the aesthetic and iconographical preferences of needlewomen, especially embroiderers, and to illuminate the moment of making. They also demonstrate that in many cases women produced careful and high quality work, whilst others were less skilled but nonetheless they, and often their families, valued their work sufficiently for it to survive to make its way into museum stores.

This thesis also uses a range of other sources. Mass Observation offers a rich resource for needlework history, both in peacetime and war. Needlework magazines have been supplemented by a limited sample of issues from *Housewife*, *Home and*

¹⁰⁶ Yow, *Recording*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ On emotional information in oral history interviews see Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, ‘Leaning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses’, in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (1991), pp. 15, 17; Kathryn Minister, ‘A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview’, in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (1991), p. 35.

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Gilbert, ‘A Knitted Cotton Jacket in the Collection of the Knitting and Crochet Guild of Great Britain’, *Textile History*, 43:1 (2012), p. 91.

¹⁰⁹ Burman, ‘Introduction’, p. 9; Buckley, ‘Margins’, pp. 165–166.

Country and *Woman and Home* magazines. The British Library's collection of needlework books has also been invaluable. The importance of needlework in producing comforts and making and mending during the Second World War brought needlework into archives and sources where it would otherwise have been absent. The Imperial War Museum has provided diaries, letters, oral history recordings and files full of patterns and government advice on 'Make Do and Mend' and making comforts. I have also utilised The National Art Library's collection of patterns and cuttings relating to comforts knitting. *The Times* covered comforts knitting and the place of needlework within the rationing scheme, as did *The Board of Trade Journal*. Volumes of Statutory Rules and Orders have enabled me to trace the shifting position of needlework within the clothes rationing scheme, and the National Archives have yielded documents relating to comforts knitting.¹¹⁰

This thesis opens with a discussion of the problematic issues around viewing needlework as 'work' or 'leisure', engaging with feminist theory on the nature of women's leisure and the difficulties of using this as a category for analysis. Focusing on women's motivations for stitching and understandings of their use of time reveals a complex web of pleasure, obligation, desire, need and compromise, demonstrating, I argue, that the project of women's leisure history is deeply flawed in presupposing the existence of the category 'women's leisure'.

The second chapter takes as its starting point the literature on women's thrift in the Second World War, and problematizes many of its assumptions. Whereas thrift in the era of 'Make Do and Mend' has often been assumed to be straightforwardly related to shortages and the introduction of clothes rationing, here motivations are shown to be far more complex. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that whilst historians have tended to see wartime and austerity needlework as novel (and even as a novelty) it was in fact an intensification of efforts and techniques found in literature from the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, many of these practices continued into the 1950s and 1960s, suggesting that the dawning of the age of prosperity and consumerism was in some cases reliant on careful domestic budgeting and compromise.

The third chapter looks at needlework in relation to women's emotional experiences of the Second World War. This illustrates the emotional richness of needlework and women's relationship with the things that they made. It also provides a window onto

¹¹⁰ For a complete list of sources cited, see bibliography.

women's wartime emotional experiences, and their active coping strategies or 'self-help', managing and manipulating their own feelings through charitable stitching for the war effort, self-prescribed 'therapeutic' or pleasurable needlework, patriotic embroidery subjects and the decision to stitch bravely on. It demonstrates women's varying sense of obligation and duty in wartime, serving the country, their own local communities, or their loved ones through knitting and donating 'comforts'. It also begins to explore the rich emotional meanings of handmade objects, imbued with sentiment through the prolonged moment of making.

The fourth chapter deals with the tensions between needlewomen's understandings of their tastes, their stitching and themselves as modern or traditional. Challenging ideas of needlework as luddite or inherently nostalgic, it is shown that whilst historical subjects for embroidery were perennial favourites, this engagement with the past was superficial. It was outweighed by interest in the new, in modern design and modernised classics, engagement with new media in the form of radio and later television, and the desire to create new, modern and fashionable clothing. It will also argue that needlewomen had their own reasons for shunning some versions of modern design and adopting or adapting others, seeking a version of the new which was compatible with decorative needlework in the home.

Whereas the preceding chapters assume needlework to have been a female pursuit, the mechanisms behind this gendering are made explicit in the final chapter. This examines the ways in which needlework was constructed as and operated as a 'woman's world', done not only primarily *by* women and girls, but also *for* and, to a lesser extent, *with* them. This chapter deals with women's experiences as accessed through oral history interviews, and also with the ways in which female spaces were created within the needlework media. This thesis is primarily an exercise in women's history, and largely excludes stitching men who constituted a small minority of amateur needleworkers. The final section of the fifth chapter begins to explore how this feminine activity was negotiated by and on behalf of *needlemen*.

By taking a new approach to needlework history which highlights re-creation, recreation, process and the moment of making, this thesis makes a valuable contribution to understandings of this ubiquitous but, until recently, neglected aspect of women's lives. Previous histories have been limited by their fashion history, design history and art history approaches. By abandoning these frameworks, this thesis explores

needlework from a needlewoman's perspective, seeking out the ordinary and valuing activity as well as objects. Three key themes emerge repeatedly throughout these chapters: identity, pleasure and obligation. These are vital to understanding why women stitched, and what it meant to them when they did. Viewing needlework as both a valid subject for research in its own right and as a window onto broader aspects of women's history, it provides us with an enriched view of women's needlework, and both verifies and challenges more wide-ranging findings and assumptions within women's history.

Chapter One

‘Many Happy and Profitable Hours’: Work, Leisure and Needlework¹

Women’s motivations for stitching have been various and complex, including the practical desire or need for a particular item and a love for making. This has left needlework in an ambiguous position, sometimes a passion, sometimes a duty, and happily for many sometimes both. The difficulty of this position was such that when Mass Observation conducted a pilot study of ‘The Housewife’s Day’ in 1951, analysing daily diaries of one hundred middle-class, suburban London housewives, rather than placing needlework into the larger categories of ‘housework’ or ‘leisure in the home’ they created a third category for it alone. They then further muddied the waters: ‘To some housewives, of course, knitting may well be an integral part of their leisure activities, and it was credited as such wherever this was reasonably clear from the context.’² The overlapping interpretations of needlework as both ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, and the difficulties of capturing it within these categories, are key to appreciating the place of stitching in women’s lives, but have left it stranded on the margins of leisure history. In 1948, Mass Observation conducted street interviews on the subject of leisure. Half of the women interviewed listed needlework as a significant leisure activity for them, yet needlework remains peripheral to women’s leisure history.³ Using needlework magazines, oral history and Mass Observation sources, this chapter will seek to explore issues around compulsion and choice, pleasure and dislike, ease and challenge, product and process, and in doing so, problematize the classification of women’s needlework in particular, and historical experiences in general, as ‘work’ or ‘leisure’.

Claire Langhamer has highlighted the neglect and distortion of women’s leisure experiences within leisure history, which has often utilized a framework derived from studies focusing on men and their public, commercialised leisure.⁴ In an effort to counter this, Langhamer has turned to a framework based upon the work of feminists within leisure studies from the 1980s onwards, who challenged androcentric definitions of leisure.⁵ The 1980s especially saw a proliferation of feminist leisure studies, much of

¹ This title is taken from Marjorie Proops, ‘Foreword’, in James Norbury, *Knit with Norbury* (1952), p. 6.

² MO Bulletin No 42, May/June 1951, ‘The Housewife’s Day’, pp. 6, 12.

³ MO FR 3067 ‘Work and Leisure’, Nov 1948, p. 10.

⁴ Though the earlier work of Andrew Davies has been important in acknowledging the problems of time and money which restricted women’s access to many types of leisure, his work focuses on public forms. Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-class culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939* (Buckingham, 1992).

⁵ Claire Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England, 1920–60* (Manchester, 2000), p. 16. Whilst

which sought ‘to go beyond the “add women and stir” approach to understanding women’s leisure’, which has, arguably, remained dominant in leisure history.⁶ In seeking to understand women’s unique relationships with leisure, academics investigated the constraints that housework, motherhood and family relationships put on women’s time, and the differing ways in which they defined and experienced ‘leisure’.

Issues of time, space and money were identified as central to understanding women’s access to leisure. Liz Stanley highlighted the complex and fragmented nature of women’s domestic work, as ‘you cannot get all of the day’s cooking or child care over and done with between the hours of nine and five’, which must instead be carried out in a fragmented manner throughout the day as required, limiting women’s ability to define any time as ‘spare’.⁷ Rosemary Deem noted the more complex geographies of female leisure, as ‘the home for most women, employed or not, is a workplace in a way that is true for very few men’. The constant presence of domestic tasks in the home make it difficult for women to end their working day.⁸ Jennifer Mason stressed the importance of access to one’s own money not only in facilitating leisure, but in legitimising it, and this has been a particular issue for housewives who frequently had very restricted access to money other than that for housekeeping.⁹

These factors were seen as not only constraining women’s leisure, but also as creating alternative definitions of and relationships with leisure. Stanley challenged definitions of leisure which were often based on male experience, claiming that the inclusion of ‘swimming, golf, pub-going and dancing’, whilst excluding feminine and home-based activities such as ‘knitting, drinking tea with neighbours or simply sitting and reflecting’ fundamentally biased the field.¹⁰ Deem argued that the nature of domestic work results in distinctly female patterns of leisure, including activities such as textile crafts, reading, and even napping as these ‘can be fitted into a fragmented time schedule, don’t require large blocks of time, are cheap or free, require little space or equipment and can quickly be disposed of or stopped when work obligations

Langhamer’s work in this area is the most high profile, Liz Oliver briefly covered some of the same theoretical ground in her PhD thesis, completed the same year as Langhamer’s. Liz Oliver, ‘Liberation or Limitation? A Study of Women’s Leisure in Bolton, c1919-1939’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Lancaster, 1996), pp. 9–10, 94–95.

⁶ Erica Wimbush and Margaret Talbot, ‘Conclusions’, in Erica Wimbush and Margaret Talbot (eds), *Relative Freedoms: Women and Leisure* (Milton Keynes, 1988), p. 177.

⁷ Liz Stanley, ‘The Problem of Women and Leisure – An Ideological Construct and a Radical Feminist Alternative’, in Centre for Leisure Studies (ed.), *Leisure in the 1980s* (Salford, 1980), p. 94.

⁸ Rosemary Deem, *All Work and No Play?: A Study of Women and Leisure* (Milton Keynes, 1986), p. 80.

⁹ Jennifer Mason, ‘No Peace for the Wicked: Older Married Women and Leisure’, in Erica Wimbush and Margaret Talbot (eds), *Relative Freedoms: Women and Leisure* (Milton Keynes, 1988), p. 78.

¹⁰ Stanley, ‘Problem’, p. 88.

intervene'.¹¹ She also argued that leisure ought to be defined by meaning and context rather than activities, since for women tasks such as childcare, knitting, gardening and cooking could be viewed as leisure in some situations, and as arduous work in others.¹² Eileen Green, Sandra Hebron and Diana Woodward suggested that the key distinction between the practice of these tasks as work and as leisure was the element of choice, with ideas around creativity and change of routine also important.¹³ Erica Wimbush and Margaret Talbot sought to challenge the concept of leisure as a 'unilinear and continuous resource', as women often combined work and leisure, using 'pleasurable activities or contexts [to] mediate or enable disliked obligations.'¹⁴ Wimbush suggested that this could be seen positively as a way for women to justify enjoyable and relaxing activities, although Wimbush and Talbot also bewailed the culture which resulted in women needing to account for their time in this way.¹⁵ Whilst it was common to present the integration of women's work and leisure within the home as negatively impacting on women's entitlement to pleasure and relaxation, Sarah Gregory has argued instead that the flexibility and possibility for pleasurable work that this integration entails should be seen as an advantage, and a model to be emulated in other lifestyles.¹⁶ Although many of these writers were critical of the social and cultural conditions which constrained women's leisure, they did not necessarily criticise existing forms of women's leisure.¹⁷ Deem suggested that in many ways traditionally female leisure pursuits could be seen as preferable to masculine ones:

There is no future in advocating that women's leisure should become more like men's, if this means women becoming involved in activities which are selfish, hierarchically organized, over-commercialized, aggressive, competitive and focused on rivalry rather than companionship.¹⁸

Clearly models of leisure derived from male experience cannot easily be transferred to women.

¹¹ Deem, *All Work*, p. 81.

¹² Deem, *All Work*, p. 34.

¹³ Eileen Green, Diana Woodward, and Sandra Hebron, *Women's Leisure, What Leisure?* (Basingstoke, 1990), pp. 9–10.

¹⁴ Wimbush and Talbot, 'Conclusions', p. 181.

¹⁵ Erica Wimbush, *Women, Leisure and Well-being* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 61 cited Erica Deem, 'Feminism and Leisure Studies: Opening New Dimensions', in Erica Wimbush and Margaret Talbot (eds), *Relative Freedoms: Women and Leisure* (Milton Keynes, 1988), p. 11; Wimbush and Talbot, 'Conclusions', p. 181.

¹⁶ Sarah Gregory, 'Women Among Others: Another View', *Leisure Studies*, 1:1 (1983), pp. 47–52.

¹⁷ Wimbush and Talbot, 'Conclusions', p. 179.

¹⁸ Deem, *All Work*, p. 149.

Applying these ideas to women's history, Stanley has argued for a more complex view of work and leisure. Drawing upon her research into the diaries of Virginia Woolf and domestic servant Hannah Cullwick, Stanley advocated 'a "whole life" way of looking at leisure: not separating it off from other activities, nor researching it outside of naturally occurring situations and the records of these that exist, but instead studying it "in the round" as a totality.'¹⁹ This approach enabled her to go beyond the black and white of 'work' and 'leisure' and begin to explore shadings of 'less work', 'less leisure' and 'more leisure', representing the variation and ambiguities in women's historical experiences.²⁰ However, these suggestions appear to have had little influence on the historiography of women's leisure.

Langhamer's work has been hugely important in bringing these vital ideas to the field of history, and in demonstrating the historical validity of many arguments of 1980s and 1990s feminist leisure studies in the years 1920–1960. She finds that women's leisure was often fragmentary, snatched in moments between domestic duties and the demands of other family members, and was often a low priority when it came to family finances.²¹ Domestic work, even when combined with part-time employment, was rarely seen as 'earning' women the right to leisure in the same way that men's work was (although the full-time employment of young women and girls did), and the internalisation of discourses of ideal motherhood as self-sacrificing 'could induce guilt in those who sought to prioritise their own pleasures'.²² She also uses age/life-cycle as a key category of analysis, demonstrating the relative freedoms of young, employed, unmarried women.²³

Yet the ambitious nature of her study has detracted from Langhamer's ability to fully explore issues around definitions of 'work' and 'leisure' within her own work. The task Langhamer set herself was herculean, given the ambiguities inherent in her subject matter. Langhamer states that her work 'problematizes "leisure" as a category of historical analysis', treating it as 'an area of conceptual ambiguity rather than as constituting particular, pre-defined forms', and asserting the 'futility of an approach in

¹⁹ Liz Stanley, 'Historical Sources for Studying Work and Leisure in Women's Lives', in Erica Wimbush and Margaret Talbot (eds), *Relative Freedoms: Women and Leisure* (Milton Keynes, 1988), p. 20.

²⁰ Stanley, 'Sources', pp. 21–23.

²¹ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, pp. 30–32, 133, 145, 159.

²² Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, pp. 44, 133, 135, 190. This raises the further question of the extent to which activities which provoke negative emotional responses such as 'guilt' can be seen as 'leisure'.

²³ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, pp. 49–112. Although similar issues were identified by Andrew Davies, Langhamer's cross-class focus demonstrates these as pervasive, not limited to those struggling in the poverty that Davies describes. Davies, *Leisure*.

which work and leisure are considered as definitional opposites', noting that many activities combined elements of both.²⁴ This has enabled her to begin to broaden ideas of women's leisure, yet this remains a history of 'leisure experiences', prioritising the 'leisure' side of this ambiguity, especially outside of the opening chapters which explicitly focus on definitions of 'leisure', often in relation to 'work'. Although she often restates the ambiguity of 'leisure' and 'work' within women's lives, the broad scope of her study precludes any detailed analysis of how this ambiguity operated, and what it meant for the women who experienced it.

Whilst this chapter is concerned with themes of work and leisure, it is not itself a leisure history, an approach which, I argue, poorly serves women's complex historical experiences. The very nature of leisure history demands that an activity or experience be first analysed and determined to be 'leisure' before it becomes a valid subject for research. This is particularly problematic for the many activities that make up either women's 'leisure' or their 'work' depending on context, such as cooking, needlework and time spent with children. A leisure history approach at worst risks ignoring these activities, and at best can lead to separating their study as leisure from their simultaneous status as work. Whereas Langhamer has criticised research which has taken a single activity, such as magazine reading, as a starting point, since 'these are activities selected by historians as important, and do not necessarily reflect the leisure priorities of women themselves', the – perhaps artificial – grouping of activities in her own work gives insufficient scope to analyse ambiguities of 'work' and 'leisure'.²⁵ By switching the focus of study from 'leisure' to needlework itself, it is possible to examine the tensions between leisure and work, ease and skilled labour, process and product, on a more even playing field, whilst accepting that it is neither possible nor desirable to resolve such tensions within the history of women's domestic work and leisure. Thus, throughout this chapter, where the terms 'work' and 'leisure' are used, these must be understood as themes, as adjectives, and not as absolute, mutually exclusive, or even oppositional categories.

Historians have struggled with the ambiguous position of needlework within an assumed leisure/work dichotomy. Deirdre Beddoe has written that 'One hesitates to regard most needlework as leisure but the fact that it is generally so regarded reinforces

²⁴ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, pp. 6, 189–190; Claire Langhamer, 'Women and Leisure in Manchester, 1920-C.1960' (unpublished PhD thesis, Lancashire, 1996), p. 7.

²⁵ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, p. 5.

the point that women's leisure was often productive.'²⁶ Liz Oliver also struggles in this area:

Knitting for example, described by some respondents as 'relaxing' and 'creative', may be done simply for pleasure, or there may be strong economic reasons for doing it, for example to save money or generate income. Thus in the first context knitting would be classed as 'leisure' and in the second as 'work'.²⁷

However, as this chapter will demonstrate, this is a false dichotomy. The utility of the finished item does not necessarily negate the relaxing or creative nature of the activity. Langhamer asks 'Was knitting [...] leisure for women, or was it a productive use of time? Was it, in fact a leisure legitimated by its productive nature?'²⁸ These questions are complex and are not definitively answered by Langhamer. At times she insists upon the oppositional nature of motivations based on a need or desire for the products of craft and those based on enjoyment of process, yet elsewhere she notes that definitions of needlework, work and leisure are ambiguous as 'personal creativity could melt seamlessly into necessary work'. She notes that some women considered mending to be leisure, and assumes this was due to its sedentary nature, overlooking any emotional or cultural associations of needlework, as well as the possibility of tactile pleasure or satisfaction experienced when completing tasks.²⁹ Whilst it may well be that mending was seen as leisure primarily because it involved sitting down after a hard day's labour, this should not be assumed without also exploring the wider culture and associations of textile crafts which surrounded it. In writing that 'despite its status as work which had to be done, the sedentary nature of this activity led some working-class wives to regard sitting down and mending as their leisure time', Langhamer prioritises her own definitions of leisure over those of the women she studies – whilst they *believed* that they experienced leisure, she *knows* this to be work, and the historical subject is mistaken, even deluded.³⁰ She takes a more nuanced approach with regard to cookery, noting that statements by her narrators 'reveal not only that the same activity could be both work and leisure in different contexts, but that the two meanings could exist simultaneously'. However such ambiguous forms of work/leisure are often peripheral to her work, constrained as it is by her aim to write a 'leisure' history, however complex.³¹

²⁶ Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: women between the wars 1918-1939* (1989), p. 128.

²⁷ Oliver, 'Liberation', p. 95.

²⁸ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, p. 41.

²⁹ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, pp. 41–42, 178, 179.

³⁰ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, p. 42.

³¹ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, p. 42.

None of the current literature on needlework history has explicitly interrogated the tensions between ideas of ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ as a central theme. However, as demonstrated in the introduction, much of it has focused on needlework as ‘product’ rather than ‘process’, and this approach often assumes that desire or need for the finished object is the primary or even sole motivation for textile crafts, resulting in a strong emphasis on work and production.³² There are, however, a number of works which have included issues of ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, albeit in a peripheral manner. Sherry Schofield-Tomschin has researched twentieth-century statistical studies into the motivations of women sewing in the United States of America, and touches upon the awkward position of sewing as work or leisure.³³ Fiona Hackney notes that in interwar magazines, needlework was presented as ‘relaxing’ and even therapeutic, and that women themselves remember it as a pleasurable activity. Whilst not engaging with literature on ‘leisure’ and ‘work’, her focus elsewhere on the handmade object and on the transformation of the home such objects facilitated also emphasises the importance of craft as a means to an end.³⁴ Sarah A. Gordon, looking at the United States, presents sewing predominantly as work, a money-saving contribution to the household economy, but has also argued that ‘Many women found sewing to be a source of creativity and pride: an activity considered to be work was reinterpreted as pleasurable’. She notes that ‘fancywork’ (including tatting, quilting, embroidery and crochet) could be a source of pleasure for women from a range of class backgrounds, and an enjoyable yet productive activity which could serve as a means to avoid housework.³⁵ Sharon Ann Messenger, in her oral history study of young middle-class women in Liverpool in the 1920s and 1930s, notes that whilst needlework ‘might be classified as domestic “work”, my respondents recalled taking considerable pleasure in their handiwork’, and that her interviewees would have had the means to purchase ready-made items if they had disliked sewing.³⁶ However, the work of Lynn Abrams on handknitting in the Shetland Islands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries highlights the importance of culturally,

³² See above, pp. 21-23

³³ Sherry Schofield-Tomschin, ‘Home Sewing: Motivational Changes in the Twentieth Century’, in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 102–105.

³⁴ Fiona Hackney, ‘“Use Your Hands for Happiness”: Home Craft and Make–do–and–Mend in British Women’s Magazines in the 1920s and 1930s’, *Journal of Design History*, 19:1 (2006), pp. 23–38.

³⁵ Sarah A. Gordon, ‘“Boundless Possibilities”: Home Sewing and the Meanings of Women’s Domestic Work in the United States, 1890–1930’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 16:2 (2004), pp. 70, 80. Elsewhere her discussion of pleasure in sewing has focused predominantly on the pleasure of ownership of finished objects, not pleasure in the process of making them. Sarah Gordon, *‘Make It Yourself’: Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930* (New York, 2009), pp. 31–34.

³⁶ However, this is in the context of a much broader study, and therefore her exploration of needlework is brief. Sharon Ann Messenger, ‘The Life-Styles of Young Middle-Class Women in Liverpool in the 1920s and 1930s’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Liverpool, 1998), pp. 177–179.

geographically and economically specific factors in definitions of knitting as work and leisure. For the women of Shetland there has been little or no association between knitting and pleasure or relaxation, and knitting goods for the market has been a widespread economic necessity.³⁷

Histories of women's leisure in the twentieth century have tended to focus on adolescence and early adulthood, representing only around ten years of the lifecycle, and resulting in considerable omissions.³⁸ The reasons for this focus are twofold. Firstly, oral history has been used as a key source, and few women who experienced the early twentieth century as adults have survived as potential narrators. Secondly, younger women have been found to have had a relatively high engagement with public, commercialised leisure, which is relatively easily defined as leisure and found in sources. Whilst revealing in their own right, these studies leave many questions unanswered. This study also relies heavily on oral history, and narrators were aged between thirty-two and forty-six at the close of the period. However, in focusing on a group of activities in which women participated into old age, and in combining oral history accounts with Mass Observation and media sources, it is hoped that this chapter will reveal some of the tension and complexity of women's relationship with 'work' and 'leisure' in adulthood and later life, as well as in youth.

Oral history research points to 'leisure' as a highly problematic term in women's history. Langhamer found that her narrators were often reluctant to categorise their own activities as 'leisure', associating this with physical activities and modern 'leisure centres', and opting instead for terms such as 'spare time', 'hobbies', 'social life', 'pleasures' and 'enjoyment'. These self-definitions are, however, also problematic for Langhamer. Organised activities such as pre-planned trips to the cinema and Church activities were often excluded from 'spare time' by narrators. Enjoyment or pleasure-based definitions often included productive tasks such as housework and sewing, or, even more problematically for Langhamer, employment.³⁹ Similarly, Liz Oliver found

³⁷ Lynn Abrams, 'Knitting, Autonomy and Identity: The Role of Hand-Knitting in the Construction of Women's Sense of Self in an Island Community, Shetland, c. 1850–2000', *Textile History*, 37:2 (2006), p. 158.

³⁸ Selina Todd, 'Young Women, Work, and Leisure in Interwar England', *The Historical Journal*, 48:3 (2005), pp. 789–809; Katharine Milcoy, 'Image and Reality: Working-Class Teenage Girls' Leisure in Bermondsey During the Interwar Years' (unpublished PhD thesis, Sussex, 2001); Oliver, 'Liberation'. Whilst covering leisure in adulthood, Langhamer devotes more of her focus to young women and courtship. Langhamer, *Leisure in England*.

³⁹ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, pp. 20–23. Edith, one of Langhamer's narrators, 'resisted all prompts to discuss her use of spare time'. Although Edith insisted that she had 'really loved' her paid employment at a foundry, Langhamer presents this as an avoidance tactic and an indication that she had no access to

that her narrators did not refer to 'leisure', but when talking about their youth used terms including 'going out' and 'having a bit of fun', and in reference to their adult lives spoke of 'a bit of peace' or 'putting [their] feet up'.⁴⁰ As Marjorie L. Devault has argued, much of our language is not suited to reflecting the realities of women's lives, including the categories of 'work' and 'leisure', resulting in what she calls 'linguistic incongruence':

the lack of fit between women's lives and the words available for talking about experience present real difficulties for ordinary women's self-expression in their everyday lives. If words often do not quite fit, then women who want to talk of their experiences must 'translate,' either saying things that are not quite right, or working at using the language in non-standard ways.⁴¹

Both Langhamer and Oliver acknowledge this linguistic difficulty, and adjust their interviews accordingly. Both shy away from the more radical conclusion that this 'linguistic incongruence' fundamentally challenges the validity of the project of women's leisure history.

Whilst Langhamer and Oliver have reacted to this linguistic problem by attempting to see through it to uncover the 'real' category of leisure in women's lives, in my own oral history research I chose instead to accept women's own categorisations and language. Hoping to explore the complex net of meanings, needs, obligations and desires surrounding women's needlework, the terms 'leisure' and 'work' were avoided in interviews. In their place women were asked an array of questions which eschewed such direct categorisations. These included questions such as 'why do you feel you did needlework?', 'did you enjoy it?', 'what kind of projects did you enjoy?', 'were there things you did not enjoy?', 'did you finish every project you started? If not, why not?', 'would you have stitched if you did not need to?', 'what would prompt you to start a new project?', and 'did you make items you did not need?'⁴² Responses to these questions provided a complex and nuanced view of the place of needlework within women's lives.

Using needlework magazines, oral history and Mass Observation sources, this chapter will explore what it meant for women to stitch. It will proceed with a discussion

leisure, not that her leisure and her employment may have been one and the same. Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, pp. 25–26.

⁴⁰ Oliver, 'Liberation', p. 10. Katharine Milcoy briefly describes having similar difficulties. Milcoy, 'Image', p. 10.

⁴¹ Marjorie L. Devault, 'Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis', *Social Problems*, 37:1 (1990), p. 97.

⁴² See interview guide, appendix three.

of women who disliked some or all needlework, and practical and product-oriented reasons for stitching. It will then be shown that many women found great pleasure in needlework. Acknowledging that pleasurable needlework was also often productive, it will examine Robert A. Stebbins' concept of 'agreeable obligation' within leisure, and argue that this element of obligation helps to destabilise ideas of 'work' and 'leisure' as oppositional categories. Moving on from this with an understanding of needlework as a (sometimes) productive and (sometimes) pleasurable activity, but abandoning the idea of work and leisure as categories, the chapter goes on to explore the complex and differing forms of pleasure that needlework offered some women, providing both relaxation and challenge. Looking at disliked tasks and abandoned projects it will be shown that experiences of needlework as pleasant/unpleasant and 'work-like'/'leisure-like' varied not only between individual women, and between different crafts, but within an individual woman's experience of a single project. Finally, this chapter will examine the ways in which needlework as a potential source of pleasure fitted into women's day-to-day lives, often slotting between employment and domestic duties, and in many cases fulfilling women's psychological need for near-constant industrious effort and 'busyness'. The complexities found in this activity-based approach demonstrate the limitations of the leisure history approach, even as expanded by Langhamer. Whilst it is important to study experiences of and access to pleasure in women's history, and to investigate women's engagement with 'commercialised leisure', grouping these into a 'leisure history' cannot convey the ambiguities of women's historical experience.

It should of course be noted that not all women enjoyed needlework, and that not all forms of stitching were enjoyed to the same extent. From an early twenty-first-century viewpoint it can be difficult to comprehend quite how ingrained mundane needlework was in many women's day-to-day existence before the Second World War. This is especially true for those who could not afford to delegate clothes washing to a laundry, servant or washerwoman.⁴³ Two labour-saving products touted by needlework magazines and their advertisers in 1940 illustrate this. Cash's 'Washing Ribbons' were a positive boon in the eyes of *Needlework Illustrated*, as 'The introduction of ribbons that wash brings the practical note we moderns like. No need now for tedious re-threadings each time a garment is tubbed nor to spend ages sewing on new shoulder straps after every laundering.'⁴⁴ In the same year Dainite were advertising their 'Washable &

⁴³ For more on laundry, see Christine Zmroczek, 'Dirty linen: Women, class, and washing machines, 1920s–1960s', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 15:2 (1992), pp. 173–185.

⁴⁴ *Needlework Illustrated (NI)*, No. 158 (1940), p. 6.

Unbreakable Buttons’, which would withstand the rigours of both the tub and the mangle, allowing women to launder clothes without having to remove and re-attach each button.⁴⁵ It is doubtful that many women relished these laundry related sewing tasks, thankfully reduced by more easily washed modern fabrics and laundry techniques. As shown in chapter two, throughout the period under study many women routinely mended their own clothes and those of their families, and whilst oral history narrators expressed little resentment towards these tasks, they made it clear that they did not particularly enjoy them.

This is primarily a study of women who *did* stitch, but nonetheless it should be acknowledged that there were some who resisted some or all forms of needlework, or wished they could. In 1953 the thirty-three-year-old non-knitting wife of a farmworker told Mass Observation: ‘I can’t bear knitting. It puts my nerves all of a jangle, and I get so bad-tempered I snap everybody’s head off. Oh, it affects my nerves something awful, and when I see people sitting in the train doing this (knitting gestures) well, I could scream.’⁴⁶ This quote was collected in the course of an ambitious study, in which a socially representative sample of a thousand women were interviewed about their knitting habits.⁴⁷ It found that whilst a third of British women knitted regularly, and a further third knitted only occasionally, the remaining third were non-knitters. Of these non-knitters, a third explained that they had no time for it, a fifth said their health or eyesight meant they could not knit, a tenth said they did not know how to knit, and third said they did not like it or were even irritated by it.⁴⁸ Whilst some needlework was necessary for the economical upkeep of working and many middle-class households (as shown in chapter two) and would therefore need to be done regardless of a woman’s displeasure, disliked and nonessential tasks would likely have been shunned. Whilst a great deal of this chapter deals with the pleasure some women found in stitching, and with non-essential forms of needlework such as decorative crochet and embroidery, we

⁴⁵ *Stitchcraft*, March 1940, p. 1. Pat recalled her mother and herself removing glass and painted buttons from garments before laundering. Both Percival and Zmroczek describe buttons being removed from garments that would go through the mangle. Jacqueline Percival, *Breadcrumbs and Banana Skins: The Birth of Thrift* (2010), p. 90; Zmroczek, ‘Dirty’, p. 178.

⁴⁶ MO Bulletin No. 52, March 1955, ‘Smoking and Knitting’, p. 13. This bulletin is dated 1955 but relies on data gathered two years previously.

⁴⁷ From the study: ‘A national sample of 1000 women was interviewed, distributed amongst towns and villages of Great Britain selected at random with probability proportionate to size of population. The women interviewed in these places were chosen in such a way as to represent what is known of the female population of the country in respect of age and the income of their chief wage-earner.’ MO Bulletin No. 52, March 1955, ‘Smoking and Knitting’, p. 13.

⁴⁸ MO Bulletin No. 52, March 1955, ‘Smoking and Knitting’, pp. 13–15.

must nonetheless bear in mind the truth of Stanley's statement that 'One person's free and untrammelled leisure can be, and often is, another person's pain in the neck.'⁴⁹

Some women were undoubtedly motivated to stitch by the need or desire for the objects they made. Whilst, as we will see, magazines occasionally recommended projects as pleasurable to make (process), they unfailingly showed or described the finished object (product) to persuade readers.⁵⁰ The vast majority of patterns included little or no additional text, as the image of the finished product alone was sufficient to 'sell' the project to the reader. She needed no enticing description of the process, because it was the finished article illustrated within the magazine she desired. Where text was present it served most frequently to further describe or praise the finished object. The reader would have understood the process of recreating the item, and would be aware of whether she personally enjoyed the necessary techniques, but nonetheless it was possible for magazines to appeal to readers through images (product) alone in a way which was not attempted for process. Once it was technologically and economically viable to illustrate every project within the magazine this became standard, but enticing text, although it was subject to little financial or technological hindrance, was not universally used, and when it appeared, it often also referred to the appearance of the finished article, not the process.

Needlework must therefore also be seen as partly a means to the ends of the finished product, and as such it had certain advantages over buying readymade. Homemade garments could be cheaper, or at least more economical as they could wear better than cheap, shoddily made goods.⁵¹ Items could also be adapted, allowing women to suit them to their own tastes. In 1930 *The Needlewoman* complained that shop-bought table runners 'frequently have a bright, almost garish effect', and presented needlework as a solution to this difficulty.⁵² In the same year readers were advised to 'Make your bag yourself and you will be sure to get colours which match your outfit', and to embroider their own modesty vests to match their dresses.⁵³ Needlework could also allow women to express their individuality through their homes and dress. In 1935 Clark & Co. suggested readers 'make all your things into a personal "set"', by picking 'your' motif

⁴⁹ Stanley, 'Problem', p. 94.

⁵⁰ For a brief discussion of the importance of product over process in post-war American teen advertising see Eileen Margerum, 'The Sewing Needle as Magic Wand: Selling Sewing Lessons to American Girls after the Second World War', in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 199, 201–202.

⁵¹ See below, pp. 116–117.

⁵² *Needlewoman*, February 1930, p. 23.

⁵³ *Needlewoman*, March 1930, pp. 7, 17.

from one of their booklets of ‘personal embroidery’ transfers.⁵⁴ Pat, a Woolwich secretary and later teacher, had two daughters, born in 1957 and 1960. She recalled how needlework allowed her to fulfil the young girls’ demands for clothes and toys which were ‘the same, but slightly different’, with subtle variations in colour or embellishment ‘so that they knew which was theirs and which was their sister’s’, something that would have been difficult if relying on shop-bought. Schoolteacher Ghillian believed that individuality was the main reason for her sewing patchwork for her children in 1960s Eltham: ‘well I just wanted something different for my, for my babies [laughs]. I didn’t like the sort of cot quilts that people did – ever so gooey and [laughs] I like to think I have better taste [laughs]’. Fit could also be adapted. Susan, formerly a nurse and health visitor, describes herself as short-waisted, and as she is also particular about sleeve length, she finds it easier to knit things to fit her body shape than to try to buy them.⁵⁵ On a more rebellious note, Jeanne remembered 1940s Bristol: ‘when I got to be a young teenager of course I liked to be able to do my own things, and make things fit a lot tighter than my [dressmaker] aunt would have preferred [laughs].’ For competent needlewomen, making at home could improve value, choice and fit.

Needlewomen often also took pleasure in their needlework. This was an important theme in needlework magazines and advertisements – knitting yarn could ‘simply make your fingers itch to start knitting!’, fabric could make ‘needleplay of Needlework!’ and working a tapestry of ‘Two Delightful Bird Studies’ offered to ‘give you Hours of Pleasure to work.’⁵⁶ Gordon argues that American needlework advertisers and magazines increasingly stressed pleasurable rather than practical reasons to stitch when they found they had to compete with the growing ready-made clothing market.⁵⁷ However, whilst this may explain a change in marketing strategy, it does not necessarily suggest that these pleasures were any less ‘real’. Both my own oral history research and Mass Observation’s aforementioned 1953 knitting study found various forms of pleasure to be central to needlewomen’s motivations. Noting that a large minority of their sample of a thousand women knitted to save money or to obtain better quality

⁵⁴ *Needlewoman*, January 1935, p. 4.

⁵⁵ The enduring appeal of home sewing for those with non-standard body shapes is noted in Barbara Burman, ‘Introduction’, in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 8–9.

⁵⁶ *NPJ*, No. 194 (1925), p. 2; *Needlewoman*, May 1935, p. 29; *Knit & Sew (K&S)*, June 1960, p. 11. Other examples include *Needlewoman*, February 1935, p. 34; *Stitchcraft*, February 1935, p. ii; *Fancy Needlework Illustrated (FNI)*, No. 73 Vol. 7 (1925,) p. iii; *Needlework For All*, No. 181 (1925), p. 25; *Needlewoman*, January 1935, p. 31; *Needlewoman*, June 1935, p. 5; *NI*, No. 229 (1955), p. 3; *Stitchcraft*, May 1965, p. 12; *NI*, No. 232 (1955), p. 13.

⁵⁷ Gordon, ‘Boundless’, p. 81.

items than they could in the shops, the Mass Observation bulletin went on: ‘But most of those who gave practical reasons for knitting backed them up with pleasant ones; for the most part, it is evident that knitters enjoy knitting, and get a good deal of personal pleasure and satisfaction from the process.’⁵⁸ These ‘pleasant’ motivations included relaxation (cited by forty-one per cent of knitters) and enjoying ‘knitting for its own sake’ (cited by twenty-four per cent).⁵⁹ In 1952 Mass Observation diarist and lower-middle-class Cumbrian housewife Nella Last ‘suddenly thought how lucky I was to be able to sew, and to lose myself in seeing something take shape in my fingers.’⁶⁰ The women interviewed for this thesis also emphasised the enjoyment of the process of needlework in their accounts.⁶¹ Molly, a retired personal assistant, looked back on her own history of needlework and said ‘I’ve enjoyed every minute of it, and I think, I cannot understand that people don’t want to do, you know, the satisfaction [...] It’s so therapeutic.’ Retired civil servant Margaret saw her stitching as a free choice: ‘I obviously enjoyed doing it, because there was no pressure on me to do it, and so I did it because I liked doing it [...] why would one embroider tablecloths or something if one didn’t enjoy it?’ Susan made her passion for knitting clear, and explained her particular fondness for Aran knitting, which she seems to have found almost addictive:

Oh yeah, yes I loved knitting.

I like an Aran pattern, because that’s interesting. And I like when I’m knitting a pattern that’s an Aran pattern, you can sort of think, well I’ll do that, a certain number of rows, you can’t stop mid-pattern, you carry on until you’ve got to crossing the diamond again, keep going until the pattern’s complete.

For these women the processes as well as the products of needlework were enjoyable.

Some narrators expressed a preference for certain forms of needlework over others. Pat said: ‘I didn’t enjoy knitting as much as sewing, so, you know, I’ve always done sewing.’ Ghillian felt the same: ‘I never cared for knitting as much as I did sewing, I loved sewing.’ Doreen, a retired clerical worker, preferred knitting over embroidery: ‘I much preferred knitting, that was always my one [...] I just love knitting, I always have [...] I suppose it’s ’cause it’s therapeutic’. Needlewomen were not homogenous, and some had favourite crafts.

⁵⁸ MO Bulletin No. 52, March 1955, ‘Smoking and Knitting’, p. 13.

⁵⁹ MO Bulletin No. 52, March 1955, ‘Smoking and Knitting’, p. 14.

⁶⁰ Patricia Malcolmson and Robert Malcolmson (eds), *Nella Last in the 1950s: Further diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2010), p. 219.

⁶¹ For brief biographies of all the oral history narrators, see appendix two.

Needlework offered physical pleasures. Joanne Turney's sociological study has highlighted the appeal of needlework as a calmingly rhythmic activity. Yet she also notes that the crafters she spoke to made little mention of the tactile aspect of needlework, suggesting that this is due to a culture that underemphasises the sense of touch.⁶² In contrast, during my own interviews the tactile pleasures of needlework – the feel of fabric in the hand, the sensation of pulling thread through material, the feedback that comes with shaping something with one's hands – were at points raised by narrators. Audrey said: 'I loved hand sewing, I still like that best, um... yeah, because I think you have more... you have more of a relationship with your material and what you're using than with a machine.' When explaining why she had never tried machine embroidery and did not use a knitting machine, Margaret said 'it's purely I think the pleasure of doing things with one's own hands really. You know, we might not have analysed it in that way, but that was probably what it was'. Responding to more direct questioning about tactile pleasure, Pat said: 'it's nice to have a piece of you know silky material. If I was making a silk petticoat for a Victorian doll, yeah, the feeling of the silk is nice, and being able to do tiny, tiny stitches and sewing on the lace, yes it feels good, yes you're right, it is tactile'.

Some women also found that needlework offered opportunities for enjoyable creativity. Pat said of her (largely more recent) doll-making: 'I think people experiment with things, that's half the fun, really isn't it, trying to devise something new, something that no one else has done before, or at least you hope they haven't, but they probably have.' Ghillian, now a published children's author, had always added an element of creativity to her stitching, whether by adapting commercial patterns or devising children's items herself:

if your handwork is always, as it is to me, an expression of yourself, even if you use someone else's pattern, you don't necessarily use the colours they suggest, you don't necessarily do it in the size they suggest, you can alter it as much as you like, and if you don't like it you can just pull it all out.

[On readymade items] you don't tear out a piece of yourself. Oh, that's terribly exaggerated but you know that's what it feels like sometimes.

She still felt proud of her idea, devised when her children were young, to knit their gloves in the round, meaning that she could more easily replace each fingertip as they wore out. She is now highly creative in her sewing, designing and sewing a new fabric

⁶² Joanne Turney, 'Home Craft in Britain 1975-2002' (unpublished PhD thesis, Southampton, 2002), pp. 210, 328.

ABC or counting book for each child born in her social circle. Audrey's recollections of her early married life in the 1950s, supporting her husband's acting career and following him around the country, illustrate the importance of this avenue for creativity when others were unavailable:

well I think... I mean John, my husband, is always very... you know he wants me to be doing something that I want to be doing, as long as he's able to do what he wants to do as well, it's quite a good arrangement. But he would always encourage – I know that when we were first married and I was, we were in Sunderland, and I was, I kind of went into a depression after we got married, because it was... I don't know why I did but I did, and I think it was partly that I wasn't doing anything creative and so he managed to scrape the money together and bought me a second hand sewing machine which I thought, you know, in retrospect I thought it was really good, so I would you know have some outlet for my creativity, because I was working in the box office at the theatre, just for the evenings.

However, needlework could be enjoyable and also *feel* creative without necessarily involving this level of inventive creativity. David Gauntlett's *Making is Connecting* is a compelling account of the importance of 'creativity' for everyday wellbeing and happiness. Valorising creativity, Gauntlett also takes a somewhat narrow view of what this might include, focusing solely on design and innovation (however minor that innovation may be), and, despite the title of the book, ignoring the pleasures offered by 'making' itself.⁶³ Many of the earlier references to pleasure in needlework above referred to work based on commercial patterns, and Jeanne, who had always used commercial patterns for embroidery in her youth, remembered this and her dressmaking as nonetheless feeling creative. When asked why she had stitched, she responded: 'I think it was being creative, it was use of colour, design, I mean it wouldn't have occurred to me at the time, but um, yes we did [...] I like doing things with my hands [so you did enjoy them?] Yes I did enjoy them, and I still do, yes.'

Clearly innovation or intentional variation are not sufficient to understand the feeling of creativity that many women experienced through needlework based on commercial patterns. Whilst these actions might not be seen as truly *creative* (not involving originality), they did allow women to *create* (to bring into being). Although others across the country might be simultaneously making the same object, acts of *re-creation* offer some of the same rewards as those of creation, including tactile pleasure, the

⁶³ David Gauntlett, *Making is Connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0* (Cambridge, 2011).

fascination of shaping something with the hands and watching it develop, and the satisfaction that comes with making something to be proud of, whether it is unique or not. Audrey summed this up:

But... there's a kind of urge to be, I don't know, I suppose to leave your mark in a way. And to do, well in a way it's to do things that people can see that you've done and to... now has that got to be needlework? Not necessarily is it. But it is something about using your hands and your brain... and that hand and eye coordination to produce something I mean not necessarily beautiful but very pleasing, I mean it hasn't got to be decorative, necessarily. I think it satisfies some craving, a sort of craftsman-like thing, isn't it. Not an artist, but craftsman

This 'craftsman-like' element allowed re-creative acts to feel creative.

For some women the tactile and creative pleasures of needlework could become such a strong motivator that their prolific stitching became divorced from or even outstripped their needs for finished objects. In extreme cases, needlework was done in spite of, rather than because of, the products, and the appeal of the needlework was purely in the process, or the moment of making. In 1960 *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* reviewed Margaret Hutchings' *Modern Soft Toy Making*, a book: 'both for the woman who – as mother, grandmother, godmother or aunt – has children in her life for whom she would like to make occasional toys and for the enthusiast who makes a toy for the pleasure of doing so and then looks around for a child to give it to.'⁶⁴ Doreen was emphatic about her love of knitting, and so I asked her whether she would have knitted even if she or her children had not needed knitwear at a particular point. She responded: 'Oh yes, I have to find something. I mean, I had nothing to do, so I did that' and gestured towards a recently knitted blanket on her sofa. Retired Mottingham teacher Muriel explained that she was much more interested in the process of making than in the clothes she made: 'Oh yes, I liked the doing of it, the interest of doing of it, and not so bothered about wearing it really. It was just the getting down to it and making it really.' Muriel began to make bobbin lace in the late 1960s, focusing her efforts on items for her portfolio folder and mats. Looking around the room, I commented that most of the things that could have a mat underneath them did, and she responded, only half-

⁶⁴ *Needlewoman and Needlecraft (N&N)*, No. 81 (1960), p. 5. Nella Last had a particular passion for sewing dolls and toys: 'making dollies seems such company, and so much more interesting than dressmaking.' Patricia Malcolmson and Robert Malcolmson (eds), *Nella Last's Peace: The Post-War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2008), p. 274. In 1951 she was shocked to realise how prolific she had been: 'I got a real surprise to think of my huge ragbag family. I used to make two to three dozen dollies and animals every year [for the local hospital]. Then there were all the ones I made in the war to sell and raffle, as well as those for my own children and little friends.' Malcolmson and Malcolmson (eds), *1950s*, p. 222.

jokingly, that ‘You have to find things to put more mats on [laughs].’ Fortunately the shared hobby of pottery helps Muriel and her husband provide objects to put on mats.

When women wished to make more items than they required or particular items that they did not need, they could give away or sell the things they made. As Muriel noted: ‘Well it was always useful for presents, people liked to have something that you’d made, it was something to give away.’ Margaret, herself child-free, recalled knitting for her friends’ babies, and believed that her reason for this was not primarily affection for the parent or child but ‘having an opportunity to make something like that, I think that’s what it was really.’ Her mother had been a particularly prolific needlewoman, creating ‘mountains’ of embroidered linens and crochet mats. Although many of these were for her own home, her desire to make so far outstripped her need or ability to keep these items that she sought out others to make for. In the Second World War, when packaging restrictions meant shoppers were encouraged to use their own bags, Margaret’s mother made large quantities of embroidered hessian shopping bags for others. In later years, she particularly enjoyed crocheting dressing-table mats:

Mum made loads of those for a lot of the people in the local shops [laughs]. She would... I think she went in the building society and she made a set for one young lady, and then another one was getting married, ‘oh, would you make me one? And I’d like this colour’ and so mum made them for her.

Although she did accept a ‘minimal sum’ for these items, Margaret did not believe this amounted to payment, covering only the costs of the materials and not her labour. This ‘selling’, then, enabled her making, but did not motivate it.

Some women found their productive excess more discouraging. Susan recalled of her tatting: ‘I kept it going, I didn’t tell anyone about it. I just used to do it occasionally to keep my hand in really. But you couldn’t give it away, and you sort of build up such a huge stock of stuff that nobody wants, but I carried on doing it just in the background’. Margaret felt this was one of the reasons she largely stopped embroidering: ‘One thing, you realise that you’re getting a stock of things which you’re not using, there’s not much point in carrying on, so you switch to something completely different.’ In her retirement she has taken up painting and drawing, and noted that one advantage of this is that her pictures can be put away in a portfolio, without the feeling that she need do something with them. Thus, whilst many needlewomen stitched in order to obtain the finished product, for many the enjoyment of the process was as important, and sometimes more so.

Motivations for stitching can be tied to both a need or desire for a finished product and enjoyment in the processes of needlework. This is not necessarily an issue of either/or. Whilst some women wanted or needed the product, and others wanted the process, many women wanted both.⁶⁵ Some oral history narrators recalled enjoying practical or necessary tasks. Audrey remembered herself in 1966, furnishing a new home in Greenwich with her third child on the way: ‘very hard up, having to make clothes for the children, I mean I loved doing it anyway’. Pat thought her main reason for sewing in the past had been ‘moneysaving, I suppose, but it becomes part of you, so it’s something that you do or, for me, it was something that I’ve always done, and I always will’. When asked whether she had enjoyed stitching, she replied: ‘oh yes, otherwise I wouldn’t have done it. Well, I would have made the children’s clothes because they needed them, but yeah, I always enjoyed doing sewing and craft work, yes’. The nature of needlework could be ambiguous, fulfilling a practical need and simultaneously providing pleasure.

As shown in the theoretical discussion which opened this chapter, some leisure historians have suggested that ‘work-like’ productivity negates leisure. However, turning again to the field of leisure studies, we find that ‘obligation’ is not necessarily antithetical to pleasure. Robert A. Stebbins has argued that whilst obligation has been seen as precluding leisure, academics taking this stance have wrongly assumed obligation to be unpleasant. Stebbins instead presents a distinction between ‘disagreeable obligation’ and ‘agreeable obligation’. Agreeable obligation ‘is part of leisure because obligation accompanies positive attachment to an activity and because it is associated with pleasant memories and expectations’. Further, he speculates that perhaps ‘agreeable obligation is not really felt as obligation, since the participant wants to do the activity anyway’. He notes that those experiencing agreeable obligation often understand that elements of an activity are obligations (for instance, attending rehearsals for a community play) whilst nonetheless seeing them individually, or the leisure project in its entirety, as pleasurable.⁶⁶

Although Stebbins appears to assume the existence of ‘leisure’ as a category distinct from ‘work’, the notion of ‘agreeable obligation’, taken to its logical conclusion, threatens (perhaps rightly) to entirely undo the concept of ‘leisure’ as a category of

⁶⁵ It almost goes without saying that those who neither wanted the products or enjoyed the process simply did not stitch (with the exception of schoolgirls who were compelled to do so in lessons).

⁶⁶ Robert A. Stebbins, ‘Obligation as an Aspect of Leisure Experience’, *Journal of Leisure Research*, 32:1 (2000), pp. 152–155.

analysis. At which point, if any, does an ‘obligation’, however agreeable, cease to be compatible with leisure? If sufficiently enjoyable and rewarding, paid employment or full-time education can then slip effortlessly into this newly expanded definition of ‘leisure’, thus destroying its position as a category defined in opposition to ‘work’. We are left instead with two independent axes, one of pleasure/displeasure, and another of obligation/choice. Whilst any activity characterised by a high degree of choice (that is, one that a given individual has no need to do) and also displeasure (the individual does not like doing it) will be abandoned, there is no other inherent relationship between these axes. In the case of needlework, working-class and even lower-middle-class women had a higher degree of obligation related to their needlework, as financial restraints necessitated some of the thrifty behaviours seen in chapter two, but this did not necessarily negate pleasure. The ‘leisure-like’ experience of pleasure in process and the ‘work-like’ knowledge of need for a product do not form a continuum upon which a given activity can be placed, with ‘work-like-ness’ necessarily inversely proportional to ‘leisure-like-ness’. Rather, they form a complex grid in which the combination of the two shape the experience of the project, which may feel like a ‘leisure-like’ frivolous indulgence, a ‘work-like’ resented but necessary task, a ‘happy and profitable’ use of time or anything between these three extremes.

Teasing out issues of pleasure and practicality, process and product in needlework can be especially complicated as pride in the finished article was often a source of satisfaction and delight for the needlewoman, both during working and after completion. Although generally useful associations between motivations of ‘process’ with leisure/pleasure, and ‘product’ with work/obligation have been prominent in this analysis, to some extent these break down on closer examination. In 1953 the twenty-five-year-old wife of a clerk described her motivations in knitting: ‘Well, it’s the pleasure of wearing things, and being able to show off a touch, I suppose. It’s like making things, isn’t it? You get your natural pride out of it, and you think: “I did that”, and when folks ask you can feel real proud if it’s good.’⁶⁷ Nella Last wrote of her doll-making: ‘There’s a great satisfaction in seeing a thing take shape and form under one’s hands, especially if they are made from oddments into something worthwhile.’⁶⁸ Molly had taken great pleasure in sewing her clothes well, overlocking seams and hand-stitching hems, enjoying her own knowledge that they were well made as well as admiration from others. After gaining weight she was sadly unable to find patterns that

⁶⁷ MO Bulletin No. 52, March 1955, ‘Smoking and Knitting’, p. 13.

⁶⁸ Malcolmsen and Malcolmsen (eds), *Peace*, p. 34.

produced a good fit: ‘I used to buy the patterns, but there wasn’t the same pleasure in it.’

Retired health visitor Jeanne also enjoyed making things well:

no, it wasn’t a chore, I used to enjoy doing it, and I took quite a pride in doing hems that couldn’t be seen, because my aunt had taught me extremely well how to do it. And I think that always appealed to me, just the construction side to it really.

There is a pride in turning out something well.

Similarly, Audrey said: ‘there was a lot of enjoyment and satisfaction in the process. [...] All the processes. I mean if you sort of do them as well as you can there’s a tremendous satisfaction in that.’

For some, pride in a finished item could go as far as to somewhat undermine the practicality of having made it. In 1920 Lux laundry soap claimed that for women ‘there are few things in her wardrobe so appealing as the garments she has worked herself’, and suggested that pride in their handmade articles could leave women reluctant to use them, for fear of having to spoil them by washing.⁶⁹ Jeanne remembered similar fears about using her embroidered linen in the 1940s and 1950s: ‘I didn’t particularly want to expose it, after all the work I’d put in, expose it to being damaged, really. Which is a bit foolish, but still’.

Pleasure derived from the process of needlework was sometimes inseparable from the anticipation of the finished article. In 1935 *The Needlewoman* explicitly stated that with their three-fold screen, ‘you will enjoy every stitch you embroider, because, as you work, you will be creating something that will give you so much pleasure when finished.’⁷⁰ This notion that the prospect of a beautiful finished article was a source of pleasure has implications for readings of more typical, purely physical and visual descriptions of projects. For a large proportion of the process the final product could be glimpsed as it formed under the worker’s hands, and so the subject of an embroidery might add pleasure as it ‘conjures up pleasant thoughts and pictures in the mind’, ‘takes our thoughts into the open spaces and fresh air’, or simply builds anticipation of using or displaying the finished item.⁷¹

⁶⁹ *FNI*, No. 54 Vol. 5 (1920), p. 16.

⁷⁰ *Needlewoman*, March 1935, p. 18.

⁷¹ *FNI*, No. 126 Vol. 11 (1935), p. 10; *FNI*, No. 129 Vol. 11 (1935), p. 3.

Different needlework projects had varying practical and pleasurable appeals, often relating to ideas including ease, speed, efficiency and challenge, and these have implications for understanding of ‘work-like’ and ‘leisure-like’ aspects of stitching.

Needlework magazines often featured projects which promised to be ‘easy’ or ‘simple. A 1925 pattern for a net darned slip promised ‘hopes of success even to the novice with no “flair” for needlework’.⁷² A 1935 angora tennis coat ‘presents no problems even to a very new-to-it knitter.’⁷³ In 1960 a crocheted rug was ‘as easy as winking’.⁷⁴ *Knit & Sew* provided instructions for a cross-stitched rug in 1960, and noted that ‘those of you who have never tackled cross stitch before will be pleased to know that one of the squares was worked by someone whose previous experience in needlework had been confined to sewing on buttons!’⁷⁵ Ideas of what constituted ‘ease’ are complex. In 1955 Mass Observation claimed that:

Easiness was important amongst the reasons given for choosing any particular type of pattern. One in three said they bought a line of patterns which they knew to be easy to follow, but others gave more discriminating reasons – they thought the patterns had particularly good styles, produced good fits, or offered a wide range to choose from.⁷⁶

A closer examination shows this assertion to be problematic. A pattern being ‘easy to follow’ is not the same as it being easy to knit. The latter refers to the complexity and level of skill involved in the knitting, whereas the former refers to the clarity with which the instructions are laid out. A woman may want a complex or challenging pattern, but would not want understanding and deciphering the instructions to be the challenging part.

Conversely, a number of the narrators expressed a preference for more complicated projects. Muriel described herself as an ‘average’ knitter (though this seemed overly modest) but said that she preferred patterns that offered ‘a challenge’. Molly believed that the excitement of trying something new would have been her main reason for beginning a new project and reminisced about *Vogue* knitting magazine – ‘the patterns were complicated, and that was such a challenge’ – complaining that the quick and easy projects especially dominant in current knitting magazines held no appeal for her. Doreen agreed:

⁷² *Needlewoman*, April 1925, p. 7.

⁷³ *Stitchcraft*, May 1935, p. 21.

⁷⁴ *Stitchcraft*, May 1960, p. 17.

⁷⁵ *K&S*, January 1960, p. 3.

⁷⁶ MO Bulletin No. 52, March 1955, ‘Smoking and Knitting’, p. 15.

Oh, I can't bear simple stuff, I couldn't bear to knit something just in stocking stitch or garter stitch, it's got to be a pattern or, I mean I made I wouldn't like to say how many picture jumpers, I've done all those, I love doing those, all the picture jumpers.

[So you were saying you quite liked to do complicated designs, was that because of the way that they looked, or to give you some interest when you were knitting?] Well it was just the next stage, it was another challenge wasn't it, you know above just ordinary straight knitting, you carried on and did the next.

For these women, the fascination of needlework lay, at least partially, in facing new challenges and acquiring new skills.

Whilst they tended to focus on simple projects, the pleasures of complex needlework were occasionally acknowledged in needlework magazines. In 1935 *The Needlewoman* addressed one of its tea cloths to 'needlewomen who love the more intricate pieces of work that call for fine skill'.⁷⁷ In 1960 *Stitchcraft* claimed a range of complex and feminine knitting patterns were 'by special request for those knitters who like more fancy knitting with some detailed patterning they can really get down to.'⁷⁸ Five years later they described their 'Tudor Black Work Cushion' as 'interesting work for the needlewoman who likes the expert touch'.⁷⁹ However, aware that their readership included a range of levels of skill, less expert stitchers were sometimes warned off as 'learn to run before you can walk applies just as much to knitting as to life.'⁸⁰

Although generally providing patterns rather than education, magazines sometimes attempted to introduce readers to new embroidery stitches and crafts, including crochet, tatting, Italian quilting, candlewick, rugmaking, hardanger embroidery and punchwork.⁸¹ A 1960 suggestion from *Knit & Sew* that women sew their own baby's quilt was almost certainly for the uninitiated, warning readers 'against using poultry feathers which you have collected yourself, as unless they are professionally cleaned and cured, you will find [sic] that the quilt may be ruined with grease oozing through as soon as it gets warm; also sometimes the feathers begin to smell strongly.'⁸² In 1935 *Fancy Needlework Illustrated* acknowledged the pleasures of repeated challenge and

⁷⁷ *Needlewoman*, May 1935, p. 5.

⁷⁸ *Stitchcraft*, June 1960, p. 8.

⁷⁹ *Stitchcraft*, January 1965, p. 19.

⁸⁰ *Needlewoman*, January 1935, p. 27.

⁸¹ e.g. *Needlewoman*, January 1935, p. 17; *Needlewoman*, May 1935, pp. 30–31; *Stitchcraft*, September 1950, p. 12; *Stitchcraft*, May 1965, p. 28; *NI*, No. 230 (1955), p. 12; *N&N*, No. 101 (1965), pp. 4–5; *Stitchcraft*, May 1950, p. 6; (*N&N*), No. 61 (1955), pp. 19, 24; *N&N*, No. 62 (1955), pp. 10–11; *N&N*, No. 63 (1955), pp. 22–23; *N&N*, No. 64 (1955), pp. 10–11; *N&N*, No. 83 (1960), p. 24; *N&N*, No. 84 (1960), p. 12; *Stitchcraft*, February 1955, pp. 6, 7, 26; *Stitchcraft*, April 1955, pp. 8–9; *NI*, No. 232 (1955), p. 13.

⁸² *K&S*, February 1960, p. 4.

technical progress, noting that ‘The amateur embroideress, who has a genuine interest in her craft, is bound to find great satisfaction and fun in the mastery of one style of work after another.’⁸³

These two contradictory ideas of the ideal needlework project, the simple or the challenging, reflect two very different ideas of optimal leisure. Influenced by Langhamer’s adoption of theories from feminist leisure studies, Wendy Gan has analysed leisure in interwar domestic novels and argued for recognition of a new definition of leisure, ‘leisure as mental space’. Within this definition, introspection and space to think, often only in brief moments between daily tasks and family commitments, becomes a ‘regenerative experience’.⁸⁴ This conceptualisation of leisure helps to explain the appeal of simple stitching, allowing time for the mind to roam whilst fingers are busy. In contrast, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has argued that ideal leisure and work experiences are characterised by what he terms ‘flow’. In a state of flow an individual is exploring and expanding the comfortable limits of their abilities and the activity becomes entirely absorbing without being a source of frustration. As each new challenge is conquered the individual must move on to different or more difficult activities in order to continue to reach a state of flow.⁸⁵ Whilst magazines, often dominated by simpler projects, appear to have primarily targeted more casual needlewomen in search of ‘mental space’ – those willing to rely on the embroidery transfers which were a large part of their business models – narrators for whom needlework has been a life-long love such as Molly and Doreen sought out the pleasurable experience of flow, seeking out ‘a challenge’ and thereby expanding and advancing their skills over the years.

We have seen that some women disliked some or all forms of needlework, but even enthusiasts often disliked individual tasks. Tasks were disliked for being tediously time-consuming or especially difficult to do satisfactorily. Needlewomen’s aversion to certain tasks, and their occasional choices to avoid them, provide fascinating insights into the range of ‘work-like’ and ‘leisure-like’ experiences encompassed within single projects.

⁸³ *FNI*, No. 125 Vol. 11 (1935), p. 9.

⁸⁴ Wendy Gan, ‘Leisure in the Domestic Novel between the Wars’, *Women: a Cultural Review*, 17:2 (2006), pp. 215–218. Although this research was based solely on an examination of literary fiction, Gan’s concept of ‘leisure as mental space’ bears a striking resemblance to Karla A. Henderson’s earlier description of ‘minute vacations’, which she found through oral history interviews on leisure with farmers’ wives in the United States, and therefore may well have validity outside of the domestic novel. Karla A. Henderson, ‘An Oral Life History Perspective on the Containers in which American Farm Women Experienced Leisure’, *Leisure Studies*, 9:2 (1990), p. 130.

⁸⁵ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: the Classic Work on how to Achieve Happiness* (2002).

Tricky tasks could prove frustrating. For knitters, sewing-up was popularly unpopular. Muriel said: ‘Oh I hate sewing up, jumpers, I hate sewing it up [laughs]. I cobble it. No, I’m degrading myself, but yes I’m not so keen on the sewing up, I like the knitting bit.’ Knitting expert James Norbury wrote: ‘I find that many of you produce perfect pieces of fabric but end up by making them up into the most ill-fitting, hacked together garments I have ever seen. Your constant moan is, “I don’t mind the knitting, it’s the making-up and finishing that gets me down!”’⁸⁶ These descriptions of disliked sewing-up as ‘hacked together’ and ‘cobble[d]’ speak of the frustration of struggling for the desired result. Similarly, Jeanne recalled that in her dressmaking ‘I always had problems with zips [laughs] I never seemed to get them in as flat as I would like, yes [...] It would annoy me that it didn’t come out properly, basically.’ The better the expected or desired result, the more frustrating this could be. Susan remembered her time during and soon after her nursing training:

I used to make all my jumpers, and knit, and make my clothes. In the 1960s you always made your clothes, you made your skirts, you made your dresses, but I didn’t like making dresses, although I made some, because I never got the bust right, you know the dart into your bust, I never got that right, setting the sleeves I didn’t like, but I always made my clothes because that’s what you did in those days, made your own clothes.

I like it to be perfect, if it’s not perfect I don’t like it, no, no, it’s got to be right, it can’t have any imperfections to it.

A bad result could leave a bitter taste in the mouth, as described by Teresa Berwick writing in the National Federation of Women’s Institutes’ magazine *Home and Country* in 1935:

I’m afraid though that often the first thrill is also the last, for this home dressmaking business is by no means as simple as it sounds, and the excitement of the beginning is followed by gloom and disappointment at the end when, after hours and days of work, we find we have made a thoroughly unsatisfactory garment of which we are heartily tired before ever having worn it!⁸⁷

Aware of these possible frustrations, Margaret chose her knitting projects to avoid them: ‘That’s the reason I didn’t knit things for myself generally, because difficulty of them coming out the size. [Laughing] So if you made it for a small baby it didn’t matter. It would fit them at some stage.’

⁸⁶ James Norbury, *Knitting is an Adventure* (1958), p. 16.

⁸⁷ *Home and Country*, January 1935, p. 38.

Compared with other, more practical, forms of needlework, decorative embroidery is associated with much pleasure and little obligation. Yet even here we find some aspects which were presented by needlework magazines as tiresome, such as the filling in of backgrounds or large, repetitive items. In 1935 *Stitchcraft* suggested leaving the unadorned fabric as the background for an embroidery of tulips, ensuring there was ‘almost as much joy in working this lovely needle-painting as in possessing it’, involving ‘No tedious filling in!’⁸⁸ In 1925 *The Needlewoman* promised that in their child’s ‘Rosebud Frock’ ‘the embroidery is finished before the tedium begins.’⁸⁹ Other projects promised to retain interest through their pleasant designs, as ‘So many needlewomen complain that ordinary and commonplace designs are most uninteresting and the work drags on without any impetus to finish it, whereas with a beautiful design the interest grows as the stitcher progresses.’⁹⁰

Some more tedious or daunting parts of needlework could be outsourced by buying items partly prepared, leaving the needlewoman to do only those aspects she found most enjoyable or satisfying. In 1935 ready-cut rug wool could deliver ‘twice the pleasure, half the time’ with ‘no more tedious cutting and winding wool’.⁹¹ Jeanne found cutting out curtains so that the pattern matched up especially fiddly and when possible would ask the shop assistant to do this for her. However, it wasn’t always the most obvious processes which were eliminated. In 1955 *Luxury Needlepoint* offered partly pre-worked tapestries, with the central floral motif, arguably the most interesting section, already completed, and only the plain background left to be worked.⁹² Similarly, in 1965 *Knit & Sew* announced ‘For those who love tapestry but who fear the work involved, we present a partly-worked canvas! The central posy, in pinks, blues and greens, is completed in petit-point, the scroll surrounded in gros-point – all there is left to do is the gros-point background which can be in the colour of your choice.’ These could be obtained from Messrs. Marshall and Snelgrove, Oxford Street, for thirty-three shillings.⁹³

Disliked and avoided activities provide valuable insight into the complex ways in which themes of ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ played out within needlework. Different stages of the same project could be perceived dramatically differently, either anticipated or

⁸⁸ *Stitchcraft*, January 1935, p. 27.

⁸⁹ *Needlewoman*, August 1925, p. 16.

⁹⁰ *Needle and Home*, January 1925, p. 3.

⁹¹ *Needlewoman*, February 1935, p. 39.

⁹² *NI*, No. 230 (1955), p. 28.

⁹³ *K&S*, February 1960, p. 11.

dreaded. Needlework could vary in its ‘work-like’ and ‘leisure-like’ nature not only between individual women and across crafts, but also within individual projects. Monotony or fear of complexity beyond the needlewoman’s abilities could make the outsourcing or avoidance of certain tasks an appealing prospect, removing those portions of the endeavour experienced in negative, ‘work-like’ ways, leaving those aspects felt to be pleasurable, interesting, enjoyably challenging or reassuringly achievable. However, such outsourcing relied on foresight on the part of the needlewoman. Ghillian remembered finding lining patchwork very dull, and when asked whether this would have changed what she chose to make she responded: ‘No, I tend to think of these things afterwards. Oh God I’m going to have to line this [laughs]’.

Some disliked tasks were less surprising, such as darning and patching, yet there is some evidence that these could be made less ‘work-like’. Audrey remembered: ‘I hated the darning, that was horrid, that was really horrid, that was such a chore, no I hated that. No I didn’t... hmm, patching things... no I didn’t like doing that, I suppose because it wasn’t creative in any way, wasn’t something I’d *chosen* to do.’ In these cases magazines offered to make disliked but necessary tasks more pleasurable through paraphernalia. *The Needlewoman* made efforts to sweeten the task of darning, claiming that ‘our feelings may be soothed if we can produce it from a bag which is pleasing’.⁹⁴ This echoes Wimbush and Talbot’s assertion that women use ‘pleasurable activities or contexts [to] mediate or enable disliked obligations.’⁹⁵ Similarly, in 1950 when *Needlework Illustrated* suggested readers make an appliqué bag ‘to hold your leisure sewing’, their rationale was that ‘its gaiety will urge you on to finish your embroidery and needlework’, implying that even ‘leisure sewing’ could become tiresome or a burden.⁹⁶ As well as injecting pleasure into disliked tasks with pleasing accessories, women made them less ‘work-like’ by simultaneously listening to the radio or watching television when they became available.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ *Needlewoman*, No. 2 (1919), p. 9.

⁹⁵ Wimbush and Talbot, ‘Conclusions’, p. 181.

⁹⁶ *NI*, No. 201 (1950), p. 12.

⁹⁷ Langhamer quotes a Mass Observation directive from 1949 which stated that radio listening made mending ‘less irksome’ Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, pp. 179–180. Sue Bowden and Avner Offer have found that the radio spread far more quickly than labour saving devices that may have cut women’s workload in the home, and argue that whilst the ownership of the latter may have improved an individual set of tasks, owning a radio could ease the strain of all housework by rendering it less tedious. Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, ‘The Technological Revolution that Never Was: Gender, Class and the Diffusion of Household Appliances in Interwar England’, in Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough (eds), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 246–250, 261. For more on needlework and the television and radio see below, pp. 73, 75, 200–202.

The shifting balance of motivations behind needlework, including enjoyment of process, desire for a finished product, pleasure and tedium, are revealed through unfinished projects. Evidence of abandonment can be found in magazines, objects and through oral history. An unusually honest piece in *The Needlewoman* in 1930 asked ‘Do you complete all the needlework you begin? A rather searching question this, I am afraid, but over 2,000 needlewomen have pledged their word in future to fulfil this rather drastic commandment’ as part of their membership of the National Guild of Needlewomen.⁹⁸ The scale of this abandonment is attested to by a 1943 appeal in *Needlework Illustrated* on behalf of the Invalid Comforts Section of the British Red Cross and Order of St. John, requesting partially worked but unfinished embroidery and needlepoint projects to help with the occupational therapy of injured prisoners of war.⁹⁹

There are a number of possible reasons why a project could be left unfinished. Some are related to ‘product’ – having imagined that she would like a particular design or colour scheme the needlewoman might find that, as work progressed, it did not look as pleasing as she had expected, or that over the period of making her tastes had changed. She concludes that she no longer wants this product, and ceases work. Others are related to ‘process’ – a particular project or technique is found to be fiddly, irritating, dull or above her level of skill, and out of frustration or boredom it is cast aside.

Examining these processes of disillusionment can be difficult, and sources scarce. Uncompleted objects provide an opportunity for informed speculation. Fig. 1.1 shows an incomplete ‘crinoline lady’ design bag, held in the stores of the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, which offers a tantalising glimpse into the possible reasons it was left unfinished. It was donated by a Mrs Margaret Beith, who knew nothing of the maker. The curved top is designed to accommodate a clothes hanger, and there is a slit opening at the back. In correspondence with the museum she described it as a ‘linen pegbag or wardrobe tidy’, and it was subsequently catalogued as a ‘peg bag or pyjama case’, but its large size (415x610mm) makes the suggestion that it is a peg bag unlikely. More probably it was designed for holding dirty laundry. The brown trellis and the pink folds of the skirt have been stitched, and the rest of the design is still clearly marked out in blue transfer ink. The bag itself is completely assembled, with machine overlapped edges all around suggesting that it was purchased in this completed state (probably with the design already printed on it), ready for embroidery to begin. Whilst this prepared

⁹⁸ *Needlewoman*, October 1930, p. 19.

⁹⁹ *NI*, No. 171 (1943), pp. 14–15. For more on injured service men, see below, pp. 233, 235, 237–240.

item saved the embroiderer the task of sewing the bag herself, it meant that in order to have her non-dominant hand at the back of the work to feel and guide the needle, her hand, and possibly a large proportion of her arm, had to be inside the bag. The awkwardness of this procedure is suggested by occasional embroidery stitches which show through the back at the edges, and some distortion around the slit opening, through which the stitcher's arm would have been passed. It is extremely tempting to conclude that it was these physical and technical difficulties that led the unknown maker to abort this project, yet we of course cannot be certain of this.



Fig. 1.1: unfinished crinoline lady (laundry bag?), Whitworth T.1999.101.

Oral history can give more detailed accounts of why women felt they had left some projects unfinished. Most narrators could only name one or two projects that were never finished. Often projects were discarded because the maker found they no longer liked the idea of the finished item or because they found they had made a significant and

irredeemable mistake. Other reasons were less clearly defined. Pat remembered a tray cloth she began to commemorate the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, when Pat was in her early twenties. Only half-stitched, she said ‘I don’t know why I didn’t finish it, just got caught up in doing something else I suppose.’ Margaret did most of her embroidery in the 1940s and 1950s, before her marriage, and remembered her mother often finishing projects for her when she herself had tired of them: ‘Probably showed a bit of lack of enthusiasm sometimes [laughs]. Probab... well, enthusiasm to start it I suppose, but then if it didn’t get... if it got monotonous probably, I wanted to be doing something else.’ When asked what would make a project monotonous, she answered: ‘the size of it, I would say. Hence I made the tray cloth and my mum probably made a tablecloth [laughs].’ Although she prided herself on completing all her projects, Audrey also found that the appeal of knitting a garment could wane over time: ‘knitting always sort of started off as being quite exciting and then it got so damned boring after a while you know, and your fingers got a bit sore and repetition was [laughs] I never sort of did it lightly, do you know, it was a bit of a chore.’

Obligation restricted women’s ability to abandon disliked projects. Molly differentiated between the needlework she did that was ‘needed’, such as making clothes for her children, which she would complete, and ‘anything for myself’, which was more easily abandoned. As we have seen, Molly was passionate about seeking new ‘challenges’ in her stitching, and she felt that searching for the ‘sparkle’ of a new learning experience had contributed to her many unfinished projects:

I never finished anything, very rarely finished anything because there was another craft that I wanted to try, and my aunt used to say to me that’s hobby 113, you know [laughs] [...] oh, attraction of a new thing, yes, yes. There was always something new, you know, there was always something new. And it was so exciting, these new things you know, and I just had to do it [...] because once you see something and you’ve got to try your hand at it, and when you’ve, when you’ve mastered it the excitement’s gone, because you’ve moved onto something else that’s exciting again [even if you’ve mastered it half way through the jumper or the project?] yeah, that’s right, yes that’s right [...] once I’d seen how it worked and once I could understand it and knew that I was capable of doing it then there was this... sparkle about something else.

Class and finances must also be considered, as women who practiced needlework for economy were less free to abandon projects, and many working-class women could not afford to or justify casting aside a project – practical or decorative – simply because they lost interest.

Unfinished works can reveal much about women's motivations for needlework, and the moment at which they decided a project was not worth pursuing. In some cases this demonstrates how the balance of 'work-like' and 'leisure-like' feelings could fluctuate over the course of an individual project, with the initial enthusiasm for and pleasure in a piece potentially waning over time, and women sometimes abandoning work that had initially been experienced positively if it became disagreeable. This also reveals the variable strength of 'obligation' experienced by women in their needlework, sometimes strong enough to ensure items were completed, and sometimes weak enough for them to be abandoned if they became tedious. The woman's own character was one factor, as in the example of Audrey who felt strongly that she ought to complete her projects. The nature and reasons behind a piece were also important, as we can see in Molly's case. If the item was needed to clothe her children she would finish a project such as a plain school jumper which had little of the 'challenge' or 'sparkle' she adored, but if the purpose of the project was to dress or entertain herself, she felt she could cast it aside if she lost interest. For other women, financial need would have precluded abandonment. Thus obligation (not in itself inherently onerous) was one of a number of factors in the beginning and continuation of projects, with pleasure and personal reward also playing their parts.

As demonstrated here and acknowledged by many in the field of feminist leisure studies, the idea of 'leisure' as a category of activities or time is deeply problematic in the context of women's historical experience, yet it is nonetheless important to examine the ways in which needlework fitted into women's lives as a (sometimes) pleasurable and (sometimes) productive activity. As we have seen, fragmentation of time is a characteristic of women's leisure identified by feminist leisure studies in the late twentieth century, generally understood as a reaction to women's multiple responsibilities within the home, making it difficult or impossible to separate leisure time from the continual round of household tasks. This had not gone unnoticed before second wave feminism, as shown in a 1951 Mass Observation study of middle-class housewives in London suburbs: 'the housewife's activities are necessarily multifarious – one leading on where another is left off, according to the need or urgency of the moment. She does not clock on or off; there are no job cards.'¹⁰⁰ In 1970 anthropologist Judith Brown projected this pattern of women's use of time back onto ancient societies, but her hypothesis that certain limited types of activity remained open to women as

¹⁰⁰ MO Bulletin No 42, May/June 1951, 'The Housewife's Day', p. 2.

‘compatible with simultaneous child watching’ contains truths worth considering when looking at the lives of primary carers in any century: ‘they do not require rapt concentration and are relatively dull and repetitive; they are easily interruptible and easily resumed once interrupted; they do not place the child in potential danger; and they do not require the participant to range very far from home.’¹⁰¹ Thus, ideally, the pursuits of carers are safe, interruptible, and home-based, and where activities do not strictly fit these criteria, adjustments must be made.

Some forms of women’s domestic work are, however, almost inherently unsafe. ‘Safe’ is a relative term and cooking, textile work and, in later societies, cleaning and laundry have frequently involved heat, sharp objects, and dangerous compounds, providing plentiful opportunities for an intrepid child to maim itself. In all these cases steps are taken to decrease the risk to the child, and needlework is no exception. Jeanne in particular was aware of the difficulties of combining sewing with ‘child watching’, and the ways in which safety concerns shaped and limited her opportunities for stitching:

I think, yeah, particularly with small children it is difficult because a sewing machine, particularly an electric sewing machine, could be dangerous if a small child got under the needle, and also you need to have an iron going which is also dangerous with small children around. And, I had a friend that used to keep her ironing board in the playpen ’cause it was the safest place, and the children played around the outside [laughs] which I thought was actually quite a good idea. Because of that time was restricted for when they weren’t around, yes.

This highlights the importance of differentiating between different forms of needlework. ‘Mrs B.’, a harassed twenty-six-year-old middle-class mother of two sons under five, with a husband in the forces and ‘no domestic help’ told Mass Observation in 1944:

I think it’s one person’s work cooking, don’t you? I always seem to be on the run and I’m never finished. What with the house work and the washing and getting meals and looking after children – that’s a whole-time job really – it all seems to get on t[op] of me. Then there’s mending, and I’m always knitting for the children. You can pick that up easily, but I don’t have time to do any dressmaking. A mother can’t start machining during the day because the children always need something doing for them and there always seem so many odd things to do in the evenings.¹⁰²

Not all needlework was equally compatible with child-watching.

¹⁰¹ Judith K. Brown, ‘A Note on the Division of Labor by Sex’, *American Anthropologist*, 72:5 (1970), pp. 1073–1078.

¹⁰² MOA FR 2182 ‘The Reluctant Stork/Empty Quivers’, November 1944, pp. 14, 18.

Childcare, employment and housework limited the time women could spend stitching, and some needlework projects were touted as quick, catering to women ‘who haven’t much time to spend on elaborate needlework’.¹⁰³ In 1935 *Stitchcraft* claimed that its prepared needlework kits made things ‘easier for busy women’, with items ready assembled and traced so that ‘only the fascinating task of embroidery remains.’¹⁰⁴ In 1960 the same magazine suggested cushions and chairbacks with a modern take on peasant motifs ‘for the embroideress with little free time’.¹⁰⁵ In 1960 two thick embroidery threads, Perlita and Fresca from Anchor were marketed towards busy women, with advertisements claiming that ‘New Anchor threads leave you time in a busy day [...] And because they have so much body, designs can be complete in a fraction of the time it takes with finer threads.’¹⁰⁶ Perlita was ideal for ‘the housewife who likes embroidery but cannot spare the time for long and detailed pieces.’¹⁰⁷ Another advert featured a woman delightedly exclaiming that “‘Now I do my embroidery in a matter of hours!’” [...] Embroidery is not nearly as time consuming as it used to be – and it’s the new thick Anchor threads that have made all the difference’ (Fig. 1.2)¹⁰⁸ Other projects and products foregrounded speed, without explicitly referring to time-poor needlewomen. A 1935 advertisement for Clark’s Anchor Flox embroidery thread entitled ‘Making things GAY!’ promised that ‘you’ll find that FLOX “fills up” so quickly that it not only makes your work twice as gay – it does it in half the time!’¹⁰⁹ In 1960 *Stitchcraft* offered ‘Thick Knits for speed fans’.¹¹⁰ Ideas of what constituted a quick knit differed from today. In 1965 *Stitchcraft* described a woman’s jumper as ‘Quick and easy to knit in stocking stitch’, but at a gauge of 23 stitches to 10cm, this would seem reasonably slow to many modern knitters.¹¹¹

Aware of some women’s desire to fit needlework around their ‘multifarious’ domestic activities, projects and products were sometimes marketed as interruptible, often referring to stitching in ‘odd moments’. In 1920 *Arden’s* suggested that ‘mother’ liked their crochet cotton because it offered ‘a pleasant and profitable way of occupying her odd moments’.¹¹² In 1935 a new and exciting idea from South Africa, which would

¹⁰³ *Leach’s Sixpenny Knitting & Handicraft Series*, No. 126 (1930), p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Stitchcraft*, April 1935, p. 16.

¹⁰⁵ *Stitchcraft*, May 1960, p. 17.

¹⁰⁶ *Stitchcraft*, April 1960, p. 35.

¹⁰⁷ *Stitchcraft*, November 1960, p. 17.

¹⁰⁸ *Stitchcraft*, June 1960, p. 35.

¹⁰⁹ *Needlewoman*, January 1935, p. 36.

¹¹⁰ *Stitchcraft*, May 1960, pp. 6–7.

¹¹¹ *Stitchcraft*, October 1965, p. 13.

¹¹² *NPJ*, No. 159 (1920), p. 16.

be instantly recognised today as a crocheted granny square throw, was ‘a useful pick-up job that can be done at any odd moment.’¹¹³ For Ghillian these ‘odd moments’ were a valuable resource: ‘because I could knit and talk to the kids and drop it down and rush off and rescue something from boiling over and so on at the same time, yes I suppose I did more knitting and more everyday sewing, making clothes for them.’

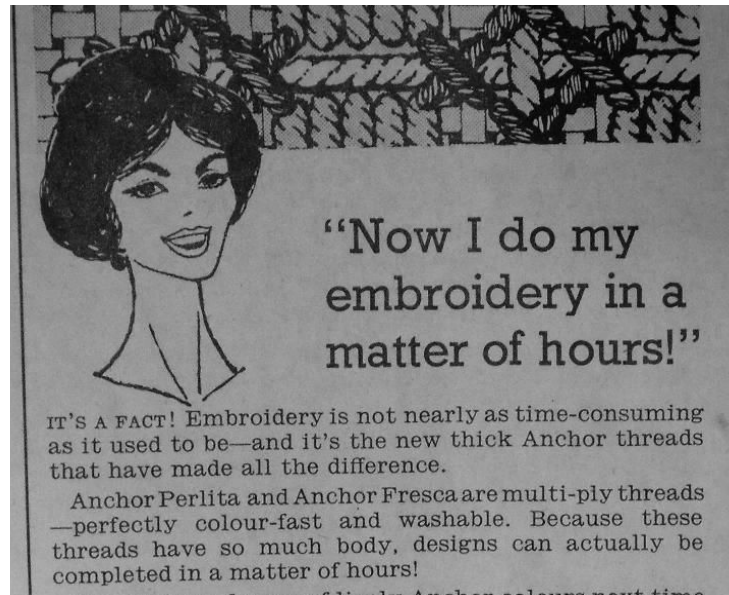


Fig. 1.2: Anchor Perlita and Fresca advertisement, *Stitchcraft*, June 1960, p. 35.

Others recalled their needlework being mostly concentrated in the evenings, when the demands of the home and paid employment eased off.¹¹⁴ Molly had often worked long hours, at one point holding down three jobs to pay back debts to family members and finishing work around eleven o'clock at night, but still found time for her hobby: ‘I would, you know, maybe not go to bed quite – I’ve always been a late person – I would sit and I found that it used to relax me, just by picking up something and getting on with it, you know.’

To some extent narrators’ continued needlework appears to have relied upon their similar (though often less extreme) determination and confidence to actively *make* time for it and set their own priorities in the use of their time. Whereas Doreen and Molly felt comfortable marking off time as their own, Ghillian’s description of doing this when her children were young in the 1960s – ‘I used to steal time’ – suggests that, although she did not appear to feel guilt about this, she was aware that it could be seen as in some way luxurious, even illicit. Making time required women to acknowledge their right to

¹¹³ *Needlewoman*, March 1935, p. 24.

¹¹⁴ Jeanne, Doreen, Margaret, Muriel, Susan, Pat and Molly all reported doing most of their needlework in the evenings.

determine their own use of time. Pat told me that, when her three children were young in the 1960s, she did not feel able to choose to spend much time on her craft interests. In recent years, a more pragmatic approach to other domestic duties has freed time for her dollmaking:

But then if you're keen on doing something you'll find time to do it anyway. Scrap the housework, who cares about housework, if you clean the house then it needs cleaning again, so I've never been the one for housework. [turns to Tony] you couldn't call me house proud, could you? [Tony – 'not now, you've got a lady that does'] oh yes, we've got a lady that does.¹¹⁵

Although the advent of television as a potentially competing source of entertainment could have edged needlework out of Muriel's routine, she continued to make space in her life for it:

I sat and did that, and one eye on the telly and one eye on your work [...] as long as you could have it on your lap. [because some people say that the complicated knitting wasn't compatible with television but...] Oh no, that came before the television, that was more important.

Women fitting needlework in and around busy schedules, using 'odd moments' and multitasking to use time already partially filled can also be seen as part of a psychology, even morality, of busyness amongst some women. For these women the productive nature of needlework was central to its appeal over other pleasurable activities. Oliver has argued that in the interwar period:

prescriptive discourse surrounding women's domestic role [...] constructed and reconstructed an ideal of the perfect wife and mother in which leisure or 'time for herself' did not feature. It is reasonable to infer that it contributed to the feelings of guilt evidenced in the interviews which precluded many women from taking and openly enjoying leisure in the home unless their moments of relaxation were combined with doing something productive such as knitting or sewing.¹¹⁶

Turney has shown that needlework is frequently seen by women as a productive task which, when done alongside television-watching, justifies an otherwise 'wasteful' use of time.¹¹⁷ Turney's recent research echoes the findings of Mass Observation's 1953

¹¹⁵ This confidence to set her own priorities is something that came to Pat later in life. Asked whether she felt comfortable choosing what to spend time on, she responded: 'when the children were younger, probably not, because you know they're your priority, but then as they grew older and left home there was more time for me to do things, and now of course I'm retired I can choose what I do when I want, so that's nice.'

¹¹⁶ Oliver, 'Liberation', p. 111.

¹¹⁷ Turney, 'Craft', pp. 184–186, 288–289, 335–336; Joanne Turney, *The Culture of Knitting* (Oxford,

research on knitting. Twenty-four per cent of the thousand respondents said they liked knitting because ‘it kept the hands busy when talking, reading, watching TV or listening to the radio’ and eight per cent because they ‘didn’t like to waste time’:

many women feel they cannot relax properly unless their hands are busy, or when they feel they are not really wasting time; others unless they have something to occupy their minds, and keep away unwelcome thoughts and worries: ‘I think it’s a recreation, and sort of good for the nerves – it keeps you from thinking,’ said one old-age pensioner’s wife [...] Housewives are so used to being busy, that they often find it difficult to rest without feeling ill-at-ease. With knitting in their hands, they can sit down with an easy conscience. ‘I find I can sit in a chair and not feel guilty of wasting time (especially if I’ve got my feet up listening to the radio) when I’m knitting,’ said one young housewife; and a lorry driver’s wife justified it as ‘restful and useful at the same time’.¹¹⁸

This desire for ‘busyness’ was encapsulated in *The Needlewoman’s* 1925 wish that their readers have a happy new year, ‘and a busy one too, for to be busy is to be happy.’¹¹⁹

Magazines suggest that some women felt they ought to be busy even whilst on holiday. In 1935 *The Needlewoman* offered a kit for a specialised workbag for the ‘ardent needlewoman’ who would ‘never waste these precious hours – a workbag simply *must* accompany our “lazing.”’ The featured workbag would open out across the lap, convenient for ‘dipping into without stirring’, providing the worker with ‘everything you will need for hours of sewing right under your hands! You needn’t move an inch, scarcely’.¹²⁰ Whilst this does give a sense of ease, the productivity and fear of ‘wasting’ this time suggests that this could hardly be defined as ‘lazing’. *Stitchcraft* described its June 1960 issue as ‘a number for lazy leisurely days. [...] Having something new to knit or sew is an important part of the holiday for lots of us – embroidery is done in the deck-chair by busy housewives who never get time at home, and find it difficult to ease off suddenly.’¹²¹

This desire for ‘busyness’ was reflected in the oral history interviews. Muriel, for instance, thought that the main reason for her starting a new embroidery project would have been ‘having empty hands, and just wanting to do something.’ Susan thought a new project would have been prompted by the need to ‘keep your hands going, got to keep busy.’ Doreen said that knitting was ‘better than sitting and doing nothing [laughs].

2009), p. 26.

¹¹⁸ MO Bulletin No. 52, March 1955, ‘Smoking and Knitting’, p. 14.

¹¹⁹ *Needlewoman*, January 1925, p. 16.

¹²⁰ *Needlewoman*, June 1935, p. 23.

¹²¹ *Stitchcraft*, June 1960, p. 3.

I just can't sit here and do nothing, I have to knit.' As in Turney's research, television watching was a particular issue for Doreen: 'I can't just sit and watch television in the evenings. I've got to be knitting or sewing, or beading. I cannot just sit and watch television [and has that always been true of you and television?] I've always done it.' Similarly, Susan remembered: 'at one time I used to feel guilty. If you sit down to watch the television, you can't sit down and watch the television and do nothing, you have to keep your hands busy.'¹²²

Some narrators attributed this desire for busyness to their upbringings, and especially their mothers. Margaret felt that she had inherited this ethos from her mother:

[Asked what would prompt a new project] I think there was probably always something on hand, yes. [so it wasn't... was it that you needed the item or wanted the item or wanted something to do?] a bit of each I suppose but it... I think because I'd got this in my mind from my, my mother, that you always had something in hand, that when you finished one thing you had another thing lined up to do, so that you always had something to sit and occupy yourself with. And my mother was quite horrified that my mother-in-law, for example, didn't ever do anything like that, you know, that she did just sit around and [laughs] not keep herself occupied, because that was the ethos in my family I suppose. To always be *doing* something.

[Of her mother] I mean right up to the time she died she was always knitting things or... yes, she'd always got something in hand, she couldn't *bear* not to have anything.

Whilst Margaret thought that she had 'got it in my mind from my, my mother', suggesting that exposure to her behaviour and values was sufficient to pick them up, Susan was clear that her own mother had taught her daughters this quite deliberately:

She never liked us to be bored or do nothing, she always kept us busy with drawing, colouring, sewing, knitting, she always kept us busy. We weren't allowed to sit down and say we were bored [...] We weren't allowed not to be busy when we were young, we had to keep busy. I've always had something on the go, and I've always finished it, too.

This 'busyness' was not merely a response to having much to do, but an ethic. The industrious nature of needlework did not preclude women's pleasure, but actively enabled it.

In addition to assuaging guilt at inactivity, needlework could also help to defend women's ability to determine their use of time. In her research on contemporary cross

¹²² For more on needlework and television, see above, pp. 66, 74 and below, pp. 201-203.

stitchers, Turney has found that needlewomen ‘created an appearance of being busy (busyness) as a means of creating personal space, i.e. by appearing to be engaged in a form of “useful” and “absorbing” activity, makers were “left alone” or “not bothered”.’¹²³ Thus the demands of household chores and family members vying for attention could be (temporarily) avoided. In the 1920s Nancy Mitford’s tongue-in-cheek advice on staying in other people’s houses demonstrates a similar technique at the top end of the social spectrum, summed up by Deirdre Beddoe as ‘how to use embroidery as a barricade’. Writing in *Vogue*, she suggested that a piece of embroidery should always be brought on long visits, as a method of avoiding any particularly disliked activity suggested by the hosts: ‘My dear, I *must* get on with this wretched work, it is for mother’s birthday and I don’t see *how* it is to be finished in time.’¹²⁴ In addition to illustrating needlework as a strategy to claim time, Mitford’s reference to her mother’s birthday demonstrates that ‘obligation’ could form part of women’s needlework even within the social and economic elite. The productive nature of needlework disrupts our understandings of leisure and work as distinct categories, even at the highest levels of society.

Just as they negotiated time, needlework also raises the issue of women negotiating space for their interests in the home. Marybeth C. Stalp has made a sociological study of later-life quilters in the United States of America and found that although many of her respondents now have their own creative spaces within the home, this is almost universally space that they have acquired only after the needs of all other family members have been met.¹²⁵ Similarly, my narrators typically had more freedom to use space within the home for needlework now than in the 1950s and 1960s. Some needlecrafts, especially knitting, embroidery, crochet and tatting, are very compact, and caused relatively few difficulties, but sewing (particularly dressmaking) often meant a great deal of time setting up and putting away equipment and materials used in shared spaces. Pat recalled:

Well, I never had a room where I could actually lay things out and leave them, so you know everything would be done on the dining room table and then you’d have to pack it all away afterwards, which was always a problem, but it’s just something that you get used to, ’cause if you haven’t got a room to leave things out then, you know, the table has to be cleared.

¹²³ Turney, ‘Craft’, p. 336.

¹²⁴ Beddoe, *Back*, pp. 128–129.

¹²⁵ Marybeth C Stalp, *Quilting: The Fabric of Everyday Life* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 104–105; see also Turney, *Knitting*, p. 28.

Ghillian, Doreen, Audrey and Jeanne all remembered using dining tables, living room tables or floors for cutting out and sewing, necessitating much packing and unpacking when rooms were needed for their usual purposes. Jeanne described this as ‘very frustrating’. Although, compared to dressmaking, Muriel’s hobby of lacemaking took up little space when in progress (‘I only needed a corner of the table for my lace’) the clearing away could cause difficulties: ‘oh yes, you don’t want your lace bobbins thrown around too much, you put it away in the cupboard, you’ve got to be careful it goes away fairly tidily, that’s true, otherwise it takes you ages to un... not impossible, but a bit frustrating.’

Other forms of needlework – such as knitting and embroidery – took up much less space, could be done in a living-room chair, and required little storage space, yet these, too, required some degree of negotiation and compromise. In 1982 Deem found that knitting and sewing appealed to women as these activities took up little space and could be easily interrupted.¹²⁶ It is likely that this was as true in earlier decades. As Susan said ‘it’s only the sewing machine that takes up room’. All of her other equipment and projects were quite compact and could easily be put away into a bag. Nonetheless, using shared spaces for needlework required consideration of other family members, and sometimes negotiations. Living with her mother and sister in Woolwich after the war, Pat said: ‘I suppose I would have kept whatever I was doing in my bedroom and then just brought into the living room to do whatever I was doing. When I was married I was very lucky having Tony, he’d build cupboards everywhere, so as soon as he’d build a cupboard I’d fill it up.’ A small number of people could object even to seemingly unobtrusive knitting, causing further complications in negotiating time and space for pleasure and productivity. Audrey remembered a friend ‘whose husband couldn’t bear her knitting because he couldn’t bear the noise of the needles, I thought that was a bit unreasonable [laughs].’¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Rosemary Deem, ‘Women, Leisure and Inequality’, *Leisure Studies*, 1:1 (1982), pp. 38–39.

¹²⁷ Isabel Wilkinson, a plotter in the Army Operations Room at RAF Biggin Hill during the war, recalled that during periods of waiting ‘knitting was out because they couldn’t stand the click of the needles, but a little bit of embroidery was permitted.’ IWM Sound 27080, reel 8, recorded 7 July 2004. Some crafts could be more objectionably noisy. In April 1940 Nella Last was on edge because of developments in the war and took the unusual decision to ask her husband if she could machine sew in the evening: ‘I asked my husband if the whirr of my sewing-machine would annoy him: I like all to be straight and quiet for him after tea, and only sew things that are on my lap.’ Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (eds), *Nella Last’s War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2006), p. 39. Purcell notes that once Last’s husband retired in 1949 he disliked noise around the home, and that this dramatically curtailed her use of the sewing machine. Jennifer Jill Purcell, ‘Beyond Home: Housewives and the Nation, Private and Public Identities 1939-1949’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Sussex, 2008), p. 204.

As outlined above, feminist leisure studies have shown that lack of money can be an obstacle to women's leisure, but this was not seen as a significant issue in the oral history interviews. There are a number of reasons for this. Whilst historians have found significant barriers to working-class women's commercialised and public leisure between the wars, my group of narrators skews towards the middle class, and most of their adult recollections are post-war.¹²⁸ The sample is also characterised by a high level of employment, which may have given narrators a sense of entitlement to personal money.¹²⁹ The productive nature of needlework is also pertinent, as expenditure could be justified as actually *saving* money compared with purchasing ready-made goods, or at least as serving the dual purpose of inexpensively entertaining the maker and beautifying the home or clothing a member of the family. Doreen had funded her needlework with money from her husband, and Pat thought hers was bought with the housekeeping:

I suppose it was, really, because any money that I saved from housekeeping, that's perks isn't it, you can keep it to do what you want with, so I suppose yes, the money for materials and things would have come out of the housekeeping, because I certainly didn't have an allowance, did I, when we were first married, couldn't afford that.

Thus access to 'personal' money was perhaps less of a barrier to women gaining pleasure through needlework than in other 'leisure' activities.

Needlework is such a ubiquitous female activity that it is difficult to justify a women's leisure history without it. Yet, as this examination has shown, including needlework in leisure history makes clear the limitations and contradictions of a leisure history approach to women's history. Stitching cannot be firmly fixed upon an imaginary continuum of activities ranging from 'leisure' through to 'work'. Women drew a variety of pleasures from needlework, including the creativity of re-creation, pride in a job well done, the fascination of a new technique and the tactile enjoyment of manipulating yarn, thread and fabric. 'Work-like' characteristics such as difficulty, struggle and the obligation of needing the finished object did not necessarily result in something being less pleasurable, less 'leisure-like', and on the contrary, sometimes enhanced or justified pleasure. Moreover, the wide range of activities within needlework had varying 'work-like' and 'leisure-like' aspects for individual women, single projects

¹²⁸ Oliver, 'Liberation', pp. 59–60; Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, pp. 159–164; Todd, 'Leisure', pp. 799–806; Davies, *Leisure*, pp. 56–61.

¹²⁹ On patterns in post-war employment, see Pat Thane, 'Women since 1945', in Paul Johnson (ed.), *20th Century Britain: Economic, Social & Cultural Change* (1994), pp. 392–410.

were experienced differently, and this varied over the process from starting to completion.

This chapter has demonstrated the usefulness of drawing on a feminist leisure studies framework to illuminate women's struggles and triumphs in fitting enjoyment into everyday life. It has used 'leisure' as a starting point to redress the negative views of needlework and domestic activities that have at times been prevalent within feminist women's histories. It is clear that, for many women, enjoyment was a key motivation in needlework, sweetening the task of making needed items or driving them to make the unneeded. However, this chapter has put women's experiences rather than assumed pre-existing categories at the centre of analysis. The weight of the evidence indicates that, within this period, 'women's leisure' is a deeply problematic category of historical analysis, which forces contemporary academic categories (however modified) onto women's historical experiences, distorting them and failing to fully accept women's own understanding of their lives. Claire Langhamer and Liz Oliver both found that the term 'leisure' was problematic for their oral history narrators. This disconnect cannot be understood purely as a methodological hurdle; it is a profound challenge to the study of women's leisure. In listening to needlewomen's own interpretations of their experiences, this chapter has provided insight into the complex meanings and motivations behind needlework. It suggests the need for further research into other ambiguous activities, including cooking, voluntary work, and the more masculine 'leisure' pursuits of gardening, allotment tending and DIY.¹³⁰ It is vital to study women's involvement in the public, commercialised and sporting leisure pursuits that have formed the core of malestream leisure history, but we must be wary of attempts to group these or other experiences into a 'leisure history'. Women's experiences were simply too complex and fluid for this approach. Pleasure, dislike, obligation and choice are deeply meaningful and significant aspects of women's lived experiences, which could form the framework for future research into women's lives, but the concept of 'work' and 'leisure' as opposing or discrete categories must be discarded.

¹³⁰ On DIY and gardening as masculine leisure, see Julie-Marie Strange, 'Leisure', in Julie-Marie Strange and Francesca Carnevali (eds), *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change* (Harlow, 2007), p. 208. Langhamer notes the ambiguous nature of these activities. Langhamer, *Leisure in England*, pp. 44, 152.

Chapter Two

‘You Had To Sides To Middle To Make Ends Meet’: Wartime Thrift in Context¹

The Second World War is perhaps the most prominent period in current historical understandings of needlework in twentieth-century Britain. Clothes rationing (lasting from June 1941 until May 1949), the government’s Make Do and Mend campaign and historical interest in the home front have brought wartime stitching to the attention of many historians who would not otherwise have covered this topic, and to some extent legitimised it as a subject of historical study. These historians have portrayed the war as a time of endless mending, of ingenious and inventive uses for scraps and oddments of yarn and cloth, of strange materials conjured into serviceable clothing and of unravelled jumpers carefully reknit. However, few historians who have written on this have grounded their research within the broader historical context of needlework, and this has led to some significant and widespread inaccuracies and misrepresentations. Through research not only on the Second World War, but also on the interwar and post-war decades, this chapter seeks to reassess the characterisation of this period as a time of new and unusual thrifty ingenuity. Instead it will be shown that prior to the war, the supposed ‘Make Do and Mend’ ethos was common amongst women in the working class and much of the middle class. Furthermore, it will be shown that this ordinary behaviour continued into the boom years of the later 1950s and 1960s, with careful saving in this area enabling spending and consumption in others. This is a story of limited change, with wartime thrift as an intensification rather than a transformation of peacetime practices. This chapter will also take a detailed view of the impact of wartime shortages and rationing on women’s needlework, and re-examine the reasons behind wartime thrift.

Where historians have researched needlework in the Second World War, the emphasis has been on what could be termed ‘ingenious dressmaking’: the various ways in which women eked out or substituted rationed or scarce materials in order to keep themselves and their families clothed. Historians have repeatedly cited examples of dressmaking using unusual materials including curtains, laundered linen draughtsman’s plans, flour bags, silk and linen maps, service blankets, surgical lint, dishcloths, unrationed butter muslin (intended for babies’ nappies), silk parachutes and blackout material (legally post-war and also less legitimately in the war years), as well as knitting

¹ This title is taken from oral history narrator Susan’s description of post-war thrift in her family.

using coupon-free darning wool, dishcloth cotton, and unravelled jumpers. These have been presented as novel responses to wartime conditions.² Museums hold a number of garments which verify that these practices did occur, and the hardships and difficulties negotiated by needlewomen in the Second World War should not be underestimated.³ However, it is possible that the frequency with which these stories were published had more to do with entertainment than instruction or prevalence. Christopher Sladen's description of these anecdotes as 'recycled almost as often as the clothes themselves' casts doubts on the attention that has been paid to them.⁴

Historians have focused on these presumed 'inventive' forms of needlework almost to the exclusion of more ordinary stitching. It is common to read discussions of clothes rationing which make no reference to new knitting wool or the purchasing of fabric by the yard. Colin McDowell is unusual in acknowledging that 'millions of women in the Thirties made all their own – and their children's – clothes, except for "special occasion" items'.⁵ Most historians have taken wartime needlework completely out of its broader historical context. Arthur Marwick is perhaps the most extreme example, claiming that during the war 'In many respects there was a return to the pursuits of pre-industrial society, to do-it-yourself and make-it-yourself, to dressmaking, to jam-making, and to the horticultural pursuits of the smallholder', as though such activities had been entirely abandoned for the preceding hundred or so years.⁶ By expanding the focus of study from the Second World War to include the decades preceding and following, it is possible to call into question this view of wartime and austerity needlework as distinct from peacetime practice, demonstrating the continued importance and prevalence of domestic production and economising in the twentieth-century home.

² e.g. Maggie Wood, *We Wore What We'd Got: Women's Clothes in World War II* (Exeter, 1989), pp. 23–30; Colin McDowell, *Forties Fashion and the New Look* (1997), p. 97; Elizabeth Wilson and Lou Taylor, *Through the Looking Glass: A History of Dress from 1860 to the Present Day* (1989), p. 114; Raynes Minns, *Bombers and Mash: The Domestic Front 1939-45* (1980), p. 151; Peter Lewis, *A People's War* (1986), pp. 169, 172; Norman Longmate, *How We Lived Then: A History of Everyday Life During the Second World War* (1971), pp. 250–256; Peter McNeil, "Put Your Best Face Forward": The Impact of the Second World War on British Dress', *Journal of Design History*, 6:4 (1993), p. 290; Angus Calder, *People's War: Britain, 1939-45* (1992), p. 379; Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian morale in Britain during the Second World War* (Manchester, 2002), pp. 115–116; Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime: Britain, 1939-1945* (2004), p. 490.

³ For images see McDowell, *Forties*, pp. 97, 102, 107; Wilson and Taylor, *Through*, p. 115.

⁴ Christopher Sladen, *The Conscripted of Fashion: Utility Cloth, Clothing, and Footwear, 1941-1952* (Aldershot, 1995), p. 14.

⁵ McDowell, *Forties*, p. 32. Also Suzanne Griffith, *Stitching for Victory* (Stroud, 2009), p. 150. A similar trend has been observed in the study of Austrian history. Margarethe Szeless, 'Burda Fashions - A Wish That Doesn't Have To Be Wishful Thinking: Home-Dressmaking in Austria 1950-1970', *Cultural Studies*, 16:6 (2002), p. 857.

⁶ Arthur Marwick, *The Home Front: The British and the Second World War* (1976), p. 92.

Whilst historians frequently divorce wartime dressmaking and knitting from its pre-war context, they have often acknowledged that the government's Make Do and Mend campaign (which sought to encourage and educate women in mending and renovating clothes and household goods) echoed existing peacetime practices amongst working-class women. This resulted in criticisms of the campaign as patronising and out of touch.⁷ Helen Reynolds's account of this scheme, launched in 1942 and presided over by predominantly upper-middle-class women, goes into particular detail. She notes that 'Most families in the lower-income brackets already made use of "left-overs" and remodelled old garments into new ones to clothe their families', and that some general women's magazines 'at the cheaper end of the market' had long offered dress patterns based on these ideas.⁸ Maggie Wood states 'This concept was hardly a novelty for many women; those struggling to raise families on low incomes had been making do and mending for years.'⁹ However, vague references to 'low incomes' and to 'cheaper' women's magazines give a somewhat distorted impression of how widespread some activities were. As we shall see, thrifty ideas were fairly common in specialist needlework magazines. It is difficult to pinpoint their intended readership, especially as pre-war references to weekend bungalows, golf and motoring could be read as either a reflection of the readership or as escapist aspiration.¹⁰ However, readers would have had sufficient disposable income to purchase these specialist magazines and would also have had the resources, both in terms of time and money, to make at least some of the decorative needlework they showcased. These magazines are therefore assumed to have been targeted towards and read by women from more affluent sections of the working class, and the middle class.

Some accounts are limited by a disinclination to engage in a detailed discussion of needlework techniques. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska describes Make Do and Mend hints as ranging 'from the common sense to the bizarre and impracticable', but in her subsequent list of examples does not indicate which she believes to be which.¹¹ By examining the culture of needlework from 1920 to 1970, with a needlewoman's eye,

⁷ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford, 2000), p. 121; Gardiner, *Wartime*, p. 491.

⁸ Helen Reynolds, "Your Clothes are Materials of War": the British Government Promotion of Home Sewing during the Second World War', in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 329–331.

⁹ Wood, 'Wore', p. 21.

¹⁰ Magazine reading is often aspirational. Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer, and Sandra Hebron, *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine* (1991), p. 11.

¹¹ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity*, pp. 120–121.

this chapter hopes to more closely define the ordinary and the extraordinary in wartime thrift, and set it in its wider historical context.

Combining evidence from needlework magazines, oral history, Mass Observation, *The Board of Trade Journal* and Statutory Rules and Orders, this chapter will seek to examine the extent, nature and causes of wartime thrift and, by placing it in its broader historical context, challenge portrayals of the Second World War as a time of novel economising. The short biographies of the oral history narrators provided in appendix two show this group of women to have a complex range of class identities and backgrounds, which is particularly relevant for interpretations of their contributions to this chapter. Whilst none identified as working class – and Audrey, Ghillian, Margaret, Muriel, Pat and Susan described themselves as middle class – the group is far from homogenous, with several women experiencing significant changes to their class identities and financial situations over their lifetimes.¹² Thus their reminiscences touch on both working-class and middle-class experience, and the slant towards the middle class within the sample allows us to explore the spread of practices which have often been associated with poverty or the working class.

This chapter will continue with an examination of the position of needlework within clothes rationing, and the advantages and disadvantages needlewomen found within the scheme. It will also examine the effects of shortages of readymade goods and raw materials on needlework. Many historians have emphasised the supposed novelty of wartime needlework, yet this chapter will systematically demonstrate that wartime practice had interwar precedent in magazines aimed at upper-working- to middle-class women, and that the war brought an intensification of previous efforts, but no revolutionary change. The limited historiography of wartime needlework is dominated by rationing and the Make Do and Mend campaign, yet it will be shown that war-linked thrift in magazines predated these developments, and was motivated by a need to economise at a time of rising prices and a desire to be patriotically frugal. The chapter then turns to the post-war period, focusing on the ‘boom’ years of the later 1950s and 1960s, finding that a continuation of thrifty needlework complicates sometimes simplistic views of this as an era of consumption. With greater access to oral history

¹² Doreen was unsure of her class, Jeanne thought her class was unclear, and Molly, the daughter of a haulage contractor who herself went into white-collar work, marrying a manager, identified as classless but with working-class roots. Margaret, a library assistant who married a librarian, specified that she considered herself to be lower-middle class. Muriel is a particularly good example of class mobility. Her father was a decorator for the local council, and her mother fostered for additional money. Muriel went on to become a teacher and married an architect. See appendix two for short biographies of all narrators.

evidence from this period, women's motivations for, and feelings towards thrifty needlework are also explored.

On the 1st June 1941, almost two years into the war, clothes rationing was simultaneously introduced to the public and brought into force. Eric Hargreaves and Margaret Gowing have stated that 'The scheme itself was not intended to restrict the quantity of clothing available for the public – that had already been done. The sole object of the scheme was to provide fair distribution of available supplies.'¹³ Supplies had already been reduced by a number of factors, including the diversion of labour and raw materials from the production of civilian clothing to the war effort.¹⁴ Most garments, fabrics and knitting wools were given coupon values, which the customer had to surrender along with their money when making a purchase. The first annual allocation of coupons was sixty-six for each man, woman and child. This was cut to sixty in 1942, forty-eight in 1943, and reached a post-war low of thirty-six.¹⁵ Clothes rationing was relaxed and removed in stages from 1948, finally ending in May 1949. However, as Bargielowska has stated, 'in June 1948 lack of money was already a more important factor than the shortage of coupons' in restricting purchases, apart from among the wealthy and the unmarried.¹⁶ Existing histories of the home front and rationing rarely mention the inclusion of knitting wool and fabric in clothes rationing, focusing instead on readymade clothing, and none go into any depth regarding the changes in the position of yarn and fabric within the period of wartime rationing. It is therefore necessary first to examine rationing policy as it applied to yarn and fabric.

The coupon cost of fabrics sold as yardage varied depending on the width of the cloth and the material from which it was made. For example, more coupons were required for fur, imitation fur, and wool, whilst a variety of specialist fabrics were excluded from rationing.¹⁷ Initially hand-knitting yarn containing more than sixteen per cent wool was rationed at a rate of one coupon for every two ounces. 'Wool' was defined broadly by the rationing scheme and included not only sheep wool but also

¹³ Eric L. Hargreaves and Margaret Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (1952), pp. 312–313.

¹⁴ For details see Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil*.

¹⁵ Coupon supplements for industrial workers, adolescents and unusually large children were later introduced. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity*, pp. 49, 142; Calder, *People's*, pp. 377–378.

¹⁶ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity*, p. 93.

¹⁷ e.g. Consumer Rationing Order (No. 8), 1941 No. 2000; The Consumer Rationing (Consolidation) Order, 1943 No. 1100. Unrationed fabrics varied over the course of the war, but included American cloth (a fabric with a waterproof coating), material for blackout curtains, buckram, butter muslin, cheese cloth, and certain furnishing fabrics.

camel, alpaca, goat, rabbit, llama, yak and vicuana.¹⁸ This left a tempting opportunity for knitters and the yarn industry. A September 1941 Mass Observation File Report on shopping in Portsmouth described prominent displays touting low- or no-wool coupon-free yarns.¹⁹

In December 1941 knitting yarn rationing was tightened, and all yarns sold for hand-knitting would henceforth require coupons. A temporary concession was made to clear stocks of yarns that might otherwise be less appealing under the rationing scheme, allowing retailers to sell yarns containing not more than sixteen per cent wool and yarns with a retail price not exceeding 4½d. per ounce at the reduced coupon rate of one coupon for eight ounces until 28th February 1942.²⁰ A young factory worker who spoke to a Mass Observation investigator had been able to make use of this lower pointing, and was so pleased with her purchase that she listed it as one of the highlights of her weekend: ‘I got some lovely wool for my jumper – a lovely shade of red, like dark rose, if you know what I mean, only a real red, not pink. Only one coupon for the eight ounces.’²¹ Her enthusiasm is not surprising – unless she was unusually large these eight ounces would have enabled her to create a jumper for a single coupon – an amazing bargain.

Despite the neglect of historians, home sewing and knitting were in no way esoteric practices. In 1944 Mass Observation studied the clothing of women with a household income of around £5 a week. It found that, of respondents who owned jumpers, fifty-seven per cent owned homemade ones; thirty per cent of those with cardigans had ones that were homemade; for gloves the figure was twenty-nine per cent.²² Such was the popularity of making baby clothes at home that rationing policy on infants’ clothes had to be entirely re-thought. Originally, clothes suitable for children aged under four were coupon-free, and babies were entitled to the full adult quota of coupons from birth, for rationed goods including knitting wool, shoes and fabric (especially for nappies). Whilst appearing generous, this prompted complaints about the plight of expectant mothers

¹⁸ *BoT Journal*, 20 September 1941, 166. It seems that very early in the rationing scheme this definition of ‘wool’ differed or was not made clear: Copley’s Knitting Wools advertised their luxurious ‘Alpaca Loop’ yarn as coupon-free in *Woman and Home*, September 1941, p. 6.

¹⁹ MOA FR 876 ‘Portsmouth Shops and Shopping’, September 1941, p. 20.

²⁰ *BoT Journal*, 20 December 1941, p. 385. At the same time a lower coupon rate of one coupon for four ounces was introduced for thick hand-knitting wools measuring less than 100 yards per ounce. *BoT Journal*, 20 December 1941, p. 385; *BoT Journal*, 7 February 1942, p. 74; *BoT Journal*, 16 May 1942, p. 251.

²¹ MOA FR 1494-5 ‘War Factory’, November 1942, p. 84.

²² MOA FR 2045 ‘Women’s Clothes in Chester, Part III Home dressmaking and clothes as gifts’, April 1944, p. 2.

who often preferred to make clothes for their infants themselves, or could not afford to buy ready-made. They would have to use their own coupons if clothes were to be ready in anticipation of the birth. Objections were so widespread that policy was changed: pregnant women were allocated an additional fifty coupons, and ready-made baby clothes became rationed goods.²³

Consumers were quick to find loopholes and novel uses for unrationed items, and the Board of Trade repeatedly reviewed and revised rules and definitions in an attempt stamp out such practices. The *Board of Trade Journal* and Statutory Rules and Orders hold some interesting hints at the dodges attempted by some. Mending wool sold in units not exceeding a quarter ounce was exempt from the rationing scheme, but the *Board of Trade Journal* later needed to clarify that, although expensive and airy angora knitting yarn was sold by the quarter ounce ball, this was not *mending* yarn, and was therefore rationed.²⁴ Mending wool, too, was open to abuse, as the following observation of a woman drinking in ‘Metrop Local’ shows: ‘F60D starts talking to investigator. Says she is tired of sitting at home knitting and has come out for a change. She knits her son socks out of darning wool, used double, as she has no more coupons, and the last pair cost 2/8 but it’s worth it.’²⁵ This woman would find her source of expensive but much needed socks cut off, or at least made less convenient, later that year when the Board of Trade decreed that darning wool be cut into lengths of forty inches or less, making it much more difficult to knit with. Even so, Wood writes that some women continued to knit with these shorter lengths. At the same time the rationing of yarn was extended to cover *all* yarn containing more than fifteen per cent wool in addition to all yarn marketed as hand-knitting yarn, countering the use of unrationed goods as hand-knitting yarns.²⁶

Furnishing fabrics also caused great difficulties. The Consumer Rationing (No. 2) Order, 1941 made by the Board of Trade on the 1st July 1941 made provisions for a range of fabrics to be excluded from the rationing scheme, including blackout material and other fabrics not usually used for clothing such as printed heavy chintzes.²⁷

²³ *BoT Journal*, 19 June 1941, p. 395, *BoT Journal*, 26 June 1941, p. 410; Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil*, p. 318. On the emotionally fraught nature of knitting for babies in Nazi occupied France, see Dominique Veillon, *Fashion Under the Occupation* (tran.)Miriam Kochan (Oxford, 2002), pp. 60–62.

²⁴ *BoT Journal*, 11 October 1941, p. 221.

²⁵ MOA FR 1611 ‘Women in Pubs’, February 1943, p. 6. Doreen remembered her mother knitting her a jumper from a variety of shades of darning wool.

²⁶ *BoT Journal*, 21 August 1943, pp. 309–310; Consumer Rationing (Consolidation) Order, 1943 No. 1100; Wood, ‘Wore’, p. 30.

²⁷ *BoT Journal*, 3 July 1941, p. 6.

However, the Board of Trade announced in June 1942 that these early exemptions had been too general and ‘women have discovered that some of these materials make excellent dresses’. Controls were tightened.²⁸

There was also, however, some loosening. In 1943 the Board of Trade made provision for the coupon-free sale of cheap hand-knitting yarns containing not more than fifteen per cent wool, with the intention that they would be used to knit unrationed items such as dish cloths.²⁹ Again, the Board of Trade felt the need to later clarify that non-woollen yarns were not made eligible for coupon-free sale merely by being labelled as dish cloth or other speciality yarns, but needed also to be sold within the Board’s price limitations.³⁰

Knitting using rationed yarns could offer significant coupon savings compared with buying ready-made. It was not unusual for knitting patterns to be recommended by their low coupon-cost, such as ‘Cami-Knickers in fine 2-ply for 3 Coupons’, ‘2 ply Wool for a 2 Coupon Jumper’, or their coupon value, as when *Needlework Illustrated* claimed that ‘Four coupons were never invested better than in this warm woolly Cardigan’.³¹ A close examination of the knitting patterns for women’s jumpers published in *Stitchcraft* magazine in 1944 show considerable scope for savings. Under the Consumer Rationing (Consolidation) Order 1943 a woman’s woollen jumper or cardigan weighing not less than ten ounces required eight coupons, and one weighing less than ten ounces required five. Under the Consumer Rationing (Consolidation) Order 1944 a woman’s woollen jumper or cardigan required six coupons, regardless of weight. Readers of *Stitchcraft* could use up to ten or twelve ounces of knitting wool at two ounces per coupon to break even compared with buying ready-made, and any jumper requiring less yarn represented a coupon saving.³² Over the year 1944 twenty-six women’s jumpers and cardigans (excluding sleeveless) featured in the magazine. Of these, one took eleven ounces of wool but, as can be seen in fig. 2.1, this garment was designed to serve as a (higher

²⁸ *BoT Journal*, 20 June 1942, p. 298.

²⁹ *BoT Journal*, 21 August 1943, p. 310; General Licence, 1943 No. 1161.

³⁰ *BoT Journal*, 2 October 1943, p. 374. Even so some knitters used these yarns to make items such as lace curtains and vests: Wood, ‘Wore’, p. 30.

³¹ *Stitchcraft*, April 1943, p. 12; *Stitchcraft*, July 1943, p. 6; *Needlework Illustrated (NI)*, No. 173 (1943), p. 19.

³² See appendix four. These savings are based on the coupon cost of a jumper weighing less than ten ounces under the 1943 Order, and the rate for jumpers in the 1944 order. The cost of a jumper weighing ten ounces or more under the 1943 Order of eight coupons, the savings would be significantly greater. To avoid exaggerating possible coupon savings all yarn quantities for the knitting patterns are based on the largest size given and, where instructions were provided for both long and short sleeves, the figure for long sleeves has been taken.

coupon-cost) jacket rather than a jumper or cardigan.³³ Another (fig. 2.2) required ten and a half ounces, but it used small quantities of multiple colours, and may have been designed with left-over or recycled wool in mind.³⁴ One further cardigan required ten ounces of wool, but the remaining twenty-three garments all took less than this amount, and the average requirement for all jumpers was 8.08 ounces of yarn, around four coupons' worth.³⁵ Savings were even more generous in smaller sizes, and whilst they would offer less warmth, shorter sleeves also required less wool. For example, the garments shown in fig. 2.3 and fig. 2.4 required only six and five ounces (three and two and a half coupons) respectively, if knitted in the smallest size (33-35 inch bust and 32-34 inch bust).³⁶ Thus, without any other thrifty measures, knitting could considerably stretch a woman's coupon-budget.

Stockings could be a particular difficulty under rationing. Initially all women's stockings required two coupons a pair, a hefty enough sum, but the Board of Trade soon realised that all stockings were not created equal, in terms of both the labour required and durability. In 1942 the coupon cost of women's woollen or fully-fashioned stockings was increased to three coupons per pair, and in 1943 the number of coupons required for a pair of non-woollen, non-fully-fashioned stockings was reduced to one and a half coupons.³⁷ Stockings were individually coupon-costly, and they also wore out quickly. Cumbrian housewife Nella Last claimed that 'Most girls, and lots of women buy one pair a week, and at 2 coupons for each pair would mean 104 for stockings alone.' She herself wore more robust lisle thread stockings 'for mornings and service', but nonetheless bought every six weeks 'two pairs exactly the same for matching, that's over half my coupons.'³⁸ Clearly women could not continue to consume stockings in the same way once rationing was introduced. The simplest way of saving coupons on stockings was not to wear them. One of the most enduring images of home front fashion is that of women staining their legs with lotions or even gravy browning and carefully pencilling on imitation seams.³⁹ Such solutions were, however, unsuitable for times

³³ *Stitchcraft*, September 1944, p. 3.

³⁴ *Stitchcraft*, December 1944, p. 18.

³⁵ Excluding short-sleeved garments raised the average only marginally, to 8.63 ounces.

³⁶ *Stitchcraft*, February-March 1944, p. 10; *Stitchcraft*, June-July 1944, p. 12.

³⁷ Consumer Rationing (No. 8) Order, 1941 No. 2000; Consumer Rationing (No. 11) Order, 1942 No. 1121; Consumer Rationing (No. 14) Order, 1942 No. 2066; Consumer Rationing (Consolidation) Order, 1943 No. 1100.

³⁸ MOA FR 756 'First Reactions To Clothes Rationing', June 1941, pp. 1-2.

³⁹ McDowell argues convincingly that whilst leg make-up, both commercial and improvised, was used by many women when stockings were precious, the drawing on of seams 'was largely a stunt' for the amusement of newspaper readers: McDowell, *Forties*, pp. 75-7. However, Wood quotes two women who remember drawing seams on their legs after washing them in sand to colour them. Wood, 'Wore', p. 13.

when stockings needed to fulfil more than just an aesthetic purpose – gravy browning does not keep you warm. A more practical solution was to knit your own stockings, and patterns were featured in a number of wartime issues of needlework magazines (see fig. 2.5). A pair could be knitted from four ounces of two ply wool (two coupons).⁴⁰ This represented a saving compared with readymade woollen stockings at three coupons, but was more than the one and a half coupons needed for non-woollen, non-fully-fashioned stockings from 1943 onwards. However, as *Stitchcraft* claimed in 1942 when introducing a stocking pattern that required six ounces of wool (three coupons): ‘Hard-Wearing Stockings will help save coupons’.⁴¹ Home knitted stockings wore more like socks, wearing thin over time and requiring darning, but were not as susceptible as thin stockings to damage caused by a momentary catch on fingernails and other rough objects. Two pairs of stockings held at the Whitworth Art Gallery, made in 1944 by Maud Heeney, a telephonist at the BBC in Manchester, for Miss M. D. Paton, show felting from wear at the heels and some mending at the toes, but would still have had considerable wear in them (one pair shown in fig. 2.6).⁴²

Dressmaking could also offer coupon-savings and advantages. In 1942 *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* advised readers: ‘Don’t waste coupons when buying material, but take that extra quarter yard and make a bag and belt set.’⁴³ These additional pieces of fabric would be especially useful when it came time to renovate the original garment.⁴⁴ The inevitable offcuts were another perk for the home dressmaker. Accessories were, according to *Needlework Illustrated*, ‘where the girl who makes her own clothes scores every time... she has all those useful pieces left when cutting out, to fashion into hats, handbags, belts and even posies’.⁴⁵

Nicholson claims that such artifice was necessary for working women whose employers continued to demand pre-war standards of dress, regardless of the stocking situation. Virginia Nicholson, *Millions Like Us: Women’s Lives in the Second World War* (2011), pp. 135–138.

⁴⁰ *Stitchcraft*, September 1942, p. 6; *Stitchcraft*, October–November 1944, p. 9; *Stitchcraft*, February–March 1945, p. 10; *Stitchcraft*, November–December 1945, pp. 3, 15.

⁴¹ *Stitchcraft*, November 1942, p. 7.

⁴² Whitworth T. 43 1975 and T. 2 1977.

⁴³ *Needlewoman and Needlecraft (N&N)*, No. 9 (1942), p. 4. The ‘extra’ quarter yard was particularly valuable as leather handbags had become very expensive. *N&N*, No. 10 (1942), p. 9. This demonstrates that saving coupons was not always synonymous with saving resources.

⁴⁴ *NI*, No. 168 (1942), pp. 20–21.

⁴⁵ *NI*, No. 171 (1943), p. 16. ‘Posies’ were small, pinned-on decorations for dresses or lapels.

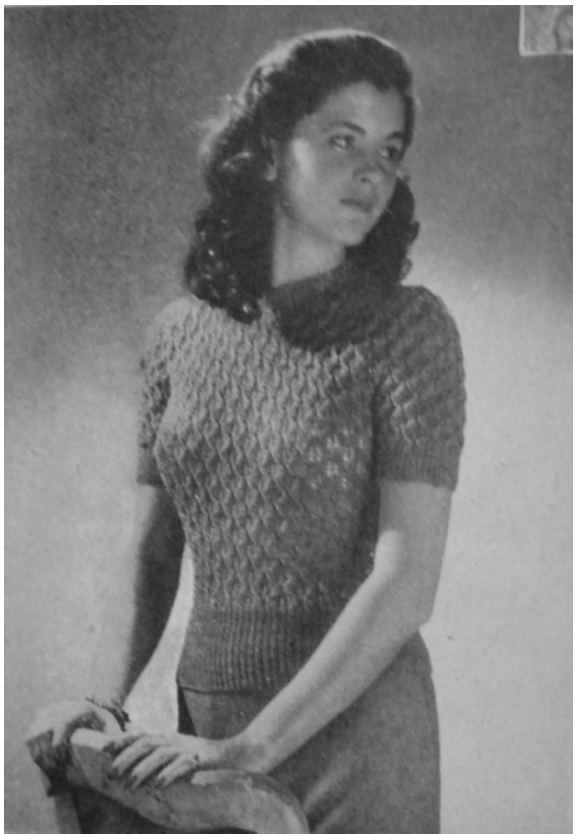


Fig. 2.1 (top left): knitted jacket, *Stitchcraft*, September 1944, p. 3.

Fig. 2.2 (top right): multi-coloured cardigan, *Stitchcraft*, December 1944, p. 18.

Fig. 2.3 (bottom right): chevron lace jumper, *Stitchcraft*, June-July 1944, p. 12.

Fig. 2.4 (bottom left): leaf lace jumper, *Stitchcraft*, February-March 1944, p. 10.



Fig. 2.5 (left): stockings, *Stitchcraft*, October-November 1944, p. 19.

Fig. 2.6 (right): green stockings, Whitworth T. 43 1975.

Coupon savings in dressmaking were not, however, always clear, and for many sewing using new fabric proved more of a hindrance than a help under rationing. A doctor's wife and Mass Observation diarist living in Belfast complained that 'Those who make their own clothes [...] are being actually penalised for their ingenuity as it will often take more coupons to purchase material for a garment than to buy it ready-made.'⁴⁶ A working-class Bolton housewife protested that 'It may be alright for small people, but I have two big daughters, and the material costs far more coupons for me to make than the ready-mades.'⁴⁷ In response to similar criticisms, Oliver Lyttelton, then the President of the Board of Trade, claimed that it was possible for the home dressmaker to save coupons, but only if she chose her patterns with efficiency in mind, avoided heavy linings and was not making particularly large sizes.⁴⁸ In 1944 *Stitchcraft* included instructions for cami-knickers, requiring only one yard of fabric (fig. 2.7), but conceded that 'To be sure, they only fit a very small-sized person, about 30-32-inch bust and about 5 feet 2 or 3 inches in height'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ MOA FR 756 'First Reactions To Clothes Rationing', June 1941, p. 3.

⁴⁷ MOA TC 18 Personal Appearance and Clothes 3/C 'Question 9: Dressmaking', 28 July 1941.

⁴⁸ *Times*, 7 June 1941, p. 2.

⁴⁹ *Stitchcraft*, September 1944, p. 5.



Fig. 2.7: cami-knickers, *Stitchcraft*,
September 1944, p. 5.

Despite this, some women found sewing a great help in coping with clothes rationing. Another Mass Observation diarist claimed that for practiced needlewomen rationing would be no great hardship:

66 clothing coupons. Wont [sic] affect us for I got in much remnant stuff to make up. M. and I had cut down a thick coat into a lovely skirt for R. We have got shoes and clothes for a year largely. [...] 66 coupons quite generous for 'those who use their hands' in war time.⁵⁰

Crucially, this observer referred to renovating and repurposing existing clothes, whereas the Belfast doctor's wife imagined buying yardage with coupons. She also stresses the importance of existing stores. This has been noted in the historiography of clothes rationing in relation to the uneven hardships experienced by working-class people who owned small stocks of cheap, badly made garments, compared with those in the middle and upper classes who were less likely to need to replenish wardrobes amply stocked with better quality, more hard-wearing clothes.⁵¹ However, this woman also notes that under clothes rationing an important buffer for her and her family will be her collection of 'much remnant stuff', a resource frequently underestimated or ignored both by

⁵⁰ MOA FR 791 'Clothes Rationing', July 1941, pp. 3, 6.

⁵¹ e.g. McDowell, *Forties*, p. 82; Wilson and Taylor, *Through*, p. 127; Calder, *People's*, p. 406; McNeil, 'Best', p. 287.

historians and contemporaries.⁵² A survey of women's clothing stocks, conducted by Mass Observation shortly before the introduction of clothes rationing, examined the clothes, including underwear, in the possession of a sample of women, but made no mention of potential clothing in the form of knitting wool, remnants and dress lengths.⁵³ Nella Last illustrates the importance of this future-clothing. In April 1941 when she was gathering her treasures to store under the stairs, hoping to keep them safe from air-raids, she included her son's and husband's best suits, 'my three pairs of silk stockings that are for high days and holidays', and 'a new coat piece and dress piece that I had treasured since just after the outbreak of war.'⁵⁴

In the context of shortages, needlework could not only save coupons but help women to obtain items difficult or impossible to acquire in the shops. In a preface to a knitting pattern, *Stitchcraft* said that 'You probably won't be able to get many warm knitted undies in the shops this season, so it would be wise to get going on a cosy vest and pantie set like this one.'⁵⁵ In 1944 *Housewife* magazine commented that 'Bath brushes and oofas [sic] are high on the "no" list in shops' and showed readers how to knit exfoliating bath mitts from string.⁵⁶ As well as these practical items, women turned their hands to making decorative items and luxuries. In 1941 *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* hoped to pre-empt shortages, saying that 'Paper doylies may go off the market, but the proud housewife still wants her tea table to be as dainty as possible, so the lace doyley once more comes into its own.'⁵⁷ In 1940 *Stitchcraft* advised that 'Now is the time to lay in a stock of materials for undies, for those lovely hand-worked sets from Italy and France are now no more to be bought', and provided a motif for delicate shadow work on homemade substitutes.⁵⁸

Wartime restrictions on the commercial manufacture of toys increased the importance of the already common practice of making them at home. Sewn and knitted examples are shown in fig. 2.8-2.11. Pat remembered her mother, a Woolwich munitions worker, making a pair of dolls from lisle stockings, giving one to Pat's younger sister for Christmas and selling the other to a neighbour. Agnes M. Miall attempted to reframe

⁵² Wood is an exception. Wood, 'Wore', p. 22.

⁵³ MOA FR 741 'Clothes Cupboards', June 1941.

⁵⁴ Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (eds), *Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2006), p. 120. In October 1945 Nella still had unused, pre-war curtain fabric to sew with. Patricia Malcolmson and Robert Malcolmson (eds), *Nella Last's Peace: The Post-War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2008), p. 35.

⁵⁵ *Stitchcraft*, August 1940, p. 10.

⁵⁶ *Housewife*, August 1944, pp. 62-63.

⁵⁷ *N&N*, No. 5 (1941), p. 21.

⁵⁸ *Stitchcraft*, October 1940, p. 9.

the shortage of mass produced toys as a boon to needlewomen, since without competition even unaccomplished efforts were likely to receive an ecstatic reception:

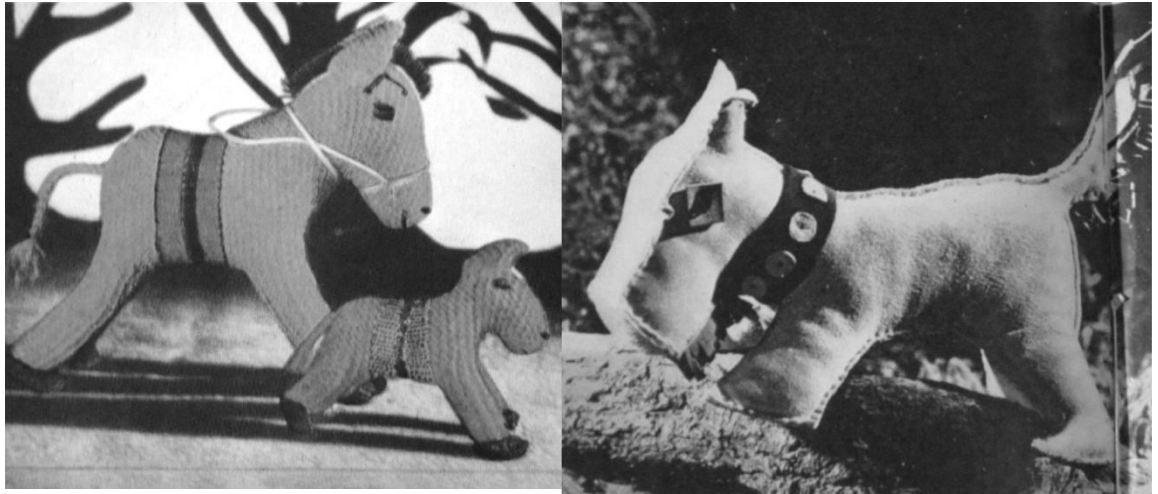


Fig. 2.8 (top left): knitted horses, *Stitchcraft*, December 1944, p. 20.

Fig. 2.9 (top right): chamois leather dog, *Stitchcraft*, October-November 1944, pp. 10-11.

Fig. 2.10 (bottom left): knitted doll, *Stitchcraft*, October-November 1944, p. 10.

Fig. 2.11 (bottom right): owl knitted from recycled wool, *Stitchcraft*, January 1944, p. 8.

Never has toy making been easier for the home worker than it is to-day. Gone are the elaborate factory-made dolls, the teddy bears and other animals of which the shops used to be full, and instead have come into being the endless variety of home-fashioned treasures, so dear to the tiny folks. Present-day children seem quite content with the ungainly, and often, we are bound to say, ugly stuffed animals which are to be seen in every modern nursery.⁵⁹

By producing goods in the home and compensating for shortages in readymade goods, needlewomen rendered an important service to the nation in wartime, one which has been underestimated both by contemporaries and by historians. Taking many of the processes of clothing manufacture out of the factories and into their own homes and 'free' time, they supported the diversion of factory space and labour to the war effort. This point was championed by the manageress of a London hosiery and underwear shop, who complained to a Mass Observation researcher about the rationing of knitting wool and fabric:

People used to make up their own stuff, they won't now, because they might just as well buy ready made. I think that's very short-sighted, because they are having to use all that labour when the women might be doing it for themselves. Really, I think the wool should be released altogether.⁶⁰

Furthermore, by obtaining supplies in a relatively raw state, they were able to utilize them to meet whichever needs they felt were greatest. As Hargreaves and Gowing have stated in relation to the Board of Trade's struggles to ensure that the ration could be honoured: 'Plentiful supplies of stockings would be no compensation for lack of shoes; it would be no use offering stock-size clothes to outsize people or to children; cotton frocks were not wanted in December.'⁶¹ But in the hands of the competent needlewoman cloth bought by the yard or knitting wool could be transformed into the exact garment needed, whether for a man, woman or child, in the correct size, or be used to repair, renovate or entirely repurpose old clothes. 'Plentiful supplies', or at least adequate ones, of raw and recycled materials could compensate for shortages of a variety of different garments, serving as a useful buffer in times of shortage.

In the 1940s it was not only readymade goods which were in short supply, but also many needlework products. In 1940 a leader in *The Times* stated that 'Every private knitter agrees that she cannot get the wool she wants, could not afford it if she could get

⁵⁹ Agnes Mackenzie Miall, *Economy Knitting and Patchwork* (1945), pp. 49–50.

⁶⁰ MOA TC 18 Personal Appearance and Clothes 4/B 'London Shop Interviews' 'Hiller' 22 July 1941.

⁶¹ Hargreaves and Gowing, *Civil*, p. 424.

it, and would not be seen dead with the wool that she can get.’⁶² Miall, in her 1945 *Economy Knitting and Patchwork*, presented shortages and cost, rather than coupons, as the main barriers to knitting with new wool.⁶³ Advertisers sometimes directly addressed shortages. Huttons Irish Linens attempted to invoke the national good to placate frustrated consumers, writing in one advertisement that ‘Until peace returns, Huttons Irish Linens and Cottons will be scarce indeed – the material is needed now for sterner tasks.’⁶⁴

At times needlewomen could have bought the threads and yarns they needed, but not necessarily in the colours they wanted. *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* featured an embroidery project in 1940, but warned readers that ‘Since preparing this colour scheme, several of the shades have been withdrawn owing to the rationing of dyes.’⁶⁵ Suzanne Griffith relates a number of stories of shortages and adaptations, including one woman who was sent a large amount of embroidery thread all in the same ‘particularly unpleasant shade of pink’ simply because her mother had seen it on sale and felt the opportunity to buy it was too good to pass up.⁶⁶ With supplies of knitting wool often short and colours discontinued due to wartime conditions, *Stitchcraft* encouraged women to avoid waste by buying what was available to them:

A Moral Tale

Be warned by Miss Susannah Bleech,
 Who wanted wool for undies – peach –
 When all her woolshop could supply
 Was in the palest shade of sky.
 ‘But How provoking!’ Susie cried
 And stamped, ‘I’ve tried and double tried;
 After the pains I’ve been and gone to
 You’d better get peach ordered – pronto!’
 ‘Pray don’t upbraid me in this fashion,’
 Replied the man, ‘I’ve had my ration,
 And now I do not think it’s fair
 To try and get an extra share,
 Small special orders grieve the souls
 Of Paper, String, and Wool Controls;
 To enemies you give a hostage
 When you incur unneeded postage.

⁶² *The Times*, 8 February 1940, p. 9.

⁶³ Miall, *Economy*, pp. 1, 74.

⁶⁴ *Stitchcraft*, August 1943, p. 16.

⁶⁵ *N&N*, No. 4 (1940), p. 18.

⁶⁶ Griffith, *Victory*, pp. 188–191.

Forget the peach and take the sky
 To do your bit for Victory.
 Besides, who really cares – do you? -
 Whether your vests are peach or blue?’
 * * * *
 The shopman paused – he’d won the day;
 ‘I’ve been a chump,’ blushed Sue, ‘O.K.’⁶⁷

Other items were entirely unavailable. In 1943 *Stitchcraft* carried directions for making a bag, noting ‘The original bag was made of lengths of plaited rug wool, but by this time you will probably have used all yours up and won’t be able to buy any more in the shops.’⁶⁸ In 1943 Pearsall’s announced that their embroidery wools and knitting and embroidery silks would no longer be produced until the end of the war, and offered their range of embroidery and knitting rayon as substitutes.⁶⁹ These difficulties could limit the range of needlework possible. In 1943 and in 1947 *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* gave a directions for a mock-blackwork tray cloths, offering a transfer of the stitches as it was difficult to obtain evenweave fabrics suitable for counted-thread embroidery.⁷⁰ In 1947 *Stitchcraft* welcomed the return to the market of Turkey Rug Wool, but had to provide guidance on how to crochet rugs, ‘Since there is no canvas available for making rugs by the usual long-pile method’.⁷¹

Those interviewed for this project, children and teenagers during the war years, recalled wearing, observing and, in some cases, helping with thrifty wartime needlework. The daughter of a Lee policeman, Doreen remembered her housewife mother making her a blouse to wear under her pinafore dress, with pretty patterned fabric for the front and sleeves, and sheeting for the back which would be hidden under the dress: ‘Well it was all Make Do and Mend, wasn’t it. I mean you turned things inside out, and you would make a blouse out of an old dress, and all that, you know, just the best we could.’ Similarly, Pat’s mother made her ‘a coat made out of a blanket and the lining was made with an old curtain which looked a bit bizarre but then when the coat was done up it didn’t show anyway.’ Susan’s mittens were made from her father’s old R.A.F. trousers and rabbit skins cured by her mother. Growing up in Bristol, Jeanne remembered old clothes being cut-up so that the good material could be used to make

⁶⁷ *Stitchcraft*, March 1941, p. 30. Patons & Baldwins made the same point in their advertising: *Stitchcraft*, February 1941, p. 3.

⁶⁸ *Stitchcraft*, November 1943, p. 3.

⁶⁹ *NI*, No. 174 (1943), p. 2. These rayons were still being advertised in 1947, with silks again being advertised later that year. *Stitchcraft*, January 1947, p. 17; *NI*, No. 190 (1947), p. 2.

⁷⁰ *N&N*, No. 13 (1943), p. 5; *N&N*, No. 29 (1947), p. 14.

⁷¹ *Stitchcraft*, October 1947, p. 3.

smaller items. Curtains in her family home were so old they could no longer be washed – the material lacked the strength to withstand the ordeal. She and others also recalled sheets, worn in the middle by the friction of a sleeping body, being turned ‘sides to middle’, that is, cut in half, and the good outside edges being sewn together to form a stronger, though lumpier, centre. Susan remembered her mother doing this in Reading, during the period of post-war austerity:

I remember after the war my mother used to sides to middle the sheets, because you couldn’t get sheets. Or if the middle of the sheet wore out, you’d use the sides to make pillowcases [...] we were a big family, there were a lot of sheets, so you had to sides to middle to make ends meet.

Ghillian would help her schoolteacher mother with the task, tacking the new seam before her mother machined it: ‘My [older] sister somehow got out of it, I don’t know how, and I really disliked it because it was done before they went to the laundry, and smelled. That was my real dislike of it.’ Although this was strongly associated with wartime in the minds of oral history narrators, it had in fact been common practice in the interwar years.

Whilst it is clear that the Second World War brought particular reasons for thrifty needlework, it is also vital to acknowledge the culture of economising prevalent in the interwar years, amongst not only the poor and the working class, but also within the middle class.⁷² With high levels of unemployment, the 1930s were times of great hardship for many. However, for the target audience of needlework magazines – upper-working- to middle-class women, employed themselves or wives and daughters of men in work – living standards were rising, thanks to a continuation of the falling cost of living seen in the 1920s.⁷³ Yet economising remained widespread. Catherine Horwood

⁷² Canadian and American histories of sewing have given more prominence to thrift in the 1930s, associated with the Depression. Marcia McLean, ‘“I Dearly Loved That Machine”: Women and the Objects of Home Sewing in the 1940s’, in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles: 1750-1950* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 71–72; Sarah Gordon, *‘Make It Yourself’: Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930* (New York, 2009), p. 127. Also looking at the United States, a survey of twentieth-century studies of the motivations for home sewing found that money saving and obtaining better quality items for the same money were consistently important. The importance of thrift declined for married, working- and middle-class women in the second half of the century. It was also found that although in the latter quarter of the century home sewing offered little financial saving, older women who had grown up with the belief that sewing saved money continued to cite economics as a primary reason for their craft. Sherry Schofield-Tomschin, ‘Home Sewing: Motivational Changes in the Twentieth Century’, in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 98–100, 107. For examples of thrifty needlework in Britain before the period studied here, see Barbara Burman, ‘Made at Home by Clever Fingers: Home Dressmaking in Edwardian England’, in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), p. 43.

⁷³ John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *Britain in the Depression: Society and Politics 1929-1939* (1994), pp.

has demonstrated that many middle-class women stretched their dress budgets by buying high-quality clothes through a discrete but flourishing trade in second-hand clothing, by dyeing and altering items from their own wardrobes, and by sewing clothes for their children and, to a lesser extent, themselves.⁷⁴ Barbara Burman has described the dressmaking magazine *Fashions For All* as appealing to women ‘some way above the breadline, but watching small incomes carefully, making home sewing part of a range of economies in order to maintain an acceptable level of fashionableness.’⁷⁵ More recently, Jacqueline Percival’s *Breadcrumbs and Banana Skins: The Birth of Thrift* has highlighted the range of literature available to women offering hints and tips on money-saving between the outbreak of the First World War and the eve of the Second. Focusing on food, she does not explicitly engage with or challenge narratives of the Second World War as a time of novel economising, but her references to eggless Christmas puddings and dried eggs suggest that some practices often seen as characteristic of food rationing were relatively common in peacetime. She stresses that money-saving tricks reached higher up the social scale than might be imagined, with sample budgets in books and magazines sometimes including servants’ wages. This hints at the contriving routinely practiced by women to obtain and maintain certain standards of living, even in times or conditions of relative comfort.⁷⁶ In a brief section on general household thrift she gives examples of the wide range of money-saving tips available to both working-class and middle-class women, including re-footing socks, cutting down worn sheets to make smaller items from the better parts, and making baby shoes from old suede gloves.⁷⁷

The Second World War has often been linked with endless mending, but this must be viewed in its broader historical context. In the 1940s garments were undoubtedly carefully and painstakingly nursed far beyond their normal life expectancy, and wearing clothes that were visibly old and mended became both more acceptable and more necessary. Yet, mending to a lesser extent had been utterly normal amongst the upper-working- and middle-class readers of needlework magazines in the 1920s and 1930s. Many items, even before the war, were simply too precious to discard. *Needlework For All* noted that ‘[i]t certainly is one of the most annoying things, especially to one whose

11–13.

⁷⁴ Catherine Horwood, *Keeping up Appearances: Fashion and Class Between the Wars* (Stroud, 2005), pp. 18–22.

⁷⁵ Barbara Burman, ‘Home Sewing and ‘Fashions for All’ 1908–1937’, *Costume*, 28:1 (1994), p. 79.

⁷⁶ Jacqueline Percival, *Breadcrumbs and Banana Skins: The Birth of Thrift* (2010), pp. 9, 12, 19–22, 42.

⁷⁷ Percival, *Breadcrumbs*, pp. 83–86.

needs are greater than the extent of her purse, to find that cashmere stockings soon wear out', and thoughtfully gave advice on re-footing these rather luxurious accessories.⁷⁸ Specialist mending yarns were available for darning silk stockings, and in 1935 *Stitchcraft* readers were encouraged to embroider a 'gay little apron' with a pocket for needlework, which 'ought to make it easier to keep those good resolutions on the mending of stockings!'⁷⁹ Peacetime magazines seem to have assumed that women who needed to mend knew how, but the increased need to eke out stockings during the war prompted the publication of detailed instructions.⁸⁰ Preventative measures could reduce the need for mending. In 1920 *Needlework For All* showed readers how to knit longer lasting socks, reinforcing heels and toes by knitting a strong thread along with the wool, and using a hard-wearing slip-stitch pattern on the heel.⁸¹ But the war emphasised the need to prolong the life of garments still further, making mending and darning both more necessary and more acceptable, as 'cheerful darns are patriotic.'⁸² The Board of Trade's Make Do and Mend campaign suggested preventative alterations to new, shop-bought garments, such as pre-darning socks, reinforcing cardigans, jerseys, and the buttons that attached men's braces to their trousers.⁸³ Other practices were also taken to new extremes. Taking single sheets 'sides to middle' had been common enough before the war, but the Board of Trade advised that once *this* mended sheet was once again worn out, it could be laid on top of another similarly dilapidated one, and the two carefully quilted together.⁸⁴ Growing up during wartime as the daughter of a Bromley motor mechanic, Audrey's tale of upholstery repair illustrates how exhausted an item might be whilst still being considered worth mending:

We had a big Rexene covered sofa that had a big split along the back and I, you know, herringboned it all together, moved it back into place and put my knee through it. And there was a kind of sort of desperate quality that, you know, things would never get better, it was quite... quite a depressed childhood in a way.

⁷⁸ *Needlework For All (NFA)*, No. 121 (1920), p. 3.

⁷⁹ *Needlewoman*, July 1930, p. 2; *Stitchcraft*, April 1935, p. 16.

⁸⁰ *N&N*, No. 8 (1941), p. 23; *NI*, No. 171 (1943), pp. 18–19.

⁸¹ *NFA*, No. 122 (1920), p. 37.

⁸² *Stitchcraft*, September 1943, p. 17.

⁸³ IWM Eph. C. Fashion (Make Do) K 87/312-3 Make Do and Mend Leaflet No. 12; IWM Eph. C. Fashion (Make Do) K 74105, Make Do and Mend Leaflet No. 4.

⁸⁴ IWM Eph C Fashion (Make Do) K 74105-3 Make Do & Mend Leaflet No. 3.

A number of historians have associated the unravelling and re-knitting of garments with the shortages and rationing of this period, yet it was not new.⁸⁵ Pat described her mother using this strategy:

Wool was scarce, so she used to undo old jumpers, and she'd wind it round the back of the chair, and then we'd tie little bits of wool all the way around it to keep it together, and then it was washed to take the curly bits out. But quite often it really wasn't straight, it was still a little bit nobbly so that when it was knitted up there was a kind of a nobbly pattern on it as well.

Whilst surely less common, this had again been fairly usual practice in the interwar period. In 1920 'Economical knitters' reading *Leach's Sixpenny Knitting* series were shown how to remove the kink from unravelled yarn using a vegetable steamer.⁸⁶ Readers of the classic *Mary Thomas's Knitting Book*, first published in 1938, were given similar advice.⁸⁷ Indeed, pulling back knitting and re-knitting would have been, as it is today, a common remedy for knitters, enabling them to try again when finished garments did not fit, suit, or when mistakes were found. Tara Maginnis, in her work on wartime needlework in the United States, has claimed that 'Recycled knitting was an idea imported from England, where a coal shortage and nightly air raid disturbances made warm clothes a high priority.'⁸⁸ This not only mischaracterises the practice as a wartime novelty, but overlooks the significant possibility that it had a longer history in America.

However, there was an intensification of such efforts, and during the war and the years of post-war hardship the items that were unravelled were often already heavily worn, and probably mended. Returning to Pat's mother in wartime Woolwich:

Sometimes people would give her an old jumper and if it had a hole in the elbow or something or was coming unfrayed somewhere, and um, and then she'd unpick it, very carefully knot all the pieces together so you didn't waste anything, or if there were too many short pieces she used to keep them and then use it for sewing up.

In 1945 Miall suggested unravelling garments as 'Wool of several years ago, and particularly that bought before the war, has a quality which cannot for the moment be

⁸⁵ e.g. Wood, 'Wore', p. 29; Wilson and Taylor, *Through*, p. 114.

⁸⁶ *Leach's Knitted Jumpers and Sports Coats* (1920), p. 3.

⁸⁷ Mary Thomas, *Mary Thomas's Knitting Book* (1938), p. 242.

⁸⁸ Tara Maginnis, 'She Saves Who Sews for Victory': Home Sewing on the American Home Front', *Costume*, 26 (1992), p. 66.

obtained in any shop', implying that unravelled wool could be several years old.⁸⁹ Unsurprisingly, some garments offered little useable yarn: 'Sometimes, owing to fading or wearing, quite a lot of wool must be scrapped, and then you may only have enough for a much smaller item, such as a cap, pixie scarf, gloves or socks, but whatever it is you will have made a considerable saving.'⁹⁰ Though not new, this practice was treated as increasingly normal in the war years, with patterns for accessories, children's toys, and entire garments specifically written for unravelled wool, and tips as to how to make garments with easy unravelling in mind. Whilst the latter, achieved by using single crochet for the seams, made the knitting easy to undo, the finished garment may have been less than satisfactory: 'It does tend to make the work a bit lumpy inside, but judicious pressing will work wonders. Don't use this method for babies' garments; they may protest.'⁹¹

Even before the war, magazine readers were sometimes directed to their 'remnant box' or 'oddments' for small amounts of leftover fabric or yarn, despite the need to promote sales for key advertisers or parent companies. These scraps had a variety of uses, including multi-coloured knitting, knitting practice swatches, and sewing small items.⁹² Instructions to raid the bit bag became more common in the 1940s. As Miall wrote:

When wool and yarn of all sorts are scarce, besides being expensive, as they are in war-time, we are well advised to delve into our cupboards and wool bags and see how we can make use of every single yard. Apparently unpromising fragments may often be ingeniously used up once we have thrown overboard the idea that only material fresh from the shop can be used.⁹³

The Board of Trade included in their Make Do And Mend booklet a handy table explaining what sections of garments could be knitted from various quantities of wool, helping women to adapt ordinary knitting patterns for 'bit bag' knitting.⁹⁴ *Stitchcraft* provided patterns for knitted cushions, noting that 'So long as you get the same tension it doesn't matter how you mix colours and qualities... the wilder the better!'⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Miall, *Economy*, p. 75.

⁹⁰ Miall, *Economy*, pp. 75–76.

⁹¹ *Stitchcraft*, August 1943, p. 14.

⁹² e.g. *Needle and Home*, January 1925, pp. 3–4; *NFA*, No. 183 (1925), p. 49; *NFA*, No. 187 (1925), p. 125; *Needlewoman*, March 1935, p. 24; *Stitchcraft*, March 1935, p. 24; *Stitchcraft*, August 1935, pp. 30, 36; *Stitchcraft*, September 1935, supplement, p. 2.

⁹³ Miall, *Economy*, p. 1.

⁹⁴ IWM Eph C Fashion (Make Do) K 98/188 Make Do And Mend, p. 30.

⁹⁵ *Stitchcraft*, June 1940, p. 22,

Whereas substantial oddments and scraps had previously been hoarded, during the war women used ever-smaller – and sometimes stranger – scraps. A rag-rug from *Needlework Illustrated* could be made from ‘All those bits and pieces left over from dressmaking... even the bits left when cutting out’.⁹⁶ Women also used more unusual scraps and household items. For Christmas 1943 *Needlework Illustrated* encouraged readers to ‘dig out the bits of stuff from here and there. You will be amazed what can be utilised once you start looking round’, and provided instructions for making a toy horse from undercarpeting.⁹⁷ Audrey recalled making her own doll from old shirt tails. In 1940 *Needlework Illustrated* instructed readers on how to make rugs from stockings that were worn and darned beyond use, describing the finished product as ‘Almost skin-like in effect’, presumably imagining this to be appealing rather than unnerving.⁹⁸ Although this sounds strange, it was not entirely novel: in 1935 an article in the Women’s Institute magazine *Home and Country* on the fishermen’s wives in the Banffshire village of Findochty (described as ‘the Village Where Nothing is Wasted’) noted a similar technique:

‘Aweel, therre’s rrag, they mak’ some kind o’ roogs, but if you want a rale bonny roog, trry stockin’ legs.’

‘Stocking-legs’

‘Aye. They silk stockin’s what the lassies go sae daft over. When the feet arre gone, you dye the legs all colours, then you cut them in strips crossways an’ threath them thro’ the canvas. They mak’ the bonniest roogs, fir forr the Queen hersel’.⁹⁹

Embroidery threads were undoubtedly luxury items during the Second World War, and amidst difficulties in buying a good range of shades, magazines were enthusiastic in their suggestions to use leftover odd lengths. Similar suggestions can be found in earlier magazines, but far less frequently. In 1930 a reader wrote to *The Needlewoman* asking ‘Can you tell me how I can use up my left over Silks and Wools. I get such a lot and do not like to throw them away.’ Whilst the suggestion here is conscientious frugality rather than a practical need to eke out resources, this nonetheless suggests that retaining and using leftovers was normal before the Second World War.¹⁰⁰ It was even a practice to be encouraged in the young. *The Needlewoman*, within its ‘Needlework of the Schools’ page, argued that ‘The virtue of economy in all things cannot be too early

⁹⁶ *NI*, No. 155 (1940), p. 9.

⁹⁷ *NI*, No. 174 (1943), p. 4.

⁹⁸ *NI*, No. 155 (1940), p. 9.

⁹⁹ *Home and Country*, September 1935, p. 489.

¹⁰⁰ *Needlewoman*, August 1930, p. 26.

instilled in the young, and children should be taught to preserve their odds and ends of embroidery thread throughout the year and put them to some attractive use.’¹⁰¹ During the war, however, such carefulness was not only a virtue, but a duty, and a necessity for a far greater proportion of women than in peacetime. Needlewomen did not even have the luxury of restricting themselves to scraps of purpose-made embroidery threads. In 1943 *Stitchcraft* cautioned:

The materials given here are those *actually* used to make the panel, but remember that you may find difficulty in buying just what you need. Before setting out to buy new skeins of cotton, look first in your workbag to see what you already have. For instance oddments of stocking mending may be used instead of the beige and brown skeins quoted.¹⁰²

Whilst directions for making macramé posies were given by *Fancy Needlework Illustrated* in 1935, posies and other ways of brightening up existing clothes became far more prominent in the 1940s.¹⁰³ They could be made using a variety of materials and techniques. A particularly unusual and effective version was suggested by *Stitchcraft* in 1943, made from the two halves of a broken zip, coiled and sewn into spirals.¹⁰⁴ As *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* said in 1940, ‘You may not be going to buy any new clothes for a while, but at least you can brighten them up so that they *look* different.’¹⁰⁵ In 1941 readers were promised ‘Pin a spray of these in the lapel of your jacket and you will forget you are wearing last year’s suit.’¹⁰⁶ Posies were also quick to make, ideal ‘For Spare Time Knitters’ ‘who have not a great deal of time or money to spend on “chickening up” for the spring.’¹⁰⁷ Jane Waller has highlighted the use of unrationed cotton thread to crochet collars and cuffs as accessories for dresses.¹⁰⁸ These, and embroidered fabric versions, were very common in the war years and post-war, allowing women to ‘create new interest in an old frock’, or ‘pep up dowdy, dispirited clothes’ (fig. 2.12 and 2.13).¹⁰⁹ *Needlework Illustrated* was particularly enthusiastic about their versions, knitted in crochet cotton or made from scrap-bag oddments, claiming that ‘they TRANSFORM old or dowdy clothes, are “life-savers” when

¹⁰¹ *Needlewoman*, December 1930, p. 21.

¹⁰² *Stitchcraft*, March 1943, pp. 2, 19.

¹⁰³ *FNI*, No. 128 Vol. 11 (1935), p. 12.

¹⁰⁴ *Stitchcraft*, May 1943, p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ *N&N*, No. 3 (1940), p. 17.

¹⁰⁶ *N&N*, No. 6 (1941), p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ *Stitchcraft*, February 1940, p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ Jane Waller, *Knitting Fashions of the 1940s: Styles, Patterns and History* (Wiltshire, 2006), p. 52.

¹⁰⁹ *N&N*, No. 1 (1940), p. 9; *NI*, No. 173 (1943), p. 5.

coupons are getting low.’¹¹⁰ However, this also was a continuation of an earlier trend. In the 1930s patterns were given for making collars and cuffs, to brighten ‘simple’, ‘dark’ or even ‘old’ dresses.¹¹¹

Waller has associated the ‘dickey’ or ‘gilet’, ‘a false front knitted up without a back to save wool’, with the Second World War and the subsequent years of austerity, and Wood also presents ‘cunning little fronts’ as advantageous in wartime.¹¹² These were indeed relatively common in this period.¹¹³ However, neither Waller nor Wood identify the longer history of such garments. Both knitted and sewn backless tops to wear under jackets can be found in *The Needlewoman* in 1935.¹¹⁴



Fig. 2.12 (left): crochet bib collar, *Stitchcraft*, December 1944, p. 6.

Fig. 2.13 (above): cut work collar, *Stitchcraft*, August 1944, p. 6.

¹¹⁰ *NI*, No. 167 (1942), p. 16.

¹¹¹ e.g. *Needlewoman*, March 1930, p. 16; *Needlewoman*, January 1935, p. 14; *Stitchcraft*, June 1935, p. 16; *Needlewoman*, February 1939, p. 21; *Needlewoman*, April 1939, p. 6; *Fancy Needlework Illustrated (FNI)*, No. 150 (1939), p. 33; *Stitchcraft*, January 1939, p. 11; *Stitchcraft*, February 1939, p. 22; *Stitchcraft*, April 1939, p. 13; *Stitchcraft*, June 1939, p. 8.

¹¹² Waller, *Knitting*, p. 132; Wood, ‘Wore’, p. 30. See also McDowell, *Forties*, p. 98.

¹¹³ e.g. *Stitchcraft*, March 1940, pp. 10–11; *N&N*, No. 5 (1941), p. 8.

¹¹⁴ *Needlewoman*, April 1935, pp. 20–1; *Needlewoman*, May 1935, p. 26.

Renovation and adaptation of garments was particularly common during the Second World War.¹¹⁵ Muriel remembered her mother, a foster-carer, doing this in Eltham during the war:

Well she would cut up her dresses to make a dress for me, and then after that she would cut up my dress to make something smaller for... if there was any material left, any strength in the material left, she would do that. Nothing was thrown away. I can't remember clothes being put in the bin like they do today, you sort of tried to make something out of it.

Susan's family were mobile during the war, following her father around the country due to his work with the RAF. They did not restrict themselves to their own cast-offs: 'You recycled clothes, too, in those days. If you went to a jumble sale and there was a nice something that didn't fit you, you could use the material to make things, we made things out of old jumble sale stuff.' Whilst women were often reminded to only use garments for renovation once they were so worn as to be unusable in their current form, an extract from the booklet *Housewife's Guide To Making and Mending*, suggests that the need or desire for something new and different could also be a motivator: 'Children, bless them, are always delighted with "something new" even if they have seen Mother wearing it in different guise for the last five years. Clothes rationing has brought us all back to this childish appreciation of novelty as apart from newness.'¹¹⁶ The Board of Trade was highly critical of such desires, urging 'Don't waste precious time just for the sake of making something new and different' and 'Don't cut down grown-up's clothes to make clothes for the children, which they don't really need, just for the sake of making something new for them.'¹¹⁷

Renovations can also be found in earlier years. In 1938 *The Pictorial Guide to Modern Home Needlecraft* included instructions on restyling old garments, switching sleeve styles and neck lines, renovating 'shabby' skirts, enlarging garments, cutting down adult clothing to make items for children, and enlarging children's woollens.¹¹⁸ Noting the difficulties faced by British women wishing to follow the long, flared skirts of Dior's 'New Look' after the war, Lou Taylor and Elizabeth Wilson have presented the lengthening of skirt and coat hems with contrasting materials as a novel solution.¹¹⁹ Yet,

¹¹⁵ Pat and Audrey both remembered their school needlework classes relying on (though not necessarily teaching) this kind of adaptation. Asked to supply their own fabric for projects, but unable to spare the coupons (nor, in Pat's case, the money), they had taken fabric cut from their mothers' old clothes.

¹¹⁶ IWM Eph C Fashion (Make Do) K 98/189 *Housewife's Guide To Making and Mending*, p. 28.

¹¹⁷ IWM Eph C Fashion (Make Do) K 98/188 *Make Do and Mend*, p. 19.

¹¹⁸ Catherine Franks (ed.), *The Pictorial Guide to Modern Home Needlecraft* (1938), pp. 224–232.

¹¹⁹ Wilson and Taylor, *Through*, pp. 151–152. In January 1948 Nella Last explained how she would be

in 1930 *Fancy Needlework Illustrated* reacted to a new fashion for a lower hemline by instructing readers on how to lengthen 'princess slips', which 'were bought ready made and there is no spare material with which to lengthen them'. The shoulder seams could be opened and augmented with a crochet insertion. This not only shows alteration of clothes in peacetime, but in noting regretfully that these shop bought items have 'no spare material' for lengthening, indicates that adaptations of homemade items would have been well known to readers.¹²⁰

As we have seen, historians have emphasised the use of supposedly unusual fabrics in wartime. In 1940 *Needlework Illustrated* suggested readers sew with scouring flannel: 'just the ordinary cloth one uses to wash the floor ... has been lifted from its lowly state to make the newest furnishing fabric for modern rooms! One wonders why it has not been used in this way before, so suitable and so effective does it prove.'¹²¹ It had been. In 1935 *The Needlewoman* gave directions for 'A New Cushion in Scouring Flannel!' which had the advantages of being 'soft, with a pleasing diagonal weave', cheap at only 1s.3d. a yard, 'very easy to work on, and, of course, it washes endlessly'.¹²² This also illustrates how tempting it can be to assume that wartime thrift was innovative. Writers in periodicals were keen to appear topical, inventive and indispensable, and so often claimed or implied that the ideas they presented were novel. Therefore, viewed in isolation from magazines from the 1920s and 1930s, it is all too easy to take them at their word. Nonetheless, suggestions to use unusual fabrics did become both more frequent and more inventive in the 1940s, and utilised some materials which were specific to this period. Audrey recalled sewing parachute silk after the end of the war, and in 1947 *Needlework Illustrated* suggested making a handbag and posy from 'one of those fascinating silk escape maps issued during the war to troops overseas. Most drapers and stores have government surplus ones for sale, uncouped'.¹²³

The wartime intensification of pre-existing peacetime thrift can be seen by comparing editions of *The Pictorial Guide to Modern Home Needlecraft* produced in 1938, 1943 and 1946. The first of these opened by emphasising the late 1930s as a time of exciting plenty for the needlewoman: 'Who has not gone to a large store and been

adjusting her old clothes to the New Look. Malcolmson and Malcolmson (eds), *Peace*, p. 216.

¹²⁰ *FNI*, No. 97 Vol. 9 (1930), p. 1.

¹²¹ *NI*, No. 159 (1940), p. 10.

¹²² *Needlewoman*, April 1935, p. 6.

¹²³ *NI*, No. 188 (1947), p. 14–15. This quote also suggests sewing with maps may have been remarkably mainstream whilst supplies were available.

bewildered by the vast array of even the cheapest materials? Designs are so much more interesting than they were only a year or two ago.’¹²⁴ Yet thrift was nonetheless a key theme in this book, which contained advice on drawing your own dressmaking patterns to save money, mending, and even rejuvenating and repurposing old clothes: ‘The section on renovating will be interesting to everyone, and especially to those who are called upon to be constantly thinking out new ways of making one garment last until it is absolutely impossible to wear any longer.’¹²⁵ Differences between the 1938 and 1943 editions can be explained primarily not by the need to save fabric, but the need to save paper. Whilst the 1938 edition was 320 pages long, subsequent editions were only 256. This necessitated the removal of much detail, and the 1938 sections on leather work, knitting, crochet and millinery did not appear in these later editions. Given the general pruning of content the largely unchanged sections on mending and renovation represent an increase in the relative importance of thrift, but no new information was introduced until the 1946 edition. In this, the instructions on mending remained much the same, but the section on renovating old clothing contained considerably more detail than in previous editions.¹²⁶

That such a range of thrifty, supposedly wartime, tricks were in use in the 1920s and 1930s is in some ways unsurprising. The Make Do and Mend campaign invited the submission of such tips from the general public, which were then used in advertisements, leaflets, booklets and classes. This publicised existing practices to a wider audience, rather than developing new ones.¹²⁷ Women with expertise in economising also spread their knowledge through less official means, finding that their scrimping was no longer an uncomfortable secret but a vital way for them and their communities to make the most of limited resources. Nella Last was not poor – the daughter of an accountant, in 1939 her husband owned a motorcar and his own business, and the Lasts owned their own home – but years of making do on her limited housekeeping money had made her an invaluable source of knowledge for her local

¹²⁴ Franks (ed.), *Pictorial* (1938), p. 7.

¹²⁵ Franks (ed.), *Pictorial* (1938), p. 8.

¹²⁶ Franks (ed.), *Pictorial* (1938); Catherine Franks (ed.), *The Pictorial Guide to Modern Home Needlecraft* (1943); Catherine Franks (ed.), *The Pictorial Guide to Modern Home Needlecraft* (1946), pp. 169–175, 180–231.

¹²⁷ IWM Eph. C (Make Do) K 05/668 Board of Trade advertisement, Sunday Papers, December 13th, 20th or 27th, 1942; IWM Eph. C (Make Do) K 05/672 Board of Trade advertisement, Sunday Papers, November 15th or 22nd, 1942; IWM Eph. C (Make Do) K 05/669 Board of Trade advertisement, Sunday Papers, October 25th, 1942.

W.V.S.¹²⁸ The head of the canteen invited her to act as ‘advisory cook’ when their service expanded in 1941:

She say’s I’ll not have to work really hard, only over-look and give advice on economical and tasty oddments. [...] I’m realising more each day what a knack of dodging and cooking and managing I possess, and my careful economies are things to pass on, not hide as I used to!¹²⁹

Needlework Illustrated commented in 1941 that “‘Making Do’ is no longer the grim hush-hush business it used to be and we are proud of the ingenuity shown here to help household economy and the national effort.”¹³⁰ However, in contrast to Maginnis’ observation that American women’s magazines of the 1930s rarely catered to readers needing to sew thriftily, the presence of such tips in British needlework magazines (although they were not always explicitly described as economical) does warn us not to overstate the ‘hush-hush’ nature of interwar thrift.¹³¹

Echoing the evidence from magazines, many narrators believed that careful thrift was usual in their families before the war. Audrey recalled her motor mechanic father mending the family’s shoes, and her mother patching clothes, and believed that they had done this as a matter of course before the war. Jeanne, the daughter of a shipping clerk, believed her family would always have been careful in this way, and particularly recalled her professional dressmaker aunt keeping offcuts from the garments she was commissioned to make. During her childhood in Eltham, Muriel’s father was a decorator for the council and her mother took in foster children for additional money. When asked, Muriel answered that wartime thrift was possibly not new to her family. Molly’s mother had grown up in poverty in the 1910s and 1920s, one of a family of eleven, with a heavy-drinking father. She had shared a pair of boots with her brother, and was only able to attend school when it was her turn to wear them. Unsurprisingly, Molly did not believe the war brought any changes for her mother’s needlework. Margaret, the daughter of a civil servant, said that Make Do and Mend ‘was a bit of a joke in a way’, and referred to Joyce Grenfell’s satirical Women’s Institute talk, ‘Useful and Acceptable Gifts’. This vein of wartime crafting she considered faintly ridiculous: ‘used to be things like sticking wallpaper onto biscuit tins [laughs] we were supposed to

¹²⁸ Jennifer Purcell, *Domestic Soldiers: Six Women’s Lives in the Second World War* (2010), pp. 14–15; Malcolmson and Malcolmson (eds), *Peace*, p. 290.

¹²⁹ Broad and Fleming (eds), *War*, p. 160. Purcell also notes this about Last’s wartime experience. Purcell, *Domestic*, pp. 101–102.

¹³⁰ *NI*, No. 162 (1941), p. 22.

¹³¹ Maginnis, ‘Saves’, p. 60. These interwar precedents are particularly interesting as they rarely catered to the interests of the needlework companies that advertised in and published these titles.

make these dreadful things and give them to friends'. Acknowledging more practical strategies, such as mending sheets, she pondered: 'I don't know how much we did that, that we wouldn't have done anyway'. Ghillian, on the other hand, believed that much wartime thrift would have been new to her schoolteacher mother who had been raised in a lower-middle-class family.

Whilst thrifty stitching was hardly new, its degree and spread was changed by the war, not purely from necessity, but also from patriotism. The existing literature stresses hardship and need resulting from clothes rationing and shortages, as well as encouragement from the government's Make Do and Mend campaign as the rationale behind much wartime needlework. Whilst, especially in the later years of the war and immediate post-war period, much renovation, mending and making was done within the context of genuine want, this should not obscure the fact that this was not the only motivator. Furthermore, the war prompted a shift in the culture of needlework much earlier than might be expected, before both the introduction of clothes rationing in June 1941 and the launch of the Make Do and Mend campaign in 1942.

Early in the war the patriotic benefits of avoiding unnecessary expenditure were twofold – as Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir John Simon explained, it would allow as much money as possible to be invested in National Savings Certificates, funding the war effort, and simultaneously help to restrain price rises caused by increasingly limited supplies.¹³² Yet early and voluntary restraint has often been neglected in histories of clothing in the Second World War.

Almost as soon as the war entered the pages of needlework magazines – and long before clothes rationing or shortages – women were being told of the need to be practical and frugal. A 1940 *Stitchcraft* pattern for a woman's short-sleeved lacy jumper called for only four and a half ounces of wool, 'which is always a matter for rejoicing at times like these.'¹³³ A piece in *Fancy Needlework Illustrated* from 1939 reminded readers that 'In these war-time days we must not waste a thing' and suggested readers 'Use your old silk stockings to make charming dolls for children.'¹³⁴ The same issue saw the magazine announcing a change in name after over 30 years in print:

commencing with the issue published January 1st, 1940, this Magazine will be titled 'Needlework Illustrated.' This change is in order to conform with the

¹³² *Times*, November 23 1939, p. 3.

¹³³ *Stitchcraft*, May 1940, p. 11.

¹³⁴ *FNI*, No. 154 (1939), pp. 5, 11.

present demand for the 'Practical' rather than the 'Fancy' in all forms of Embroidery and Knitting. We shall still continue to feature a wide selection of charming and attractive things to make, but also we feel that our readers will readily appreciate the addition of ideas which have due regard to present-day demands for economy in time, cost and labour.¹³⁵

The following issue suggested readers practice 'war time economy' by making rag-rugs from old stockings or dressmaking offcuts.¹³⁶ In 1940 *Needlework Illustrated* noted that 'making and trimming home and dress accessories means sound, useful economy, which is most necessary in our united effort as a Nation to foot the staggering costs of war' and that utilizing 'the rag bag' was vital 'when thrift-consciousness is so vital a weapon on our home front.'¹³⁷ The National Federation of Women's Institutes was also an early adopter of wartime thrift, suggesting in October 1939 that branches run demonstrations on 'as good as new', teaching members how to cut down old clothes for children, and turn and press skirts, in order to adapt meetings to wartime conditions.¹³⁸

For many women, this economising was a reaction to rising prices. By March 1941 the cost of living index was up twenty-nine per cent compared with pre-war, and clothing prices had increased sixty-nine per cent.¹³⁹ Mass Observation noted in December 1939 that 'women seem to notice rising prices more than rising wages', and with restrictions on imports, and factories switching from civilian to war production, many were noticing decreased supplies and increased prices of little luxuries such as cosmetics, imitation jewellery, sweets, fabric and knitting supplies.¹⁴⁰ The Retail Distributors Association complained to the Board of Trade that the knitting wool situation was unacceptable. In the autumn of 1940 supplies were being squeezed on all sides – the government had limited the quantity of wool available to spinners of knitting wool, much of what had been spun was being requisitioned to be dyed khaki, and at the same time the demand for knitting wool was greatly increased. Mass Observation noted that 'The knitting boom had become one of the main features of the home front. The BBC even had a series of Knitting for Men, advising them to start with a ladies vest'.¹⁴¹ Yet even with wool prices on the increase, knitting could be a money saver. In 1940

¹³⁵ *FNI*, No. 154 (1939), p. 6.

¹³⁶ *NI*, No. 155 (1940), p. 9.

¹³⁷ *NI*, No. 159 (1940), p. 3.

¹³⁸ MOA TC 32 Women in Wartime 4/G 'Home and Garden Groups of Subjects', p.1. This document is undated but was originally attached to an October 1939 notice from the NFWI 'Hints on War-Time Programmes for Women's Institutes'

¹³⁹ Sladen, *Conscription*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁰ MOA FR 15B 'Working Women In This War', December 1939, p, 6.

¹⁴¹ MOA FR 28 'Preliminary Report on Fashion', February 1940.

Patons & Baldwins illustrated this with ‘A Fairy Yarn’ in which ‘the Good Twin Fairies P & B’ helped a mother conquer three giants: ‘Giant Taxes, whose home was in an enormous Shed-ule; Giant Rates (splashing in Water and breathing fiery Gases); Giant Costofliving, whom no one could peg down’.¹⁴²

As Wilson and Taylor have stated, even after the introduction of rationing, conserving clothing was sometimes motivated not by high prices, the constraints of the coupon allocation, or difficulties finding replacements amidst shortages, but rather by patriotism. Those who could, often took great pride in consuming *fewer* clothes than their ration entitled them to, to contribute further to the savings of labour and resources for the war effort.¹⁴³ Needlework magazines often emphasised this patriotic element. In 1943 *Needlework Illustrated* congratulated its readers on ‘doing a splendid WAR-JOB... Sewing, Mending, Patching, Renovating. Every stitch you take to Save is another stitch towards Victory.’¹⁴⁴ In 1944 *Needlework Illustrated* proudly asserted that ‘Women, with their versatility, have become adepts at making do. We know that needles have contributed much ... will contribute more ... to speed on Victory and hasten the day of happy family gatherings by dear familiar firesides.’¹⁴⁵ Without this sense of wartime patriotic purpose, women resented economising more after the war: ‘I used to look upon “making do” and renovating as a national duty and make a game of it. Now it is just a tiresome necessity.’¹⁴⁶

It is however important to acknowledge the distinction between legitimate and illicit dodges under rationing, as crafting was not always patriotic. As *Vogue* told its readers in 1941 ‘Ingenuity within the spirit of regulations is legitimate. It is fair to coax two dresses out of one length.’¹⁴⁷ Making clothes from unrationed butter muslin intended for infants’ nappies, on the other hand, clearly involved not only attempting to get more than one’s fair share, but also diverting resources from those who the government had deemed in need – mothers and their babies.¹⁴⁸ These more underhanded ideas do not appear in needlework magazines. Other examples are less clear-cut. In 1941 *Needlework Illustrated* invited readers to make ‘handsome cushions made of

¹⁴² *Stitchcraft*, May 1940, p. ii.

¹⁴³ Wilson and Taylor, *Through*, pp. 116–118. This was encouraged by the government. McDowell, *Forties*, p. 112.

¹⁴⁴ *NI*, No. 173 (1943), p. 3.

¹⁴⁵ *NI*, No. 178 (1944), p. 3.

¹⁴⁶ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951* (2008), p. 297.

¹⁴⁷ *Vogue*, October 1941 cited Wilson and Taylor, *Through*, p. 116.

¹⁴⁸ e.g. Gardiner, *Wartime*, p. 490.

uncrushable, wear-for-ever, UNRATIONED hessian'.¹⁴⁹ This title also gave a range of suggestions for using unrationed ribbon and cloth under 3 inches wide, including sewing a vestee from wide petersham.¹⁵⁰

The emphasis on wartime thrift as unusual, even comical, also conceals the extent to which many of these practices continued after the end of clothes rationing and even through the consumer boom of the mid- to late-1950s and 1960s.¹⁵¹ Margaret Beetham *et al* have argued that this period was dominated by an 'ideology of "never had it so good", when domestic economy (both national and household) was understood to have declined in favour of energetic consumption'.¹⁵² Similarly, Elizabeth Roberts argues that after the war, women's domestic roles as financial managers decreased, as increased prosperity meant careful spending and economical cooking was less important: 'in an increasingly consumerist society, being economical and making something out of nothing was less important than the ability to buy.'¹⁵³ Burman has argued that with increased female employment, women's earning potential in employment came to outweigh their saving potential as fulltime housewives, and this led to a dramatic shift in motivations for dressmaking. This was no longer an exercise in thrift, but leisure or a practical solution for 'those who cannot enter the ready-made clothing market [...] those with non-standard body shape or disability [...] individuals who wish to stay outside or ahead of trends', and also people making clothes for special occasions such as weddings.¹⁵⁴ However, Burman's argument cannot be extended to other forms of needlework. Dressmaking differs from many other forms of stitching in that it is ideally done in large, relatively uninterrupted 'blocks' of time (especially if using a machine), and can take up a good deal of space. It does not fit around other aspects of women's lives as easily as knitting, crochet and embroidery. Thus Burman's either/or approach to dressmaking and employment is not necessarily applicable to other crafts and mending,

¹⁴⁹ *NI*, No. 165 (1941), pp. 12–13.

¹⁵⁰ *NI*, No. 165 (1941), p. 14.

¹⁵¹ Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (2005), pp. 97–104. Whilst not directly related to needlework, Lisa Hirst's work on domestic workwear sheds light on thrifty clothing practices in the 1950s and 1960s, with clothes initially bought as Sunday best being 'passed down' as they became worn to Saturday clothes, 'then to weekdays and finally to do the cleaning in. What had once been a fashionable outfit for best could end up being put to practical use in the home.' Lisa Hirst, 'Dressing the part: Workwear for the home 1953-1965', *Things*, 9:Winter (1998), p. 39.

¹⁵² Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer, and Hebron, *Worlds*, p. 110.

¹⁵³ Elizabeth Roberts, 'Women and the Domestic Economy, 1890-1970: the oral evidence', in Michael Drake (ed.), *Time, Family and Community: Perspectives on Family and Community History* (Oxford, 1994), p. 136.

¹⁵⁴ Barbara Burman, 'Introduction', in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 8–9.

which could continue to fill ‘odd moments’ of employed women’s time.¹⁵⁵ There are also broader issues with the characterisation of this period as one of consumption and plenty. Jen Browne argues that ‘the 1950s in Britain did not mark the arrival of mass consumer culture’, but were characterised by continued shortages which necessitated continued DIY home improvement in the spirit of Make Do and Mend.¹⁵⁶ Historians have focused on change at the expense of continuity, emphasising a growth in consumption and affluence without adequately acknowledging the limits of this.¹⁵⁷ Economising remained a necessity for many, and for others saving in some areas enabled the splurging in other, sometimes more publicly visible, areas that has been the subject of such academic interest. What follows is not an attempt to deny the relative affluence of the later 1950s and 1960s, but to add nuance, examining the domestic production and mending which helped to build an era of cars, washing machines and televisions.

Popular understandings of post-war thrift tend to highlight habits acquired by those who ‘lived through the war’, but whilst this may have been true of the ethic of thrift, at the level of technique this explanation falls short. Books and magazines continued to re-introduce many of these ideas to their readers. In 1958 readers of the *Pins and Needles New Treasure Book of Family Needlework* were instructed on straightening unravelled wool, crocheting rugs from old, dyed stockings cut into strips, altering, updating and entirely repurposing old clothes, and given plentiful advice on mending – including a scheme for dealing with worn trouser cuffs that allowed them to be mended four times without any shortening of the trouser leg.¹⁵⁸ Magazines continued to include ideas for scraps and oddments, although with lesser frequency than during the war and immediate post-war years.¹⁵⁹ In 1960 *Knit & Sew* showed readers how to salvage an old towel and, using candlewick fabric bought by the yard, turn it into a mermaid-themed bath mat.¹⁶⁰ Scraps were used in toy-making in greater variety than in other crafts. Women might make soft toys from old towels, dressing gowns or discarded lisle stockings, or stuff a

¹⁵⁵ Most of the women taking part in oral history interviews for this study had stitched in their evenings when employed. For more on needlework and women’s time, see above, pp. 70-77.

¹⁵⁶ Jen Browne, ‘Decisions in DIY: women, home improvements and advertising in post-war Britain’, in Maggie Andrews and Mary M Talbot (eds), *All the World and Her Husband: Women in the Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture* (2000), p. 132.

¹⁵⁷ On the more general bias towards change in history, see Judith M. Bennett, ‘Confronting Continuity’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 9:3 (1997), pp. 78–79.

¹⁵⁸ Christine Veasey (ed.), *Pins and Needles New Treasure Book of Family Needlework* (1958), pp. 79, 155, 171–175, 177–182.

¹⁵⁹ e.g. *Knit & Sew* (*K&S*), January 1960, pp. 3, 4; *K&S*, September 1960, p. 24; *Stitchcraft*, January 1965, pp. 28–29; *Stitchcraft*, May 1965, p. 26; *Stitchcraft*, December 1965, p. 3.

¹⁶⁰ *K&S*, April 1960, p. 33.

family of ‘Golly’ dolls with cut up nylons or unravelled wool.¹⁶¹ Unusual fresh materials were used as well. *Knit & Sew* suggested teenage readers knit a hat and handbag from coloured dishcloth cotton.¹⁶² Crocheted or embroidered collars continued to be featured, although more rarely, and whilst in 1960 *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* commented that they could refresh an old dress, they were more often presented simply as fashion accessories.¹⁶³

Narrators remembered needlework as a strategy to save money in the 1950s and 1960s. The women, largely based in south-east London, recalled economising through careful shopping for fabric and remnants in places such as Deptford Market, East Street Market, Lewisham Market, Petticoat Lane Market, and ‘Rolls and Rems’, a shop in Lewisham. Audrey, the wife of an actor, recalled needing to do a great deal of sewing when setting up her home in Greenwich in 1966, after the birth of her second child. As well as making loose covers for furniture and many curtains, she sewed sheets for all the beds from cheap but good quality sheeting sold by the bolt. Narrators believed that in this period sewing and knitting at home was generally cheaper or better value than buying ready-made, regardless of careful shopping for materials.¹⁶⁴ Audrey said that ‘Money’s always been a factor really, and it was obviously always cheaper to buy material than to buy a dress.’ Margaret described sewing as ‘a handy way of saving money’ when she was saving to get married. She continued to sew after her marriage to her librarian husband, ‘while money was tight, and especially when I found there weren’t clothes in the shops that were what I wanted, it was easy to buy cloth and patterns and make them yourself.’ Thrift also led women to continue to use many of the techniques which we have seen associated with the Second World War. Ghillian remembered being ‘very, very poor’ when at college in the 1950s: ‘I wore everything, you know, twice turned down sort of thing [laughs] well, not quite twice turned, but not far off. And things I’d made myself or altered or changed. Grew out of things, cut them in, cut them in half – a bolero and a skirt instead of a dress.’

Children’s clothes were a particularly significant area of thrifty sewing. For many women, finances were especially difficult when they had young children, managing

¹⁶¹ *NI*, No. 202 (1950), p. 24; *K&S*, August 1960, pp. 6–7; *NI*, No. 203 (1950), p. 20; *K&S*, April 1960, pp. 12, 14.

¹⁶² *K&S*, August 1960, p. 30.

¹⁶³ *NI*, No. 200 (1950), p. 18; *N&N*, No. 84 (1960), p. 10; *Stitchcraft*, September 1965, p. 26; *N&N*, No. 102 (1965), p. 21; *N&N*, No. 104 (1965), p. 14.

¹⁶⁴ However, Jeanne felt that, for her, thrift in dressmaking was especially important from the 1930s to the 1950s, and that after this ready-made became cheaper than they had been.

with the expense of caring for them, sometimes quite soon after setting up home, and perhaps taking time away from earning. Jeanne, a retired health visitor and fieldwork teacher who married a sales representative and clerical officer, stated that when their three children were small, in the 1960s, 'we were very hard up'. She remembered ready-made children's clothes being expensive. Since they required little fabric to make, stitching at home could offer significant savings. Molly, a retired personal assistant, commented that this was not only a matter of cost, as making clothes at home could provide better *value* than shop bought, as the same money could buy better quality materials, and the workmanship was under her control. Jeanne also explained that making clothes at home could make it easier to adapt them to growing children: 'You can put hems on them and let them up and down. I had a pair of duffle coats that I made for my children that were everlastingly having their hems taken up and down [laughs] and extra lengths on the sleeves as well, which is always useful.' In 1963 Pat (a shorthand typist and later teacher) altered clothes that had been worn by her two older daughters so that they could be worn by her young son, switching buttons and button bands to the appropriate side and sewing smocked dresses into romper suits. She also renovated and repaired her children's clothes:

[On her reasons for making for children] because we couldn't afford to buy any clothes, so again I did what my mum did during the war and often used an old garment or adapted them, especially for everyday wear that they would wear in the garden, it didn't really matter.

And sometimes I used to patch the children's clothes and put the patch on in a shape, an animal shape or something. So, um, well, they didn't mind about it being repaired, but it just looked a bit better than a square patch, so they used to have animals on their knees and things like that.

This latter idea was also featured in *Knit & Sew* magazine in 1960, which encouraged readers to sew padded cat-face patches onto the knees and seat of boys' dungarees, to cover worn areas and provide cushioning against falls.¹⁶⁵ In the same year this title suggested readers use contrast trim to rejuvenate a girl's old dress or enlarge it if it had been outgrown, and even to make nursery furniture: 'As a caricot [sic] is used only for a short time in baby's life, we suggest you make this attractive one yourself. Believe it or not, it is a cardboard egg-box covered and hooded with pretty animal-motif plastic!'¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ *K&S*, February 1960, p. 29.

¹⁶⁶ *K&S*, January 1960, p. 25; *K&S*, February 1960, p. 4.

Whilst magazines and objects from earlier periods can tell us much about the prevalence and normality of thrifty needlework and mending, oral history interviews offer insight into women's attitudes towards these activities. Women emphasised the difference between mending and other forms of needlework, generally seeing it as less rewarding and relaxing. Jeanne disliked the lack of creativity involved, describing mending as: 'incredibly boring [...] You weren't actually creating anything, you were just changing what was there in a way. There was no element of creativity at all in that. Well, you got maybe another year out of it and that's about it.' Audrey agreed: 'that was such a chore, no I hated that. No I didn't... hmm, patching things... no I didn't like doing that, I suppose because it wasn't creative in any way'. The element of choice was also important to her: '[it] wasn't something I'd *chosen* to do.' Muriel, a Nottingham teacher, preferred other stitching: 'No, not so much a rest. Not so enjoyable as doing your embroidery, no, just a necessity.'

Although there was a general feeling that mending could not take the place of other, more enjoyable, forms of needlework, some were keen to emphasise that it was not actually hated. Margaret mended things as she noticed the need for it, or put the item aside to deal with in the evening, 'it was there to be done, you did it, and I never found it an awful chore'. She preferred this to other domestic work, such as cleaning, and did not feel burdened by it, but suggested that might have been different if she had a large family to mend for (she was child-free). Muriel did not like mending, but she did not seem to resent it: 'Well it was a necessity, it was a chore, but it was a necessity. So you just got on with it and do it.' Molly said: 'It never bothered me, I didn't have any ill feeling about it.' For Pat, it was simply part of everyday life: 'It was just something that needed doing and you did it. I wouldn't say it was relaxing exactly, except that it was a good excuse to sit down. No, it was just something that you did... normally, you know.'

Yet for some, this thrift was something more than a necessity, it was part of a particular way of living, a morality of avoiding waste. For some narrators this ethic had lasted into the present-day. Jeanne recalled recently converting some old double duvets to singles and carefully cutting them in such a way that the excess fabric could be made into pillowcases, despite having plenty of pillowcases: 'habit dies hard I'm afraid [laughs]'. Pat linked this to her upbringing:

Just because you tore something, you know, you didn't throw it away, you repaired it, and if it was you know a bad tear, you'd patch it [...] well, it was the

way I was brought up, so you just did it as a matter of course, that was what you did [...] You didn't throw away anything that could be used again.

This had stayed with Margaret, and she was particularly explicit about the moral element:

Well, you could look on it as thrift, but there was a strange attitude. I mean I've still got it, when things are quite cheap to buy, I would still put a stitch in a pair of tights if they were fairly new.

It's some sort of, it's hardly thrift or economy really, it's a matter of not wasting things, waste being seen as something bad. Whether it comes with the war or poverty or what I don't know, because we were never that hard up, and I think it had always been like that, you just didn't waste things if you could possibly save them.

Muriel felt that in recent years economising and housewifery had become denigrated:

Well, there was more time in those days, not so many women went to work. Today everyone wants to go to work, don't they, they feel compelled to go to work today [...] but then you practiced economy. Today people want to buy convenience foods and things like that, which are more expensive than going and doing it yourself. And also society wants to know 'what's your job' [...] 'I'm a housewife' is, um, derogatory.

In contrast, Molly was aware that she did not always choose to mend: 'They'd pile up, and then sometimes they'd disappear [laughs] Yeah, I would make them disappear, you know, like... make it disappear [into the rag-bag]. I wasn't, I'm not going to make out I was a perfect housewife doing all this mending and sewing 'cause I wasn't.'

Thrift-as-lifestyle should not, however, obscure the fact that, for some, homemade items could represent 'an unwelcome badge of poverty'.¹⁶⁷ Molly remembered a trip to the Proms with her husband:

I'd made myself this dress, and there was this very posh young woman who said to her friend 'oh, that's obviously very handmade' [...] I felt very put down about it [...] I think that maybe the connotation of a handmade dress at that time would have been, oh well, it's poverty. She was a very middle-class young woman, and she probably saw me in my little handmade dress and thought that I was impoverished, which I was, let's face it, I was. But I thought that was my very first memory of anybody being nasty to me.

A similar fear of conspicuous economising limited clerical-worker Doreen's mending for her sons: 'I can't remember doing a lot, I have mended of course [...] But, I mean

¹⁶⁷ Burman, 'Clever', p. 37.

not with the school uniform, because if it went like that you replaced it, because you wouldn't let them go to school shabby.' Thus whilst economical making and mending remained normal behaviour for the upper-working- and middle-class readers of needlework magazines and amongst the predominantly middle-class oral history narrators, this was, unlike during the war, limited by a desire to avoid the 'shabby' and external signs of frugality.

By placing wartime 'ingenuity' in its historical context, it has been shown that whilst during the Second World War there was certainly an intensification of many of these thrifty activities, few were entirely new. Presenting them as such has often masked continuities in women's engagement with needlework in general and thrifty needlework in particular. Most historians touching upon this field have tended to exaggerate the strangeness of wartime change, emphasising these practices as indications of desperation and inventiveness. By ignoring ordinary sewing and knitting in this period and before, histories of dress in the Second World War have risked downplaying the normality of the production of clothing in the home, and exaggerating the extent to which clothing was purchased ready-made both during and prior to the Second World War.

Rationing was clearly a significant motivator behind wartime thrifty needlework, and one that can be much more fully understood with a careful examination of the precise position of knitting and sewing materials within the scheme. Scarcity of finished goods, especially toys, were another reason to turn to the needle. In some cases this ability to transform relatively raw materials into needed items can be seen as a previously unacknowledged form of women's war work, easing the difficulties caused by national shortages and uneven local distribution, and bringing manufacturing processes out of the factory and into the home. However, this chapter also challenges historical narratives that have linked wartime thrift primarily or solely with clothes rationing and the government's Make Do and Mend campaign. Clothes rationing was not introduced until 1941, and the Make Do and Mend campaign was not launched until 1942, whereas a culture of wartime-motivated thrift appeared in needlework magazines startlingly early. Whilst necessary economising at a time of increasing prices was certainly a factor behind this, a great deal of thrifty needlework both before and after the introduction of clothes rationing must be seen as patriotic, conserving the nation's resources, restraining price increases, and, as part of women's wider economy drive, making ends meet amidst

rising prices and ensuring that as much money as possible was available for contributing towards the war effort in the form of National Savings.

Evidence from books, magazines and oral history accounts also reveal a great deal of economical needlework continuing beyond the period of post-war austerity into the late 1950s and 1960s. Again this challenges notions of the Second World War as a time of strange sewing. As with evidence from the interwar period, this demonstrates the continued importance of the home as a site of domestic production. It also adds subtlety to more usual characterisations of this boom period as one of plenty, illustrating the strategies that enabled conspicuous consumption. The relative abundance of living potential oral history narrators for the post-war decades also allows us to explore aspects of the history of needlework thrift that can otherwise be difficult to access, including women's attitudes towards these activities and their priorities, revealing thrift to be routine, generally tolerated and, for some, an enduring ethic, regardless of need. Combined with evidence from earlier decades, this begins to reveal the shifting and various meanings of twentieth-century thrift, whereby the same activity could be understood as a shameful necessity, a proud act of patriotism, or a virtuous duty, preventing waste.

Chapter Three

‘A Pleasure, a Solace and a Service’: Needlework and Women’s Emotional Experience of the Second World War¹

The Second World War could be emotionally turbulent, mixing fear, absences, bravery, grief, anxiety, and patriotism. A number of recent histories of women in the Second World War have used diaries and oral histories to give vivid, moving and sympathetic insights into the emotional experience both on the home front and in the services. In particular, Jennifer Purcell and Virginia Nicholson have connected women’s emotional experiences with dramatic developments in the war and in their personal lives.² However, this approach has not been applied to the same extent to the minutiae of life on the home front, integrating food difficulties, clothing issues, blackouts and queues with quotidian experiences of anguish, terror, heartbreak and hope. Using magazines, Mass Observation materials, letters, diaries, oral history and objects, this chapter uses needlework to examine the finer threads woven to form the fabric of everyday emotional experience and management.³ Not so much a history of emotions, in that the primary focus here is not on the construction of emotions themselves, rather it is an *emotional* history, grounding needlework in the emotional landscape and experience of the time, recognising and acknowledging the emotions and emotional motivations of the historical actors which influenced their reasons for stitching and the things that they made. Whereas historians have often presented needlework as primarily or solely a strategy for obtaining finished objects, this chapter stresses the importance of viewing wartime needlework within the broader context of women’s lives, demonstrating how its process and product reflected, and also helped to construct and express,

¹ This title is taken from Lady Smith-Dorrien’s description of needlework in wartime. *Needlewoman and Needlecraft (N&N)*, No. 1 (1940), p. 1.

² Virginia Nicholson, *Millions Like Us: Women’s Lives in the Second World War* (2011); Jennifer Purcell, *Domestic Soldiers: Six Women’s Lives in the Second World War* (2010); Julie Summers, *Stranger in the House: Women’s Stories of Men Returning from the Second World War* (2008); Jennifer Jill Purcell, ‘Beyond Home: Housewives and the Nation, Private and Public Identities 1939-1949’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Sussex, 2008).

³ Although some histories of needlework in other periods have engaged with emotions, they have relied heavily on fiction as a source, and as such have risked confusing lived emotional experiences with stitching as a dramatic device. Zena Forster, ‘The Home-Makers: Needlework, Homes and Domestic Femininities in Middle Class, Mid-Nineteenth Century England with Particular Reference to Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Nottingham, 1995); Laurie Yager Lieb, ‘The Works of Women are Symbolical’: Needlework in the Eighteenth Century’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 10:2 (1986), pp. 38–39. An exception is Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (2009), pp. 244–246.

needlewomen's ideas around patriotism, bravery, beauty, domesticity, duty, emotional connections and separations.

In the limited historiography of needlework in the Second World War, the subject of thrift and 'Make Do and Mend' (examined in chapter two) has been so dominant as to exclude almost completely other concerns, resulting in histories which isolate needlework from the broader realities of war. The distortions caused by this are made clear when looking at the renovation of clothing. The repurposing of clothes, cutting up worn or unwanted garments to sew into needed items, was a common part of wartime needlework. Maggie Wood's oral history notes that some men returned from war to find their wardrobes had been appropriated to make clothes for their womenfolk or children.⁴ But what of the men who did not return? Norman Longmate has given short shrift to emotional concerns in his description of fashion hungry women picking, vulture-like, through the clothes of the dead:

Plus fours were much valued as raw material for skirts and boys' shorts, but even more in demand were discarded dinner jackets and trousers and to inherit one from a dead relative softened the blow of bereavement for any woman eager to make herself a smart dark suit or long evening skirt.⁵

This account is especially callous as its reference merely to 'a dead relative' glosses over the all too real possibility that the garment's late owner was a young, fit, and loved man, not a great-uncle passing away quietly at home in old age, but a husband, son, or brother, suffering a violent, sudden and distant death.

Cumbrian housewife Nella Last's Mass Observation diary is suggestive of the hesitancy some women would have felt at repurposing the clothes of even merely absent men. In March 1943 her younger son, Cliff, was in the army. Intending only to air his clothes, she began to empty his wardrobe:

a wave of the smell I always associated with the boys came to my nostrils. Partly tobacco, partly Harris tweed from an old favourite jacket my brother bought the material for when he was in the Highlands, partly shaving-soap – Wright's Coal Tar. I stood with my face pressed against a jacket, and then pushed everything back and closed the door.⁶

⁴ Maggie Wood, *We Wore What We'd Got': Women's Clothes in World War II* (Exeter, 1989), pp. 27–28. See also Suzanne Griffith, *Stitching for Victory* (Stroud, 2009), pp. 159–160; Colin McDowell, *Forties Fashion and the New Look* (1997), p. 103.

⁵ Norman Longmate, *How We Lived Then: A History of Everyday Life During the Second World War* (1971), p. 254.

⁶ Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (eds), *Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife,*

With her doting son removed from her by war, and at risk of annihilation, these clothes and their odour were on the cusp of being, in the words of Susan Stewart, ‘the material sign of an absent referent’, all of him that could be tangible to her.⁷ Cliff’s smell was powerfully evocative of his presence, and her familiarity with it reveals the physical affection between the two of them. In closing the wardrobe door she both preserved this precious reminder of him and shut it away from her, having found it almost overwhelming. Both of Last’s sons survived the war but it is hard to imagine that, had it been otherwise, she would have reused these garments lightly, despite her frugal nature. Those women who did choose to use the clothing of their dead husbands, brothers and sons may have felt uncomfortably reminded of their loved one when seeing their children dressed in their ‘new’ shorts, or whilst wearing the skirt that had been his suit.

This is one example of the conspicuous absence of the war in histories of wartime dress. Women are frequently presented as resourceful, and whilst shortages are acknowledged, their emotional and psychological context is not. Fears of invasion, bombings, and the loss of loved ones abroad are neglected, and instead women in these hard times are gently mocked as ‘uniquely clad!’⁸ This risks an excessively and inappropriately light-hearted history of the home front, in which brave faces, stiff upper lips and humour are taken at face value.

This chapter will deal with the continuation of peacetime needlework, elements of wartime thrift, and the knitting and sewing of ‘comforts’ for the forces and hospitals.⁹ A 1941 survey of the National Panel of Mass Observers found that though none of the one hundred and fifty male respondents had knitted for the war effort, thirty-one of the eighty female ones had, making it the single most common form of war work amongst

49 (2006), p. 235.

⁷ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C., 1993), p. 139.

⁸ Wood, ‘Wore’, p. 20.

⁹ Knitted ‘comforts’ were frequently similar to civilian clothing, simply jumpers, pullovers, cardigans or socks in the service colours of navy blue, khaki, air force blue and, less commonly, clerical grey. Other items, such as fingerless mitts and balaclavas were more specialised. The long sea-boot stockings needed for the navy received a bemused response from *Stitchcraft* magazine: ‘The result looks rather like winter warms for a baby elephant, but we are assured it’s just what the sailors want.’ *Stitchcraft*, October 1940, p. 16. Needlework magazines opened the war with a flurry of comforts patterns, but these decreased in prominence from 1941 onwards. *Needlework Illustrated (NI)*, *Stitchcraft* and *N&N* contained only eight instances of service knitting between a combined total of twenty-two issues in 1941. This should not, however, be equated with a collapse in interest. Near the end of 1940 *NI* emphasised the need to keep knitting, as the loss of equipment and comforts at Dunkirk and Calais, along with wear and tear, meant that items needed replacing. *NI*, No. 159 (1940), p. 3. Rather, by the later years of the war, interested knitters would have been able to purchase dedicated booklets of comforts patterns, including officially approved collections, and would have kept earlier issues or clippings, as suggested in *Stitchcraft*, August 1940, p. 15.

women. It was noted that the National Panel was not a representative sample of the nation, more heavily laden with the middle class, socialists, conscientious objectors, and ‘social rebels’.¹⁰ Another report suggested that Mass Observation diarists were less likely than the general population to be knitters.¹¹ Thus the proportion of women knitting comforts was likely even higher than this suggests. In 1943 it was claimed that a quarter of a million women were knitting for the Merchant Navy alone.¹² Whilst comforts knitting has been dismissed as ‘mundane’ by James Hinton, it was clearly a significant aspect of the wartime experience of a great many British women, and one that has received little scholarly attention.¹³

Demonstrating needlework in wartime as ‘a pleasure, a solace, and a service’, this chapter will first examine the continuities embodied and enabled by needlework. It will then reveal the ways in which needlework was used as an emotional tool to invoke and reinforce feelings of patriotism, bravery, and (at a time when emotional aspects of national identity were especially overt) British fortitude, to provide needed pleasure, relaxation and therapy, and as a way to help the nation, which in turn helped the individual feel a part of the war effort. Finally, the chapter deals with the role of the stitched object in interpersonal relations, marking memories and expressing care for absent loved ones and disrupted communities.

The Second World War was a time of great change and uncertainty, both exciting and terrifying. In this context needlework helped to both create and enable certain reassuring continuities, providing a sense of stability.¹⁴ Knitting comforts was not a usual peacetime activity, but precedence in previous wars meant it was the ‘normal’ thing to do in such an abnormal situation. For Ethyle Campbell, who had written books on her involvement in the fashion industry in the 1930s, the impulse to knit in wartime even temporarily overcame her prejudices against the craft: ‘unthinkingly, I began war by knitting’, making both comforts and items for herself. She was, however, so vexed at later finding superior garments in the sales for less than she had spent on wool that her

¹⁰ MOA FR 739 ‘Questionnaire on Psychological Warwork and on Air Raids, War Activities and Opinions’, June 1941, pp. 1, 15.

¹¹ MOA FR 774 ‘Clothes Rationing’, July 1941, p. 9.

¹² *Times*, 6 November 1943, p. 7.

¹³ James Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War: Continuities of Class* (Oxford, 2002), p. 58.

¹⁴ On the disruption of gender roles and domesticity in wartime and the need for feelings of continuity, see Antonia Lant, ‘Prologue: mobile femininity’, *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 14–17.

‘knitting needles have disappeared.’¹⁵ Knitting in the Great War was a particularly potent memory. Bestway noted that there had not been so much enthusiasm for knitting ‘since the last War’, and both the London Co-operative Society’s staff paper *The Beehive* and *Knitting for the Army: Official Guide* referenced the iconic song of the First World War, ‘Sister Susie’s Sewing Shirts for Soldiers’.¹⁶ When the knitting writer Mary Thomas commented in *The Queen’s Book of Red Cross* that ‘knitting in war-time automatically conjures up to the vision such articles as Balaclava helmets, socks, sweaters, mittens, comforters, etc.’ she drew on the concept of a stable wartime knitting tradition. She wrote that women knit these for ‘their own menfolk. They always have, and always will do so’. This was reinforced by an illustration of a medieval damsel presenting her beau with an almost-finished tunic emblazoned with Saint George’s cross (fig. 3.1).¹⁷ The official RAF knitting booklet contained an image of an airman in his balaclava juxtaposed with a portrait of a knight similarly attired in his chain mail (fig. 3.2).¹⁸ These contributed to a sense that this war, and women’s feminine contribution to it, was neither revolutionary nor unsettling, but a recurrence of past practice. Instances of wartime knitting were linked to each other, and thus women’s role in this war was framed not as a troubling disruption of gender roles, but as part of a long and stable tradition. This was stretched by images of knights and damsels past the Great War and Crimea into an almost mythical sense of wartime knitting as something women – and specifically British women – ‘always have’ done.

Comforts knitting was seen as part of women’s proper role in wartime, supporting their menfolk.¹⁹ Sailor Sam Gibbs, writing a letter in thanks for comforts sent to him and other men aboard his minesweeping trawler, presented this as a reciprocal arrangement: ‘you keep the needles going and we’ll do our best to keep you in food by keeping the seas clear for the gallant merchant men.’²⁰ A notice from the Lord Lieutenant of Surrey’s Fund asked ‘Our Men Are Doing Their Duty – Are YOU Doing YOURS?’, encouraging women to ‘do YOUR part in providing Comforts **urgently**

¹⁵ Ethyle Campbell, *How to Get By in War-Time* (1940), p. 76.

¹⁶ *Bestway Knitting No. 68: War Knitting*, p. 3; *Beehive* 19 (5) March 1940; *Knitting for the Army: Official Guide* (1941), p. 3.

¹⁷ Mary Thomas, ‘Our Knitting Forces’, *The Queen’s Book of the Red Cross* (1939), p. 243. The ‘balaclava’ helmet directly references earlier wars as, like the ‘cardigan’ its name came to the English language through the Crimean War. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁸ *Knitting for the R.A.F.: Official Book of Instructions*, p. 11.

¹⁹ This connects with Alison Oram’s identification of domestic war work as part of ‘a complementary feminine citizenship for women’, Alison Oram, ‘“Bombs don’t discriminate!” Women’s political activism in the Second World War’, in Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (eds), *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester, 1996), p. 55.

²⁰ IWM Documents 570 Gibbs, 18 October 1940.

needed by the men who are preserving you and yours from the horrors of War'.²¹ W&B Wools stated bluntly 'HIS DUTY – to serve, YOURS – to knit'.²² A rather more cynical view of this reciprocity was provided by the British author Mollie Panter-Downes in *This Flower, Safety*, a short story for *The New Yorker*. She described wealthy middle-aged and elderly women who fled London for the safety of 'Crumpington-on-Sea', where they could continue their comfortable lives in the seaside hotels. In the communal areas:

all the teagown laps were full of khaki and navy-blue wool that would end up as comforts for the brave boys who were having such a horrid time somewhere so that the Graves could arrive properly chilled on Miss Ewing's table and Mrs. Prentiss could be lugged in a Bath chair unmolested along the sea front.²³

Whilst here the value of this knitting is reduced to, at best, a token effort, tainted by the privilege and cowardice of the knitters which contrasts starkly with the 'horrid time' endured by servicemen, this nonetheless supports the existence of a notion of exchange of feminine and masculine contributions. These echoed peacetime gender divisions, with men providing protection and resources, and women supporting their menfolk by combining these resources with their physical and emotional labour to create comfort and home. The safe and reassuring femininity, domesticity, and continuity of knitting were significant to its appeal.²⁴

²¹ Original emphasis. MOA TC 32 Women in Wartime 4/I 'Lord Lieutenant of Surrey's Fund', 21 October 1940.

²² *Needlewoman*, January 1940, p. 31.

²³ Mollie Panter-Downes, 'This Flower, Safety', *Good Evening, Mrs Craven: The Wartime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes* (1999), p. 37. Originally published 6 July 1940.

²⁴ On the broader concern around reinforcing femininity and domesticity in wartime, see Sonya O Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 122–142.



Fig. 3.1 (above): Illustration from Mary Thomas, 'Our Knitting Forces' in *The Queen's Book of the Red Cross* (1939) p. 243.



Fig. 3.2 (right): Illustration from *Knitting for the R.A.F.: Official Book of Instructions*, p. 11.

In such changing times, needlework could support the continuation of many aspects of women's culture, moderating the effects of war on their everyday lives and providing them with the security of continuity. Sonya O. Rose and Pat Kirkham have examined the use of discourses of beauty in wartime, and needlework, too, continued to emphasise the need for women to maintain their appearance.²⁵ This is implicit in magazine photographs of knitwear-clad models with immaculately coiffed hair and pristine make-up, and was made explicit in advertising and editorial copy early in the war. *Stitchcraft* told its readers that knitting for yourself was patriotic: 'Knit a pretty jumper or an occasional pair of gloves; you owe it to those about you to look as nice as you can, for an attractively dressed woman is always a joy to look on, and you won't help any national cause by going around badly dressed.'²⁶ P & B Wools claimed that 'by looking your best in times such as these, you are doing your bit!'²⁷ Even the gas-mask could be transformed into a decorative accessory with the addition of an embroidered case.²⁸ As we shall see in chapter four, the emphasis on fashion as a process of change disappeared

²⁵ Pat Kirkham, 'Beauty and Duty: Keeping up the (Home) Front', in Pat Kirkham and David Thoms (eds), *War Culture: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two* (1995), pp. 13–28; Rose, *Which*, pp. 130–135. See also Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism* (2010), pp. 78–79; Peter McNeil, 'Put Your Best Face Forward': The Impact of the Second World War on British Dress', *Journal of Design History*, 6:4 (1993), pp. 288–289.

²⁶ *Stitchcraft*, October 1939, p. 5.

²⁷ *Stitchcraft*, November 1939, p. ii.

²⁸ Museum of London, 90.312/2.

from the pages of needlework magazines amidst the patriotic and necessary thrift described in chapter two. However, magazines highlighted coupon-conscious ideas for variety and decoration in clothing, providing women with ways of feeling normal, feminine and beautiful despite wartime upheaval.²⁹

Domestic life was hugely disrupted by the war, and needlework illustrated and enabled women's continued emotional investment in the domestic. Nicholson has argued that especially during the early days of the blackout: 'Everything associated with the home assumed increased importance: its safety, its cosiness and its guiding deity – "Mum" – all took on the roseate glow of something loved, and something under threat.'³⁰ Whilst, as Alison Oram has argued, the domestic was altered by its conscription into the war effort through billeting, rationing and salvage campaigns, it could also offer an island of familiarity and relative stability.³¹ As Ethyl Campbell wrote:

The home, when you come to think of it, is the one unchanging thing in a world of flux. It is the headquarters for the family, the rallying-ground for those who are scattered by war, the goal for those who have been taken away by circumstances. The home is even something more, for it is the homes which make the nation, and in the long run a nation is as strong, as efficient, as decent, as cheerful and as enduring as the millions of homes of which it is comprised.³²

Embroidery in particular was deeply entwined with women's relationships with their homes, one of the many ways in which they feathered and personalised their nests. Throughout the war magazines featured projects for the house-proud. That some women continued to take such interest in their homes, and invest time and effort in beautifying them, is worth noting at a time when these were under threat. Under threat physically, from bombs, metaphorically, from the disruptions caused by billeting, evacuation, and family members going into service, and also potentially, with fears of invasion.³³ Nella

²⁹ See below, pp. 188-189.

³⁰ Nicholson, *Millions*, p. 30. Lee Rumbarger argues that wartime women's magazines imagined men as fighting not only for the collective home of the nation but for the preservation of and their return to their own individual homes. Lee Rumbarger, 'Housekeeping: Women Modernists' Writings on War and Home', *Women's Studies*, 35:1 (2006), p. 2. Penny Summerfield notes the position of women caught between the patriotism of war work taking them out of the home, and that of maintaining 'national stability and morale' by upholding the domestic. Penny Summerfield, "The girl that makes the thing that drills the hole that holds the spring...': discourses of women and work in the Second World War", *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester, 1996), p. 40.

³¹ Oram, 'Bombs', p. 58.

³² Campbell, *How*, pp. 8-9.

³³ For the effects of bomb damage on domestically-minded women see Nicholson, *Millions*, pp. 94-96.

Last's love of her own home and the things she made for it gave her a deep sympathy for Finnish women forced to uproot in the face of the German army:

As the account of the Fin's exodus came over the wireless, I looked round at my cushions, lampshades and rug with their uncounted hours of effort, at Gran's old tea-set in the cabinet, at my bits of brass and the bowl of golden yellow tulips, and thought of the anguish of mind it would be for me to crowd a few essentials on to a handcart and leave my bits of treasures.³⁴

Nella's interest in her home was not solely for her own benefit. The domestic life she created was clearly also a solace to her husband. In June 1940, after the fall of Paris, with French surrender and fears for the British Expeditionary Force in the air, Will returned home from work troubled:

My husband came in and we looked at one another silently, and then I said, 'Bad – very bad.' He nodded and sat down at the table, and he said 'It's not so bad now I'm HOME,' and I saw his work-grimed finger tracing the hollyhocks embroidered in the corner of the cloth.³⁵

Here the focus of his attention on the embroidered cloth is especially telling. Any other item on the tea table might have signified 'HOME', but the cloth, stitched by his own wife, was symbolic not only of home, but of *his* home, the home that Nella made and kept for them and their sons, their refuge and anchor.

Adaptations using needlework could make wartime conditions more bearable to the house-proud, allowing a semblance of normality. In 1940 *The Needlewoman* showed readers how to make a decorative, ruffled lampshade cover for the blackout, an idea from New York City, 'which happens to be the perfect thing to dim a shade too luminous for present conditions [...] without making it look dreary.'³⁶ *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* suggested that 'those ugly black-out curtains' could be hidden by using them to line embroidered ones.³⁷ However, for more significant changes to décor under rationing, women were forced to make difficult decisions. A London dress shop manageress told *Mass Observation* in July 1941:

I was at the meeting of the Board just after it came in, and I told them how hard it was on a woman. I told them about a customer of mine, she'd moved house, and she'd had to spend the whole 26 [initial instalment of coupons] just on

³⁴ Broad and Fleming (eds), *War*, pp. 37–38.

³⁵ Broad and Fleming (eds), *War*, p. 57.

³⁶ *Needlewoman*, January 1940, p. 27. For a similar project see *Fancy Needlework Illustrated (FNI)*, No. 154 (1939), p. 6.

³⁷ *N&N*, No. 1 (1940), p. 18.

curtains. What could she do for clothes, she'd have to go naked, I told them. So they said 'Oh, but she shouldn't have spent the coupons on curtains.' Well, I don't think that's right, do you? The Englishman's home is his pride and joy, has he got to let it go to ruin because of Hitler? English women are the most house-proud in the world. What is going to happen to them if they aren't to make their houses look nice. Have we all got to curl up and die because of Hitler? They tell you to carry on, but you can't, can you?'³⁸

The patriotic woman was coping with significant changes in domestic life and duties, and needlework could be made to (or marketed to) fill a plethora of wartime niches. An embroidered knitting apron (essentially a large zippered pocket) which kept dirt from the knitting, and woollen fluff from everything else, came 'at just the right time – when we are all busy knitting in our spare moments.'³⁹ An embroidered tea cosy – a perfectly ordinary item in peacetime – was now an accessory to 'the most popular war-time drink'.⁴⁰ The ubiquitous ration book gained embroidered covers, and hanging bags could be made to collect items for salvage.⁴¹ Anchor noted that "Dig For Victory!" means sacrificing flower beds for cabbage patches, but you can still have the glories of a garden in your homes by embroidering this charming picture with its wealth of colour and variety of blooms.'⁴²

For women forced from their homes through relocation for war work, processes of needlework could be symbolic of the private domesticity which was denied to them by life in billets, emphasising not precious snippets of normality but the deep disruption of domestic life. One twenty-year-old factory worker complained to a covert Mass Observation researcher:

I don't know what I'm going to do this evening. Did want to get on with making my blouse, but she (landlady) gets on my nerves so, sitting staring at me. She doesn't read a paper, she doesn't knot [sic], she doesn't do anything. Just sits

³⁸ MOA TC 18 Personal Appearance and Clothes 4/B 'London Shop Interviews'. 'Gertrude' 21 July 1941, p. 2.

³⁹ *Needlewoman*, November 1939, p. 24.

⁴⁰ *Needlewoman*, December 1939, p. 29.

⁴¹ *N&N*, No. 4 (1940), p. 7; *Stitchcraft*, November 1940, pp. 14-15; *NI*, No. 170 (1942), pp. 8-9; *N&N*, No. 16 (1943), p. 13; *NI*, No. 167 (1942), p. 20. Despite the best intentions some projects seem antithetical to the need for wartime efficiency. In response to the Ministry of Food's request that people used jam straight from the jar to save waste in decanting it, magazines suggested readers use their time, effort and resources crocheting a 'jacket' to cover the pot. *N&N*, No. 13 (1943) p. 4. Similarly *FNI* advised readers of its children's page to make a box for their mothers to collect useful string in, using cardboard, tapestry canvas, and seven skeins of embroidery thread. *FNI*, No. 154 (1939), p. 28.

⁴² *Stitchcraft*, March 1940, p. 2.

and watches me while I eat my dinner and then watches what I do next, if I'm knitting or sewing or what it is. It's enough to drive you potty.⁴³

A colleague of the same age had a clear idea of the cosy evenings she would like to spend with her husband, and saw their endless evenings out as a necessity to be endured:

I'm fed up with going out every evening, but we can't stay in, my landlady wants the kitchen most days. I'm so tired, I don't feel like going to a dance tonight. Do you know what I'd like? I'd like just to go back and curl myself in front of the fire with my knitting, and him with his pipe, and have a nice quiet evening. But what I've really got to do, I've got to rush back and wash myself in the scullery, and put on my dance dress. It's going to be another late night again.⁴⁴

Stitching could be an act of psychological self-preservation. Many of those on the home front dealt with concerns for their own safety and their loved ones serving overseas, frustration at the progress of war, feelings of helplessness in the war effort, and bereavement, some repeatedly. Yet historians have noted a surprisingly low level of civilian psychiatric casualties.⁴⁵ Needlework reveals strategies for emotional management which contributed to this, enabling women to cope, and even thrive, in wartime. Joanna Bourke has criticised views of 'emotion-work' as simply 'the "struggle for emotional control" [...] a process generally conceptualised as suppressing emotional expression'.⁴⁶ Moving away from 'emotion-work' as repression, we can see that needlework aided women in strategies of invoking and expressing alternative emotions.

As an emotional sentiment, patriotism was a vital element of the psychological tool-kit on the home front, incorporating national pride, solidarity, optimism in Britain's ability to prevail, and the righteousness of fighting against fascism. The process of needlework, the moment of making, was frequently used to rehearse these feelings, and the products of needlework were used to display and reinforce them as women re-created patriotic imagery.⁴⁷ Crests of the various services were offered repeatedly as

⁴³ MOA FR 1494-5 'War Factory', November 1942, p. 99.

⁴⁴ MOA FR 1494-5 'War Factory', November 1942, p. 99.

⁴⁵ Angus Calder, *Myth of the Blitz* (1991), p. 130; Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (2005), p. 230.

⁴⁶ Joanna Bourke, 'Fear and Anxiety: Writing about Emotion in Modern History', *History Workshop Journal*, 55:1 (2003), p. 123.

⁴⁷ Recent work by Gilly Carr on Channel Islanders held in German internment camps has stressed the importance of visualisations and material displays of patriotism for their morale and wellbeing. Gilly Carr, "God Save The King!": Creative Modes of Protest, Defiance and Identity in Channel Islander Internment Camps in Germany, 1942-1945', in Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum (eds), *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire* (New York, 2012), pp. 174-178.

motifs for embroidery, aimed at ‘All who are interested in the Services’.⁴⁸ The available range expanded over the duration of the war, and by 1943 women could buy transfers for a range of one hundred and thirty-six badges, including the Land Army, the Royal Army Pay Corps, the Army Dental Corps and a number of American and Canadian crests.⁴⁹ In 1940 *Needlework Illustrated* gave away transfers of the badges of the RAF, Royal Navy and the Army, allowing readers to achieve ‘Up-to-the-minute smartness! [...] by embroidering HIS particular badge on your little plain dress or new spring tailored woollies’, assuming that each reader would have someone special in the services to honour.⁵⁰ Needlewomen would be ‘proud to display the badge of “his” Service or regiment’ on everything from firescreens to handbags.⁵¹ Other women drew their own patterns. The slightly unevenly hand-drawn badge in fig. 3.3 was embroidered by Mrs Joan Davis in honour of her husband. The skilfully appliquéd handkerchief shown in fig. 3.4 was owned by Yvonne George and was probably worked by her or one of her colleagues in the WAAF. The care taken in the work and the glamour of the un-regimental fashion pose display great pride in the WAAF.⁵²

⁴⁸ *N&N*, No. 1 (1940), p. 14. The vogue for regimental badges was not unique to needlework. Mass Observation noted in February 1940 that the craze had begun early in the war for women to wear brooches and pins of the regimental badges of their sweethearts, husbands, or sons. The quality and cost of brooches varied greatly, from those made using precious stones to cheap costume jewellery, ‘and the society woman did not grudge the factory girl hers because there was sufficient difference between them in value.’ MOA FR 28 ‘Preliminary Report on Fashion’, February 1940, pp. 21-22.

⁴⁹ *N&N*, No. 2 (1940), p. 1; *N&N*, No. 4 (1940), pp. 23, 28; *N&N*, No. 13 (1943), p. 24.

⁵⁰ *NI*, No. 156 (1940), p. 13.

⁵¹ *NI*, No. 157 (1940), p. 29; *NI*, No. 158 (1940), p. 10.

⁵² For more on feminine pride in service uniforms see Nicholson, *Millions*, p. 148.

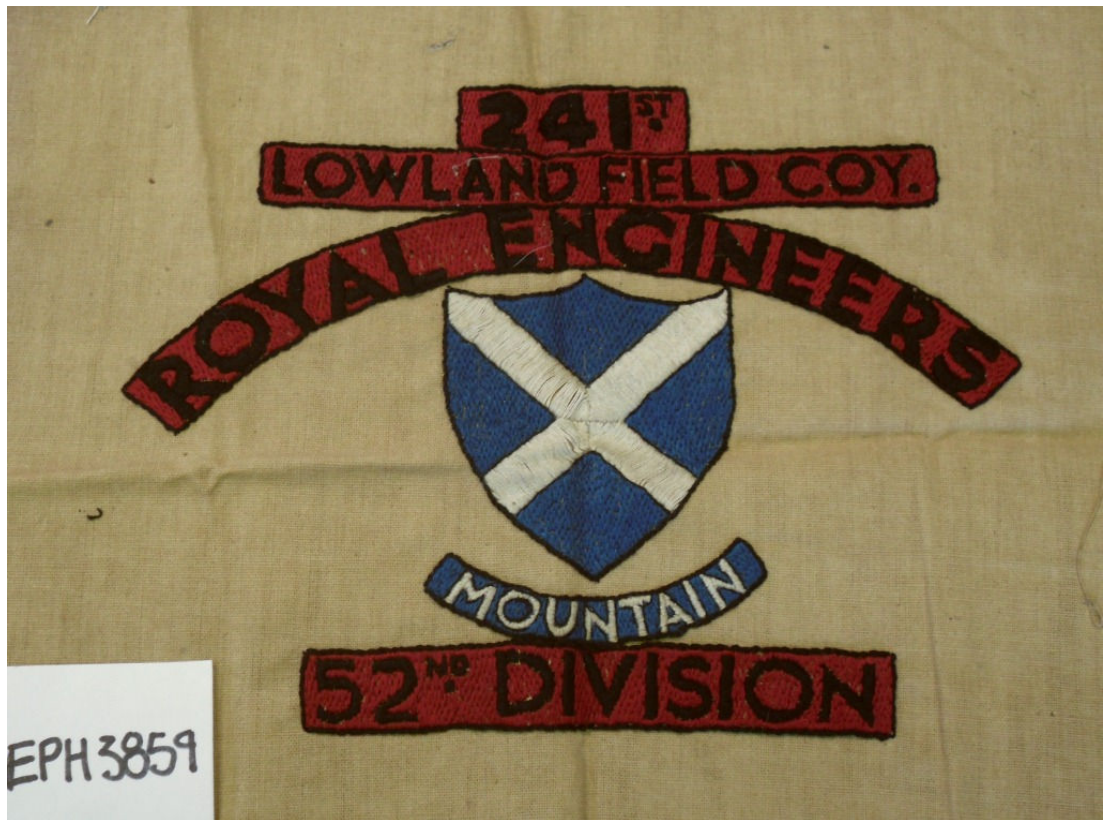


Fig. 3.3 (above): Mrs Joan Davis' embroidered badge, IWM EPH 3859.



Fig. 3.4 (left): Appliquéd handkerchief owned by Yvonne George, IWM EPH 3990.

A broad range of patriotic wartime imagery was featured in embroidery designs. *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* provided a free transfer of 'Personal Motifs' to decorate clothes and accessories, including a variety of figures from 'Tommy Atkins' to a Land Girl.⁵³ If this was not to the reader's taste, she could work a rousing panel of William

⁵³ *N&N*, No. 4 (1940), pp. 14-15.

Blake's 'Jerusalem', 'so expressive of what everyone in Britain feels.'⁵⁴ In 1943 *Needlework Illustrated* readers were invited to 'Splash these history-making place names across a scarf and tell the world how proud you are of our glorious Victories'. The illustrated example commemorated 'Attu', 'Stalingrad', 'Malta', 'Battle of Britain' and 'Tunisia', amongst others.⁵⁵ Other projects ranged from a vegetable-strewn appliqué belt promoting the 'Dig for Victory' campaign, to a panel commemorating the Atlantic Charter.⁵⁶ In July 1945, with the end in sight, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* presented a 'Salute to the Allies' table cloth, featuring joyfully dancing couples in national dress from countries including Britain, Poland, Russia, Albania, the United States, and China (fig. 3.5).⁵⁷ Diana Foxwell, then working as a nurse, chose to embroider a teacloth in preparation for VE day (fig. 3.6). This bore images of servicemen and women, a nurse and a land girl, flags of the allied nations, and a central motif honouring King George VI, incorporating the emblematic plants of England, Scotland and Ireland (though not, oddly, Wales). These motifs were most likely taken from different commercial transfers, and arranged into the teacloth design by Foxwell herself. Laying out and executing this design in anticipation of VE day demonstrated and reinforced her certainty that victory was on its way. Unfortunately, she and her parents spent VE day working at the hospital, and so her cloth remained unused.

Women also devised their own patriotic and commemorative patterns. The Imperial War Museum holds a quilt of unknown provenance signed 'Betty Nicholls 1945'. This commemorates many organisations and slogans associated with the war, almost all of which were hand drawn rather than from transfers (fig. 3.7). Fig. 3.8 shows a beautifully made quilt, started in 1939 by Maire Ness (1883-1965) for her granddaughter Janet Mary Ness, which uses appliqué to mix imagery from wartime, nursery rhymes, storybooks, their family history, and pictures of 'Daddy' (Maire's son) on service. In 1941 Mrs W.K. Beck designed and stitched the dynamic and accomplished sampler depicting a bomber in flight shown in fig. 3.9. When it was acquired by the Imperial War Museum she proudly listed the stitches she used, including more unusual stitches such as darning stitch, couching, feather stitch, and fishbone stitch.

⁵⁴ *N&N*, No. 10 (1942), p. 19.

⁵⁵ *NI*, No. 173 (1943), pp. 22-23.

⁵⁶ *Stitchcraft*, March 1943, p. 4; *N&N*, No. 17 (1943), pp. 10-11.

⁵⁷ *N&N*, No. 23 (1945), pp. 6, 12-14, 20.



Fig. 3.5 (above): 'Salute to the Allies' tablecloth, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, No. 23 (1945), pp. 12-13.



Fig. 3.6 (left): Diana Foxwell's VE cloth, IWM EPH 9062.

Fig. 3.7 (below): Betty Nichols' quilt, IWM EPH 903.

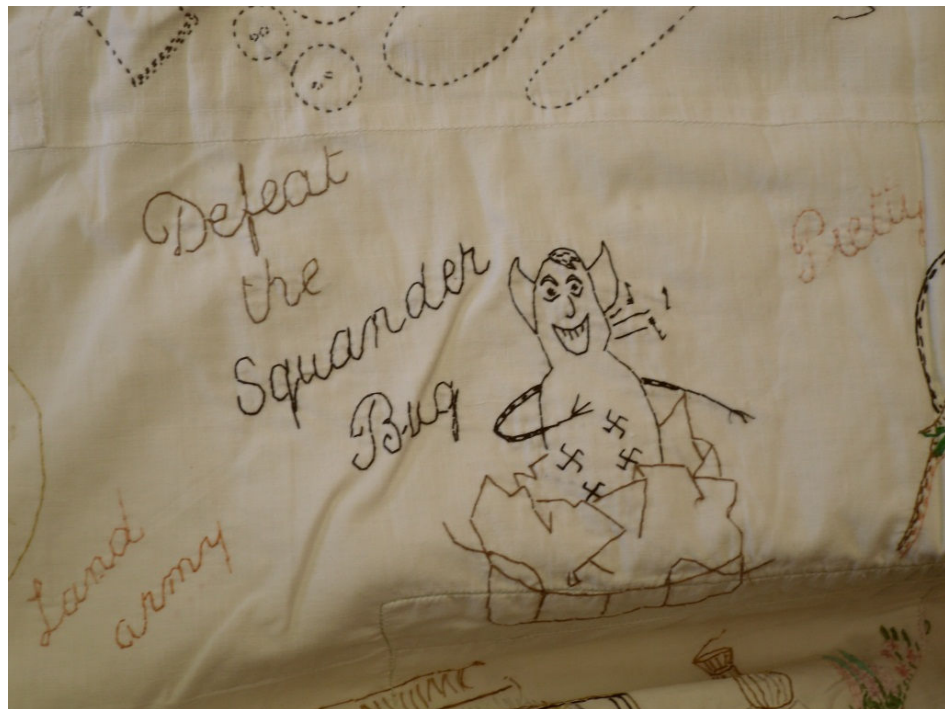


Fig. 3.8 (right): Maire Ness quilt,
IWM EPH 2519.

Fig. 3.9 (below): Mrs Beck's bomber
sampler, IWM EPH 1974.



During the war, the absence of fear was in itself psychologically desirable, and also an enactment of the supposed national character. Maggie Andrews has noted that constructions of 'brave little Britain' were used to define 'us' against a 'cowardly' German 'other': 'This version of Englishness incorporated a spirit of fortitude and pluckiness, which was to deal with the danger of war by almost pretending it wasn't happening [...] hence an image of the English gaily singing in the air-raid shelters.'⁵⁸ Similarly in 1940 Patons & Baldwins declared a 'Salute to the brave knitters of Britain!' in an advert which described a woman with her children sleeping upstairs who 'sits alone and serves by knitting and waiting, unafraid, until the Family can be itself again' (fig. 3.10).⁵⁹ However, this bravery was not a natural reaction to the present and potential threats to those on the home front.⁶⁰ Angus Calder has argued that the idea of

⁵⁸ Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (1997), p. 102.

⁵⁹ *Stitchcraft*, September 1940, p. 2.

⁶⁰ Pete Grafton has highlighted the experiences of the great many people who did not fit with this image of unflappable bravery. Pete Grafton, *You, You & You! The People Out of Step with World War II* (1981),

Britons as uniquely brave, the ‘myth of the Blitz’, was formed during, not after, the war, and was to some degree self-fulfilling: once established it became a model to emulate.⁶¹ Britain could take it largely due to the powerful – and powerfully appealing and reassuring – idea that ‘Britain Can Take It’. Britons needed to ‘do’ bravery: for their own wellbeing, and as part of performing Britishness.

Needlework in air-raid shelters aided ‘doing’ bravery, helping women manage their own emotions and those of their children. Bourke has shown that psychologists placed responsibility for guarding children from fear onto the parents, especially the mother. Children only understood that they needed to be afraid by observing the reactions of others, and thus mothers were advised to control their own emotional responses.⁶² Needlework offers a concrete example of the ways in which women were advised to ‘perform’ bravery for the benefit of those around them. Mrs Cresswick Atkinson, R.R.C., technical adviser to the Women’s Voluntary Services for Civil Defence, argued that keeping calm and knitting on was a tool to inspire bravery in others. In her BBC authorised booklet, *Care of Children in War-Time*, she listed essential items that should be kept ready to be taken into the shelter in an air-raid. These included food and drink, a shaded torch, valuables, toilet paper, a basin (in case a nervous or excited child vomited), and knitting or embroidery: ‘You want your knitting or some work to do, because the homelike sight of seeing you working will have an excellent effect on the children. Give them the example which you wish to set them – “business as usual” – and, of course, keeping busy will help you, too.’⁶³

Shelter knitting was not only a technique for calming children, but also a strategy for living and performing the national, patriotic and adaptive identity of the brave woman. Images of British women knitting during air-raids, in propaganda and in films such as *In Which We Serve* (1942) reinforced this image of feminine bravery. Women are shown as practical and composed in the midst of danger and chaos, harnessing their nervous energy to transform terror into a productive demonstration of bravery and stoicism.⁶⁴ In 1941 *Needlework Illustrated* celebrated industrious and seemingly unflappable women knitting comforts for the troops whilst in shelters:

pp. 24–26.

⁶¹ Calder, *Myth*, pp. 120, 125.

⁶² Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History*, p. 230.

⁶³ MOA TC 32 Women in Wartime 4/I ‘The Care of Children in War-Time’, 1940, pp. 16-18.

⁶⁴ IWM Photographs: D 1631, D 1522, D 1510.

When sirens raise their eerie wail
 I have no time for turning pale.
 Before the guns begin to shoot
 I've slipped into my siren suit,
 Seized gas-mask, torch, and bag of knitting -
 And in my shelter I am sitting.
 While shrapnel falls like summer rain
 I murmur low: '*Two purl, two plain.*'
 While bombs come hurtling from afar
 I busily *Repeat from star.*
 While 'planes whizz by, now high, now low,
 I quickly *K. to end of row.*
 And when 'All Clear' the sirens sound
 And I emerge from underground,
 I've done another little bit
 For those who face the Messerschmitt.⁶⁵

Many women did knit in these situations.⁶⁶ Wembley diarist Rose Uttin knitted during air-raids 'like Madam Defage', counting gunshots rather than executions.⁶⁷ 'Miss A', a teacher and mass observation diarist living in Hertfordshire, wrote that 'My sister showed me a little woolly coat she had knitted entirely during raid warnings at night. Her husband calls it her "Spitfire Cardigan"'.⁶⁸ Win Harris, a London schoolteacher, taught non-knitters in shelters how to knit: 'knitting being my piece of pleasure, I thought everybody ought to knit [laughs]'.⁶⁹ Longmate relates the tale of one woman who so annoyed her fellow shelterers with her incessant talking and knitting that one of them shouted 'Can't you shut up, and stop clicking those damn needles as well.'⁷⁰ The stressful conditions of the air-raids were not, however, always conducive to good knitting. Patricia May Prout was a schoolchild living with her family in London in 1940 and 1941:

Tell you a funny story, when we went and shared the brick shelter down the road, we had a housekeeper called Mrs Leigh. She didn't live in, but, my mother, having been a business woman, run this business, she was at a loss, didn't know what to do with herself, so Mrs Leigh taught my mother how to knit. My mother had never knitted. And so she started her off with a set of needles to knit a sock, a pair of socks for my father. And so she'd sit in this air-

⁶⁵ *NI*, No. 161 (1941), p. 23.

⁶⁶ MOA FR 407 'A Shelter in Middlesbrough', September 1940, p. 3; MOA FR 436 'Shelter in London', October 1940, pp. 12, 21-22; MOA FR 492 'Directive Results', November 1940, p. 15.

⁶⁷ IWM Documents 547, 24 March 1944.

⁶⁸ MOA FR 290 'Women in Wartime, Section III Wartime Leisure', October 1940, p. 216.

⁶⁹ IWM Sound 28612, reel 2.

⁷⁰ Longmate, *Lived*, p. 129.

raid shelter, [...] and she'd knit. And she used to get so steamed up that they were so tight these stitches on these needles, she had to really force herself in. And so my mother was taking ages to knit this sock, so Mrs Leigh whizzed on and knitted the other one, and when the great day came [...] that my father's pair of socks was finished, and one was beautiful and the other cut off his circulation! [...] so that was the end of the knitting for my mother.⁷¹

Fig. 3.10: Advertisement for P&B. *Stitchcraft*,
September 1940, p. 2.



It is important not to overstate the extent of shelter knitting; even amongst women who did knit, the majority of their time during raids was spent sleeping (or trying to), or otherwise doing little.⁷² Mass Observation studies found that in the public shelters, predominantly used by the working class, knitting was one of the more common

⁷¹ IWM Sound 19008, reel 1.

⁷² MOA FR 436 'Shelter in London', October 1940, p. 22.

activities. However, compared with private shelters women seemed ‘unable or disinclined to organise for themselves any kind of occupation.’ Though women commonly brought their knitting or book to communal shelters, many did not actually use them. Whilst tube shelters were reasonably well lit, the brick built surface shelters ‘provide poor light and facilities for the staple leisure occupations of women, knitting or reading.’ This poor light could favour knitting over reading. A study of a brick shelter ‘in the North’ lit by a hurricane lamp found that of forty alarms in August and September 1940 shelter occupants read during only two, compared with seventeen raids where between three and six of the twelve to fifteen women present knitted. Even here knitting dwindled as exhaustion set in during September.⁷³ Yet for those who did knit, the distraction and the air of nonchalant bravery it lent them was invaluable.

Whilst needlework in general could help women with short-term emotional control (or at least the appearance of it), the sense of purpose given by involvement in the war effort was perhaps more enduringly helpful. Advertisements for knitting wool were keen to emphasise knitting comforts as part of women’s patriotic duty, exclaiming ‘England Expects every hand will do its Duty! Knitters, the Country needs you!’, entreating women to ‘Make THIS part of your “National Service”’, as ‘If you can KNIT – you can “do your bit”’ (fig. 3.11).⁷⁴ In a particularly stirring turn of phrase, *Stitchcraft* rallied its readers ‘on with our “knits krieg!”’⁷⁵ The official Stationery Office guide to knitting Army comforts asserted that ‘the woman who knits, like her sisters in the munitions factories, and in the hospitals, is doing important war work.’⁷⁶ Sam Gibbs expressed concern in his letters to the Maidenhead knitting party who were supplying his ship, reminding Mollie Baker: ‘keep it up but don’t tire yourselves you need your rest the same as other people’, categorising knitting firmly as ‘work’ rather than ‘rest’ or ‘leisure’.⁷⁷

This war work was validated by a uniform of sorts. Some knitters were eligible to purchase official voluntary worker badges from the respective comforts funds of the Army, RAF (fig. 3.12), Navy League, and ATS, as well as numerous local groups. The

⁷³ MOA FR 290 ‘Women in Wartime, Section III Wartime Leisure’, pp. 196-197, 200-202; MOA FR 468 ‘The Prospect of Winter’, October 1940, p. 7; MOA FR 520 ‘Women and Morale’, December 1940, p. 10.

⁷⁴ Examples of such advertisements can be seen in *Bestway Knitting No. 74: Woollies for Wardens and Shelter Knitwear*, p. 15; *Weldon Knitting Series No. 7: Woollies for our Sailors, Soldiers & Airmen*, p. 17; *Good Housekeeping’s Forces’ Knitting Book* (1940), p. 7.

⁷⁵ *Stitchcraft*, August 1940, p. 14.

⁷⁶ *Knitting for the Army; Official Guide* (1941), p. 3.

⁷⁷ IWM Documents 570 Gibbs, 24 October 1940. For more on needlework and the categories of ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, see chapter one.

Army took their scheme seriously, requiring that recipients of their individually numbered badges worked for a recognised comforts working party for three months or more, ceased to wear the badge if they discontinued knitting, and reported any lost badges.⁷⁸ The RAF badge was made available to individual knitters, for a shilling, if they knitted and donated four garments, and to members of recognised working parties. 75,000 of these badges were issued.⁷⁹

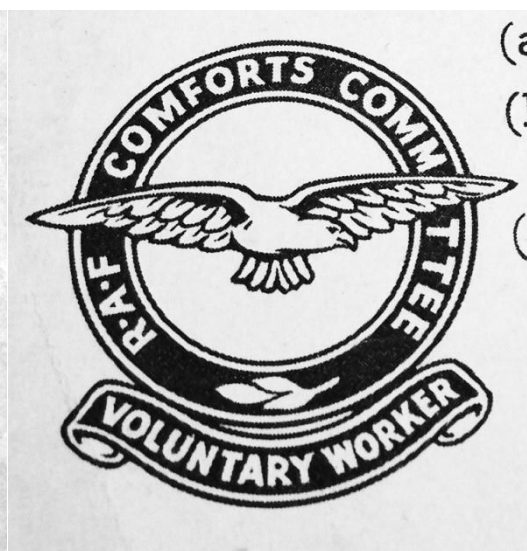


Fig. 3.11 (left): Sirdar advertisement, *Weldon Knitting Series No.7: Woollies for our Sailors, Soldiers & Airmen*, p. 17.

Fig. 3.12 (above): RAF comfords committee badge, *Knitting for the R.A.F.: Official Book of Instructions*, p. 2.

Needlework enabled women to combine war work with their domestic duties. Whilst a number of histories have focused on women's mobilisation into formal war work within the women's services and factories, Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has asserted that although 7.25 million British women were working in industry, civil defence or the forces at the height of female mobilization in 1943, this left approximately 8.75 million women who were full-time housewives.⁸⁰ Many of these women felt they had few opportunities to contribute to the war effort, and leapt at the chance to knit for the

⁷⁸ *Knitting for the Army; Official Guide* (1941), p. 16.

⁷⁹ *Knitting for the R.A.F.: Official Book of Instructions*, pp. 2-3; *Knitting for the Army; Official Guide* (1941), p. 16; Jon Mills, *Doing Their Bit: Home Front Lapel Badges 1939-1945* (Chelsfield, 1997), pp. 164-166.

⁸⁰ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford, 2000), p. 103. For fuller discussions of the emphasis on employment and mobilised women in histories of the Second World War see Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity*, pp. 99-105; Hinton, *Leadership*, p. 1. Notable recent exceptions include Purcell, 'Beyond'; Purcell, *Domestic*; Nicholson, *Millions*; Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 129-137.

national good. Needlework was only one of many forms of women's war work, but it was a particularly accessible one for those who could not devote themselves to voluntary work full-time or for regularly scheduled hours because of commitments to family, housework or paid work.⁸¹ In November 1939 a letter to *The Times* complaining about wool shortages spoke of the author's particular desire to knit comforts as 'a housewife who cannot actively serve on the home front'.⁸²

Although needlework could form part of women's contribution to the war effort, this alone was not always sufficient. A Worcester woman reported to Mass Observation that she was questioned by the supervisor at her Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) centre, Mrs Digby-Houston, who 'said that they had been rather disappointed that she had not stayed on at Gorse Hill Canteen, as they felt she was young and should be doing something more active than going to a sewing party.'⁸³ Young and fit women were expected to do more than sit and knit, but could nonetheless augment more formal efforts with knitting. 'Hilda', a worker at a factory studied covertly for Mass Observation, seems to have only barely been able to knit for the war effort. Described uncharitably as 'a heavy, plain girl of about twenty-eight [. . .] as good natured as she is stupid', who sat at the handpress 'stolidly pushing the handle round hour after hour, looking vacantly in front of her', she was also one of the best of the machine workers.

Her chief interest in life at the moment is her knitting. She and her mother belong to a knitting party in their town, and between them they are knitting a scarf in garter stitch for the Merchant Navy. Every day Hilda brings it to work with her and knits slowly but eagerly through all the breaks – she is not one of those who get on with their knitting under the bench or out in the cloakroom during working hours. She always tries to get 10 rows done during the day, because she and her mother have worked out that if she does 10 rows at work every day, and then brings it home for her mother to do a few more in the evening, they will get it done in time for Easter. Only on Monday is she at a loss, and sits doing nothing during the breaks, because Monday is the day when the knitting party meets in the afternoon, and Hilda's mother likes to have the scarf to take to it.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Mass Observation related the tale of one woman, keen to do her 'bit', who was unable to find organisations that would take her on as a volunteer on a part time basis, and also noted that working-class women were less likely to have much spare time for formal voluntary work. MOA FR 290 'Women in Wartime, Section III Wartime Leisure', October 1940, pp. 261-263.

⁸² *Times*, 6 November 1939, p. 4.

⁸³ MOA TC 32 Women in Wartime 4/I 'Worcester W.V.S.', 17 July 1940.

⁸⁴ MOA FR 1494-5, 'War Factory', November 1942, pp. 23-24. 'Garter stitch' refers to knitting where every row is knitted in 'plain', with no purl stitches. This scarf is the simplest form of knitting possible, and many a young schoolgirl would have been easily able to surpass the level of skill this required.

As shown in chapter one, knitting could be made to fit into women's 'odd moments', and in wartime this made it a particularly convenient way for women to substitute or supplement other forms of national service.⁸⁵

Not all knitting was done in odd moments, as many volunteers, like Hilda's mother, attended group meetings. These were organised by the WVS, pre-existing organisations such as the Women's Institute, by workplaces, or local women. Hinton has argued that pleasure was central to the popularity of knitting groups as they 'had little to do with maximising the efficiency of women's labour – the work could just as well have been done at home – than with meeting the therapeutic needs of the knitters', providing fellowship.⁸⁶ Echoing one Mass Observation report's description of knitting parties as 'conversation as aid to the war effort', this view reflects the experience of many women, including this Yorkshire housewife:

Went to weekly knitting party (a dozen ladies knitting for the Forces at each other's houses in turn. We each take 2 biscuits and a spoonful of tea and lately take our milk also). Gave in a pair of socks. As usual 2 small children there with their mothers, aged 1½ and 4 years, who make the interest of the party as the conversation is entirely just pleasant gossip about babies, food, cinemas, etc.⁸⁷

However, Hinton's rose-tinted view does not take into account more negative experiences. Mrs M. Gothard, a Huddersfield mother of two, wrote in her diary that at her small local knitting group the hostess, Mrs Hepworth, 'talked about her wonderful marmalade for 2 hours and bored us to death.'⁸⁸ More seriously, a twenty-eight-year-old middle-class woman told Mass Observation about an event soon after her husband had been called up:

Mother invited five ladies for tea, and we had a real hen party – there were eight of us altogether, and most of us were knitting for the soldiers or Red Cross. One lady amazed and horrified us all by saying (after we had been discussing evacuees) that she would rather have her husband and six sons killed at the front than have evacuees in her house. Everybody was so horrified that there was

⁸⁵ See above, pp. 72-73.

⁸⁶ Hinton, *Leadership*, p. 62.

⁸⁷ MOA FR 1651, 'People's Homes', April 1943, pp. 512-513. Other groups strove for more serious conversation. The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds suggested discussion topics such as 'Do you feel the need to know more about the lives of people of those countries so much in the news at present?' MOA FR 26 'Women's Organisations in War-Time', 2 February 1940. The Women's Liberal Federation organised local knitting parties and gave suggestions for political readings from newspapers and newsletters to be read aloud and discussed. MOA TC 32 Women in Wartime 4/H 'Women's Liberal Federation, Notes on War Work for Women's Liberal Associations'. Hinton describes the increasingly depoliticised nature of women's organisations during the war, so it is likely that these activities dwindled fairly rapidly. Hinton, *Leadership*, pp. 57-58.

⁸⁸ IWM Documents 13720, 7 Feb. 1940.

complete silence for quite a minute, then I weakly gasped that I most certainly wouldn't (feeling all the time that if by having a house full of evacuees Harold would not have to go to the front, I would have them like a shot.)⁸⁹

This was clearly a personal clash, but in other cases class and politics created divisions or tensions within knitting parties, shattering any possible assumptions that knitting groups were universally characterised by comradeship found in effort for the common good. A Mass Observation study of a knitting and sewing meeting in an East Coast village highlighted the class barrier. Ten working-class women sat together at a large table, knitting, chatting and enjoying their refreshments, at 4d. for a cup of tea with two biscuits, whilst around five elderly middle-class women sat at a separate table. Barely a word was exchanged between the two groups.⁹⁰ Elsewhere, a teacher tried to join the activities at her local WVS but found that 'the personnel is the elite of B..... and no strangers are wanted. I tried to do some knitting, but was treated with such rudeness that I have not gone back.'⁹¹ Rose Uttin complained that the Wembley Mayoress's Knitting Party was split along political lines, and saw this as damaging efficiency and attendance: 'the conservative ladies dropped off when Mrs Barton the labour member's wife was mayoress last year – now the new labour members have stopped coming [since] Mrs Plyman the Liberal member's wife took office.'⁹² These examples demonstrate divisions and conflict amongst the rank and file membership of the WVS and other comforts groups, reminding us that despite our tendency to view women's crafts with a cosy nostalgia, neither knitting nor the common good served to calm these tensions. They also challenge Hinton's assertion that the purpose of group knitting was solely therapeutic. Whilst the shunned teacher refused to return, Uttin, Gothard, and others continued to attend less than satisfactory knitting meetings. Many women *did* find groups helpful and pleasant, and Hinton is correct in asserting that knitting in a group is no more efficient than knitting alone. Between travel, conversation, and refreshments it may have been significantly *less* efficient, and most group knitters did the majority of their comforts knitting outside of these events. Crucially, knitting parties underscored the purposefulness of comforts knitting, creating a feeling that the labour was structured, directed, official, and socially validated. Whilst often enjoyable, the meeting setting emphasised knitting as *war work*.

⁸⁹ MOA FR 290 'Women in Wartime, Section I', 25 July 1940, p. 17.

⁹⁰ MOA FR 290 'Women in Wartime, Section III Wartime Leisure', October 1940, p. 263.

⁹¹ MOA FR 1402 'Bulletin and Directive', September 1942, p. 2.

⁹² IWM Documents 547, 23 March 1944. Hinton has commented on similar personal and political rifts and distinctions of class within both organisational and social aspects of branches of the WVS. Hinton, *Leadership*, pp. 50–51, 77–79.

Participating in war work, including comforts knitting, could be vital to an individual's psychological wellbeing. An influential 1939 report commissioned by the War Office claimed that women not involved in war work were more prone to panic, and thus women needed to be convinced of the importance of their activities in the war effort.⁹³ There appears to have been a grain of truth in this. Purcell details the emotional strain that could result from feeling inactive in the war effort, for both men and women, quoting one woman who states that unless she could be useful to the war she felt she had 'no right to exist.'⁹⁴ One working-class Birmingham housewife commented on the therapeutic effect of war work for her sister:

My eldest sister was there too, the one who had the first bomb drop half a mile from her. I expected her to get frightfully hysterical over this war and I am surprised to see she is another woman, she has started a savings group in her neighbourhood and now has 40 in it, she collects books and things for the soldiers and knits.

'In our service to others we forget ourselves.' How true that is.⁹⁵

An advertisement for W&B Wools adapted the words of Charles Kingsley's poem of 1851 'The Three Fishers' to illustrate this point. The original details the dangers and tragedies in the lives of fishermen and their families, repeating the line 'men must work and women must weep'. The advertisement subverted this familiar refrain, suggesting a more positive and proactive role for women: 'For men must work and women must **knit**'.⁹⁶ Nella Last's war would have involved a good deal more weeping had she not buried herself in voluntary work. Her oldest son, Arthur, teased her about her efforts to collect even second-hand socks for sailors, but 'if he knew the dreadful wakenings from even more dreadful dreams sometimes – dreams of men in open boats or on rafts, when I can hear the splash of cold waves and feel the numbing coldness that is of death – he

⁹³ Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History*, p. 247. Edward Glover, President of the British Psycho-Analytical Society was more critical. He warned of the risk that single women, lacking families through which to challenge their patriotic fervour, could resort to an 'orgy of knitting', seeing it at best as a coping strategy, and at worst as pathological. Gillian Swanson, "So much money and so little to spend it on': morale, consumption and sexuality", in Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (eds), *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 74–76.

⁹⁴ Purcell, *Domestic*, pp. 61–62, 109. In 1951 Mrs Higham, a friend of Nella Last's, spoke of the worry of another war on their way home from a Civil Defence class: 'Worry won't help us, ducks. If the worst ever happens, we will be the lucky ones again. Remember those of us who worked busily the last time and had a purpose in life that did bring us peace of mind enough to carry on.' Patricia Malcolmson and Robert Malcolmson (eds), *Nella Last in the 1950s: Further diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2010), p. 229. Similar themes were dealt with in the 1945 film *Great Day*.

⁹⁵ MOA FR 290 'Women in Wartime, Section III, Wartime Leisure', October 1940, p. 220.

⁹⁶ Original emphasis. *Needlewoman*, January 1940, p. 31; Elspeth Huxley, *The Kingsleys: A Biographical Anthology* (1973), pp. 26–27.

would understand.’⁹⁷ She was not alone in this: her local WVS Centre experienced a boom in attendance around the evacuation of Dunkirk.⁹⁸

Knitting and sewing comforts was thought to be especially well suited to women’s emotional motivations in helping the war effort. One Mass Observation report argued that, whether or not the woman personally knew the recipient of her knitting, ‘she is able to identify her efforts with the object – sick people in hospitals, the Sailors Home, all definite people who will make use of and appreciate her work.’⁹⁹ If she did not know his face, she could imagine it, and hope that he would be brought comfort through her efforts. Although slightly more distanced from her beneficiaries – her main efforts were in fundraising for the Red Cross rather than producing items directly for recipients – Nella Last felt this personal connection:

We put the wireless on, to listen to ‘Trans-Atlantic Call’, and heard a P.O.W. speak about Red Cross parcels. I felt the tears gather and slide down my cheeks. I knew it all, but again I felt the privilege to be able to think, ‘This will be another parcel.’ [...] I looked at my little cuddly toys, and thought of all the dollies sold. It’s not a bad place to have one’s brains – in one’s fingers!¹⁰⁰

However, imagining the recipient of handmade items could bring women uncomfortably close to less comforting realities. Despite its often safe and domestic image, knitting comforts presented a direct connection with fighting men, which could be ethically, politically or emotionally problematic, implicating women in the violence and tragedy of war. Some women had few qualms about this - hence Mrs Beck’s bomber sampler (fig. 3.9) and *Needlework Illustrated’s* scarf marking British battle victories – but for others it could be deeply uncomfortable. Andrews cites a response to an earlier letter in the Women’s Institute’s *Home and Country* magazine on a woman’s joy at the first wartime spring: ‘When she watches an air battle, and feels she has done it herself, does she think of the young man killed, maimed, trapped in burning wreckage? British or German, they are all mothers’ sons’.¹⁰¹

Knitting comforts for hospitals may have sidestepped moral issues around supporting the acts (including killing) that might be carried out by comforts-wearing servicemen, yet they could be upsetting to produce, highlighting the human cost of war. Knitting patterns for items such as a ‘bag mitten for injured hand’ powerfully convey the reality

⁹⁷ Broad and Fleming (eds), *War*, pp. 39–40.

⁹⁸ Broad and Fleming (eds), *War*, p. 50.

⁹⁹ MOA FR 290 ‘Women in Wartime, Section III Wartime Leisure’, October 1940, p. 259.

¹⁰⁰ Broad and Fleming (eds), *War*, p. 257.

¹⁰¹ *Home and Country*, May 1940, p. 95, cited Andrews, *Acceptable*, p. 102.

of men's bodies mutilated in the line of duty, and it is tempting to imagine patriotic women dutifully knitting these items, whilst desperately stifling thoughts that their own men might come to need them.¹⁰² Even items less explicitly connected to injuries could be deeply moving. This is shown in Nella Last's emotional response to her involvement in sewing 'pathetic, brave little bags' for the personal belongings of injured soldiers. She eloquently described how convalescents' comforts, especially when produced on a large scale, could illustrate the consequences of war:

There are huge stacks of them to make, and when I think of all the W.V.S. Centres all over England making the same numbers, I could have wept. It's little things like that which seem to bring home to me the dreadful inevitableness of things, with everything prepared for a three years' war. The chintzes I sewed would have made such gay cushions or curtains – or romping children's overalls.¹⁰³

If not upsetting, war work could be exhausting. One writer in *Home and Country* magazine described 'that inexpressible dreariness that besets all war work – the feeling that you are darning a sock painfully with one hand and cutting off the foot with the other'.¹⁰⁴ In June 1940 a Mass Observation diarist wrote of the grinding and confining effects of war work:

I used to love travel books – by people who had explored and travelled and books that took me back to far away Egypt or Rome, but now my mind is all in small circles instead of a far curve and each little circle revolves round and round and never gets far. My work at Centre, my raffles, begging for wool fund, begging for my sailors or minesweepers and trawlers and shipwrecked men, or my rag dolls and soft toys – all tiny circles with no 'building' or goal. I never look forward to anything – Xmas holidays, a new dress, etc... It's the clutching of everyday things and trying to do the 'same' things that bring the most peace.¹⁰⁵

Given this fatigue, and the other many strains of wartime life, women were in dire need of enjoyment and relaxation, and for many this meant continuing their peacetime interest in their favourite forms of needlework.¹⁰⁶ However, historians have tended to focus on wartime needlework in relation to practical need. Whilst this could include pleasure, it has not been presented as the primary goal. Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield have written that for the good needlewoman 'wartime austerity

¹⁰² *Knitted Comforts for our Sailors, Soldiers & Airmen in 'Greenock' Service Wool*, p. 30.

¹⁰³ Broad and Fleming (eds), *War*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁴ Cited MOA FR 26 'Women's Organisations in War Time', February 1940, pp. 22-23.

¹⁰⁵ MOA FR 290 'Women in Wartime, Section III Wartime Leisure', October 1940, p. 188.

¹⁰⁶ For more on the pleasures offered by needlework, see chapter one.

represented a challenge against which she enjoyed pitting her wits'.¹⁰⁷ Jane Waller, in her book of vintage knitting patterns *Knitting Patterns of the 1940s*, argues that 'knitting was now discovered to be useful therapy' for 'anxious hours' spent in the air-raid shelter.¹⁰⁸ Yet more generally these concerns are overshadowed by ideas of needlework as a wartime necessity, and one that is often assumed to be unwelcome.

The start of war had profound effects on women's leisure options and choices. External activities were hindered by wartime conditions, especially the blackout, when roads and pavements became dark, unfamiliar, and dangerous places. Many people, and especially women, chose to go out significantly less, foregoing the cinema, visits to friends, walks and other excursions. Although some younger women were spurred by boredom in the home to frequent dancehalls and cinemas more than before (once these were reopened after the first few weeks of the war), the general trend was to spend more time at home. Even here women might struggle to find activities to amuse themselves. The BBC reduced its broadcasting to only the Home Service for the first months of the war, and Radio Luxembourg and Normandy were no longer available, meaning the wireless offered much less entertainment and variety. Libraries closed earlier, making reading less convenient for many.¹⁰⁹ The anxieties of war could also impair reading: Last wrote that when stressed she was incapable of the concentration needed to read books.¹¹⁰ With alternatives limited, for many women needlework would have been a particularly appealing pastime.

Needlework magazines and companies urged women to fill their time in the home with crafts. Knitting was a 'soothing black-out hobby'.¹¹¹ Needlework was presented by Old Glamis Fabrics as a suitable occupation for 'The Black-Out Nights', and a way to keep the home 'cheerful and normal through difficult times.'¹¹² P&B offered the opportunity to 'spend endless happy and instructive hours in rug-making with Turkey Rug Wool – especially now that outdoor amusements are few.'¹¹³ *Fancy Needlework Illustrated* saw needlepoint tapestry as a way of making the best of a bad situation:

¹⁰⁷ Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (1987), p. 253.

¹⁰⁸ Jane Waller, *Knitting Fashions of the 1940s: Styles, Patterns and History* (Wiltshire, 2006), p. 23.

¹⁰⁹ MOA FR 290 'Women in Wartime, Section III Wartime Leisure', October 1940, pp. 160-185; Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime: Britain, 1939-1945* (2004), pp. 45-52, 113-118.

¹¹⁰ Broad and Fleming (eds), *War*, p. 58.

¹¹¹ Daily Express, *War-Time Needlework. A Complete Guide to Thrifty Sewing and Knitting* (1940), pp. 97-98.

¹¹² *N&N*, No. 1 (1940), p. ii; *N&N*, No. 2 (1940), p. ii.

¹¹³ *Stitchcraft*, March 1940, p. ii.

Most of us feel the need for some restful recreation to relieve the tedium of these long black-out evenings. Now's your chance to work that beautiful piece of tapestry that you've always longed to do but never found the time for – with this absorbing needlework in hand those hours will be all too short.

Whilst it was brighter indoors than out during the blackout, the need to lower lights could cause problems for domestic pursuits as well. With this in mind the proposed tapestry project was on a relatively coarse canvas, - 'so that even if the lights are a bit dim your eyes will not be tired.'¹¹⁴

Although needlework could be an emotionally valuable source of entertainment and relaxation, this often needed to be justified by reference to the 'practical'. As shown in chapter one, women often felt a need to be 'busy' or industrious, and this practical note would have justified women's pleasure, to themselves as well as those around them.¹¹⁵ Lady Smith-Dorrien, D.B.E., the Principal of the Royal School of Needlework, noted in *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* that 'Most women who have not some very special talent leading them in an altogether different direction, long to create something beautiful with their fingers. To-day this something has to be of practical use as well as ornamental.'¹¹⁶ *Needlework Illustrated*, in their first issue after dropping the 'Fancy' from their title in 1940, announced that

Our policy, in keeping with the present time, is to concentrate even more on the practical side, because we feel that is what is really needed by women to-day. We want to assure our Readers that issue by issue they will be kept in touch with all the newest ideas likely to prove most helpful during the economy days ahead.

Yet they also reassured that 'At the same time we shall not overlook the need for maintaining all the little touches of charm and beauty which we consider equally needful in times of stress.'¹¹⁷ Lady Smith-Dorrien introduced the first issue of *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, saying that 'At a time when all forms of needlework are at once a pleasure, a solace, and a service, I welcome the new journal'.¹¹⁸ She later differentiated between forms of needlework in terms of practicality and recreation, claiming 'it is an unbounded relief to pent up feelings to turn our minds for a few minutes daily away from the eternal knitting, and to manufacture something useful and

¹¹⁴ *FNI*, No. 154 (1939), p. 9.

¹¹⁵ See above, pp. 74-76.

¹¹⁶ *N&N*, No. 4 (1940), p. 5.

¹¹⁷ *NI*, No. 155 (1940), p. 5. For more on 'practical' wartime needlework, see chapter two.

¹¹⁸ *N&N*, No. 1 (1940), p. 1. In 1940 the monthly *Needlewoman* and the bimonthly *Needlecraft Practical Journal* joined to form this new quarterly title, apparently as part of the drive to conserve paper. *Needlewoman*, January 1940, p. 3.

beautiful. In fact, it is essential for most people to have a respite from War Work occasionally if they are to carry on to the end.’¹¹⁹ Whilst women would enjoy making something ‘beautiful’, for many it needed also to be ‘useful’ in order to justify this enjoyable use of time and resources.

Needlework was not only a ‘pleasure’, but a form of self-prescribed therapy.¹²⁰ Knitting, P&B Wools claimed, ‘is healthy and saves money; few things are more steadying to the nerves. Always have a piece of work in hand and the long, dark evenings and periods of waiting will fly by as if by magic. Try it yourself!’¹²¹ Another P&B advertisement presented empty hands as dangerous: ‘by always having some knitting to do, you are keeping yourself occupied during those hours of suspense when to sit with idle hands would only encourage nerviness.’¹²² Needlework was marketed as a vital distraction from the war. Pearsall’s argued that ‘Nothing takes the mind off war-time worries so happily as working an easy embroidery design like this’, and that their “‘Filoselle” Painting’ style of embroidery was so ‘absorbing’ that ‘It makes you forget the war’.¹²³ *Needlework Illustrated* commanded readers to ‘GO TO IT – and Sew. Sew – and forget. Not a heartless forgetting, but a healthy relaxation in the midst of war-time anxieties.’ As with shelter knitting this could calm others: ‘By thinking about what we are sewing, we calm our own minds, steady our own nerves, and at the same time do a whole lot of good in thus calming and steadying other people.’¹²⁴ This was not mere advertising rhetoric. Walter George Cook recalled his time in the Royal Army Education Corps, arranging needlework lessons and supplies for women working at anti-aircraft gun sites around London. The women clamoured for these ‘because of the strain on the nerves. It was peaceful, it was morale, as I told General Pile, it is not what they’re doing, it’s the *effects* of what they’re doing’.¹²⁵ Nella Last found her needlework an invaluable distraction from her worries. Soon after her sensitive youngest son joined the Army she wrote in her diary: ‘When my sewing machine is whirring it seems to

¹¹⁹ *N&N*, No. 4 (1940), p. 5.

¹²⁰ This aspect of wartime needlework is briefly commented on in Helen Reynolds, ‘Your Clothes are Materials of War’: the British Government Promotion of Home Sewing during the Second World War’, in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 336–337. For a recent exploration of the therapeutic benefits of needlework, see Joanne Turney, ‘Home Craft in Britain 1975–2002’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Southampton, 2002), pp. 208–209.

¹²¹ *Stitchcraft*, January 1940, p. ii.

¹²² *Stitchcraft*, November 1939, p. ii.

¹²³ *Stitchcraft*, April 1940, p. 36; *Stitchcraft*, September 1940, p. 30.

¹²⁴ *NI*, No. 159 (1940), p. 3.

¹²⁵ IWM Sound 9352, reel 13.

wrap me round with a rhythm, as music sometimes does, and keeps me from thinking about my Cliff in the Machine Gun Corps.’¹²⁶

Countering the fear and anxiety of wartime, many decorative needlework projects were designed with tranquillity in mind. *Needlework Illustrated* gave directions for ‘a delightfully restful scene to inspire your needle’, a garden of ‘still dark green conifers’, ‘a riot of apple blossom’ and ‘grey stone steps going down to the quiet waters of the lake where ducks swim happily in the sunshine’¹²⁷ In 1944 *Needlework Illustrated* invited readers to trace and embroider a crinoline lady hand-feeding a fawn:

Far removed from the clamour of war is the peaceful, happy scene in this little picture. You will find true recreation in the embroidery, and we hope that many copies of our book will be passed on to hospitals and rest-homes where the work will bring comfort and diversion to those suffering from nerve-strain.¹²⁸

‘The Farnsfield tea-cloth’ in *Needlework Illustrated* in 1940 seemed almost an escape. It recalled ‘Swiss mountains in their springtime loveliness’:

We are all a little tired of hearing about brighter blackouts. Instead, we should like to help you capture the Spirit of Spring by introducing this lovely cloth to you [...] As one works away at the embroidery, one can almost feel the refreshing mountain breezes and exhilarating air.¹²⁹

The existing historiography presents wartime stitching as a practical and thrifty necessity, thrust upon unwilling women by circumstance, but this obscures the struggles of enthusiastic needlewomen to continue these pleasurable and therapeutic activities in the face of rationing and shortages.¹³⁰ Amidst continued shortages and rationing, in January 1946 Nella Last’s young neighbour, Margaret, called hoping for spare wool scraps, but Nella had none: ‘I feel sorry for busy-fingered girls and women nowadays who cannot get wool, rug wool (decent, worthwhile stuff at a reasonable price) or little cheap remnants of good material to make up into undies or blouses. Margaret is

¹²⁶ Broad and Fleming (eds), *War*, p. 10.

¹²⁷ *NI*, No. 158 (1940), p. 24.

¹²⁸ *NI*, No. 176 (1944), p. 10.

¹²⁹ *NI*, No. 156 (1940), p. 16.

¹³⁰ Some of these issues have been discussed in Griffith, *Victory*, pp. 188–192. Her heavy reliance on *Embroidery*, the magazine of the Embroiderer’s Guild, which was not available to non-members until 1950, results in a disproportionate emphasis on more elite work. Constance Howard, *Twentieth-Century Embroidery in Great Britain, 1940-1963* (1983), p. 48. For more on the practical, thrifty element of wartime needlework, see chapter two.

completely worked up.’¹³¹ For many women, the moment of making was an aim in itself, and an increasingly elusive one.

Women’s pursuit of enjoyment and relaxation through needlework was hindered by limitations on magazine publishing. In 1941 *Stitchcraft* apologised that it was unable to maintain a stock of back issues, so that ‘when your husband has lit his pipe with the instructions needed to knit your new Summer model, or the dog has chewed up the latest issue, we cannot supply you with a new copy.’ The magazine went on to explain that some women were struggling to buy even the current issue, and offered the following humorous advice:

Please, if you are a regular reader, be also a good neighbour, and share STITCHCRAFT with your less fortunate friends. And if you are not a regular reader, remember to choose your friends not for their social position, laid up Rolls-Royces, onion beds and tomato houses, but because they have a copy of STITCHCRAFT. Make no bones about it – JUST CADGE.¹³²

During the war needlework magazines reduced dramatically in size, cut the number of issues per year, ran out of back issues, became available in newsagents only to those who pre-ordered, refused to take on new subscribers, and ceased offering free transfers or began inviting those readers who wanted them to send for them by post.¹³³ In March 1942 *Stitchcraft* again softened the blow of bad news with humour, and also the hope of brighter days ahead:

Dear Readers, I take up my pen
To tell you news that’s sad; for when
You see our issue next,
‘Twill be with a diminished text.

Now I must say that truth to tell,
Our plight is somewhat horribell [sic],
But it hurts us far more than you,
For this is what we have to do -

To keep our handcrafts much the same
And quality (whence comes our fame),

¹³¹ Patricia Malcolmson and Robert Malcolmson (eds), *Nella Last’s Peace: The Post-War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2008), p. 72.

¹³² *Stitchcraft*, May 1941, p. 5.

¹³³ *N&N*, No. 4 (1940), p. 1; *Stitchcraft*, April 1942, p. 15; *NI*, No. 168 (1942), p. 13; *Stitchcraft*, December 1943, p. 9; *Stitchcraft*, December 1941, p. 21; *Stitchcraft*, No. 155 (1942), p. 14. On the impact of war on general women’s magazines, see Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* (1998), p. 61.

With saddened mien we are devising
To cut out lots of advertising.

The cooking page has had to go,
But that should not involve much woe,
For most of you by now, I ween,
Are feeding in the works canteen.

So bear with us as best you may
Till Victory brings a better day,
and with kind **Mr. Brown's permission
We'll print a 100-page edition!

** He sometimes writes to us from Paper Control.¹³⁴

Clothes rationing introduced severe limitations on women's ability to stitch for enjoyment and therapy. When first announced, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* displayed a stiff upper lip: 'We who love needlework will be unable to obtain much of the material required for it. No one will grumble or complain, it is all part of the war effort.' The uncomplaining needlewoman would, of course, still stitch, 'to help her relax to give her jangled nerves relief'. The magazine quickly advised readers on turning out their cupboards, cutting worn or badly damaged sheets, tablecloths, curtains and even clothes into smaller items such as napkins, cosies, chair backs, runners and tray cloths to embroider, and also to look over items currently in use: 'If you possess a plain piece of linen or even a plain tablecloth don't leave it as such. Embroider it and make it a thing of beauty.'¹³⁵ Later issues showcased designs suitable for plain table cloths from the linen cupboard, and cutwork doylies that could be made from 'Portions of old fine bed linen which has been worn beyond repair'¹³⁶

Continuing to embroider could be coupon-costly, and women adapted the things they made to provide maximum recreation with the minimum amount of fabric. Although most household linen remained 'coupon free', under clothes rationing manufacturers were forbidden from using rationed materials for making certain unrationed items including table cloths, mats and runners, napkins, antimacassars, duchess sets, tea cosies, and nightdress cases – the staples of domestic embroidery.¹³⁷ Women were still able to sew these items from cloth bought by the yard, but this had to be weighed

¹³⁴ *Stitchcraft*, No. 155 (1942), p. 21.

¹³⁵ *N&N*, No. 7 (1941), p. 1. Muriel recalled embroidering cut up sheets in the early 1940s.

¹³⁶ *N&N*, No. 10 (1942), p. 11; *N&N*, No. 14 (1943), p. 14.

¹³⁷ General Licence, 1941 No. 1812; The Miscellaneous Textiles (Manufacture and Supply) Directions, 1942 No. 1551 .

against their other coupon needs – making a tea cloth could require as many as five coupons. However, smaller, often purely decorative, items were more commonly featured in magazines, sometimes enabling women to buy materials for up to four projects using a single coupon.¹³⁸ Popular densely stitched miniature embroidered pictures, such as those shown in fig. 3.13 and 3.14, allowed women a great deal of recreation at minimal coupon cost. Magazines also featured embroidered pictures which included areas which were appliquéd (fig. 3.15) or even painted, enabling readers to eke out their limited resources of threads and fabrics, whilst still keeping themselves amused and maintaining this aspect of their normal peacetime lives.¹³⁹ These embroidered miniatures and appliqué pictures did not serve a practical purpose. Rather, they fulfilled women's emotional needs in recreation, therapy, and beautifying their homes.

Women's opportunities to knit were limited by wool rationing, and so patterns were written not only to produce practical and appealing garments, but to maximise the valuable, soothing recreation that knitters found in their hobby. Thrift was, of course, often an important concern, with some jumpers designed to utilise small oddments of yarn in various colours, and others contrived to use as little wool as possible.¹⁴⁰ Yet, during the war and post-war rationing period, some patterns continued to use bobbles and cables, which require a great deal of additional yarn.¹⁴¹ Waller has argued that whilst textured patterns were sometimes avoided to save wool, in other situations they were favoured as they made hard-wearing garments and, especially later in the war, because they helped mask thinning sections in the unravelled wool from which many jumpers were knitted.¹⁴² Whilst the heavily textured garments shown in fig. 3.16-3.18 all required fewer coupons than ready-made jumpers, more coupons could have been saved with alternative designs. These factors focus on the *product* of knitting to help explain knitting pattern design, but the *process* of knitting is also important. Historians have tended to emphasise the ways in which rationing and shortages hindered the consumption of clothing, presenting the production of clothing as a necessary (and sometimes burdensome) means to an end and one that is assumed to have increased

¹³⁸ *N&N*, No. 14 (1943), p. 2. In another 1943 issue of *N&N* none of the projects available from the Needlewoman Shop required more than one coupon. *N&N*, No. 16 (1943), p. 17.

¹³⁹ e.g. *N&N*, No. 16 (1943), p. 6; *NI*, No. 174 (1943), p. 21; *NI*, No. 176 (1944), pp. 10-11. Difficulties obtaining threads in wartime are addressed in chapter two, pp. 97-98, 104-105.

¹⁴⁰ See above, pp. 88-89, 103.

¹⁴¹ eg. *NI*, No. 171 (1943), pp. 6-7; *Stitchcraft*, December 1943, p. 5; *Stitchcraft*, April 1947, p. 8; *NI*, No. 187 (1947), pp. 4-5.

¹⁴² Waller, *Knitting*, pp. 24, 90.

dramatically during the war years.¹⁴³ However, many women were accustomed to knitting for pleasure, and by decreasing their access to yarns, rationing and shortages limited the extent to which they could indulge in this recreation. These women would have been interested in the process as well as the product of their knitting, and complex textural and colour patterns made what knitting they could do as interesting, absorbing and challenging as possible, whilst also slowing down and extending the process. By careful choice of pattern keen knitters could wring every ounce of enjoyment as well as wear from their yarn and coupons, maximising their limited access to domestic recreation and restorative pleasure.

Women's enjoyment of the process of knitting also had implications for their involvement in making comforts. In spite of constructions of comforts knitting as war work, the official Army guide noted that 'fortunately most women enjoy knitting.'¹⁴⁴ *Knitting for the Menfolk* reassured readers that 'any leisure time you have will be well spent in knitting these garments.'¹⁴⁵ Sirdar claimed that 'it's not a hard task', and Copley's prescribed it as 'First Aid for Dull Evenings'.¹⁴⁶ Ideas of comforts knitting as simultaneously duty and pleasure, industry and recreation, may have helped in the appropriation of women's labour. Thus it could be suggested that already busy women could knit convalescents' comforts to 'fill in those few precious half-hours' possibly constituting all of their rare leisure time.¹⁴⁷ It may also have legitimised claims on their pocketbooks. Even for donations to the 'common pool' women were often expected to pay for the wool they knitted, and official patterns.¹⁴⁸ Nella Last commented that out of her weekly housekeeping of £3.10s.0d. 'expenses at the Centre average out – with the

¹⁴³ See chapter two, pp. 81-82. This view should not be entirely dismissed – in particular the painstaking mending of deteriorating clothing would surely have been a tedious and time-consuming task.

¹⁴⁴ *Knitting for the Army; Official Guide* (1941), p. 3.

¹⁴⁵ *Knitting for the Menfolk: 'Ramada' Super Fingering Wool*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁶ *Weldon Knitting Series No. 7: Woollies for our Sailors, Soldiers & Airmen*, p. 17; *Weldon Knitting Series No. 11: Wartime Socks, Stockings, Scarves and Gloves*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ *Weldon Knitting Series No. 8: Hospital Woollies*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁸ *Times*, 5 October 1943, p. 6; *Knitting for the R.A.F.: Official Book of Instructions*, p. 2. The 'common pool' was a frequently used term to describe the system in which donated garments from numerous local groups and individuals were collected by the Comforts Funds of each service, and then distributed through a centralised system within each according to priority and need. Both commercial and official booklets of patterns were charged for, though some attempted to keep costs down. For example *Knitted Garments for the Royal Navy and other Fleet Auxiliaries, Minesweepers, Trawlers, Etc.* cost only 2d. and contained an offer to supply navy blue wool at wholesale prices to groups of 8 or more knitters, provided all finished garments were returned to the depot. Knitters producing gloves for the 'Knit for Russia' campaign in the winter of 1941 were refunded only 5s of their 5s.2½d. deposit for a pound of wool when they returned their finished garments. 2½d. per pound of wool was extremely cheap (maximum retail prices for wool ranged from 7½d. to 1s.½d. per ounce in 1942) but women were nonetheless being asked to contribute money as well as labour. TNA:PRO T 161/1425; TNA:PRO BT 64/76.

subscription and all my little sundries for sewing – at quite 5s.’ the same amount that she spent on lighting and coal per week in winter.¹⁴⁹

Needlework enabled women to make objects imbued with emotional meaning, creating and preserving memories. Those living through the Second World War frequently demonstrated an awareness of the historical importance of the times they were living through, for example beginning for the first time to keep a diary. It may have been a similar impulse that prompted the creation of many of the patriotic items already discussed, commemorating the war and creating personal souvenirs. Similarly, embroidered signature cloths marked the time, place and people central to so many women’s lives during the war.¹⁵⁰ The cloth shown in fig. 3.19 is dated 1943, and was embroidered by Leading WREN Cousins. It shows the names of a number of people, predominantly women, connected with the Naval Controller of Shipping’s office, Alexandria. The smaller, uncompleted, cloth in fig. 3.20 was stitched by Lorna De L Hays, neé Hills, adjunct to the WAAF Officers School at Windermere in 1944 to 1945, and contains the names of men and women she met there.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Broad and Fleming (eds), *War*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁰ Pristash *et al* have argued that friendship quilts and signature quilts ‘visually combine a multiplicity of voices to create a sentiment of solidarity and friendship.’ Heather Pristash, Inez Schaechterle, and Sue Carter Wood, ‘The Needle as the Pen: Intentionality, Needlework, and the Production of Alternate Discourses of Power’, in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles: 1750-1950* (Farnham, 2009), p. 19. However, the sheer number of signatures on some Second World War cloths suggest that, whilst they speak powerfully of wartime solidarity, they have less to do with selective friendship, instead reflecting the way groups were thrown together by the upheavals of war.

¹⁵¹ Whilst somewhat outside the remit of this thesis, it should be noted that British female civilian internees in the Far East also used embroidery to mark their time spent together. See Bernice Archer and Alan Jeffreys, ‘The Women’s Embroideries of Internment in the Far East 1942-1945’, in Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum (eds), *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire* (New York, 2012), pp. 244–260. Gilly Carr describes handkerchiefs embroidered by female civilian internees from the Channel Islands which featured names organised in a clearly hierarchical manner, but this seems somewhat unusual. Carr, ‘God Save’, p. 175.

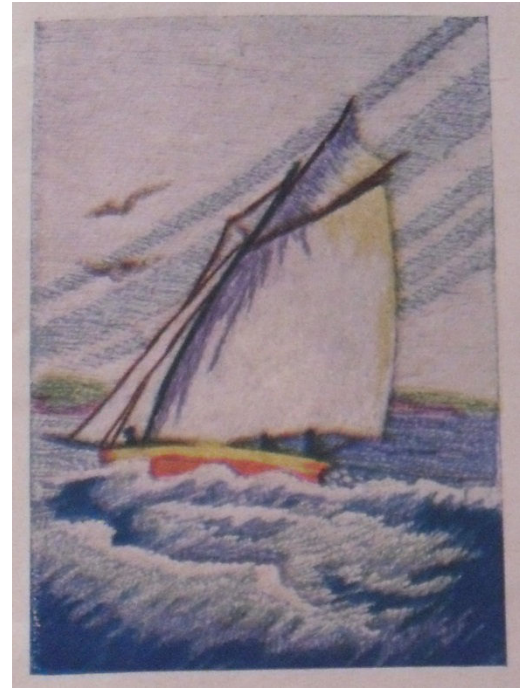
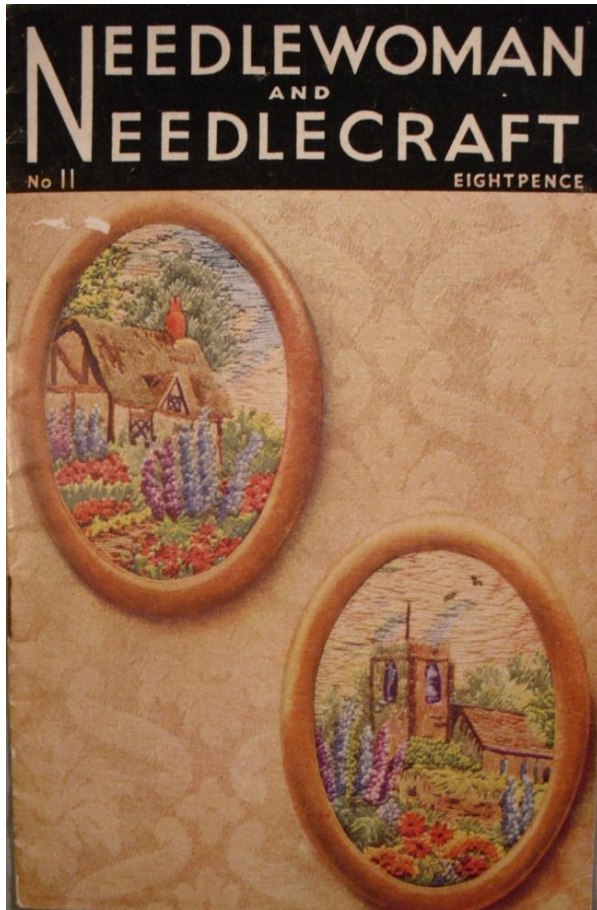


Fig. 3.13 (above left): rural miniatures,
Needlewoman and Needlecraft, No. 11 (1942),
p. 1.

Fig. 3.14 (above right): nautical miniature,
Needlewoman and Needlecraft, No. 23 (1945),
p. 9.



Fig. 3.15 (left): appliqué picture, *Stitchcraft*,
April-May 1944, p. 19.



Fig. 3.16 (above left): red jumper. *Stitchcraft*, September 1944, p. 20.

Fig. 3.17 (above right): cable detail cardigan. *Stitchcraft*, October-November 1944, p. 6.

Fig. 3.18 (left): all-over cabled cardigan. *Stitchcraft*, October-November 1944, p. 1.

The need and patriotic impulse to ‘make do and mend’ meant that sentimental objects were under threat, but clever needlewomen could preserve symbolic relics. *Needlework Illustrated* demonstrated this in a 1944 article on the ‘Sentimental Cushion’ created by ‘Glamorous Star, Gabrielle Brune’, an actress on the London stage and wife of an American Colonel. The patchwork cushion incorporated ‘her souvenirs of romance and success’, featuring scraps of her wedding dress, stage costumes, and the dress she wore when she first met her husband. Readers were shown how to make their

own version, tracing the flower shape for the patches from the page.¹⁵² At a time when garments often could not be kept for sentimental reasons, but had to be worn, repaired, remodelled, repurposed, and eventually sent for salvage, this could save something of the emotional link many women felt for such special items of clothing.

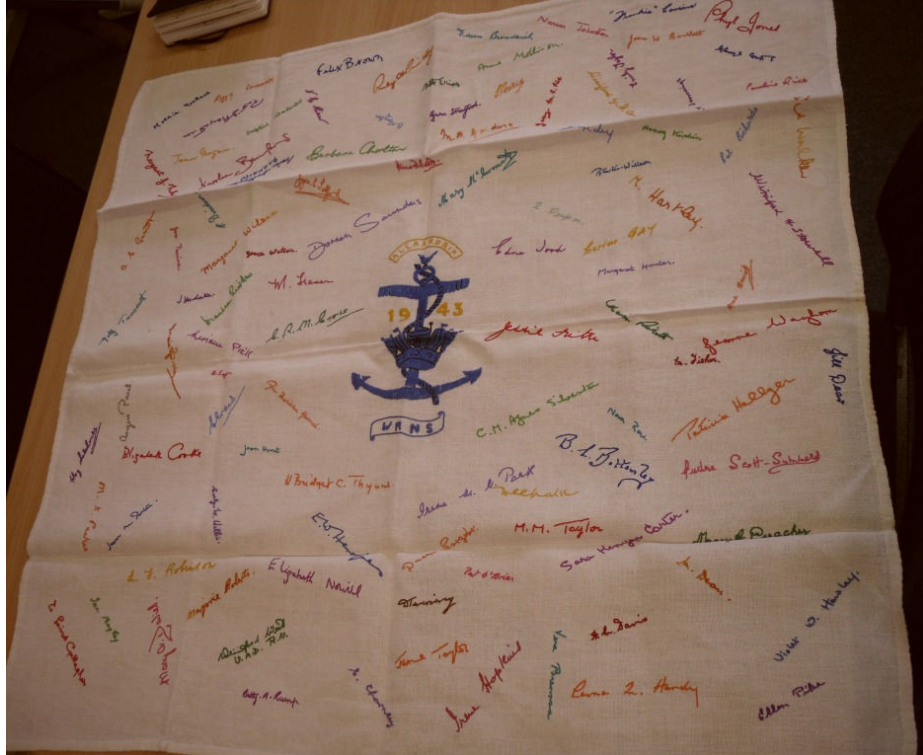
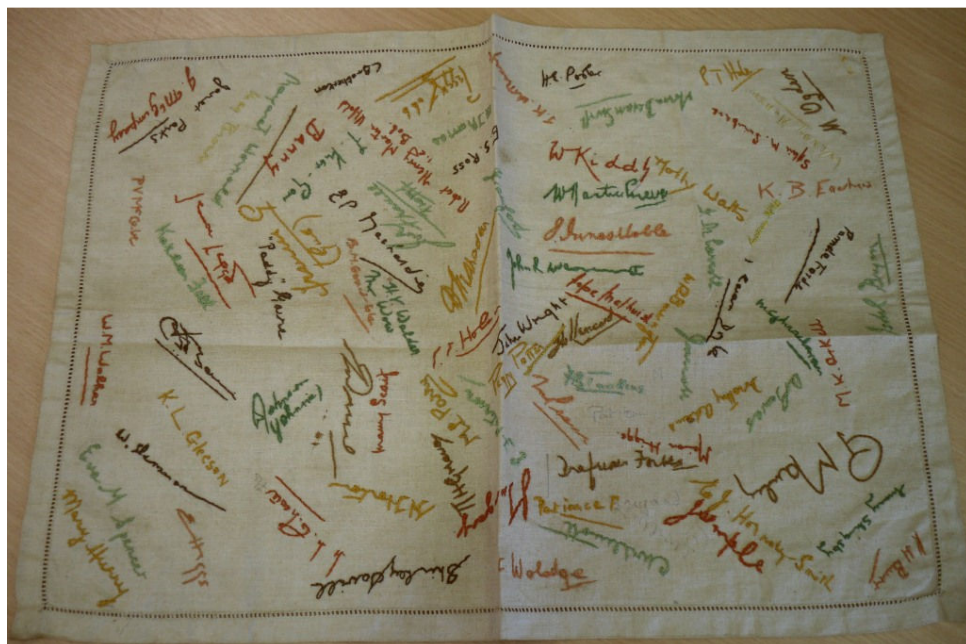


Fig. 3.19 (above): WRNS signature cloth, IWM EPH 1275.

Fig. 3.20 (below): WAAF signature tray cloth, IWM EPH 4007.



¹⁵² *NZ*, No. 177 (1944), pp. 4-5.

New items could also be invested heavily with emotional meaning. Penelope Art Needlework encouraged women to embroider chair seats, as ‘Embroidery Will Brighten His Home-Coming’, and *Needlework Illustrated* offered women’s jumper patterns ‘For “His” Leave’.¹⁵³ Even baby knits were suggested for ‘when Daddy comes home on leave’.¹⁵⁴ Crafted in eager anticipation of reunions, the time, effort and thought involved in these projects could make disappointments even more crushing, as this factory worker discovered:

I had such a disappointment this weekend. My husband was to have 48 hours’ leave, and then Friday night I got a wire to say he couldn’t come. Oh, I could have cried my eyes out. I’d been getting all worked up for it – you know. I’d bought myself a new pair of stockings, and I’ve sat up every evening to finish my cardigan, and I’d just finished it when the wire came. It’s blue – a sort of powder blue, that’s his favourite colour on me. I couldn’t put it on. My mother said: Why don’t you put it on, see how it looks, now you’ve finished it? But I couldn’t do it. I’d got it all planned I was going to put it on when he came home, I just hadn’t any heart for it. Just pushed it away in my drawer as if it was one of my old things, I never even held it up to see how it looked.¹⁵⁵

This account suggests that the anticipation of his leave had initially been enhanced by these preparations – ‘I’d been getting all worked up for it’. This was perhaps a conscious attempt to heighten the excitement of the event, imagining his reaction to the cardigan in his favourite shade and knitting into the night as his expected arrival date neared. Before it was ever worn her cardigan was rich with emotional meanings built through the moment of making. The destruction of her plans by his cancelled leave was so bitter that, despite clothes coupons, money and hours spent on the creation of the cardigan ‘I never even held it up to see how it looked.’ What may have initially seemed to be a harmless attempt to enhance her husband’s homecoming, and the excitement of the period leading up to it, backfired badly.

With families fractured by evacuation and war work, needlework could be a way of maintaining ties over long distances. In 1939 W.B. Wools tugged at the heartstrings, outlining knitters’ new priorities: ‘The menfolk are of course the main consideration and you mustn’t forget the children, particularly if they have been evacuated and are out of your care.’¹⁵⁶ One thirty-year-old factory worker turned out her own wardrobe to find items to remodel for her six-year-old son, then living with her sister in Leicester.

¹⁵³ *Needlewoman*, January 1940, p. 31; *NI*, No. 159 (1940), pp. 12-13.

¹⁵⁴ *NI*, No. 171 (1943), p. 8.

¹⁵⁵ MOA FR 1494-5 ‘War Factory’, November 1942, p. 86.

¹⁵⁶ *Needlecraft Practical Journal*, No. 277 (1939), p. 20.

Unable to care for him personally, or even witness the growth spurts that necessitated these ‘new’ clothes, sewing was one of the few motherly acts she could perform for him:

I had a good tidy up when I got in, and had a look through my summer clothes. I wanted to see what I’d got I could cut up for a suit for my little boy. He’s a terrible one, he grows out of all his clothes. My sister says he’s hardly got a thing he can wear, he’s growing so.¹⁵⁷

For Pat’s husband, Tony, objects were moving in the opposite direction. Aged nine in 1939, he was evacuated from Woolwich with his school to Wrotham, Kent, and lived with an unmarried woman and her brother:

The lady was very, very good to me. And she obviously, although she was an unmarried lady, she certainly looked after my being there for Christmas 1939, and she said at that time, you must do something for your mum, because she’s away in Woolwich still. So, she then started teaching me how to knit and sew, just so that I could make something to send home to mum.

The garter stitch pot holder and small embroidered table mat Tony made for his mother would undoubtedly have been more meaningful and shown her more about his wellbeing and affection for her than the manufactured gifts that were still relatively plentiful in the shops that Christmas.

Knitted comforts could also reflect and help to maintain emotional bonds. Julie Summers has highlighted the role of letters in improving the emotional wellbeing of and sustaining relationships between wives and their serving and prisoner of war husbands, but parcels were also sent.¹⁵⁸ Despite the rhetoric of comforts knitting as forming part of the war effort and a national service, garments were often intended as personal gifts to known members of the services, especially in the early years of the war. This is sometimes evident in the patterns themselves. Cashmere or angora wristlets were likely too luxurious for donation to the ‘common pool’, and patterns incorporating the wearer’s initial would have been knitted with a specific individual in mind.¹⁵⁹ Many jumpers were far from uniform, using various fancy stitches both for women’s and

¹⁵⁷ MOA FR 1494-5 ‘War Factory’, November 1942, p. 85.

¹⁵⁸ Summers, *Stranger*, pp. 21–44. Michael Roper has shown the emotional as well as practical importance of food and clothing sent to men fighting in the Great War by their mothers, for whom it demonstrated continued maternal care and ‘a tangible connection with home’ Michael Roper, ‘Slipping Out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History’, *History Workshop Journal*, 59:1 (2005), pp. 63–64.

¹⁵⁹ *Hutchinson’s Knitted Comforts for the Forces* (1940), p. 12; *Stitchcraft*, August 1940, pp. 14–15.

men's items, adding interest to the knitting process, and allowing knitters to choose patterns most suited to the recipient.¹⁶⁰

In other cases the intended recipient is indicated in advertising or the text accompanying the pattern (fig. 3.21 and 3.22). Women were invited to 'knit your man this body-belt', or make scarves for their 'Soldier or Sailor friends'.¹⁶¹ Arden's encouraged readers to knit 'for that brother, husband, father or sweetheart in khaki or blue'.¹⁶² Even children were urged to 'Knit these cosy wristlets for your soldier daddy or big brother'.¹⁶³ In the earlier years of the war official propaganda supported this kind of knitting. The Ministry of Information's film *They Also Serve* (1940) was dedicated to British housewives – 'Every Day they are Helping to Win' – and depicted an ordinary housewife's activities helping the war effort. These included caring for her factory-worker husband, helping her neighbours, and sending parcels containing hand-knitted socks to her soldier son.

Other knitters broadened their net, but nonetheless preferred to knit for emotionally meaningful groups, most notably 'local' men; hence, the formation of organisations such as 'the Shacklewell knitting club for provisioning Comforts for Shacklewell men on service'.¹⁶⁴ These groups were not merely born out of convenience, but reflected strong local loyalties. There were protests when the Wembley Comforts Fund was encouraged to redirect its products to the common pool.¹⁶⁵ This was not the resistance to national effort described by Summerfield as associated with idle and selfish middle-class women, but a definite choice of the known, local and emotionally meaningful over the national and anonymous.¹⁶⁶ For one working-class woman quoted by Mass Observation this preference for local distribution was rooted in a distrust of the faceless organisation of the common pool:

I've knitted I don't know how many pullovers. We got together in our parish – ten of us there were. We used to go to the Rectory one or two afternoons a week

¹⁶⁰ eg. *Stitchcraft*, November 1940, pp. 8-9; *Stitchcraft*, August 1940, pp. 14-15. This break with uniformity was not unusual, as McDowell notes that women who procured their own ATS uniform could choose from a range of acceptable khaki shades, different fabrics, and suppliers, having them made to measure by companies such as Burberry. McDowell, *Forties*, p. 58. See also McNeil, 'Best', pp. 287–288.

¹⁶¹ *Home Notes Series No. 201: Wartime Woollies for Men*, p. 1; Daily Express, *War-Time*, p. 113.

¹⁶² *NI*, No. 155 (1940), p. 2.

¹⁶³ *NI*, No. 156 (1940), p. 14.

¹⁶⁴ TNA:PRO MEPO 2/4121.

¹⁶⁵ IWM Documents 547, clipping.

¹⁶⁶ Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 162–164.

and the rector's wife gave us tea. We paid 6d. each and she got the wool. Much better that way – working, I mean in parties like that – you know where your things are going. I've never been one for those Comforts Funds. You never know where your things are going. I expect they do go, of course, but you don't really know, do you? Now with the rector's wife, she had a list of all the boys in the parish who'd joined up, and she saw that the poorest one got the most things.¹⁶⁷

June
P.S. I hope you like the cardigan

What more welcome for the boys away from home than this splendid Sirdar cardigan? You could knit it quickly – inexpensively – professionally . . . from only 13 ounces "Sirdar" Majestic Wool. Sirdar Wools are so soft, smooth and even that they make perfect knitting a matter of course. Get LEAFLET No. 659 for directions to make this model, price 2d., from woolshops, or 2½d. post free from HARRAP BROS. (SIRDAR WOOLS) LTD., Bective Mills, WAKEFIELD.

it's best to use

Sirdar
KNITTING WOOLS

If he's in the **ARMY**
or the **NAVY**
or the **AIR FORCE**

**Knit him something
in Ladyship Wools.**

There are lots of garments you can knit for him in Ladyship Wools—socks, mittens, a scarf or a woollen helmet. Ladyship Wools are soft and warm; they stand the hardest wear, and they keep their shape. Ask your dealer to show you Ladyship Wools in Khaki, Air Force Blue, Navy and the official Army Grey.

Ask also for Leaflets Nos. 695, 696 and 705 with directions for service garments.

LADYSHIP
Registered WOOLS Trade Mark

For name and address of your nearest Ladyship dealer, write to:
BALDWIN & WALKER LTD., (Dept. F) HALIFAX, ENG.

Fig. 3.21 (left): Sirdar advertisement, *Weldon Knitting Series No. 11: Wartime Socks, Stockings, Scarves and Gloves*, p. 2.

Fig. 3.22 (right): Ladyship advertisement, *Weldon Knitting Series No.7: Woollies for our Sailors, Soldiers & Airmen*, p. 20.

Other areas or groups could also have emotional significance. The Pembrokeshire Comforts Association appealed to 'those who have spent happy holidays in the county'.¹⁶⁸ The London Co-operative Society even had a staff knitting circle dedicated to the creation of comforts for employees who joined the service, allowing women to knit for their colleagues.¹⁶⁹

As well as reflecting and reinforcing existing bonds between recipients and knitters, the provision of comforts could produce new relationships. A number of naval ships were 'adopted' by schools whose pupils supplied them with comforts, letters, games,

¹⁶⁷ MOA TC 32 Women in Wartime 4/A 'Women's Organisations', 23 August 1940, p. 1.

¹⁶⁸ *Times*, 21 January 1941, p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ *The Beehive*, 19 (5) March 1940.

and even cigarettes bought with their pocket money.¹⁷⁰ The RAF Comforts Committee provided slips to be filled in with the details of the knitting party and sewn to finished items so that recipients could send a letter of thanks.¹⁷¹ This may have been an attempt to simulate and redirect the desire to knit for ‘our’ men, and make donations to the common pool emotionally meaningful. An official Merchant Navy pattern booklet stated that ‘We know that both those who make and those who receive gifts of knitted comforts appreciate the personal touch and a note of greeting attached to garments will make them even more welcome and often bring a letter of acknowledgement in reply.’¹⁷² This ‘personal touch’ makes explicit the notions of maternal care and emotional as well as physical labour implicit in the creation of hand-knit comforts for both known and unknown members of the services. Knitters provided not only practical help in clothing the recipients, but also the knowledge that someone back ‘home’ (their country, their home town, or their family) was thinking of them and their welfare.¹⁷³ The products were a practical help but also represented the emotionally meaningful process of their making, the time and effort a known or unknown woman was giving to them. Letters of thanks to Mollie Baker and her fellow knitters from men at sea started an exchange in which servicemen and knitters could talk about their families, pre-war lives and some of their current activities. Men could send thanks for garments, make suggestions for future knitting, or, as in the case of Sam Gibbs, gently suggest improvements.¹⁷⁴ They gave an added depth of meaning to the comforts that were sent, as when Gibbs assured Baker that no matter the size of jumper she sent ‘I shall be proud to wear it because you made it for me’. They also allowed men to express how much it meant that those back home were thinking of them, even in the midst of the Blitz.¹⁷⁵ However, donating knitting did not guarantee thanks. Rose Uttin complained that having knitted over fifty garments with printed labels attached she had received only two letters in response. This, the redirection of local knitting into the common pool, and

¹⁷⁰ *Times*, 9 November 1939, p. 6; *Times*, 16 November 1939, p. 6.

¹⁷¹ *Knitting for the R.A.F.: Official Book of Instructions*, p. 3.

¹⁷² *Knitting for the Merchant Navy*, p. 1.

¹⁷³ Bruce Scates’ work on Australia in the Great War highlights this emotional aspect of comforts knitting, with even donations to strangers representing connections with ‘home’ and motherly care. Bruce Scates, ‘The Unknown Sock Knitter: Voluntary Work, Emotional Labour, Bereavement and the Great War’, *Labour History*, 81 (2001), p. 37. Emotional labour was also a characteristic of other forms of women’s war work. The importance to wounded men of emotional connections with and support from women is shown in Nicholson’s descriptions of women’s work nursing and entertaining in hospitals. Nicholson, *Millions*, pp. 206–208, 249–250. Peacetime voluntary work was also sometimes imbued with emotional meaning. When a Henley-on-Thames branch of the WI sent quilts to distressed areas in Wales and Jarrow consignments included ‘rosemary for remembrance, with love and sympathy from a little village in Oxfordshire.’ *Home and Country*, January 1935, p. 50.

¹⁷⁴ IWM Documents 570; IWM Documents 10728.

¹⁷⁵ IWM Documents 570 Gibbs, 22 September 1940; IWM Documents 10728.

fears that comforts may have disappeared into the black market led her to declare ‘Voluntary work! Never again!’¹⁷⁶

These diverse approaches to the donation of comforts were dramatically altered by the introduction of clothes rationing, threatening the emotional significance of comforts. On 4th June, 1941, in the first days of the scheme, *The Times* ran a piece dealing with ‘clothes coupons anomalies’, including the plight of women knitting ‘personal gifts’ for servicemen. These women had either to use their own clothing coupons or rely on coupon-free wool from the Comforts Fund and return finished garments to ‘the pool’.¹⁷⁷ This piece assumed that the government would make the necessary adjustments to address the ‘knitters’ grievance’, and that women were naturally entitled to knit for ‘their’ men, regardless of the uneven distribution of resources that would result. Despite the collectivising idea of the ‘war effort’, some women were unwilling to knit for unknown men. One middle-class female bank worker felt this might put people off entirely: ‘People will stop knitting comforts if they don’t know who they’re going to. You’d much better knit for friends.’¹⁷⁸ Recipients, too, could suffer from these changes. One correspondent wrote to Mass Observation criticising the switch to the ‘common pool’ system for prisoners of war: ‘the woman is robbed of the pleasure of knitting for her own prisoner & the satisfaction that he has all he needs - & the prisoner is robbed of one of his greatest pleasures – receiving gifts made by the hands of his mother, wife or sister etc.’¹⁷⁹ The threat posed by clothes rationing laid bare the rich emotional meaning of comforts, for both the knitter and the recipient.

Initially Oliver Lyttleton, President of the Board of Trade, expressed a willingness to make concessions to facilitate knitting for individual service personnel, implying that this practice was acceptable and even desirable.¹⁸⁰ When dealing with women knitting for ‘their’ servicemen ‘fair shares for all’ and national unity were temporarily overridden by personal attachments and familial provision. Khaki knitting wool was available coupon-free for the period of one month.¹⁸¹ The Personal Knitter Scheme was then established. Knitters with a friend or relative in the services or Merchant Navy

¹⁷⁶ IWM Documents 547, clipping.

¹⁷⁷ *Times*, 4 June 1941, p. 2.

¹⁷⁸ MOA TC 18 Personal Appearance and Clothes 3/C ‘Question 9: Forces’, 28 July 1941.

¹⁷⁹ MOA TC 18 Personal Appearance and Clothes 4/A ‘Mill Hill, JS’, 13 June 1941, p. 1. Arrangements were made comparatively swiftly for families to supply their own relatives in POW camps with clothes, though it is not clear whether home knitted items were included in these schemes. *BoT Journal*, 19 June 1941, p. 395; Eric L. Hargreaves and Margaret Gowing, *Civil Industry and Trade* (1952), p. 324.

¹⁸⁰ *Times*, 7 June 1941, p. 2.

¹⁸¹ Other service colours were not included as they might be misused to make civilian clothing. *Times*, 16 July 1941, p. 9.

could apply for vouchers enabling them to purchase twenty-four ounces of coupon-free wool in service colours. This scheme expired at the end of August 1942, since it could not 'be expected to ensure fair and economical distribution of comforts.'¹⁸² Other small-scale concessions were made. Oiled wool for sailors' sea-boot stockings remained coupon-free and after the expiration of the Personal Knitter Scheme retailers were temporarily permitted to sell cheap khaki knitting wools without coupons to dispose of stock.¹⁸³ Generally, however, eager comforts knitters were left with no choice but to sacrifice their own scarce coupons or knit for the common pool (though many had been doing this since the outbreak of war). The 'common pool' *could* be emotionally meaningful to knitters, who could still choose to knit for the service to which their relatives or friends belonged.¹⁸⁴ Yet a later letter by Rose Uttin to *The Wembley News* expressed bitterness that centralised donations meant that 'the men of Wembley borough, unless they were in a unit that received a bale of garments, did not benefit by Wembley's Comforts Fund.'¹⁸⁵ She clearly deeply resented the enforced centralisation and nationalisation of this charitable effort; her loyalties were not to the men of Britain, of England or even of London, but far more restricted and localised.

This chapter has demonstrated the importance of viewing the minutiae of the home front in its emotional context. It has revealed how needlework helped to manage and manifest women's emotional experiences. When so much of life in Britain changed, needlework formed a buffer, enabling women to continue to beautify themselves and their homes in spite of rationing, shortages and manufacturing restrictions, and through comforts knitting moderated wartime upheaval with a sense of tradition that drew on previous wars and peacetime gender roles. Emotions influenced the things that women stitched, expressing, invoking and reinforcing feelings through process and product. They used the moment of making to influence emotions, soothing women in times of stress, reinforcing feelings of patriotism that gave hope for victory, serving as a tool for performing bravery both as an adaptive strategy and as part of a British identity, and inspiring bravery in others. When recreation was scarce the creation and re-creation of needlework offered women restorative pleasure, though this could be difficult to

¹⁸² *Times*, 28 August 1941, p. 2; *Times*, 9 October 1941, p. 9; *Times*, 29 August 1942, p. 2; *BoT Journal*, 6 September 1941, p. 136; *BoT Journal*, 11 October 1941, p. 222; *BoT Journal*, 7 September 1942, p. 410.

¹⁸³ *BoT Journal*, 11 October 1941, p. 221; *BoT Journal*, 14 November 1942, p. 503.

¹⁸⁴ Isabel Wilkinson, a plotter in the ATS recalled a similar model of supporting large organisations because of individual connections: '[Mrs Clarke] soon got to know about my cousin being a prisoner of war, and he was, he was our prisoner [laughs]. I was the only one who had a prisoner of war at the time and the girls all thought he belonged to them, you know. We all contributed to the Red Cross because of the one we knew about.' IWM Sound 27080, reel 8.

¹⁸⁵ IWM Documents 547, clipping.

achieve amidst shortages and rationing. A sense of 'duty' and a desire, even need, to be useful drove women's involvement in needlework as war work. Knitting parties helped to assert the status of knitting as 'war work'. Though for some women these groups offered companionship, personal clashes and rifts of politics and class demonstrated the limits of wartime unity. The process of needlework allowed women to demonstrate their love and loyalty by making for others, and the meaningful nature of these objects was appreciated by some recipients. In contrast with previous work that has emphasised practicality as the motivation for needlework, here we see a plethora of alternate rationales, including love and loyalty, self-help, self-indulgence and self-preservation.

Chapter Four

‘Contemporary but Comfortable’: the Modern and the Traditional in Needlework¹

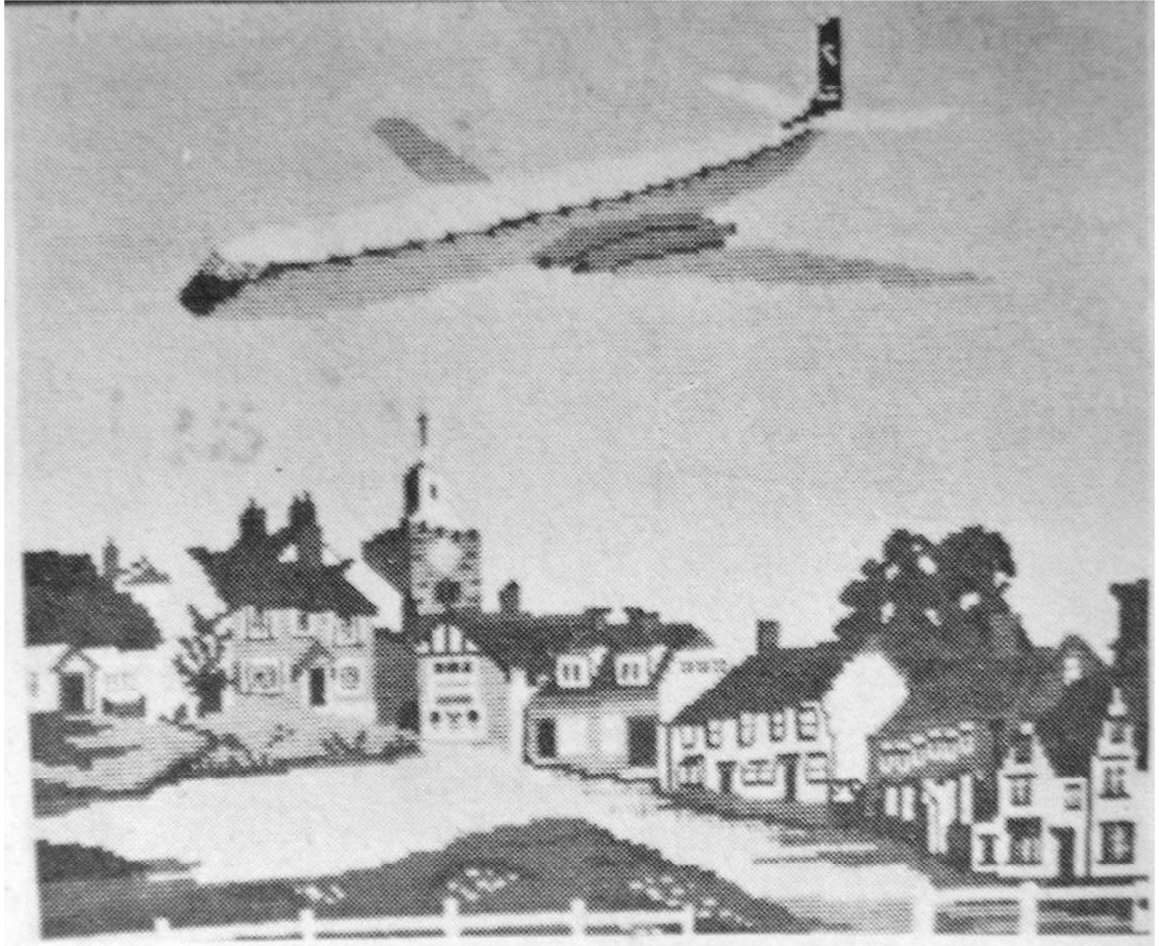


Fig. 4.1: Mrs Ross’s ‘Finchingfield’ tapestry, *Stitchcraft*, June 1960, p. 27.

The popular imagination has certain preconceptions about needlewomen – they are older (grandmothers, mothers, or spinsters), they are unfashionable, staid, and romanticise the past. Joanne Turney has claimed that ‘Home Craft is a genre, virtually untouched by fashion [...], existing in a nostalgic vacuum, characterised by the familial and the sentimental.’² The recent craft revival, with its ‘Stitch and Bitch’ groups meeting to knit in pubs, crocheted bikinis, and subversive cross stitches juxtaposing a domestic aesthetic with four letter words is helping to dispel these ideas in relation to the craft of today, but in doing so positions itself as ‘not your grandmother’s’ craft, reinforcing ideas that needlework is, by default, backward-looking.³ This chapter

¹ This title is taken from *Stitchcraft*, February 1960, p. 10.

² Joanne Turney, ‘Home Craft in Britain 1975-2002’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Southampton, 2002), p. 305.

³ Jenny Hart’s ‘Sublime Stitching’ uses the slogan ‘this ain’t your gramma’s embroidery’ and sells

examines the ways in which tradition and modernity were negotiated in relation to needlewomen and their craft, primarily using needlework magazines, objects and oral histories.⁴ As Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters have stated: ‘few ideas are more troubled than the concept of modernity. A cursory glance at the literature reveals that there is no historical or sociological agreement about the meaning of the term.’⁵ Drawing on Bernhard Rieger and Martin Daunton’s reference to ‘contemporaries’ conviction of living in and through an era of profound, man-made changes as the defining hallmark that observers associated with modernity’, this chapter addresses modernity as an awareness of the ‘present as a period of both transformation and transition’.⁶ Whilst tradition is backward-looking and focuses on continuities, modernity emphasises change, the ‘new’ and the ‘up-do-date’. It will be demonstrated that despite the venerable histories of many forms of needlework, the culture of needlework held them to be entirely compatible with modernity.

The relationships between modernity and tradition in twentieth-century Britain have been seen as complex. In his overview of the subject, Harry Cocks has argued that:

Questions of modernity matter because so much of early-twentieth-century culture was preoccupied with rejecting the immediate Victorian past and redefining the world in accordance with radically new precepts and ideas. These ideas, in turn, had an enormous influence on the shape of British culture. However, in spite of the strenuous efforts of early-twentieth-century Britons to throw off the shackles of the past, the nineteenth century continued to cast a long shadow.⁷

Others have seen the attempted rejection of the Victorian and tradition as less comprehensive, and its lingering ‘shadow’ as less involuntary and unwelcome. Rieger and Daunton have emphasised ‘efforts to preserve or recapture aspects of the past in order to anchor the present in history’ before the Second World War – with examples including celebrations of the rural idyll and the folk-song revival – as well as conceptualisations of Britain as having ‘traditions of modernity’. This idea allowed

embroidery transfers featuring zombies, tattoos and Mexican wrestlers. Accessed 4 August 2012, www.sublimestitching.com See also Greg Der Ananian, *Bazaar Bizarre: Not Your Granny's Crafts* (New York, 2005) and publisher Wiley’s ‘Not Your Mama’s Craft Book’ range.

⁴ The bulk of this chapter focuses on the interwar and post-war years. During the war needlework magazines reduced in size dramatically, cutting and condensing their content. It is therefore problematic to analyse wartime and austerity-era issues alongside their peacetime equivalents.

⁵ Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters, ‘Introduction’, in Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (eds), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain: 1945-1964* (1999), p. 9.

⁶ Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger, ‘Introduction’, in Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger (eds), *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the late-Victorian era to World War II* (Oxford, 2001), p. 5.

⁷ Harry Cocks, ‘Modernity and Modernism’, in Julie-Marie Strange and Francesca Carnevali (eds), *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change* (Harlow, 2007), p. 26.

potentially destabilising changes in society and culture to be seen ‘as solidly grounded on historical foundations rather than adrift, without direction, in the present.’ However, such buffers against modernity were, Rieger and Daunton argue, lessened by the advent of the Second World War, and the profound political and societal changes both reflected in and created by post-war reconstruction and the creation of the welfare state.⁸ Conekin, Mort and Waters have said of the post-war years that ‘the modern in this period was a hybrid affair, assembled out of tales about the past as well as narratives of the future’, but also argued that: ‘After 1945 there were clear and identifiable languages of modernisation (accompanied by adjacent terms such as “the new” and “the future”) occurring across British society.’⁹

The significance of the folk song revival and other attempts to resurrect aspects of the past have been explored by Eric Hobsbawm through the concept of ‘invented tradition’:

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. [...] However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of ‘invented’ traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious.

Even originally genuine traditions can become ‘invented traditions’ once their preservation or renewal is championed, argued Hobsbawm, as ‘Where the old ways are alive, tradition need be neither revived nor invented.’¹⁰

Alison Light, looking at the interwar years, has argued for a specifically female understanding of modernity, looking not only at the public and the overtly political, but also at the personal, the private. This is a broad definition of the ‘modern’, taking into account social and stylistic manifestations, such as changes in hairstyles, and the possibility that ‘perhaps the disposable sanitary napkin was in its own way as powerful an event as increasing female education or shifts in the employment market’.¹¹ This echoes Martin Pumphrey’s earlier statement that ‘Any adequate reading of the modern period [...] must take account of the fact that the debates over women’s public freedom,

⁸ Daunton and Rieger, ‘Introduction’, pp. 5, 11, 14–15.

⁹ Conekin, Mort, and Waters, ‘Introduction’, pp. 3, 10.

¹⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1–2, 8.

¹¹ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991), p. 10.

over fashion and femininity, cosmetics and home cleaning were as essential to the fabrication of modernity as cubism, Dada or futurism, as symbolism, fragmented form or the stream-of-consciousness narrative.’¹² Writing of a similar phenomenon to Cocks, Rieger and Dauntun, Light has coined the term ‘conservative modernity’:

Janus-faced, it could simultaneously look backwards and forwards; it could accommodate the past in the forms of the present; it was a deferral of modernity and yet it also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which had gone before. It is the women of an expanding middle class between the wars who were best able to represent Englishness in both its most modern and reactionary forms.¹³

This was a mood that could act as a comforting buffer against the challenge of the new:

Far from being stuck in the mud of the past, conservatism seems to have improvised rather well in the modern period, making something homely and familiar from the brand new: think of the inventiveness of the spirit which could take that futurist symbol of speed and erotic dynamism – the motor car – and turn it into a Morris Minor!¹⁴

Penny Sparke has examined the relationships between masculine and feminine tastes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the ways in which these related to ideas of modernity and tradition. For Sparke, taste is a feminist issue, with masculine taste typically held up as ‘good’ design, and feminine styles denigrated as cluttered, uneducated, sentimental and frivolous. Yet women’s roles as keepers of hearth and home have given them a distinctive relationship with the modern:

Entering into and assimilating modernity was also, for women, a much more gradual experience for one of their duties in the era of modernisation was to act as guardians of the past, maintaining a sense of continuity by keeping one foot in the pre-industrial world. In this way they provided an anchor to ensure that modernity was encountered with a set of values that was both tried and tested.¹⁵

However, this role was under threat in the twentieth century from modern aesthetics allied with the scientific, the rational and the masculine, and the interwar ‘rational household movement’ which viewed the home primarily not as a site for cultural display, but as a workplace to be made streamlined and efficient.¹⁶ As Judy Giles has

¹² Martin Pumphrey, ‘The Flapper, the Housewife and the Making of Modernity’, *Cultural Studies*, 1:2 (1987), p. 181.

¹³ Light, *Forever*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁴ Light, *Forever*, p. 214.

¹⁵ Penny Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (1995), p. 4.

¹⁶ Sparke, *Pink*, pp. 78–79, 85–87.

argued, scientific and professionalising ideas of housewifery – often linked to use of labour saving technology – were both empowering and challenging:

On the one hand they were encouraged to see themselves as agents of modernisation and scientific rationalism in their domestic roles, while on the other hand they remained caught up in conceptions of home that valued it precisely because it was constructed as the antithesis of modernity.¹⁷

Whilst the efficient and modern was embraced by some women, others resisted to varying degrees. Sparke argues that women ‘straddled the spectrum of modern to traditional’ in furnishing their homes, incorporating the modern and the traditional in differing proportions according to taste, age, location, their need for the practicality of modern styles, and the room – dining rooms and living rooms were rarely as modern or ‘efficient’ as kitchens or bathrooms.¹⁸ Those that filled their homes with reproductions of antique furniture were, according to Sparke, not burying their heads in the sand but ‘retaining continuity with their cultural roots’ both aesthetically and by continuing to use their homes as spaces for comfort, display, and creativity.¹⁹

Many enthusiastically took up those twentieth-century styles which combined modern and historic, masculine and feminine, such as Art Nouveau and Art Deco.²⁰ However, Sparke argues that it was in the 1950s that women truly found a version of the modern with which they could identify. Variety in colour and pattern became incorporated into the rational and modern through scientific discourses around the influence of colour on psychology and mood. This created a market in which consumers could select from a plethora of colourful products for their own, often aesthetic, reasons.²¹ This contributed to the appeal of the ‘contemporary’ style of furnishing, which was ‘unmitigatingly [sic] “new”’, whilst embracing pattern, colour, comfort and

¹⁷ Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004), p. 22.

¹⁸ Sparke, *Pink*, pp. 153, 155, 158, 193. In her study of early residents of Harlow in the 1950s Judy Attfield offers a more mundane explanation for the amalgamation of the modern and the traditional in the post-war home. Shortages of furniture continued into the 1950s, and many of those moving to the new town of Harlow could not afford an entirely new set of modern furnishings. Out of necessity their homes were filled with items bought second hand and given by their families alongside new items bought on hire purchase. Judy Attfield, ‘Inside Pram Town: A Case Study of Harlow House Interiors, 1951-1961’, in Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (eds), *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design History* (1989), p. 223.

¹⁹ Sparke, *Pink*, pp. 158–159.

²⁰ Sparke, *Pink*, pp. 121–122, 125–127.

²¹ Sparke, *Pink*, pp. 181, 195–196.

display.²² This style also included women such as Lucienne Day, Jacqueline Groag and Marian Mahler amongst its most prominent textile designers.²³

The new consumer society helped to create the identity of the modern housewife. Deborah Ryan argues that the *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibition in the early twentieth century:

offered new modern identities to consumers through a vision of a new home, an imaginary purchase of a new kitchen or living-room suite, or perhaps the most up-to-date and efficient gadgets [...] Aspirations for, and consumption of, objects that represented modernity created a modern identity for the housewife.²⁴

Modernity-through-consumption was linked to ‘the modernity of the suburbs’, often derided as either not modern or expressing the wrong kind of modernity by architects, designers and cultural critics. It was nonetheless a way in which people (especially women) within their newly-built Tudorbethan semi-detached homes could feel part of the modern world through the consumption of mass culture.²⁵ This was a modernity which ‘did not radically alter the exterior of the home but instead entered through the back door’, modernising the home from within with labour saving devices, modern kitchens, hot water and indoor bathrooms, whilst often leaving the home overtly and stylistically unchanged.²⁶

Issues of modernity and tradition in women’s craft have previously been examined in Fiona Hackney’s work on British women’s magazines between the wars, and Beverly Gordon’s on colonial revival needlework in the United States from 1860 until the Second World War. Hackney has demonstrated that ‘home craft’, a broad category including needlework, home decoration and Do It Yourself, was made to fit with magazines’ broader versions of feminised modernity. This was characterised by an

²² Sparke, *Pink*, pp. 189–191. Similarly Angela Partington argues that although 1950s functionalism stressed practicality in use and manufacture over decoration and was frequently hostile to the aesthetic and emotional functions domestic items served for women, the products created through this thinking were adopted by women’s magazines and their readers as new fashions, unintentionally undermining the principles around which they were designed. Angela Partington, ‘The Designer Housewife in the 1950s’, in Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (eds), *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design History* (1989), pp. 208–212.

²³ Lesley Jackson, *Twentieth Century Pattern Design* (New York, 2007), pp. 93–101; Fashion and Textile Museum, ‘Designing Women: Post-war British Textiles’, accessed 9 November 2012, <http://www.ftmlondon.org/exhibitions/detail/?ID=75>.

²⁴ Deborah S. Ryan, ‘“All the World and Her Husband”: The Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition, 1908–1939’, in Maggie Andrews and Mary M Talbot (eds), *All the World and Her Husband: Women in the Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture* (2000), p. 15.

²⁵ Ryan, ‘All’, pp. 18–19. As Giles has argued, female domesticity ‘is as much a manifestation of modernity as the consciousness that sees domesticity as suffocating, and for millions of women in the West it offered opportunities for a “better” life.’ Giles, *Parlour*, p. 3.

²⁶ Ryan, ‘All’, p. 20.

embrace of a modified modern aesthetic and the construction of the housewife as a professional ensuring the efficient and healthy running of the home.²⁷ Gordon, in contrast, highlights the extent to which colonial revival needlework emphasised ideas of tradition. Whilst American revivalism engaged with the modern through mass media, marketing, and the modification of historical styles of embroidery and quilting to suit more modern aesthetics, Gordon presents this as fundamentally an act of idealisation of and identification with earlier American women, with some stitching whilst in period costume or as part of historical re-enactments.²⁸ Whilst superficially treading similar ground to Gordon and Hackney, this chapter emphasises the importance of *self-conscious* manifestations of ‘the traditional’ and ‘the modern’, that is the extent to which needlewomen and needlework media presented themselves, individual projects and their customers as *explicitly* traditional or modern.

This chapter will begin with an examination of aesthetic manifestations of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ in needlework magazines and culture, demonstrating that whilst traditional subjects and styles were popular, they were adapted to the modern with no interest in authenticity. Modern projects were also common, and this chapter will defend the forms of modernity which they expressed, and assert them as vital survival strategies for the needlework industry and for keen stitchers. Whereas home décor often combined the traditional and the modern, it will be shown that in clothing needlework magazines wholeheartedly embraced the new through fashion. The focus then shifts from style to substance, arguing that by looking beyond the surface, even the seemingly unchanging rural idyll – a popular subject for embroidery – is revealed as modern. Although magazines plundered the past for images and styles, they showed surprisingly little interest in history, especially the history of needlewomen, revealing the superficiality of their interest in ‘tradition’. Where historic needlework and needlewomen did appear, discontinuity was emphasised, distancing the reader from her foremothers rather than encouraging identification, and emphasising her own modernity. The changes that brought about this discontinuity were often lamented between the wars, but this sense of regret is absent in magazines from the 1950s and 1960s, which (along with the rest of the country) more wholeheartedly embraced the new. Whilst interwar advertisers used images of older and historic needlewomen, these were presented in modern ways, and did not encourage identification. After the war, these

²⁷ Fiona Hackney, ‘“Use Your Hands for Happiness”: Home Craft and Make-do-and-Mend in British Women’s Magazines in the 1920s and 1930s’, *Journal of Design History*, 19:1 (2006), pp. 23–38.

²⁸ Beverly Gordon, ‘Spinning Wheels, Samplers, and the Modern Priscilla: The Images and Paradoxes of Colonial Revival Needlework’, *Winterthur Portfolio*, 33:2/3 (1998), pp. 163–194.

images largely disappear, and begin to be used to deride the old-fashioned. Finally, it will be shown that needlework embraced the modern in the form of television and radio, and also gadgets, which were plentiful, though not always successful. Focusing on the limited success of the knitting machine, it is argued that this failed on its own merit, not as a symbol of the modern.

The tensions between tradition and modernity were played out in needlework patterns. Rozsika Parker has argued that, although many needlewomen did not create their own needlework patterns, their selection from the options available to them were culturally meaningful: ‘needlewomen chose particular patterns, selecting those images which had meaning for them. The enormous popularity of certain images at different moments indicates that they had specific importance and powerful resonance for the women who chose to stitch them.’²⁹

Throughout this period, bygone eras were frequently used as inspiration for embroidery designs. Jacobean embroidery was a perennial favourite, and fig. 4.2 shows an example photographed amongst antique or reproduction furniture.³⁰ In 1960 *Stitchcraft* claimed that their period-inspired cushion and footstool, shown in fig. 4.3, were timeless classics: ‘Although traditional in origin these lovely designs never lose their appeal or go out of date. They can be copied again and again in various ways to fit in with changes that come and go in home furnishing.’³¹ In the 1920s and 1930s period embroideries were recommended to accompany traditional interiors. *The Needlewoman* claimed that:

Anyone who possesses antique furniture cannot do better than make a cross-stitch runner to go with it. There is an old-world sampler suggestion about cross-stitch designs which makes them especially sought after just now, when every home boasts at least a few pieces of fine old furniture.³²

In the following issue it was lamented that ‘Only too often it is difficult to find a runner which is really suitable in treatment. Those displayed in shops very frequently have a bright, almost garish effect, which is quite out of harmony with the dignified simplicity

²⁹ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1996), p. 12.

³⁰ e.g. *Needlecraft Practical Journal (NPJ)*, No. 220 (1930), supplement; *Stitchcraft*, March 1935, p. 16; *Stitchcraft*, November 1935, p. 16; *Needlewoman*, April 1939, free transfer; *Needlework Illustrated (NI)*, No. 169 (1942), p. 15; *Stitchcraft*, January 1942, p. 15; *Needlewoman and Needlecraft (N&N)*, No. 16 (1943), p. 12; *Stitchcraft*, January 1947, p. 18; *N&N*, No. 30 (1947), p. 15; *Stitchcraft*, March 1955, p. 3; *Stitchcraft*, January 1961, p. 14; *N&N*, No. 101 (1965), p. 3.

³¹ *Stitchcraft*, February 1960, p. 35.

³² *Needlewoman*, January 1930, p. 22.

of old furniture.’³³ In both these cases specific projects are suggested to compliment traditional interiors. However, there is no suggestion that period-style homes were necessary to accompany and accommodate the resident needlewoman’s hobby. Whilst historical styles of needlework were natural bedfellows to antique and reproduction furniture, needlework itself was not presented as inherently traditional or as necessitating such settings.



Fig. 4.2 (above): Jacobean footstool,
Stitchcraft, January 1960, p. 40.

Fig. 4.3 (right): ‘period’ cushion and
footstool, *Stitchcraft*, February 1960, p.
35.



³³ *Needlewoman*, February 1930, p. 23.

Historical imagery was also a common subject for embroidery, most notably the figure of the ubiquitous ‘crinoline lady’ (fig. 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6).³⁴ In 1930 embroiderers might stitch a faux-sampler depicting a Victorian woman and her daughters approaching their picturesque cottage, and in 1947 readers of *Needlework Illustrated* were invited to embroider illustrations showing the changes in Victorian fashions, following the ‘whims of madam’s personal conceits – fluttering handkerchief, flirtatious parasol and, later, the even more seductive muff.’³⁵

Traditions and histories of other countries were also used for inspiration. In 1947 *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* included an embroidered ‘Dutch Interior’, showing women in traditional dress (fig. 4.7).³⁶ Chinese, Japanese, or ‘Oriental’ inspired embroideries, generically described ‘Peasant’ embroideries (fig. 4.8) and ‘Czechoslovakian’ designs were recurring themes.³⁷

The ‘traditional’ was not put on a pedestal, but was frequently reshaped and adapted to the modern, allowing women to combine these two elements in individual objects. The past was plundered for inspiration, with no qualms about inauthenticity. Projects featuring ‘traditional’-looking cross-stitch were often worked from transfers instead of by the original counted-thread method.³⁸ In the midst of the Victoriana of *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*’s Diamond Jubilee issue, they claimed ‘The thick, quick threads “Fresca” and “Perlita” in which our Jacobean Cushion is embroidered, are essentially of the 1960’s.’³⁹ Aesthetics were also updated, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1950 *Stitchcraft* presented readers with a ‘Modern Sampler’ which had ‘a sophisticated air whilst retaining the charm of an early Victorian sampler’. As well as mixing Victorian and modern aesthetics, this design emphasised the modernising and technologically advancing elements of the past, depicting top-hatted men driving

³⁴ Pat Kirkham has shown that in the interwar years, conflicts within the Women’s Institute over taste often centred on the crinoline lady. Whilst the educated and middle-class women who organised handicrafts exhibitions hoped to promote ideas of ‘good’ taste, the crinoline lady remained popular amongst rank and file members. Pat Kirkham, ‘Women and the Inter-War Handicrafts Revival’, in Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (eds), *A View From the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design* (1989), pp. 178–179.

³⁵ *Fancy Needlework Illustrated (FNI)*, No. 95 Vol. 8 (1930), p. 4; *NI*, No. 187 (1947), p. 16. Post-war examples include *Knit & Sew (K&S)*, January 1960, p. 34; *Stitchcraft*, March 1965, pp. 10–11.

³⁶ See also *Stitchcraft*, March 1947, p. 3.

³⁷ e.g. *FNI*, No. 76 Vol. 1 (1925), p. 6; *Needlewoman*, March 1935, p. 18; *Stitchcraft*, July–August 1947, p. 3; *Stitchcraft*, June 1965, p. 23; *Stitchcraft*, February 1960, p. 14; *Stitchcraft*, September 1965, p. 38.

³⁸ e.g. *FNI*, No. 95 Vol. 8 (1930), free transfer; *Needlewoman*, April 1935, free transfer; *N&N*, No. 29 (1947), p. 8; *N&N*, No. 30 (1947), p. 12; *N&N*, No. 35 (1948), p. 4; *NI*, No. 200 (1950), p. 21; *N&N*, No. 42 (1950), pp. 4–5; *N&N*, No. 44 (1950), pp. 25, 26; *N&N*, No. 61 (1955), p. 21; *Stitchcraft*, March 1955, p. 18; *Stitchcraft*, November 1955, pp. 16–17; *Stitchcraft*, December 1955, pp. 2–3, 16; *Stitchcraft*, April 1960, p. 12.

³⁹ *N&N*, No. 84 (1960), p. 3.

‘Puffing Billy’ steam engines.⁴⁰ Similarly, a later vibrant and modern panel and cushion set used ‘amusing Victorian motifs’ of an early motor car, a steam train and a penny farthing (fig. 4.10). In 1960, *Stitchcraft* readers were encouraged to design their own samplers. Whilst it was acceptable ‘to copy a traditional sampler for historical interest or as a sampler of stitches’, ‘for the real fun of it and to make a family heirloom, you will get tremendous satisfaction from planning and designing your own piece.’ To this end, readers were given guidance on depicting their own homes in cross stitch, and were provided with charts for traditional sampler elements and modern additions, including a car and an aeroplane (fig. 4.9).⁴¹ Indeed, in the magazine issues studied for this thesis there has been no example of a project recreating an individual historic sampler, suggesting a disinterest in historical authenticity. These modernised traditional projects could be seen as later manifestations of Light’s conservative modernity, incorporating the new into the old.⁴² Yet they are also characterised by humour, a gleeful, shameless lack of reverence for the past, reducing history to a resource to be pillaged, perhaps demonstrating affection, but certainly not respect.

Alongside traditionally inspired embroideries and tapestries, magazines contained a wealth of modern projects, and those suited to modern interiors. In 1935 *Stitchcraft* asserted the virtues of modern needlework:

Too large a proportion of the really worth-while needle-art practiced to-day draws inspiration from the beautiful work of past generations; it cannot be said to be creative, essentially a product of the age in which we live. Here, for a change, is a wonderful piece of embroidery which is wholly contemporary in idea and treatment.⁴³

A cushion featured in a 1920 issue of *Needlework For All* gave ‘an effect that is as new as it is unexpected’, featuring a trompe l’oeil tear in the fabric, with a bouquet of flowers thrust violently through it. The magazine’s claim that this was a ‘somewhat daring use of stencil work’ was an understatement, and the finished effect was striking.⁴⁴ In preparation for Christmas 1955, *Stitchcraft* suggested women make appliquéd ‘contemporary pictures’ as ‘original gifts for home-making friends with an eye for the

⁴⁰ *Stitchcraft*, April 1950, pp. 4, 7.

⁴¹ *Stitchcraft*, August 1960, pp. 26-27.

⁴² Light, *Forever*.

⁴³ *Stitchcraft*, January 1935, p. 21. This should not, however, be mistaken for a statement of editorial stance, as only two issues later the same magazine was noting that “‘Period’ embroidery is very much the fashion just now”, and presenting a Jacobean inspired chair seat to embroider. *Stitchcraft*, March 1935, p. 16.

⁴⁴ *NFA*, No. 120 (1920), p. 193.

modern' (fig. 4.11).⁴⁵ *Needlework Illustrated* presented 'Contemporary Table Linens': 'Embroidery designers of the new school are doing a grand job producing work suited to modern décor. Here we show three examples of their skill – presenting modern-minded linens that will make an immediate appeal to the young home-maker.'⁴⁶ In 1960, a quilted cushion and an embroidered cushion, both with a leaf design (fig. 4.13 and 4.14), gave a 'Modern effect using bold outline motifs.'⁴⁷



Fig. 4.4 (above left): 1930s beadwork cushion (detail) worked by mill worker Evelyn Lyons for her sister Miriam Trillo. Whitworth T.126.1991.

Fig. 4.5 (above right): crinoline lady traycloth (detail), author's collection.

Fig. 4.6 (left): crinoline lady design, *The Needlewoman*, February 1934, p. 1.

⁴⁵ *Stitchcraft*, November 1955, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁶ *NI*, No. 229 (1955), p. 10.

⁴⁷ *Stitchcraft*, January 1960, p. 18.

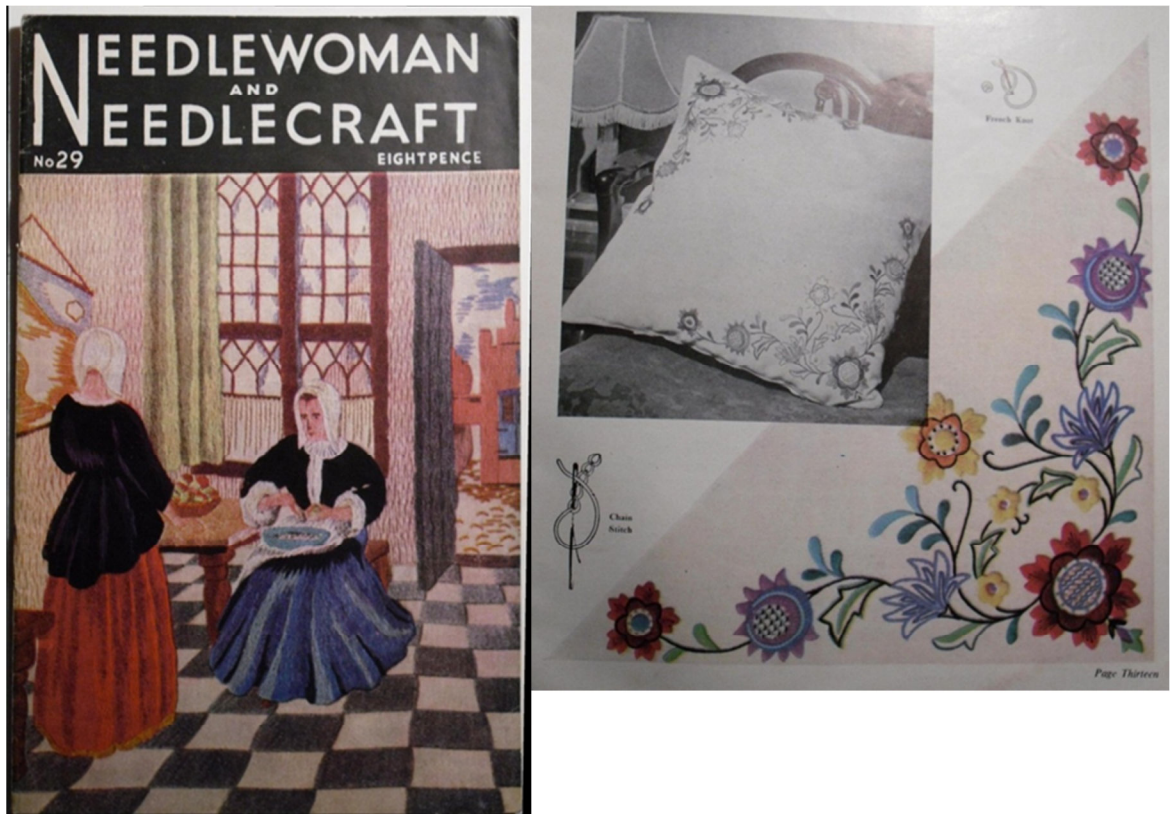


Fig. 4.7 (above left): 'Dutch Interior', *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, No. 29 (1947), p. 1.

Fig. 4.8 (above right): 'Peasant' cushion, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, No. 43 (1950), p. 13.

Fig. 4.9 (below left): sampler, *Stitchcraft*, August 1960, p. 26.

Fig. 4.10 (below right): 'Dashing' *Stitchcraft*, January 1960, p. 2.



Modern needlework was not necessarily challenging, and in some cases reveals examples of women engaging with the modern on their own terms. In 1935 *Stitchcraft* showed sensitivity to women keen to be up-to-date whilst shunning the tyranny of tubular chrome, reassuring readers that their rug design was:

modern in feeling, but not the kind of modern that calls exclusively for chromium-tubing surroundings and the rug will, in fact, fit in nicely with any decorative scheme that is not too rigidly 'period,' and is particularly well suited to the typical present-day room, with plain carpet and walls and more or less miscellaneous furniture.'⁴⁸

In 1920 *Needlework For All* had encouraged readers to embellish, even feminise, the modern: 'Some of the cretonnes and printed cottons among the new season's productions, with their queer, futurist designs and daring colourings, lend themselves particularly well to touching up with embroidery for decorative purposes.'⁴⁹ Post-war needlework magazines reassured readers that the forms of modern needlework they presented could also be 'comfortable' or homely. In 1960 *Stitchcraft* showcased a red, cream, black and grey rug and cushion set in 'modern Swedish design' which would fit 'perfectly into a simple modern setting, contemporary but comfortable, and one to appeal to all your friends' (fig. 4.12).⁵⁰ In 1953 *Stitchcraft* presented a 'Pair of modern cushions [. . .] for a contemporary sitting-room.' The cushions resembled modern art canvasses, complete with signature. The magazine acknowledged that such designs were out of character: 'I hope you will enjoy this breakaway from the usual run of designs, and I am sure readers with rather modern homes will welcome them with open arms.' Yet even these were framed as accessible and adaptable: 'these original cushions are really meant for those of you who have bought some of to-day's attractive contemporary furniture, but even so they would add an original and lively touch to any living room that is not strictly period.'⁵¹ As presented in needlework magazines, the modern could be unthreatening and adaptable.

Women could also adapt ideas from magazines and other sources to fit their own attitudes towards the modern and the traditional, pulling back or pushing forward. In 1987 Pen Dalton complained that within popular and commercialised textile crafts 'The craft is taken from its functional and formal roots, simplified and de-skilled, then sold back as a package of tuition, patterns, materials, magazines and books', leaving no space for women's individual creativity and self-expression.⁵² Yet some women did indeed find ways of expressing their views on the modern within needlework. Whilst some projects were offered as complete kits, others were sold as transfers or charts, and

⁴⁸ *Stitchcraft*, September 1935, p. 12.

⁴⁹ *NFI*, No. 123 (1920), p. 62.

⁵⁰ *Stitchcraft*, February 1960, p. 10.

⁵¹ *Stitchcraft*, February 1953, pp. 2-3.

⁵² Pen Dalton, 'Housewives, Leisure Crafts and Ideology: De-skilling in Consumer Craft', in Gillian Elinor, Su Richardson, Sue Scott, Angharad Thomas, and Kate Walker (eds), *Women and Craft* (1987), pp. 31-33.

women could choose whether or not to use the suggested thread colours. Modern colour schemes could be used for supposedly ‘traditional’ projects, and modern ones could be toned down.⁵³ In 1960 *Stitchcraft* invited readers to experiment with traditional and modern colour schemes:

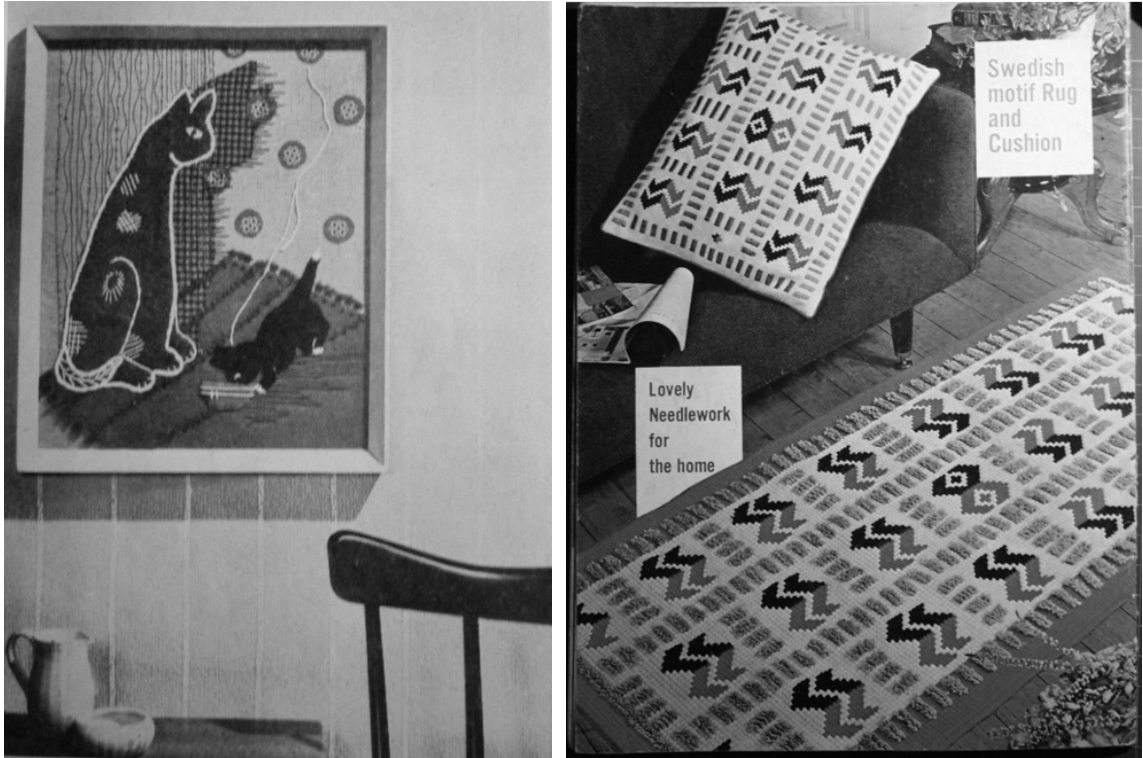
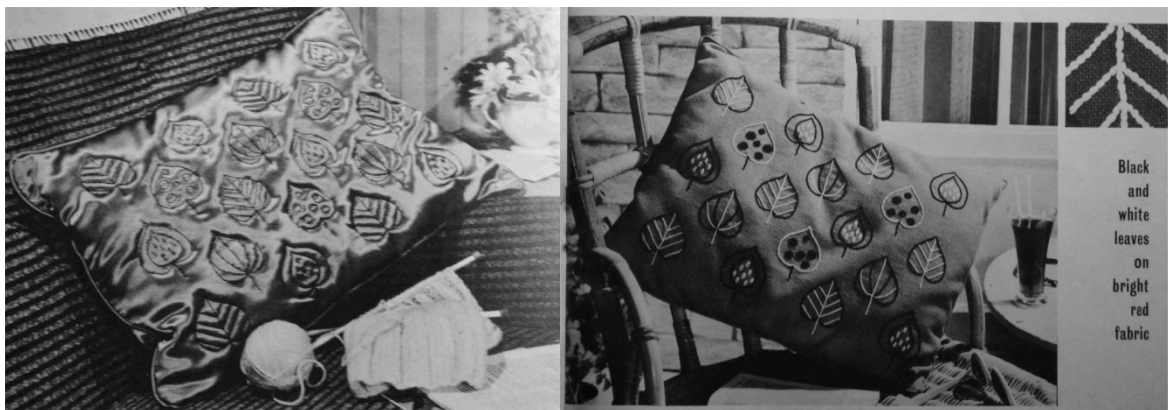


Fig. 4.11 (above left): cat panel, *Stitchcraft*, November 1955, p. 18.

Fig. 4.12 (above right): Swedish rug and cushion, *Stitchcraft*, February 1960, p. 36

Fig. 4.13 (below left): quilted cushion, *Stitchcraft*, January 1960, p. 18.

Fig. 4.14 (below right): embroidered cushion, *Stitchcraft*, January 1960, p. 19.



The design we have chosen is simple but very striking and the rather soft colours of darkish blues and magenta tones with touches of brighter shades on a dull green linen, will fit in with most furnishing schemes. For a completely different

⁵³ The format of the magazines may have unwittingly encouraged this. Up to at least 1965 the magazines rarely had more than a handful of colour pages. The majority of projects were illustrated using black and white photographs, perhaps enabling readers to imagine the finished item in their own choices of colours.

and more modern effect, use dark linen and 2 shades of wool for the design – off white and a bright contrasting colour.⁵⁴

Needlewomen could vary other details. In 1960, ‘Mrs Ross of Berkhamsted’ wrote into *Stitchcraft* magazine to show them her adaptation of one of their needlepoint tapestries. The original design had been titled ‘Finchingfield’, and was a tranquil view of this picturesque Essex village. Mrs Ross’s interpretation, however, had been ‘cleverly adapted [. . .] to bring in her husband’s interest in aeroplanes’, introducing a ‘Comet’ Jet plane into the sky, looming large and low, shattering the peace of the traditional rural scene (fig. 4.1).⁵⁵

The versions of the ‘modern’ showcased in needlework magazines and embraced by women did not necessarily correspond to those envisioned by the design elite, but were nonetheless valid interpretations, and enabled women to create and reinforce identities as modern needlewomen. In 1960 *Stitchcraft* claimed their red, cream, black and grey rug and cushion set was a ‘modern Swedish design, a country which is right in the front on contemporary furnishing trends’ (fig. 4.12).⁵⁶ Although this was presented to readers as cutting edge, as early as 1954 Muriel Dale complained in an article in *Embroidery*, the magazine of the Embroiderer’s Guild, that Swedish design and red, black and white colour schemes were overused.⁵⁷ It should not, however, be assumed that ordinary needlewomen either knew or cared about such pronouncements, and the continued success of needlework magazines suggests that the versions of modernity they offered had a broad appeal. Narrators generally suggested that their rejection or alteration of patterns available to them was not due to failures on the part of the designer, producing unattractive or out-of-date patterns, but a matter of personal preference and choice. When discussing the success or failure of needlework magazines to ‘do’ modern design correctly, questions are raised as to who is the valid or relevant arbiter. The modern-ness of projects as viewed by outside observers is largely irrelevant to a needlewoman-centred history of needlework. Most readers of *Stitchcraft*, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, and *Needlework Illustrated* may have had little contact with, and perhaps no interest in, the opinions of the design elite, or critics such as Dale. Sparke and Judy Attfield have emphasised women’s agency in this period in choosing those elements of modern design which appealed to them, and discarding the rest in spite of the disapproval of those dictating ‘good’ design. Building upon this, the modern in

⁵⁴ *Stitchcraft*, January 1960, p. 16.

⁵⁵ *Stitchcraft*, June 1960, p. 27.

⁵⁶ *Stitchcraft*, February 1960, p. 10.

⁵⁷ Constance Howard, *Twentieth-Century Embroidery in Great Britain, 1940-1963* (1983), p. 51.

needlework magazines should be judged in the context of their own milieu, as a deliberately created interpretation of the modern, and not as a failed or successful emulation of a more authoritative or authentic version.⁵⁸ Post-war projects rarely reflected the daring modernity of textile designs by Lucienne Day, Jacqueline Groag and Marian Mahler, yet they could still be presented and understood as ‘new’ and modern.⁵⁹ The design elite’s possible condemnation of the versions of modern design contained within these magazines does not render them not-modern. What is more important is how projects were presented to and viewed by their makers and magazine readers, and how this was used to create a version of the modern in which women could participate. Further, it would be simplistic to see needlewomen as uniform in the versions of modernity they embraced. An anecdote from the late and renowned embroiderer Constance Howard illustrates well the disconnection between the modern embroidery championed in art schools and the tastes of ordinary needlewomen. Howard’s eighteen-foot stumpwork mural, *The Country Wife*, depicted the crafts and activities of the Women’s Institute. It was exhibited in the Festival of Britain in 1951, and afterwards was given to the Women’s Institute and held at their headquarters, Denman College:

Once or twice I had occasion to repair stockings that had laddered and to renew stitching that had loosened on the panel. While doing this at Denman, various people used to come into the room, and not knowing me, made remarks such as ‘Do you call that embroidery? I think it is terrible’ and ‘I don’t know what embroidery is coming to’.⁶⁰

Whereas Howard may have been (understandably) keen to dismiss these insults as demonstrating ignorance of modern design, they should be seen instead as indicators that more typical, domestic, leisure-time needleworkers were very particular as to which versions of the modern they were willing to embrace.

Lay needlewomen also varied in their attitudes towards modern design, as shown in the reactions of oral history narrators. Muriel, who lives in a stylish home filled with Ercol furniture with her retired architect husband, reacted approvingly to the Swedish rug and cushion in fig. 4.12: ‘yes, it doesn’t date, does it really. That’s just as modern as today really [...] it’s quite acceptable isn’t it. I’m not very much of a flowery person’. Of the cottage in fig. 4.21 she said ‘Oh, I’d hate that... that’s horrible [laughs and

⁵⁸ Sparke, *Pink*, pp. 179, 182, 193, 195, 204–221; Attfield, ‘Pram Town’.

⁵⁹ Jackson, *Pattern*, pp. 93–101; Fashion and Textile Museum, ‘Designing Women: Post-war British Textiles’, accessed 9 November 2012, <http://www.ftmlondon.org/exhibitions/detail/?ID=75>.

⁶⁰ Howard, *1940-1963*, p. 49.

cringes]’. However, when saying ‘some things never date, do they?’ she also cited William Morris as an example. She has also been able to fit her hobby of lacemaking into her modern home, with mats under the ceramics she and her husband have made. Margaret, conversely, had a preference for traditional needlework (fig. 4.22). Most of her embroidery was done for her ‘bottom drawer’, and as the furniture in her marital home was rather more modern, some parts of her trousseau remained largely unused.



Fig. 4.15: embroidered home, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, No. 81 (1960), p. 1.

The modified models of modern design embraced by post-war needlework magazines can be seen as survival strategies for the needlework industry and needlewomen. Fig. 4.15 shows an ideal *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* interior from 1960, blending contemporary furniture with a variety of embroidery, including modern interpretations of the Jacobean style. Sparke has suggested that ‘contemporary’ and Scandinavian styles were embraced by women because they left opportunities for display of colour, pattern, individuality, and ‘knick-knacks’ with personal significance.⁶¹ However, these styles had a particular appeal for needlewomen and the needlework industry. Whereas variation in pattern was desirable for a feminine aesthetic, for needlewomen it was essential. Those forms of stitching for the home most prominent in needlework magazines – embroidery, cutwork and crochet lace edgings – fundamentally

⁶¹ Sparke, *Pink*, pp. 189–193.

relied on the elaboration and embellishment of surfaces that many high-modernists would rather had remained uncluttered and clear. Without licence for pattern, variation, elaboration and embellishment, embroidery for the home would have been impossible. Thus the embrace of such styles (along with a continued interest in traditional and rural designs) and a rejection of the high-modern can be seen as a survival opportunity, allowing needlewomen to continue their craft, and enabling the substantial industry of magazines, designers, shops, thread and fabric manufacturers to continue.

Needlework magazines were most emphatic about their embrace of the new in the arena of clothing, catering to women's desires to appear fashionably up-to-date.⁶² Being modern is more than a matter of acknowledging that which differentiates our times from previous decades or centuries. Often the focus is instead on more recent variations.⁶³ In the 1920s needlework magazines such as *Needlework For All* claimed to be 'nothing if not up-to-date', with advertisers offering dressmaking designs 'endorsed by the fashion editors of Vogue - the fashion authorities of the World', and 'Furida' wool in 'all the newest shades from Paris'⁶⁴ By the 1930s *The Needlewoman* had adopted the tagline 'a magazine of exclusive fashions in dress and in the home', reflecting a more detailed focus. Its regular feature 'Through the Eye of a Needlewoman', detailed trends in fashion, interior decoration, hair, and make-up, alongside light gossip. Other articles specifically addressed needlework in fashionable clothes.⁶⁵ In 1934 *The Needlewoman* suggested embroidery on dresses, as 'all the most famous Paris dress designers are using it in some form or other' (fig. 4.16).⁶⁶ By 1935 it was routinely referring to the

⁶² As with interior décor, the versions of fashionable modernity displayed in knitwear and home-made clothes may not have corresponded with cutting-edge style approved of by the fashion elite. Margarethe Szeless has shown that the dressmaking magazine *Burda* sought to appeal to ordinary Austrian women by providing not 'the fashion of tomorrow' but 'the fashion of today', softening the new and adapting it to women's practical needs, allowing them to feel up-to-date but not outlandish. Margarethe Szeless, 'Burda Fashions - A Wish That Doesn't Have To Be Wishful Thinking: Home-Dressmaking in Austria 1950-1970', *Cultural Studies*, 16:6 (2002), p. 850. As with décor, deviations from the fashions laid out by top designers should not be seen as a failing on the part of magazines or needlewomen, but rather as conscious adaptation and variation.

⁶³ Needlework also had its own trends and fads. Whilst knitting and embroideries using transfers were consistently popular, interest in other crafts came and went. In 1950 *Needlework Illustrated* claimed that tatting was 'now enjoying a revival', and J. & P. Coats urged readers 'Why not be original and learn to "tat" - it's a fascinating form of needlework now much in vogue.' *NI* No. 202 (1950), p. 18; *Stitchcraft*, April 1950, p. 20. Also *NI*, No. 229 (1955), p. 25; *NI*, No. 230 (1955), p. 12. *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* encouraged readers to knit 'lace luncheon mats' and 'be up-to-date with the current fashion "knitting with crochet cotton"'. *N&N*, No. 43 (1950), p. 19. In 1965 *Stitchcraft* noted that 'With the current crochet craze, lots of readers who do not know anything about it, must be wild at missing out on this snappy fashion angle.' *Stitchcraft*, May 1965, p. 26.

⁶⁴ *NFA*, No. 182 (1925), p. 29; *Needlewoman*, January 1925, p. 13; *Needlewoman*, October 1925, p. 2; *NPJ*, No. 194 (1925) p. 15.

⁶⁵ e.g. *Needlewoman*, January 1930, pp. 5-6, 14-15; *Needlewoman*, February 1930, pp. 5-6, 14-15; *Needlewoman*, March 1930, pp. 5-6, 14-15.

⁶⁶ *Needlewoman*, February 1934, p. 6.

knitted and embroidered content of collections by designers such as Creed and Chanel, and even featured a knitting pattern by Elsa Schiaparelli.⁶⁷ *Stitchcraft* magazine had a Paris correspondent who reported on the possibilities for needlewomen suggested by the collections of designers such as Lanvin, Lucien Lelong, and Schiaparelli, with whom the author claimed to have spoken.⁶⁸

Early in the war magazines and their advertisers were still heavily invested in the notion of fashion. In 1940 an advertisement for Marjory Tillotson's *The Complete Knitting Book* assumed the march of fashion would go on, boasting that it would enable 'even the inexperienced knitter to evolve entirely new and attractive garments to her own measurements and in her own choice of colour, thus keeping ahead of the prevailing fashion.'⁶⁹ Also in 1940, a knitted bolero had 'all the fashion points – short, in-at-the-waist line, near-to-the-elbow sleeves, becoming turn-down collar and pockets.'⁷⁰ However, the pre-war reports on the latest collections of famous designers had disappeared.



Fig. 4.16: fashionable dress embroidery, *Needlewoman*, February 1934, p. 6

⁶⁷ e.g. *Needlewoman*, January 1935, p. 10; *Needlewoman*, February 1935, p. 10; *Needlewoman*, August 1935, p. 9; *Needlewoman*, December 1935, p. 5.

⁶⁸ *Stitchcraft*, March 1935, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁹ *Stitchcraft*, November 1940, p. 5.

⁷⁰ Original emphasis. *NI*, No. 158 (1940), p. 22.

Although in 1943 *Needlework Illustrated* promised ‘lots of clever notions to help you contrive smart Gay Fashions for the sunny days, without buying one thing more than is strictly necessary’, overt references to fashion as a process of change was notably absent from needlework magazines in the later years of the war.⁷¹ However, magazines continued to reflect, encourage and enable women’s desires for new and varied clothing.⁷² A *Needlework Illustrated* jumper pattern incorporated horizontal bands of ribbon and could be ‘brought into line with any colour scheme at a moment’s notice, merely by threading in ribbons of the colour required.’⁷³ Sirdar suggested women knit gilets which would ‘enable you to “ring the changes” in your ensemble’ and solve your ‘Coupon Crisis’ at only one coupon each, stressing the need for variety and decoration in women’s clothes rather than mere utility.⁷⁴ As shown in chapter two, knitting, and stitching, especially with saved oddments, could be used to brighten outfits with accessories such as collars or brooches, allowing women to express and decorate themselves despite rationing and shortages.⁷⁵ Women were offered variety, things that would be, or appear to be, new to them, and ways of adapting and augmenting their wardrobes to give the illusion of a far broader sartorial repertoire than was possible under rationing. Fashion as self-conscious up-to-dateness, with its attendant implication of inbuilt obsolescence on the other hand, was largely abandoned in the face of shortages, rationing and patriotic economising.

After the war, fashion returned to the pages of needlework magazines, albeit slowly and never again reaching the level of engagement with high fashion seen in the 1930s. In 1947 there were no overt references to fashion in either *Stitchcraft* or *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, but *Needlework Illustrated* was already embracing ‘the simple elegance of styling, the more rounded shoulder, tiny waist and graceful length’ typical of post-war fashion.⁷⁶ In 1950 *Needlework Illustrated* was pleased to announce that, with the hardships of the 1940s receding, it was able to return to bi-monthly publication, having released issues only quarterly during the preceding years of war and austerity.

⁷¹ *NI*, No. 172 (1943), p. 3.

⁷² On the significance of beauty and appearance in wartime, see Pat Kirkham, ‘Beauty and Duty: Keeping up the (Home) Front’, in Pat Kirkham and David Thoms (eds), *War Culture: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two* (1995), pp. 13–28; Sonya O Rose, *Which People’s War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 130–135; Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism* (2010), pp. 78–79; Peter McNeil, ‘Put Your Best Face Forward’: The Impact of the Second World War on British Dress’, *Journal of Design History*, 6:4 (1993), pp. 288–289.

⁷³ *NI*, No. 172 (1943), p. 3. If it could be found, ribbon was unrationed.

⁷⁴ *Vogue’s 20th Knitting Book*, p. i.

⁷⁵ See above, pp. 105-106. See also pp. 128-129.

⁷⁶ *NI*, No. 187 (1947), pp. 4, 7-9.

This meant ‘that we can keep in even closer touch with our Reader friends, bring you a continuous flow of needlework ideas, and show you quickly the latest fashion trends.’⁷⁷ There is no suggestion here of needlework as an eternal and traditional constant – in contrast it is an ever-changing medium, on which a mere four updates a year was insufficient. *Needlework Illustrated* introduced readers to ‘the Sunny Sue, most exciting newcomer of 1950 fashions [...] just as easy to wear as the popular Sloppy Joe, it’s infinitely more feminine and up-to-date.’⁷⁸ Extolling the virtues of ‘Rimple’ textured yarn in 1960, *Stitchcraft* claimed: ‘Knitters with a fashion sense know that this is the right wool for their new knitteds to be in the swim for Spring!’⁷⁹ In 1960 *Stitchcraft* claimed that ‘the high fashion look can be achieved in handknitting by the careful choice of simple but elegant design and colours’ (fig. 4.17).⁸⁰ Allusions to fashion often took the form of references to a general sense of Parisian or Continental chic. In 1950 *Needlework Illustrated* promised readers that with the help of Weldon’s dressmaking patterns they could make ‘a cocktail dress that whispers “Paris” in every line’.⁸¹ A 1961 knitted hat pattern was titled ‘Paris Hat News’ (fig. 4.18). A *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* pattern for a short-sleeved lacy jumper claimed: ‘Inspired by the Italian fashion shows this crochet jumper is very AVANT GARDE.’⁸² In 1950 *Stitchcraft* even produced a special ‘Paris’ issue, with models shot in ‘Latest in fashions’ hand knits’ on location around the city.⁸³ Christian Dior’s Autumn/Winter 1954-5 collection prompted unusually specific references from *Stitchcraft* and *Needlework Illustrated*, which both mentioned the new fashionable ‘H-line’.⁸⁴ By consuming magazines that kept abreast of the latest trends, and making and wearing the clothes they contained, women were able to feel a part of the ever-changing world of fashion, modern and up-to-date.

⁷⁷ *NI*, No. 199 (1950), p. 7.

⁷⁸ *NI*, No. 200 (1950), p. 7.

⁷⁹ *Stitchcraft*, January 1960, p. 35.

⁸⁰ *Stitchcraft*, February 1960, p. 23.

⁸¹ *NI*, No. 199 (1950), p. 14. See also *Stitchcraft*, October 1960, p. 4; *K&S*, March 1960, p. 26.

⁸² *N&N*, No. 104 (1965), p. 10.

⁸³ *Stitchcraft*, November 1950; *Stitchcraft*, October 1950, p. 7. Whilst such chic locations were not the norm, they were also not limited to Paris, and *Stitchcraft* published pictures from a shoot in Derry and Tom’s roof garden. *Stitchcraft*, June 1960, p. 5.

⁸⁴ *Stitchcraft*, March 1955, pp. 16-17; *NI*, No. 231 (1955) p. 9; Claire Wilcox, ‘Introduction’, in Claire Wilcox (ed.), *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London, 1947-57* (2007), p. 21.

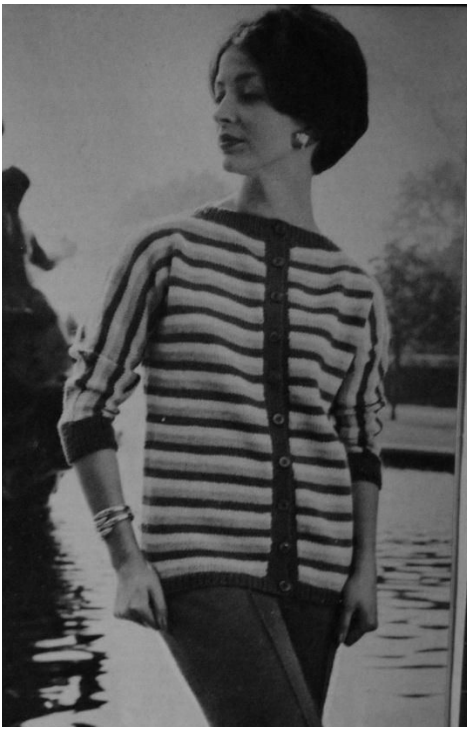


Fig. 4.17 (left): 'the high fashion look', *Stitchcraft*, February 1960, p. 23.

Fig. 4.18 (above): 'Paris hat news', *Stitchcraft*, January 1961, p. 7.

When examining the things women made, it is vital to look beyond style to meanings and the context of the moment of making. Pennina Barnett has viewed a wide range of embroidered subjects as inherently traditional:

Most of these kits preserve the natural, genteel and feminine associations of embroidery, joining one myth to another, with country cottages, pastoral idylls, and floral bouquets. They evoke the eighteenth-century feminine ideal of the aristocratic lady of leisure, and the domestic femininity of the Victorian bourgeois housewife, whose 'work' involved embroidering every available surface of her home.⁸⁵

These 'pastoral idylls' were common subjects for embroidery and needlepoint tapestry, depicting old cottages, picturesque villages, unchanged countryside, or traditional country pursuits such as the hunt (fig. 4.19 to 4.22).⁸⁶ The appeal of rural imagery appeared to go beyond aesthetic preferences in needlework. In 1947 *Needlework Illustrated* told readers:

Homes are in the news just now, with the first post-war home-planning exhibitions on hand, and with this in mind we have included plenty of house-embroideries. We know you will love our charming picture of a Cottage in a

⁸⁵ Pennina Barnett, 'Women and Textiles Today', *The Subversive Stitch Exhibition Catalogue* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 40–41.

⁸⁶ e.g. *Needlewoman*, March 1939, p. 14; *N&N*, No. 29 (1947), p. 15; *N&N*, No. 32 (1947), p. 1; *N&N*, No. 48 (1951), p. 1; *NI*, No. 229 (1955), pp. 14–15; *N&N*, No. 76 (1958), p. 12; *Stitchcraft*, March 1960, pp. 10–11.

Kentish orchard with apple trees a-bloom, and hope your own dream cottage, too, will soon materialise.⁸⁷

In 1960, *Knit & Sew* saw the cottage as an imaginary escape from discontentment with lived, urban domesticity:

We chose this enchanting tapestry because we think it is probably the perfect interpretation of everybody's ideal cottage – the place we all secretly dream of retiring to one day – surrounded by trees and country-garden flowers and with even the traditional trail of roses round the door. And though, for many of us anyhow, it will remain just a dream, we think you will enjoy working this delightful piece and having it in your home (either as a picture or a fire-screen) to cheer you up when it is raining outside and the chimney tops look even more depressing than usual!

The printed canvas needed for readers to re-create this stitched chocolate-box scene was available from Marshall and Snelgrove of Oxford Street for two guineas, postage included.⁸⁸ Barnett's view that such subjects are automatically anachronistic is simplistic, failing to take into account the changing cultural contexts in which the needlework was carried out. Rosemary McLeod has examined the appeal of country cottage embroidery for women in New Zealand from the 1930s to 1950s. The cottages which featured so prominently in their needlework were brick-built and thatch-roofed, utterly unlike the cottages built to withstand New Zealand's climate and earthquakes. These ideal cottages were decidedly English, symbols not only of idealised domesticity, but of a love for and connection with their distant mother-country, a home which their families had left only a few generations before.⁸⁹ For British needlewomen and designers the choice of the thatched cottage is also telling, marked as distinctly English/British.⁹⁰ This is particularly striking in embroideries of Anne Hathaway's cottage, referencing perhaps the most iconic of Englishmen, Shakespeare (fig. 4.19 and 4.20). The cottage symbolised the national, the pastoral and the historical, but it was also a home, and therefore domestic. Claire Langhamer has stressed that in the 1940s the domestic could be understood as modern, as plans for post-war reconstruction held the promise for 'dream homes of the future', a point the above *Needlework Illustrated* quote demonstrates.⁹¹ The yearning encapsulated in this Kentish cottage was not for the

⁸⁷ *NI*, No. 187 (1947), p. 3.

⁸⁸ *K&S*, August 1960, p. 24.

⁸⁹ Rosemary McLeod, *Thrift to Fantasy: Home Textile Crafts of the 1930s-1950s* (Auckland, 2005), pp. 88–98.

⁹⁰ For more on the relationship of these geographical terms see Rose, *Which*, pp. 218–238.

⁹¹ Claire Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40:2 (2005), p. 346.

homes and the domestic roles of the past, but for those to come, the privacy of a home of one's own after acute housing shortages, replete with modern conveniences – the 'modernity of the suburbs' showcased in home-planning exhibitions where women hoped and planned for lives of modern housewifery.⁹²

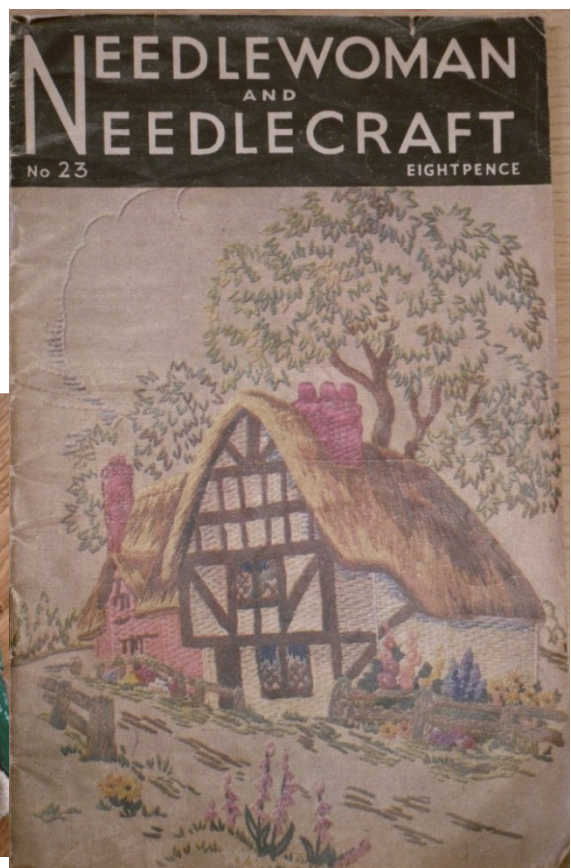


Fig. 4.19 (above left): tea cloth featuring Anne Hathaway's cottage, Shakespeare's birthplace and Mary Arden's home (detail), author's collection.

Fig. 4.20 (above right): Anne Hathaway's cottage, *The Needlewoman*, February 1934, p. iii.

Fig. 4.21 (right): cottage, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, No. 23 (1945), p. 1.

Fig. 4.22 (below): Margaret's cottage cosy, stitched over 3 months in 1958 for her bottom drawer.



Whilst, as we have seen, needlework magazines contained projects which used historical imagery and traditional motifs and styles, they rarely engaged meaningfully with the history of crafts. They seldom featured articles, focusing instead on patterns and projects. Very occasional pieces on needlework history appeared, particularly in the

⁹² Ryan, 'All', pp. 18–19.

interwar period. Accounts of needlework history tended to be just that, histories of the form of needlework, where and when it developed, and its defining characteristics. The historical needlewoman was notably absent. Throughout 1925 *The Needlewoman* ran a series of articles on historical needlework, typically focusing only on the physical description of historic items, making little or no reference to the conditions of their production or their creators. Articles were instead written to inspire emulation (but not recreation) of antique needlework, such as Laura E. Start's study of ecclesiastical embroidery, which used museum objects to encourage needlework in church guilds.⁹³ Magazines typically commented on the origins of styles and techniques, but not their associated social histories.⁹⁴ The shared pursuit of needlework appeared to foster little interest in or sense of affinity with historical needlewomen within magazines.

Embroidered samplers, which by their nature push their maker to the fore, and the needlework of otherwise notable women were exceptions. A 1965 article on antique thimbles focused on the shapes and materials used for these and elaborate museum specimens rather than the history of their owners, but did note that:

Tucked away in the London Museum is a touching collection of miniature thimbles, mostly eighteenth-century. These remind us of the immense industry of little girls with their needles in early days. Therle Hughes tells us about one such girl in her book 'English Domestic Needlework' (Lutterwoth Press). This damsel, in 1780, worked a sampler containing 250 words, stating that 'Mary Dudden were 12 years of age when this sampler were worked, and some part of it by moonlight.' Poor little Mary Dudden!⁹⁵

A *Stitchcraft* review of a book on samplers suggests the editor believed some readers had an interest in the subject, and *The Needlewoman* commented on the work of the Brontë sisters, Mary, Queen of Scots, Catherine of Aragon and Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury.⁹⁶ In 1960 *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* was unusual in inviting readers to emulate the work of a historic needlewoman, dressing wooden dolls of the same kind that were clothed by the young Princess Victoria and her governess Lehzen. This was not, however, a faithful recreation as the dolls were to be dressed in styles typical of the decades between 1875 and 1925, starting beyond Victoria's girlhood and ending well past her death.⁹⁷

⁹³ *Needlewoman*, April 1925, pp. 19-22.

⁹⁴ e.g. *NI*, No. 232 (1955), p. 13; *N&N*, No. 83 (1960), p. 24.

⁹⁵ *N&N*, No. 103 (1965), p. 21.

⁹⁶ *Stitchcraft*, February 1965, p. 28; *Needlewoman*, March 1925, p. 22; *Needlewoman*, June 1935, p. 8.

⁹⁷ *N&N*, No. 84 (1960), pp. 18-19.

Echoing the content of the magazines, most of the women interviewed reported having little interest during this period in needlework history or their families' history of stitching.⁹⁸ Audrey, a retired teacher, was amongst these, and referring to her family's needlework past noted sadly 'I'd love to know now but I can't'. Margaret, a former civil servant, said she had not had an active interest in historical needlework, but remembered reading Mary Thomas's writings on the topic. This statement almost certainly referred to *Mary Thomas's Embroidery Book*, first published in 1936, which provides instructions for a wide range of decorative techniques, many of which were accompanied by brief histories of the style of work.⁹⁹ Some other books on needlework included an introductory section on the history of needlework technique.¹⁰⁰ After Muriel stated that she had little interest in needlework history in this period, and would have struggled financially and logistically to take her children to museums, I mentally noted her large collection of needlework books and asked whether she would have been interested in these sections: '[whispers] I would have skipped that [...] no, not interested in the history of it at all.'

Needlework projects and articles often emphasised differences rather than similarities between the twentieth-century needlewoman and her predecessors, highlighting change and discontinuity rather than tradition. As Rieger and Daunton have noted:

Many scholars of modernity have stressed that a sense of rupture in the historical continuum and a loss of coherence underlay characteristic experiences of modernity. In this view, a deep discontinuity separated the past from a present that appeared as radically distinct from former times. These contemporary accounts considered a return to past times as impossible, and history appeared as 'a lost domain'. Even so, these accounts were far from being unhistorical, for these interpretations of modernity emphasized the features separating past from present through creating narratives of historical rupture.¹⁰¹

Whereas historic needlework in magazines might be assumed to be connected to an idea of continued tradition, a closer examination suggests the opposite. Interwar magazines

⁹⁸ This view was held by Audrey, Doreen, Jeanne, Margaret, Pat, Susan, and Muriel. Ghillian and Molly were unusual in reporting an interest in needlework history in this period. Although there is a 14 year age gap between the youngest and oldest narrator studied, it is possible that this may be a generational issue, yet the content of needlework magazines suggests that there was not a widespread demand for historical information. The general disinterest in needlework history amongst the sample is especially interesting as, having put themselves forward for this project, one might assume that narrators would be *more* interested in this subject than other needlewomen.

⁹⁹ Mary Thomas, *Mary Thomas's Embroidery Book* (1936).

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Helen Brooks, *Your Embroidery* (1949), pp. 13–16; Christine Risley and Patricia Wardle, *Machine Embroidery* (1961), pp. 7–26.

¹⁰¹ Daunton and Rieger, 'Introduction', p. 5.

often used historical examples to argue that needlework skill had declined in the twentieth century, and that therefore one must look to the past for the most accomplished examples. *The Needlewoman* claimed that in antique samplers ‘Stitches of a fineness rarely seen to-day were worked with painstaking care and pride.’¹⁰² In 1930 *The Needlewoman* noted the increasing interest in needlework guilds, optimistically predicting that ‘as the needle art develops, the movement will gain in strength, and we may be able to establish again in Britain the same high level of embroidery and needlework with which she was credited in the 12th and 13th centuries.’¹⁰³ In 1930 *Fancy Needlework Illustrated* was more stoical about the decline in needlework standards, seeing this as a necessary result of social change:

Times have changed and the samplers of to-day have been adapted to meet them; the stitchery is not so fine, the verses are robust and cheerful if admonitory, and it is the grown-ups who are spending their happy leisure hours working them, not the youngsters of to-day, for whom handwork with more quickly-gained results has been devised.¹⁰⁴

Whereas interwar magazines had noted differences from historical needlework with a sense of deference and respect for the past, even a desire to return, post-war examples were more enthusiastic about change and the state of modern needlework, reflecting the broader trend of casting off the past and embracing the new in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰⁵ *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* presented the traditional craft of patchwork as modern through direct comparison with its older manifestations: ‘Unlike its predecessor in grandmother’s day, this up to date version is very much in keeping with contemporary styles.’¹⁰⁶ For *Knit & Sew* technique distinguished their ‘Modern version of the ever-popular patchwork quilt of Grandmama’s day – instead of using the handsewn method we have joined the patches entirely by machine!’¹⁰⁷ In 1947 *Needlework Illustrated* invited readers to make a ‘Sampler Dinner Mat’, and noted:

The Sampler of great-grandmother’s day, instructive and decorative though it was, did not usually serve an otherwise useful purpose. In this modern embroidery the fascination of trying new, or less familiar stitches has been cleverly combined with the production of delightful place-mats for the dinner-table.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² *Needlewoman*, May 1935, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰³ *Needlewoman*, October 1930, p. 19.

¹⁰⁴ *FNI*, No. 95 Vol. 8 (1930), p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Dauntton and Rieger, ‘Introduction’, pp. 14–15; Conekin, Mort, and Waters, ‘Introduction’, p. 10.

¹⁰⁶ *N&N*, No. 63 (1955), p. 22.

¹⁰⁷ *K&S*, January 1960, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ *NI*, No. 188 (1947), p. 19.



Fig. 4.23 (left): petticoat, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, No. 84 (1960), p. 7.

Fig. 4.24 (right): Charmaine Rothwell's Festival of Britain panel, Whitworth T.2002.2.

In *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*'s Diamond Jubilee issue, filled with Victorian-inspired projects, the theme was contrast rather than continuity, with many projects introduced with the words 'Those Were The Days When'. Take, for example, the introduction to a surprisingly alluring scarlet knitted petticoat: 'Those Were The Days When Red Flannel Kept Grandma Discreetly Cosy; Today We are Glamourously [sic] Warm in the Latest Inspiration from Paris' (fig. 4.23). Readers were encouraged to see the differences between themselves and their foremothers, not a shared reality. This compare and contrast approach to the past can also be seen in a panel stitched from a transfer by Welsh schoolgirl Charmaine Rothwell to mark the 1951 Festival of Britain (fig. 4.24). Images of Britain in 1951 are juxtaposed with others of 1851: windmill/power station, horse-drawn plough/tractor, steam locomotive/aeroplane, piano/television, Crystal Palace/Royal Festival Hall. Though united by the mighty oak, the emphasis here is on change and advancement, the separation of the modern from the past.

Both interwar and post-war examples demonstrate divergence from Hobsbawm's concept of 'invented tradition'. With their emphasis on discontinuity, and on broken chains of tradition (crafts and styles associated with collective grandmothers are not also connected with mothers, or reader's own memories of the past) they highlight the

historical specificity of needlework forms. This precludes any sense of ‘always’, and leaves us instead with ‘once’ and ‘again’, demonstrating that whilst needlewomen may practice and enjoy these older forms, they are fundamentally inauthentic and alien to them. Whereas Gordon has argued that colonial revival needlework allowed American women to identify with their familial or national foremothers, in twentieth-century Britain historically inspired needlework was presented in a way that distanced women from their predecessors. This constructed needlewomen of the past as ‘other’, precluding identification with them and emphasising the reader’s modernity.¹⁰⁹

Linked to the reverence of past practice found in interwar needlework magazines, in the 1920s and 1930s some advertisements used self-consciously old fashioned or historical images, especially of Victorian needlewomen, or a fictitious ‘grandmother’ figure, to sell their products. In the interwar years older women were presented as experts, whose supposed use of a product was an indication of quality. However, it was clear that the reader was not expected to identify with the older woman but to be addressed or informed by her. Ardern’s showed a young girl presenting her crochet to her grandmother, who approvingly noted ‘I can see you have used the same make of crochet cotton which for fifty years has been my first favourite’.¹¹⁰ Listers’ presented grandmother as experienced: ‘she knows wools and needles, purls and slip stitches in and out and round about’, and of course, she fully recommended their brand.¹¹¹ Harris Linens shifted the focus instead to ‘mother’, showing an older woman presented with the embroidery of a younger woman, who exclaims:

I’ve you to thank for the *Harris* habit!
 - it’s no wonder they praise my work, mother.
 All Mother’s lovely embroidery was done on Harris Linens. She says it was the best linen *her* generation used – and it’s still the best. Good, sturdy linen this – the sort that I shall hand down to my own children someday.¹¹²

Ardern’s advertising drew on a theme of needlewomen in period dress. They proudly claimed that their crochet cotton had been ‘a prime favourite through three generations’, illustrating the point with images of crocheting women in modern, Edwardian and Victorian dress.¹¹³ Whilst claiming to be ‘the thread of to-day’, an advert for Ardern’s Star Sylko showed a Victorian lady with a white cap and lorgnette glasses, noting ‘The

¹⁰⁹ Gordon, ‘Priscilla’, p. 179.

¹¹⁰ *FNI*, No. 56 Vol. 5 (1920), p. iv.

¹¹¹ *NPJ*, No. 195 (1925), p. 15.

¹¹² *Needlewoman*, October 1935, p. 39. D.M.C. threads also entreated needlewomen to emulate their mothers. *Stitchcraft*, April 1935, p. 32.

¹¹³ *FNI*, No. 74 Vol. 7 (1925), p. ii.

style of dress shown was the fashion when Ardern's business was established, seventy years ago.'¹¹⁴ Here change is acknowledged, and the endurance of Ardern's products in spite of it is presented as testament to their quality.

Other advertisements combined images of modern and historical needlewomen. In 1925 Clark's ran a series of advertisements for their Anchor cotton which juxtaposed women and girls in modern clothing with a woman in Victorian dress.¹¹⁵ Ardern's brought the modern needlewoman into the past in their advert, 'amended history: the Raleigh legend', transplanted to an Elizabethan town and walking over the cloak a man has laid down for her at a shop entrance, saying 'I had almost forgotten to buy the "Ardern's"'.¹¹⁶ Matthew Hilton has found a similar phenomenon in the advertising of tobacco products between 1870 and 1940. He argues that the interweaving of the modern and the historic did not negate the modernism of British advertising, but strengthened it: 'Images referring to the future were made safe if rooted in the past, and capitalism's consumerist utopia could be depicted as essentially British as well as a perfectly natural and normal progressive development from the present.' Giving the example of 'Hero', the sailor character first used in advertisements for Player's cigarettes in 1883, he notes:

His original conception, in referring to the national naval heritage, owed much to that late Victorian practice of drawing on traditional symbols of the British past to solidify the image of a new product. By the interwar period, however, he increasingly appeared in a more modernist setting, his image being fixed against a clean white background or positioned alongside other pictures, such as those of young people enjoying healthy exercise. The old was therefore inseparable from the new, opening the appeal of Hero to new groups of consumers.¹¹⁷

Similarly, the use of the historic in interwar needlework advertising cannot be seen as purely backward-looking. Older women addressed younger and period dress was intentionally contrasted with modern, ensuring that these advertisements referenced the modern just as much as they did the traditional.

In the 1950s and 1960s images of older or historic women in advertisements became startlingly rare, as companies created a more unambiguously modern and youthful

¹¹⁴ *FNI*, No. 75 Vol. 7 (1925), p. ii.

¹¹⁵ e.g. *Needlewoman*, January 1925, p. 24; *Needlewoman*, April 1925, p. 24; *Needlewoman*, June 1925, p. 24.

¹¹⁶ *NFA*, Vol. xxi No. 250 (1930), p. 111.

¹¹⁷ Matthew Hilton, 'Advertising the Modernist Aesthetic of the Marketplace? The Cultural Relationship Between the Tobacco Manufacturer and the 'Mass' of Consumers in Britain, 1870-1940', in Martin Daunt and Bernhard Rieger (eds), *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the late-Victorian era to World War II* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 56-57.

image of their consumers. Hilton ends his study abruptly at 1940, and says nothing of the possible decline in this model of advertising. After the war such images are almost entirely absent from needlecraft advertising, save the logos of The Needlewoman Shop, and some advertisements for Penelope tapestry products, which had long used references to Homer's *Odyssey* in their campaigns as well as their name. One revealing exception was Singer, who in 1965 produced an advert using three images of the same model, each referencing a different period, and each with a vintage Singer sewing machine (fig. 4.25). Whereas pre-war advertisements had used 'grandmother' or the Victorian woman to suggest a long-established business, and the quality of materials and craft associated with a bygone era, here it was used to show older sewing machines as out-of-date and in need of replacement. Again we see that whilst both interwar and post-war needlework magazines emphasised discontinuity from the past, the sense of admiration for this lost world found in the 1920s and 1930s is shed in the 1950s and 1960s, mirroring the broader embrace of the modern in British culture in this period.

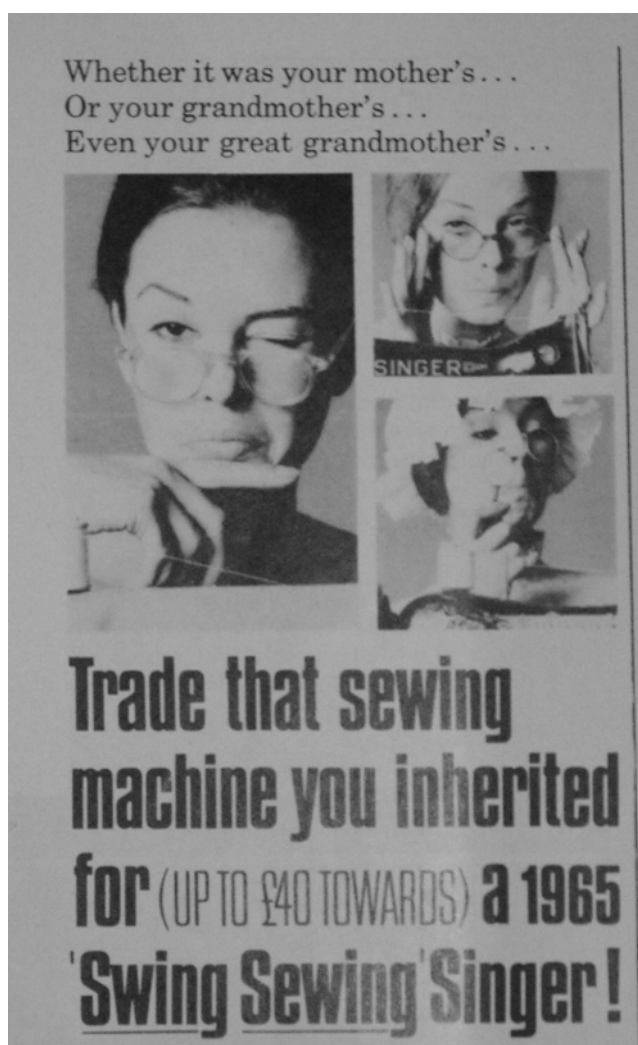


Fig. 4.25: Singer advertisement, *Stitchcraft*, April 1965, p. 30.

Needlewomen also embraced the modern in the form of broadcast media. Instead of contemplating the venerable history and traditions of needlework as they worked, or attempting to re-create the stitching experiences of their foremothers, they integrated craft interests and practices with the decidedly twentieth-century pursuits of radio listening and television viewing. Although Langhamer has argued that in the late 1940s and 1950s needlework was seen by some as ‘threatened by the advent of television as it became *the* focus for home-based leisure’, evidence from magazines and my own interviews suggests that this is a simplification, and is not equally true of all needlecrafts.¹¹⁸ Women reported some forms of needlework as co-existing with television just as they had done earlier with the wireless. Jeanne, Pat and Margaret all noted that it was difficult to sew or embroider whilst watching television because of the need to pay visual attention to both. However, Doreen, Muriel, Pat, and Susan all felt that, at least for the reasonably skilled needlewoman, knitting and television were perfectly compatible. Written before the advent of television, Agnes M. Miall’s assessment nonetheless rings true:

Both knitting and crochet are unexact forms of work in the sense that, for the most part, they can be done without very close attention on the part of the worker. The forming of the stitches becomes almost mechanical, and there is little or no strain on the eyesight – a most important point in these days of constant eye-strain. Some people can quite comfortably work and read at the same time, and this is particularly useful for the woman who sits long hours by herself, and who might, otherwise, find the time pass rather tediously¹¹⁹

Muriel felt that continuing to stitch was a matter of priorities. Asked whether television might interfere with more complicated knitting she answered: ‘Oh no, that came before the television, that was more important.’ Susan, however, noted that early televisions, such as the one bought by her parents for the Coronation, required a darkened room and that this, rather than the television itself, would have interfered with knitting. Nevertheless, the few hours of daily programming then available left plentiful time for knitting. As we have seen in chapter one, needlework was used by some to give television watching a productive aspect which assuaged guilt at not being sufficiently ‘busy’.¹²⁰ Stitching could also enhance women’s enjoyment of the radio. As Margaret explained: ‘I still feel that I don’t like listening to the radio without having my hands

¹¹⁸ Claire Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England, 1920-60* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 179–180. See also Claire Langhamer, ‘Women and Leisure in Manchester, 1920-C.1960’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Lancashire, 1996), p. 221.

¹¹⁹ Agnes Mackenzie Miall, *Complete Needlecraft* (1934), p. 193.

¹²⁰ See above, pp. 74-77.

active, because you're not, it helps you to be fully engaged I think, your mind can go into listening while your other senses are occupied doing the sewing or knitting or whatever.'¹²¹

Both broadcast media and the needlework industry acknowledged and embraced this crossover. In 1920 Arden's Crochet Cotton asked 'Could there be a more delightful way to spend the evening hours than to make dainty crochet work while you listen in?'¹²² In 1950 Milward's encouraged knitters to 'Read, talk, listen to the radio – let RO-TALLY count the rows and check the pattern.'¹²³ Embroidered covers for *The Radio Times* were featured in needlework magazines throughout this period (fig. 4.26), and in 1959 *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* carried a design for an embroidered screen 'for these TV times', to reduce draughts whilst watching the television (fig. 4.27). An accompanying illustration showed the family gathered round the set whilst mother knits (fig. 4.28).¹²⁴ Contrary to Langhamer's characterisation of television as in competition with needlework and other demands on women's time, Maggie Andrews has shown that early 'magazine' style television programmes in the 1950s were specifically designed to cater to an imagined a housewife half-watching whilst going about her daily routine, giving only occasional bursts of undivided attention.¹²⁵ Broadcasters also engaged with needlework specifically. Needlewomen could use their televisions to get pointers from 'James Norbury, TV Knitting Expert', or to watch a 'Television talk' on the subject of crochet by Muriel Hope Robins, and BBC Television reviewed sewing books.¹²⁶ These examples suggest that, whilst some needlecraft may indeed have suffered from the advent of television, the notion of these activities as competing rather than complimenting each other was not universal, being challenged both by the BBC in its engagement with needlework and by the needlework industry, eager to stay relevant (and profitable) in a changing world.

¹²¹ Between the wars some in broadcasting were critical of multi-taskers who gave radio anything less than their rapt attention. Maggie Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity* (2012), p. 24.

¹²² *FNI*, No. 73 Vol. 7 (1925), p. ii.

¹²³ *Stitchcraft*, February 1950, p. 24.

¹²⁴ *N&N*, No. 77 (1959), pp. 8-9.

¹²⁵ Andrews, *Domesticating*, p. 136.

¹²⁶ *Stitchcraft*, September 1955, p. 1; *NI*, No. 230 (1955), p. 9; *Stitchcraft*, December 1955, p. 18. A potted biography of Norbury can be found in Richard Rutt, *A History of Hand Knitting* (1987), pp. 151–152. For more on Norbury, see below, pp. 236-237.

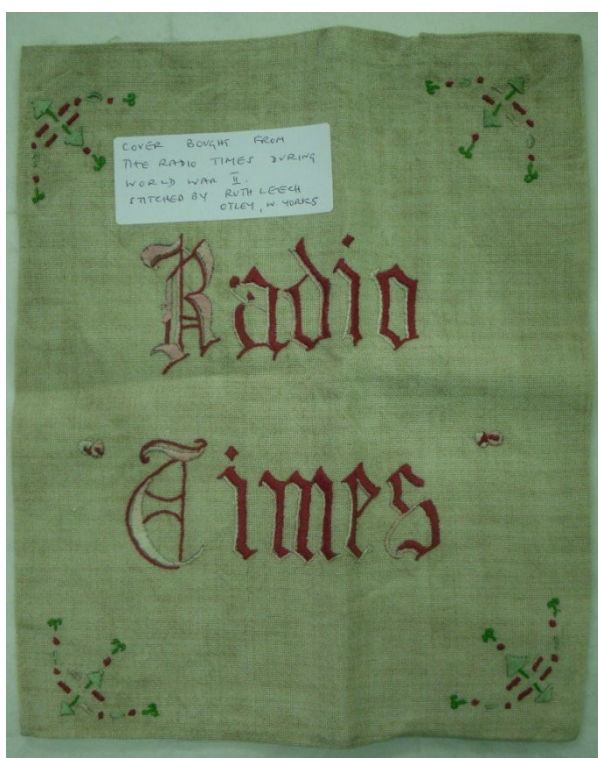


Fig. 4.26 (above left): Second World War Radio Times cover, stitched by Ruth Leech of Ottley, West Yorkshire. York Castle Museum, uncatalogued.

Fig. 4.27 (above right): embroidered screen, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, No. 77 (1959), p. 8.

Fig. 4.28 (right): television knitting, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, No. 77 (1959) p. 9.



Particularly in the post-war years, needlework's most dramatic embrace of the modern was in the field of technology. The 1950s and 1960s saw a proliferation of gadgets to ease or simplify the work of the needlewoman, as well as new twists on items such as the sewing machine, all emphasising increases in speed or efficiency, and rarely pleasure or relaxation. In 1950, the Airlyne Minor Home Embroidering Machine, an unusual device for making embroidered and candlewick items, was advertised as being 'quick and easy' and capable of creating 'a professional finish that will amaze you.' There was no suggestion that the process itself might be enjoyable.¹²⁷ A machine from Army & Navy Stores promised: 'Smock Gathering done in minutes! This astonishingly simple machine does all the tedious work for you – without "dots" or patterns – quickly and precisely. One of our salesgirls took only 3 minutes to do work that had taken 2½ hours by hand!'¹²⁸ A rather alarming invention, 'Vitocut' electric scissors (plugged into

¹²⁷ *NI*, No. 203 (1950), p. 27.

¹²⁸ *Stitchcraft*, June 1955, p. 25.

the mains electricity) claimed to be ‘Light as a feather’, and more worryingly ‘Swift as lightning’, promising ‘No more strain or fatigue from cutting’.¹²⁹ Singer advertised their 306 Swing-Needle Sewing Machine promising that ‘All these sewing effects and more, taking hours of laborious hand sewing, are yours automatically and effortlessly with a Singer 306 Swing-Needle Machine. Just put in the appropriate fashion disk . . . and the Singer 306 does the rest automatically!’¹³⁰ The ‘Darling’ sewing machine was advertised as having a ‘Pleasing, modern design’, an impressive sounding ‘Flush mounted anti-dazzle lamp’, and being ‘Fully suppressed for radio and TV’.¹³¹ Even relatively simple items could be presented as modern and efficient innovations, such as sewing boxes, ‘With TRANSPARENT LIDS for at-a-glance selection of your sewing aids’. The advertisement claimed that ‘120,000 modern housewives are using our time-saving SEWING BOXES’ (fig. 4.29).¹³²



Fig. 4.29: ‘time-saving Sewing Boxes’, *Stitchcraft*, November 1955, p. 29.

Knitting machines had been advertised even before the war, but it was the 1950s and 1960s that saw these edging towards the mainstream, presented as the ‘modern’ alternative to handknitting. A 1930 advertisement for the Cymbal Knitter, a domestic circular knitting machine, claimed that it could provide a source of supplementary income. Women were reassured that an informative booklet would be sent ‘in plain

¹²⁹ *NI*, No. 232 (1955), p. 28.

¹³⁰ *Stitchcraft*, October 1955, p. 21.

¹³¹ *Stitchcraft*, October 1955, p. 22.

¹³² *Stitchcraft*, November 1955, p. 29. Jeanne still owned one of these.

packing'.¹³³ After the war knitting machines were marketed in terms of their ease of use and ability to save time and effort, aiming to transform productive leisure into efficient labour. Machines allowed women to 'Knit the Modern Way!' (fig. 4.30).¹³⁴ In *Knitting is an Adventure*, James Norbury included a chapter on machine knitting called 'Towards the Atomic Age'. He wrote that driving along a country lane he encountered a young woman fixing her own car. Offering his opinion on the situation 'she told me in no uncertain tones that the modern Miss didn't need advice from an old fogey like me!' She then recognised him as 'the Knitting Man', and showed him a jumper 'and stated triumphantly, "Of course, being a modern girl who likes to get things done quickly, I have made it on my knitting machine."' ¹³⁵ The proponents of the knitting machine presented it as the 'modern' replacement for traditional handknitting.

KNIT the Modern Way!
on the **ROTA-PIN**

10/9 POST FREE
Perfect Results without Experience.

The 'ROTA-PIN' knits garments to perfection in stocking, ribbing, garter stitch, Fair Isle, etc. Even distribution of tension, increasing, decreasing and stitch-counting greatly simplified.

JUNIOR Model (80 stitch) 10/9 post free, complete with accessories and 50-page fully illustrated instruction book.

STANDARD Model (160 stitch) 20/- post free.
Obtainable only from Sole Concessionaires:

TEEBEE MANUFACTURING Co. Ltd.,
Dept. 393, Charlbury, Oxford.

Fig. 4.30 (above): 'Knit the Modern Way!', *Stitchcraft*, November 1955, p. 26.

SENSATIONAL NEW KNITTING MACHINE

THE **Superspeed**

Presented by **GIROTEX QUICK KNITTERS**
The amazing ultra-modern SUPERSPEED home knitting machine, built into its own streamlined carrying case, offers new and better advantages to the present day knitter.

Yours for only 5/7 per week
Cash Price **£29.19.6.**

DEPOSIT £6 and 104 weekly payments of 5/7d.
Ribbing attachment available as optional extra.

- ★ Stainless steel needle bed
- ★ 200 needles to knit the largest garment
- ★ Truly unique row counter
- ★ 20 different tension settings
- ★ Automatic wool feed
- ★ Revolutionary pattern selector
- ★ 12 months' guarantee
- ★ Complete range of accessories
- ★ One movement, one perfect row of knitting
- ★ Up to 20,000 stitches per minute

Superspeed knitting is sensationally speedy and simple.

Send this coupon for full details. You will be under no obligation.

To: **GIROTEX QUICK KNITTERS, 32 Chiltern St. London W1**
Tel: **WELbeck 2423 and 8102**

NAME

ADDRESS

Tel. No. (if any) SS/ST/1

Fig. 4.31 (right): Superspeed, *Stitchcraft*, November 1960, p. 33.

Above all, the knitting machine was an object of efficiency and productivity. One advert asked: 'Can You Knit A Jumper In 2 Hours? You Can With The Ideal Home

¹³³ *Needlewoman*, April 1930, p. 3.

¹³⁴ *Stitchcraft*, November 1955, p. 26. This quote echoes Carol Tulloch's claim that in the 1950s and early 1960s knitting machines were 'marketed as the modern alternative to hand knitting'. This research has not found evidence to support her claim that machine knitting advertising presented it as more 'youthful'. Carol Tulloch, 'Home Knitting: Culture and Counter Culture, 1953-1963', in Victoria and Albert Museum and Royal College of Art (eds), *One-Off: A Collection of Essays by Students on the Victoria & Albert Museum/Royal College of Art Course in the History of Design* (1997), pp. 209, 218.

¹³⁵ James Norbury, *Knitting is an Adventure* (1958), pp. 162-163.

Knitting Machine'.¹³⁶ The Tru-Matic Automatic Knitter was 'Light! - Easy! - Quiet! FAR, FAR QUICKER than hand knitting!'¹³⁷ Another advert said simply, 'KNITFASTER – KNITMASTER'.¹³⁸ The very names of brands such as 'Rapidex' and 'Swiftomatic' emphasised speed, and the 'Superspeed' from Girotex was an 'amazing ultra-modern' model (fig. 4.31).¹³⁹ This marketing strategy assumed that knitting constituted 'labour' which women would want to reduce or avoid.

Advertising campaigns focusing on efficiency misunderstood the appeal that handknitting had for many women, for whom it was a pleasurable tactile, relaxing or otherwise enjoyable occupation, as shown in chapter two. Whilst many hand-knitters did reject the knitting machine, this was not because it was 'modern' or 'new-fangled', but because it failed to serve all of the same purposes as hand-knitting. David Edgerton has argued that histories of technology that see the new as supplanting the old are simplistic, as new technologies frequently added to the range of choices instead.¹⁴⁰ Knitting was therefore not unusual in retaining older technologies rather than adopting new ones, and the limited spread of the knitting machine does not mark needlewomen as luddite. The title of Knitmaster's free leaflet 'Knitting For A Family Of 5 In 3 Hours' and the advertising of their SeamMaker which promised 'Away with drudgery!' presented hand-knitting as a burden.¹⁴¹ Some oral history narrators failed to see the appeal of mechanised knitting. Retired health visitor Susan liked to savour her knitting: 'Knitting machines came out, but I never took to them [...] You knit it up to quickly, you get it done in an evening, and that wasn't the purpose of knitting. You do it to take over a few days [...] It was a fashion that came and went.' Ghillian, a former teacher and now a children's author, thought these machines lacked a less definable sense of 'fun':

where's the fun in that? [laughs] You know you just put it on and go zup zup zup zup and it's done. No fun at all [laughs]. Though people would say yes it is fun because you design it and you know you can see your design coming up very quickly. Yes, I can see that... I just don't think it's fun.

Narrators who had owned knitting machines also reported unappealing aspects of them. Muriel found her knitting machine useful for knitting her children's school

¹³⁶ *N&N*, No. 61 (1955), p. 28.

¹³⁷ *Stitchcraft*, January 1960, p. 32.

¹³⁸ *Stitchcraft*, March 1960, p. 26.

¹³⁹ *Stitchcraft*, March 1965, p. 34; *NI*, No. 229 (1955), p. 29; *Stitchcraft*, November 1960, p. 33.

¹⁴⁰ David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900* (2006).

¹⁴¹ *NI*, No. 229 (1955), p. 3; *Stitchcraft*, October 1960, p. 25; *NI*, No. 234 (1955), p. 12.

jumpers – ‘it was very quick, you could knit cardigan, jumper in a day, easily in a day’ – although it was far from enjoyable:

But it was quite old and it would throw stitches off and it... a bit of a nightmare, so I never bothered with it any more [...] I remember mine used to travel up the... it wouldn't sit on the table, it used to shoot up the table, and I was fighting it [...] But it was useful, but then you did it in during the afternoon, you did a bit of knitting during the afternoon. You couldn't do it so much, like sitting in an armchair and knitting with the telly on and comfortably and that sort of way, it was a different, industrial sort of knitting [and was it quite noisy as well, or?] No, no, it only slid along and it made a sort of a [taps on table] clattery noise as you went along. No, no it wasn't terribly noisy. It was all done by hand and you got back ache, because you pushed it along and then pulled it back, pushed it along and you, you know, it made your shoulders ache. It wasn't comfortable.

Pat's knitting machine was bought by her husband, a design engineer, when she was expecting her first child, born in 1957. She pointed out its limitations:

with this one you couldn't do the ribbing, you had to knit the ribbing by hand and then put it on stitch by stitch which was a bit laborious, or you had to do what they called a mock rib where you knitted twice the amount you needed and then you flipped it over on to the, back onto the needles, and that took time as well, so you know if you were knitting a baby's ribbed vest or something, you'd have to do that by hand. I wasn't very happy with it. The needles used to pop off, the stitches used to fall off, so you know it was a bit of a bind and I don't think after knitting the first few things on it I don't think I ever used it very much [...] so no, the knitting machine was a bit of a no-no.

The eventual rejection of the knitting machine, and the choice made by many women not to try it out, was not a reaction to the intrusion of the modern into a 'traditional' pursuit – needlework was entirely open to modernisation – but the result of poorly designed machines which sought (and from some perspectives, failed) to make knitting more efficient rather than more enjoyable.

An examination of tradition and modernity is perhaps most useful for determining what needlework and needlewomen were not. Whilst magazines featured a wide range of embroidery and tapestry projects based on traditional styles, historical scenes and rural themes, it would be simplistic to see this as an embrace of the past, and by extension to characterise needlewomen as romantically nostalgic, even luddite, rejecting the modern and technology. The existing literature on modernity and tradition in early to mid-twentieth-century Britain has demonstrated that the traditional often co-existed with the modern, especially in women's aesthetic preferences. Thus traditional and

historical subjects were not dramatically more prevalent in needlework than in British culture at large. Traditional styles were worked using non-traditional techniques, and repeatedly re-interpreted to better suit modern tastes and modern homes. 'Modern' needlework was a frequent feature, creating a version of modernism softened around the edges, and capable of embracing not only the forms of individual expression and display previously highlighted by historians such as Sparke, but also women's passion for embellishing their own homes with their handwork.

Significantly, needlework relating to clothing, such as knitting, was immune to the appeal of tradition, and instead focused on up-to-dateness and fashion. Needlework was not a refuge, but was at least as modern as the wider culture in which it existed. Looking beyond the aesthetic, even traditional styles and subjects such as the rural idyll could have modern meanings. Needlework magazines carried little content on needlework history, and oral history responses indicate that this was not widely missed. Furthermore, where needlework and needleworkers from the past were referred to, the emphasis was on disconnection rather than continuity, emphasising the difference and distance between the 'modern' reader and her predecessors rather than fostering a sense of affinity and identification with these women. Although this discontinuity was sometimes lamented between the wars, in the ever-more modernising Britain of the 1950s and 1960s, historic needlework was more often happily dismissed in favour of the new. Whereas in the 1920s and 1930s images of women in period dress and of older women (living connections to past times) were a recurring feature of advertising campaigns, post-war they were conspicuously absent, save to illustrate an undesirable outdatedness, and advertisers emphasised newness and youth instead. Whereas Langhamer has seen needlework and television as competing for women's time, broadcast media and needlework interacted with and complemented one another, integrating women's stitching into one of the most pervasive incarnations of twentieth-century modernity. This period saw a significant expansion in the variety of needlework gadgets advertised, especially the knitting machine, which stressed efficiency in time and effort. In the face of the knitting machine handwork continued to appeal to many, not as a shrinking from modernising, but because not all women wanted this labour 'saved' and machines often failed to live up to their claims. Whilst needlewomen and needlework magazines played aesthetically with the past, they also embraced the present, the new and the modern, demonstrating that 'modern needlewoman' was not an oxymoron.

Chapter Five

‘Nothing Dearer to the Feminine Heart’: the Gendering of Needlework¹

This study of needlework is primarily an exercise in women’s history, reflecting the identity of the overwhelming majority of people participating in amateur stitching in the twentieth century. Whilst men might engage in paid work as tailors, in domestic settings needles, pins and hooks were wielded by women and girls. Existing histories of stitching reflect this reality, yet few examine it explicitly. Although Sarah A. Gordon’s study of sewing in the United States of America from 1890 to 1930 promised to explore stitching as ‘gendered labor’, her work tends to assume rather than explain this gendering.² Rozsika Parker’s ground-breaking work on the subject, *The Subversive Stitch*, can offer only partial illumination on this subject, focusing as it does solely on embroidery, and covering little of the twentieth century outside of the world of fine art.³

This chapter uses needlework magazines, oral history recordings, needlework books, and diaries, memoirs and objects relating to men’s stitching in prisoner of war camps and hospitals to examine the gendered nature of needlework. It will explore the ways in which femaleness was woven into the culture of needlework, and how needlework was threaded through key areas of female experience such as girlhood, motherhood and female friendship. Firstly, it will demonstrate that needlework magazines positioned themselves as part of a distinctly female culture of stitching. In their content they assumed, catered to and reinforced female interests in clothing, domesticity and nurturing children, and associations between stitching, home and family can also be found in women’s recollections and the objects that they made. It will then explore how needlework operated as a homosocial culture, in which women stitched for each other, stitched together, and learned from one another. It will then explore narrator’s first-hand accounts of needlework education within grammar and secondary modern schools, and how they felt about needlework within an education system segregated by attainment and often class. This chapter will challenge the widely held belief that in learning needlework girls learnt constraining femininities, illustrating the variety of meanings that stitching had for women and girls. Having established needlework as a world of

¹ This title is taken from *Needlewoman*, No. 1 (1919), p. 6.

² Sarah A. Gordon, ‘Boundless Possibilities’: Home Sewing and the Meanings of Women’s Domestic Work in the United States, 1890-1930’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 16:2 (2004), pp. 68–91.

³ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1996).

women, the final section of this chapter will examine the ways in which this highly gendered group of pursuits was carefully negotiated by and on behalf of *needlemen*.

Throughout the period under study, needlework was assumed to be a female area of interest, and this is demonstrated through the consistent construction of needlework magazines as female spaces. Editorial and advertising content assumed the reader to be female, and often implied not only that those interested in the needle were women, but that stitching was a near-universal female interest. In 1919 *The Needlewoman* said that ‘There is nothing dearer to the feminine heart’ than making clothes at home.⁴ In 1920 *Ladyship* claimed that working their knitting patterns ‘appeals to all ladies.’⁵ Thirty years later, *Weldon’s Home Dressmaker* advertised itself as ‘the magazine for every womanly woman who loves her needle’.⁶ A rare exception was made by *Needlework Illustrated* which, in 1940, acknowledged (with some degree of surprise) that injured servicemen might be reading the magazine, and hoped to ‘continue to inspire thousands of women – yes, and men, too. We know already how many in Hospital have taken up both Needlework and Knitting.’⁷

Whilst these explicit statements are striking, more implicit forms of gendering were omnipresent in needlework magazines, and equally powerful. Strong messages about the expected readership were given by magazine titles such as *Needlewoman* and *Needlecraft*, the countless advertisements depicting women, the use of unsexualised images of women on covers, and cultural markers not retained in the physical objects of the magazines themselves, such as their location within newsagents’ shelves. Alongside advertisements for wools, fabrics and needles, magazines carried others appealing to women’s more general wants and needs. Atora Beef Suet was ‘The needlewoman’s friend’, a boon for ‘Women who sew, and so need every help to shorten the labour of necessary cooking’, which would create ‘Time to spare for necessary sewing, and better cookery as well’.⁸ Convenience foods continued to be advertised regularly in some needlework magazines, alongside cleaning products. The beauty industry hoped to reach a female readership with marketing for goods including the iconic Amami setting lotions and shampoos and ‘Beautipon’ cream and ‘Slimcream’, products which promised respectively to increase and reduce the bust. Most strikingly, titles carried

⁴ *Needlewoman*, No. 1 (1919), p. 6.

⁵ *Needlecraft Practical Journal (NPJ)*, No. 160 (1920), p. 14.

⁶ *NI (NI)*, No. 200 (1950), p. 24.

⁷ *NI*, No. 159 (1940), p. 3.

⁸ *Needlewoman*, August 1925, p. 3; *Fancy Needlework Illustrated (FNI)*, No. 73 Vol. 7 (1925), p. 16.

advertisements for sanitary towels and tampons, marking the magazines clearly as feminine spaces.⁹ Recipes and beauty tips were also occasional features.¹⁰ Appealing to women's broader interests in both advertising and content reinforced the link between stitching and the female sex.

Women's clothing was a central feature of needlework magazines, catering to and reinforcing women's interest in fashion and their appearance. Previous chapters have demonstrated the importance of fashion within needlework, and that, in wartime, when shortages, rationing and patriotic thrift hindered fashion as a pattern of change and obsolescence, needlework continued to support variety and decoration in women's clothing.¹¹ Moreover, images used throughout this thesis attest to the importance of appearance in the appeal of needlework, as women browsed, imagined and re-created the attractive femininities laid out in magazines and patterns.

In contrast, men's clothing received comparatively scant attention, revealing the relative importance of women's wear and reflecting general attitudes towards the making of men's clothing.¹² Barbara Burman has argued:

For boys there has been a further clothing code protocol. Clothes made at home by mothers are for little boys. As bigger boys grew towards manhood, one of many steps they have taken away from their mother's sphere of practical influence has been in the consumption of ready-made and tailor-made clothing. [...] a part of achieving adult masculinity has normally involved relinquishing direct contact with the female maker of clothing.¹³

In 1940 the sometimes acid-tongued fashion writer Ethyle Campbell used the supposedly absurd image of home tailoring to ridicule the idea that ordinary women ought to make their own clothes in wartime:

⁹ eg. *Needlewoman*, April 1930, pp. 25, 27; *NI*, No. 158 (1940), pp. 27, 32; *Stitchcraft*, March 1947, p. 16; *Stitchcraft*, January 1950, pp. 18, 19, 21; *Needlewoman and Needlecraft (N&N)*, No. 61 (1955), p. 2; *Stitchcraft*, February 1955, p. 28; *Stitchcraft*, June 1955, p. 18.

¹⁰ eg. *Needle and Home*, January 1920; *Needlework For All (NFA)*, No. 183 (1925), p. 59; *NFA*, No. 184 (1925), p. 81; *NFA*, No. 187 (1925), pp. 131, 132; *Stitchcraft*, April 1950, p. 16; *Stitchcraft*, July 1950, p. 14; *Stitchcraft*, April 1955, p. 3. During the war and the following years of paper restrictions magazines used their limited space to concentrate more narrowly on needlework.

¹¹ See above, pp. 105-106, 128-129, 187-191.

¹² The earlier period of the Second World War, with its enthusiasm for comforts patterns for servicemen, was an unusual exception. This 'comforts' knitting is dealt with above, in pp. 124-127, 138-139, 141-148, 156, 162-167.

¹³ Barbara Burman, 'Introduction', in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), p. 13. Margarethe Szeless argues that tailoring never entered the home as it was seen as 'a serious business identified with technical innovation and science', whereas dressmaking was seen as relatively unskilled. Margarethe Szeless, 'Burda Fashions - A Wish That Doesn't Have To Be Wishful Thinking: Home-Dressmaking in Austria 1950-1970', *Cultural Studies*, 16:6 (2002), p. 854.

No! The war itself will be depressing enough without having you fumbling good materials into shapeless sacks in the sacred name of patriotism.

Why confine yourself to clothes? Why not learn cobbling and make your own shoes? Why not save your husband's tailor's bills and run him up a tweed suit on your machine? Why not be really patriotic, and make Mr Chamberlain a battleship?¹⁴

However, as Burman has asserted, whilst tailoring was beyond the expected and acceptable range of domestic production, it was more appropriate for women to make men's accessories and knitwear at home.¹⁵ The emphasis on knitting for women and children within magazines suggests both a greater level of interest in these projects, and also a degree of wariness in attempting to introduce exciting knits to 'the sartorially timorous male.'¹⁶ A 1935 knitting pattern for a man's jumper noted that men were 'finicky' about clothes, as they were 'so afraid of looking effeminate', suggesting a 'workmanlike' jumper that would be suitable for fishing, yachting, or after tennis.¹⁷

The culture of needlework magazines and the things women stitched both referenced and reinforced women's relationships with the home. Domestic items such as table cloths, antimacassars, tea cosies, fire screens, cushions, framed pictures, table mats, footstools and rugs formed a central part of women's stitching. The popularity of needlework – and especially embroidery – for the home is shown in the images of domestic items used throughout this thesis, and can easily be seen in visits to jumble sales and antiques fairs where embroidered linens and crochet edged cloths are stacked high and sold cheap.¹⁸ Even women with little domestic space might stitch for it, as in the case of a reader of *The Needlewoman* who wrote that she had adapted their pattern for a large portière to cover the divan-bed of her bed-sitting room.¹⁹ Choosing to spend time stitching for the home demonstrates an interest in, affection for, and desire to improve and personalise domestic space.²⁰ Furthermore, the pleasure experienced by many house-proud needlewomen in making and embellishing these generally non-

¹⁴ Ethyle Campbell, *How to Get By in War-Time* (1940), pp. 40–41.

¹⁵ Burman, 'Introduction', p. 13.

¹⁶ *Stitchcraft*, August 1944, pp. 4–5.

¹⁷ *Needlewoman*, August 1935, p. 20.

¹⁸ 'Cheap' is, of course, a subjective term. However, in collecting the items which are featured in this thesis I have rarely seen prices which reflect the hours of work involved in creating textile crafts.

¹⁹ *Needlewoman*, May 1935, p. 5.

²⁰ On the continued importance of home in wartime, see above, pp. 129–132.

essential items (demonstrated throughout chapter one) in turn served to reinforce these positive associations.²¹

Magazines often framed domestic motivations as varying through the year, as motivations for stitching *for* (product) and *in* (process) the home changed.²² Winter brought process to the fore, with the prospect of long fireside evenings at home offering plentiful time for the domestic pleasure of stitching. In 1925 *Needlework For All* spoke with relish of the ‘prospect this year of reverting to the “good, old-fashioned winter” when the fireside is the best place in the world’, and promised a range of projects which ‘will keep clever fingers busy for many a week to come’.²³ According to *The Needlewoman* in 1935, a fire, a rug-making project and ‘a congenial companion – similarly occupied – for preference!’ was all that was needed ‘to enjoy winter afternoons and evenings to the utmost’.²⁴ In 1955 Penelope, marketing small linen squares designed to be connected with a web of crochet lace, asked ‘What better hobby for winter evenings than JOIN-IT motifs? They’re the perfect accompaniment to cosy fire-side chats.’²⁵ In 1960 *Stitchcraft* suggested that rugs were ‘very satisfying to make by the fireside on winter evenings’, though this was not a project to entertain readers through the season; a smaller rug could be completed ‘comfortably in 2 weeks, filling in 2 or 3 checks each evening’.²⁶ However, winter conditions were not equally conducive to all forms of needlework. In 1920 *The Needlewoman* noted that raffia embroidery was relatively coarse work compared to other forms of embroidery, which ‘distinguishes it as a particularly suitable occupation for winter evenings’, presumably because of the poorer light at this time of year.²⁷

From at least 1930, stitching was marketed as part of the spring clean, with the products of needlework enabling women to rejuvenate and re-create the home. In January 1930 *The Needlewoman* claimed that ‘good housewives will be making new

²¹ For positive aspects of women’s relationships with domesticity see Judy Giles, ‘A Home of One’s Own: Women and Domesticity in England 1918-1950’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 6:3 (1993), pp. 239–253; Judy Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900-50* (Basingstoke, 1995); Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004); Joanna Bourke, ‘Housewifery in Working-Class England 1860–1914’, *Past and Present*, 143:1 (1994), pp. 167–197; Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity* (1994).

²² This pattern is considerably less pronounced in wartime and austerity issues of needlework magazines, a change most likely explained by the drastically reduced size of magazine issues during the 1940s which left little space for writing of any kind.

²³ *NFA*, No. 190 (1925), p. 173.

²⁴ *Needlewoman*, November 1935, p. 27.

²⁵ *Stitchcraft*, December 1955, p. 18.

²⁶ *Stitchcraft*, January 1960, p. 15.

²⁷ *Needlewoman*, No. 6 (1920), p. 5.

items to freshen their rooms to greet the spring sun.’²⁸ In 1935 *The Needlewoman* ‘reminds its readers that Spring is coming, and that new Covers and new Cushions are needed in the home’.²⁹ Such items could ‘lend a fresh charm to a Winter-faded room.’³⁰ In 1955 *Stitchcraft* advised that ‘new cushions do put a bright face on a living room that has had hard wear through the Winter!’³¹ Thus magazines worked to integrate needlework into women’s annually shifting domestic pleasures and obligations, and in so doing demonstrated the importance of both the processes and the products of women’s needlework in the home.

The culture of needlework and the things women made also served to reinforce women’s roles as mothers and nurturers of children, becoming, for some, integral to the complex mix of pleasure and obligation inherent in motherhood. Clothing for babies and children, alongside women’s clothing and items for the home, completed the holy trinity of needlework. Needlework magazines, both through their language and content, often assumed their readers were mothers. This is implicit in their regular inclusion of instructions to make children’s clothing, toys and gifts, but also occasionally more overt. In 1960 *Needlewoman and Needlecraft* published instructions for matching embroidered aprons ‘for mummy and her budding assistant’ (fig. 5.1). In the same issue readers were encouraged to embroider a ‘baby sampler’, and offered a transfer for this in which embroidered scrolls were ‘left blank, so that **your** baby’s name and birth date can be put in.’³² Magazines occasionally made reference to children’s clothes being made by ‘a fond mother or aunt’, ‘kind sisters and aunts’, and invited readers to make an ‘outfit like this for your baby or one of your baby friends’, suggesting that even non-mothers and not-yet-mothers were expected to have an interest in children and crafting for them, spending time stitching for children who were not their own.³³ Nurturing and maternity were key to needlework culture.

²⁸ *Needlewoman*, January 1930, p. 11.

²⁹ *Needlewoman*, February 1935, p. 11.

³⁰ *Needlewoman*, March 1935, p. 11.

³¹ *Stitchcraft*, March 1955, p. 19. See also *Stitchcraft*, March 1960, p. 3.

³² Original emphasis. *N&N*, No. 81 (1960), p. 3.

³³ *Stitchcraft*, November 1935, p. 21; *Stitchcraft*, April 1950, pp. 8-9; *NPJ*, No. 222 (1930), p. 13.

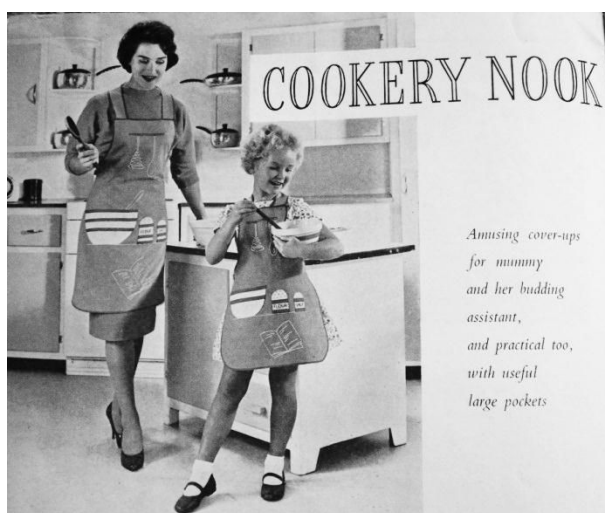
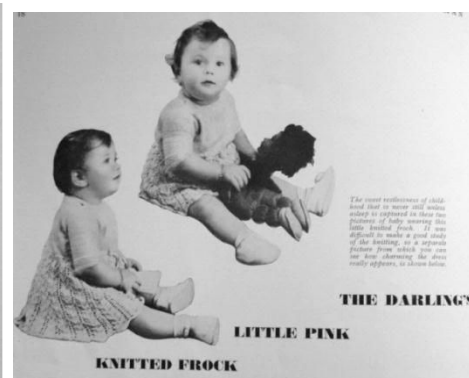


Fig. 5.1 (left): aprons ‘for mummy and her budding assistant’, *Needlewoman and Needlecraft*, No. 81 (1960), p. 6.

Fig. 5.2 (below left): ‘Mother’s Other Treasure!’, *Fancy Needlework Illustrated*, No. 27 Vol. 3, unknown date, pre-1920, p. ii.

Fig. 5.3 (below): ‘the little dimpled darling in the picture’, *The Needlewoman*, February 1934, p. 18.



Reflecting this assumed maternal interest, interwar needlework advertisements often featured winsome children, particularly girls, and harmonious domestic scenes to appeal to readers. In 1920 Ardern’s crochet cotton showed a young girl holding an outsize ball of cotton, proclaiming it to be ‘Mother’s Other Treasure!’ (an earlier printing of this advertisement can be seen in fig. 5.2).³⁴ The mother-daughter relationship was used for marketing by the magazine *Needle and Home* in 1920 when it ran a page entitled ‘Our Daughters’ Leisure Hours’, showcasing projects that could be sent for in kit form from the magazine, and directing readers to the related titles *Young Ladies’ Monthly Work* and *Little Girls’ Monthly Work*.³⁵ A 1925 Sirdar Knitting Wools advertisement shows a woman winding a ball of wool whilst her eldest daughter holds the skein, a son plays, and a crawling baby eyes up a finished ball of wool on the floor.³⁶ According to Patons & Baldwins in 1935 ‘Family affairs run smoothly for the mother who knits’, because the things she makes look good and wear well.³⁷ A particularly interesting advertisement run by Coats and Clark in 1930 showed a woman adding the final

³⁴ *NPJ*, No. 155 (1920), p. 19.

³⁵ *Needle and Home*, Vol. xv No. 1 (1920), p. 3.

³⁶ *NPJ*, No. 190 (1925), p. 16.

³⁷ *Stitchcraft*, July 1935, p. iv.

touches of trimming to her young daughter's party dress. The illustration catches the moment of her husband's return home, and both she and her daughter turn to happily greet him, the father and daughter with open arms, clearly delighted both with the dress and the reunion.³⁸ The image serves simultaneously to include the father in an idyllic domestic scene, and exclude him from the act of sewing, whilst also presenting dressmaking as an enjoyable activity for the mother and daughter.³⁹ For a number of years *Ladyship Wools* advertisements featured a very young girl comically addressing her dolls as though a knitting expert. In one she hung dolls' clothes to dry whilst saying 'Shrink? My dears of course not! They're made from Ladyship Wools.'⁴⁰ This marketing strategy suggests an additional explanation for the prominence of children's wear projects in needlework magazines. Although, as we will see, evidence from oral history narrators shows that making clothes for children was popular amongst mothers, these projects also provided magazines with an opportunity to feature photographs of appealing child models which some women may have enjoyed in their own right. In 1934 *The Needlewoman* was unusually clear about the charm of its model, referring to it as 'the little dimpled darling in the picture' (fig. 5.3).⁴¹

Recollections of making children's clothes were common amongst oral history narrators, who began their families between the late 1940s and the 1960s. More practical reasons for this are explored in chapter two, but for many women this stitching also served a range of personal, emotional purposes.⁴² For Ghillian, now an author and retired teacher, stitching at home allowed her to match her own individuality and that of her four children with their clothes. She explained 'We could have afforded to buy clothes that I made. I liked to have my kids wear something different.' Susan, a retired nurse and health visitor, similarly thought that providing her two sons with something different was important, but also cited a less clearly defined notion that stitching was an integral part of her role as a mother: 'It's something you wanted to do for your children, wasn't it, all part of the mothering. [...] It's just to make the children look individual I

³⁸ *Needlewoman*, January 1930, p. 28.

³⁹ It should be noted that this advertising image is of course highly idealised, remote from the more likely scenarios of fidgeting children and exasperated mothers.

⁴⁰ *NPJ*, No. 190 (1925), p. 15; *NPJ*, No. 220 (1930), p. 2.

⁴¹ *Needlewoman*, February 1934, p. 18.

⁴² Gordon argues that, in America, as the material need to sew at home declined with the development on an increasing affordable ready to wear market, greater emphasis was placed on less tangible, more emotional motivations for sewing. 'when someone had the opportunity to buy a child's outfit, it became more meaningful to make it at home'. Sarah Gordon, *Make It Yourself: Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930* (New York, 2009), pp. 16-17. For the implications of women's desire to stitch for their children for wartime rationing policy see above, pp. 86-87. On the emotional significance of stitching for evacuated children, see above, pp. 161-162.

suppose.’ For some, this association between mothering and stitching began even before the birth of their children. Retired clerical worker Doreen explained that, whilst expecting each of her three children, ‘I just did it because it was part of the being pregnant.’ Muriel, a retired Nottingham teacher, described making for her babies as ‘something to do [whilst pregnant], and something to sort of welcome the baby in, you know. “I’ve got your clothes, hurry up and come.”’ She also explained that she did it ‘because I wanted to.’ Doreen simply assumed that children’s knitwear would be made at home:

I made all the jumpers and cardigans for all my three, I mean they never had a bought knitted thing ever. I do now, but I didn’t then [and was that do you think because it was so much cheaper, or...?] well, it was just automatically I made their jumpers for them [just an ordinary part of motherhood?] yes, I didn’t dream of going out and buying a jumper.

For these women, the association between mothering and stitching was so strong as to be thought of as ‘automatic’, ‘part of being pregnant’ and ‘all part of the mothering’, an integral part of ‘doing’ motherhood.

Needlework and the culture of needlework within specialist magazines allowed women a space in which they could focus on female relationships. Stitching both acknowledged and reinforced elements of homosociability within women’s lives through gift exchange, shared interests, activities and knowledge.

Needlework could help to reinforce homosociability amongst women through gift exchange, encouraging and enabling women to create handmade gifts for female friends and relatives, physical manifestations of the time, thought and resources they devoted to one another. Instructions for handmade gifts were common in winter issues of needlework magazines, helping readers to prepare for Christmas. These were almost entirely intended for female recipients, gendering the consumption as well as the production of needlework.⁴³ In 1920 *The Needlewoman* claimed that ‘of the many gifts appropriate from one woman to another, few are more appreciated and valued than a daintily designed and embroidered article of underwear’, and ten years later *Fancy Needlework Illustrated* concurred, stating ‘dainty embroidered underwear is always a valued gift’.⁴⁴ Knitting offered a relatively large scope for manly presents, including

⁴³ eg. *Needlewoman*, December 1925; *NFA*, No. 189 (1925); *Needlewoman*, December 1930; *NPJ*, No. 223 (1930), supplement; *Stitchcraft*, September 1955, pp. 12-13; *Stitchcraft*, October 1955, free gift book; *NI*, No. 233 (1955), p. 19; *Stitchcraft*, October 1965, pp. 10-11; *N&N*, No. 104 (1965), pp. 16-17.

⁴⁴ *Needlewoman*, No. 6 (1920), p. 16; *FNI*, No. 95 Vol. 8 (1930), p. 3.

socks, scarves, and golf club covers.⁴⁵ Embroidery was more precarious, although in 1930 *The Needlewoman* ventured a project drawing upon the ‘days of chivalry’ when women supposedly embroidered ‘coat armour’ worn by their knights. As ‘to-day fashion decrees nothing so romantic in the way of dress for men’, this was updated as a cushion or tobacco pouch embroidered with ‘his regimental, school or club badge’.⁴⁶ Thus embroidery was safely masculinised. Beyond the pages of magazines, women faced real difficulties in making for men. With money tight early in her marriage in the 1950s, retired personal assistant Molly remembered feeling rebuffed by her father-in-law after making him a waistcoat for Christmas:

I can remember when I was married, we hadn’t very much money and I made my mother-in-law a bedjacket and I made my father-in-law a waistcoat. And I was so pleased with myself, but my father-in-law said that he didn’t go in for ‘clothing parades’, and he was very disappointed that I’d made this waistcoat and surely there was other things [...] my father-in-law was very shirty about it, ‘clothing parade’ he called it.

Also in the 1950s, soon after her marriage to her actor husband (a match of which her mother did not approve), whilst based in Sunderland for his work Audrey made clothes for the two of them: ‘I made him a horrible dressing gown, that was my only foray into men’s clothes, and I did make him quite a nice waistcoat.’ Overwhelmingly, hand-made gifts were made for other women, not men.

Women’s motivations in this predominantly feminine exchange of handmade gifts were manifold. Like Molly, many women opted to make gifts to economise.⁴⁷ But hand making could also alter the meaning of the gift both to the maker and the recipient. As Turney has found:

When making was undertaken for a specific recipient, interviewees spoke of how they believed that their making brought them closer to the intended recipient. For example, the choosing of a design, item and medium, combined with time spent making, repeatedly brought the recipient to mind. The tactile act of making enabled the maker to keep ‘in touch’ with the person they were making for.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ eg. *Needlewoman*, January 1930, p. 17; *Stitchcraft*, December 1955, p. 15; *NI*, No. 233 (1955), p. 12; *Stitchcraft*, October 1960, pp. 6-7; *Knit & Sew*, February 1960, p. 14; *Stitchcraft*, December 1965, p. 28.

⁴⁶ *Needlewoman*, November 1930, p. 16.

⁴⁷ See also *FNI*, No. 100 Vol. 8 (1930), p. 1.

⁴⁸ Joanne Turney, ‘Home Craft in Britain 1975-2002’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Southampton, 2002), p. 336.

Similarly, Zena Forster has seen nineteenth-century needlework as a vital aspect of feminine friendship, arguing that ‘Often, in the solitary practice of their needlework, women were working on bonds which linked them to other women, and by displaying received gifts, they positioned their homes in a feminine community.’⁴⁹

Magazines reassured readers that these acts of making would be meaningful to recipients. In 1935 *The Needlewoman* gave directions for personalised embroidered guest towels, as made for friends by the actress Irene Vanbrugh (who presumably had no pressing need to economise). Embroidered with the recipient’s name and the year when they were given, they had ‘that personal touch, so beloved by recipients of gifts great or small’.⁵⁰ Later that year *The Needlewoman* claimed that handmade Christmas gifts offered ‘that personal touch that means so much’ when offering kits of pre-made and traced items for embroidery. In actuality these offered no scope for personalisation or variation, but would nonetheless demonstrate through re-creation the effort and thought involved in handwork.⁵¹ With stitched gifts aimed primarily at female recipients, their near-universal basic grounding in textile crafts would have contributed to the appreciation of hand-made items, ensuring that they understood to some extent the skill and labour involved in their production. Although the reaction of her father-in-law showed that recipients of homemade gifts could at times be ungrateful, Molly had a deep sense of the value of homemade gifts: ‘the way I was brought up, you know, this great big family, that if you made something for somebody it was better than... you know, just by going and buying something, but it was a question of money as well.’ This added meaning would have deepened the significance of handmade gifts between women.

The pleasures of needlework may also have encouraged gift-creation, and therefore gift-giving. Crafting for others could help women to justify the time and expense of an enjoyable project, and remove concerns about whether they themselves needed the finished item. The pleasure that many women found in needlework could sometimes inspire over-production, as demonstrated in chapter one.⁵² The desire to find a home for needlework products may have encouraged female gift exchanges and reinforced the

⁴⁹ Zena Forster, ‘The Home-Makers: Needlework, Homes and Domestic Femininities in Middle Class, Mid-Nineteenth Century England with Particular Reference to Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Nottingham, 1995), p. 51. On the emotional significance of finished objects in wartime, see above, pp. 157-167.

⁵⁰ *Needlewoman*, April 1935, p. 11.

⁵¹ *Needlewoman*, November 1935, p. 25.

⁵² See above, pp. 56-57.

homosocial relationships they produced. As *The Needlewoman* exclaimed: ‘may your “Gifties” bring pleasure to you in the making, and give pleasure to others on whom you bestow them!’⁵³ Muriel found that the need to give gifts to others dovetailed with her own sometimes prolific stitching: ‘Well it was always useful for presents, people liked to have something that you’d made. It was something to give away.’

In addition to bonding through the meaningful products of needlework, women sometimes joined together for the process of making. Magazines and their advertisers sometimes hinted that women stitched together as a form of socialising. An advertisement for Ardern’s threads showed two women, seated, at their crochet, suggesting that ‘After your strenuous work, there’s nothing you’ll enjoy so much as a friendly chat and some restful crocheting.’⁵⁴ Marketing often features people engaged in unlikely conversation in order to enthuse about a given product, and therefore advertisements featuring women discussing or sharing needlework products could be seen as no more reliable indicators of women’s lived experiences than are modern television advertisements showing female friends discussing washing-up liquid or constipation relief. However, needlework magazines also mentioned women stitching together outside of advertisements. In 1930 a sewn cloak decorated in leaves was described as particularly enticing as ‘you can take the crochet leaves with you when you visit your friend’s house, and sit and work them while you gossip.’⁵⁵ In the same year *The Needlewoman* suggested that a particularly smart workbag could be carried ‘like an ordinary handbag, when you go to that talking and working afternoon with a friend.’⁵⁶ Women might also stitch as part of a guild or women’s group, or divide the work of a single project between friends and family members.⁵⁷

Some, but not all, of the oral history narrators, recalled stitching with other women in adulthood during the 1950s and 1960s. Ghillian had rarely spoken to others about her needlework and did not bring it out in public. She presented this as part of her more general tendency not to ‘do’ typical female sociability, and related the story of her one attempt to host a coffee morning, which ended in disaster when she found she had no coffee to offer. Audrey and Doreen did not remember stitching with others. Others remembered stitching with female family members but not with friends. Molly, whose

⁵³ *Needlewoman*, December 1925, p. 5.

⁵⁴ *NPJ*, No. 158 (1920), p. 16.

⁵⁵ *Needlewoman*, January 1930, p. 21.

⁵⁶ *Needlewoman*, April 1930, p. 16. See also *Stitchcraft*, September 1960, p. 23.

⁵⁷ *Needlewoman*, April 1925, p. 19; *Needlewoman*, September 1925, p. 20; *Needlewoman*, October 1930, p. 19; *Knit & Sew*, February 1960, p. 3.

family came from the working class of Poplar, recalled crafting being important in her family life, and had sometimes kept a project at her parents' home to work on whilst visiting them. Susan and her sisters, the daughters of a headmaster and a teacher, often knitted together, and Pat, a shorthand typist and later teacher, embroidered when visiting family and also friends. More formal settings gave women the opportunity to practice needlework together, such as the adult education classes in craft attended by Molly, Muriel and Jeanne, a health visitor and a fieldwork teacher. Whilst the small oral history sample gives only partial evidence for women stitching with other women, it may not be representative, and, incorporating women born between 1924 and 1938, predominantly reveals post-war experiences. For evidence on women meeting together to knit 'comforts' for the services in the Second World War, see chapter three.⁵⁸

Needlework magazines often highlighted the ways in which women stitched for a female audience, emphasising needlework as a feminine culture. Needlework, particularly embroidery, was geared towards a feminine aesthetic, and with a near universal grounding in the basics of stitching it was women who were best placed to appreciate and evaluate one another's efforts.⁵⁹ In the interwar years there was a recurring theme in needlework advertising of younger women seeking approval from or deferring to the opinion of an older mother or grandmother figure.⁶⁰ A 1920 advertisement for Ardern's crochet cotton showed two women having tea, the guest examining and admiring the tablecloth whilst the hostess presides over the teapot. The claim within the copy that your crochet can be 'a delight to your friends' (rather than family or husband) clearly positions crochet within a realm of female aesthetics and, given the guest's close examination, expertise.⁶¹ Similarly, in 1925 an advertisement for Cock 'o th' North wool promised that 'when you shew [sic] your best friend' your knitted garments, the quality of the wool will be evident, illustrating the point with an image of a woman showing a knitted top to another.⁶² Continuing this theme in the post-war era, *Stitchcraft* claimed in 1960 that 'One of the pleasures of entertaining is laying

⁵⁸ See above, pp. 144-145.

⁵⁹ Penny Sparke has claimed in relation to embroidery: 'Masculine culture could neither understand nor, more importantly, value, the symbolic and aesthetic role that images such as "the crinoline lady" – a much loved subject inspired by countless Victorian embroideries which re-emerged in the inter-war years in a number of guises, including knitted tea-pot warmers and nightdress cases – played within women's culture. [...] However well-made such artefacts may have been, they could never have entered the masculine canon of "good design" objects, so rooted were they in the world of women's domesticity and feminine taste.' Penny Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (1995), p. 152. For images of the crinoline lady, see above, p. 180.

⁶⁰ For a fuller exploration of the mother and grandmother figure in advertising, see above, pp. 198-200.

⁶¹ *FNI*, No. 55 Vol. 5 (1920), p. iv; see also *FNI*, No. 95 Vol. 8 (1930), p. 16.

⁶² *NPJ*, No. 190 (1925), p. 2.

the table or arranging the tea-tray, and this is where your own embroideries come in. A tray set with a hand-worked cosy and matching traycloth always looks so attractive, and your friends will notice at once.’⁶³ Whereas advertisements for convenience foods sometimes featured appreciative husbands or offspring, needlework marketing showed women appreciating women’s work. It was female peers who were supposed to be impressed with the fruits of one another’s labours, rather than men or children who, though using and benefiting from such objects, were not necessarily expected to understand or fully appreciate them. Thus not only needlework production, but to a lesser extent, needlework consumption was gendered as feminine.

The feminine culture of needlework was characterised by a female-to-female transfer of knowledge and skills across generations. Many narrators remembered being taught to stitch in the 1930s and 1940s by older women in their families, reflecting and reinforcing bonds between female relatives. The general positivity of these accounts reflects the life-long love of stitching which led each of the narrators to this history project. Muriel was slightly sceptical of the account of her early stitching given by her mother, an Eltham foster-carer:

she told me that as I sat up propped by cushions, because I couldn’t sit very well, she used to give me a bodkin and buttons and get me to sew buttons on, and I think that might be a bit farfetched, I might have been a bit older, but she did tell me that. And of course I watched her and she taught me to sew.

For some this felt automatic, assumed to be normal and simply part of being female in the company of other females. When asked why she thought she stitched, Doreen cited her mother, a Lee housewife married to a policeman, as key: ‘I think it was because my mother did it, I did it.’ Margaret expanded on the same theme:

My mother did every sort of craft imaginable, my grandmother did dressmaking for money as well as doing embroidery and sewing, knitting of every sort, so I grew up sewing from the earliest age I could wield a needle. It was just a thing that one did. The family were doing it and I joined in.

Interestingly, here the ‘family’ signifies prominent female relatives. Susan’s account gives an unusual glimpse into her schoolteacher mother’s possible motivations for teaching her daughters to stitch, keeping them occupied, productive and out of trouble:

Well, my mother had three girls first, and it was wartime, so she was, we were moving around. And girls did domestic things then. She never liked us to be

⁶³ *Stitchcraft*, May 1960, pp. 18-19.

bored or do nothing, she always kept us busy with drawing, colouring, sewing, knitting, she always kept us busy. We weren't allowed to sit down and say we were bored, because there was no television, and the radio was on, we could have the radio on, we could listen to the programmes they chose, but we were always kept busy with sewing and knitting. And it seems to me I learnt at a very young age how to sew buttons on and how to make things. And my aunt came to stay with us and she taught me to knit when I was about six. I can see her now, we were sitting round the fire, coal fire, and she showed me how to knit and from then onwards I've never stopped, I've always carried on knitting, knitting, knitting. And after that, we did some embroidery, and we sewed dolls clothes.

A home-based introduction to needlework was supplemented, to a greater or lesser extent, by lessons at school. Educated between the 1930s and the early 1950s, all the female narrators had needlework instruction at school. Although, as shown in the introductory chapter of this thesis, many feminist historians have been scathing of this aspect of girls' education, oral history narrators often had positive recollections of these classes.⁶⁴ The women interviewed for this thesis all stitched in later-life, to varying extents, and so these positive associations are perhaps unsurprising. Yet they nonetheless provide a neglected perspective on needlework education. Molly was especially enthusiastic about her needlework lessons:

absolutely loved them, absolutely loved them, and it was such a pleasure, because I'd never, until that time at senior school, I hadn't – I'd knitted, you know knitted dolls' clothes, and um, with my grandmother's guidance, knitted clothes for the teddy bear and knitted clothes for the dolls, but the handsewing of the hem and round the neck of the petticoat that I made at school, it gave like a shell pattern at the bottom, and I was so pleased with that, you know, I'd achieved something, and I can still remember that pleasure of achievement.

Other narrators who had more negative recollections of school needlework lessons, tended to cite difficulties with individual teachers, rather than the subject itself. Doreen's difficulties with needlework lessons were a result of a bad relationship with one teacher

The school I went to, Charlton Central, we had a teacher there [...] and we didn't get on, if you know what I mean, and every time I did something she'd say to me 'it's wrong, undo it and do it again', and that turned me off [...] But this teacher, I mean she was [whispers] horrible [chuckle]. I still think so, but there you are. And you know, everything I did, even though my mother had said to me 'this is how you do it', according to [her] it was wrong, and that does turn you off, if you get it all the time. But basically it was because she and I didn't

⁶⁴ See above, pp. 24-26.

gel. I mean you do get, and in those days teachers were [clears throat]. Say no more.

Audrey also remembers disliking lessons that, because of her existing knowledge, she felt she did not need:

because I'd done a lot of sewing at home I was quite cocky, and when the teacher said look, Audrey this isn't good enough, your stitches are too big [laughs] I was outraged. So I had to unpick them all, and then I did them very, very small [laughs] and the teacher said they're too small [laughs] I said well I'm sorry I can't unpick them [...] I suppose I resented being taught what I already knew, or thought I knew.

Thus whilst some of these women did have negative experiences of needlework classes, these cannot be ascribed to needlework itself.

Although some level of needlework classes was near-universal for girls in this period, the extent and nature of this varied according to school, attainment and ultimately, social class. At this time the educational system was tiered, and (both before and after the reforms of 1944) the type of school a child attended correlated closely with their class background.⁶⁵ The variety and depth of needlework education experienced by girls depended on their place within this tiered system. Many of my narrators attended grammar schools, an academically-oriented sector of the educational system which was dominated by the middle classes. These included Ghilian (her father a registrar, her mother a teacher), Margaret (her father a civil servant), Jeanne (her father a shipping-clerk) and Muriel, a less typical grammar-school girl, her father a painter and decorator whose income was supplemented by his wife's work as a foster-carer. Many of these remembered their schools placing little emphasis on their needlework education. Ghilian remembered that when she returned to London with her family after the war and began grammar school 'I almost unlearned handicrafts because nobody did handicrafts, the nearest you got was cooking, domestic science.' Margaret recalled a single term of needlework classes 'when I think an art mistress left rather suddenly and they had to find something for us to do. But otherwise sewing was all associated with

⁶⁵ For more on schooling in this period see Penny Tinkler, 'Girlhood and Growing up', in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2001), pp. 35–43; Penny Summerfield, 'Cultural Reproduction and the Education of Girls: a Study of Girls' Secondary Schooling in Two Lancashire Towns, 1900–1950', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women 1850–1950* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 155–157; Katherine Watson, 'Education and opportunity', in Julie-Marie Strange and Francesca Carnevali (eds), *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change* (Harlow, 2007), pp. 354–362; Michael Sanderson, 'Education and Social Mobility', in Paul Johnson (ed.), *20th Century Britain: Economic, Social & Cultural Change* (1994), pp. 374–376; Michael Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change in England* (1987).

the home, the encouragement came from the home.’ Jeanne remembered her main needlework assignment at her grammar school, sewing her own gym knickers and tunic:

I don’t think I learned a great deal. They were quite particular, I believe before we did that we had to make an apron, because all children were taught to make an apron, and we had to stroke all the gathers down. I can remember that quite clearly and I found that quite tedious [laughs].

I didn’t like it very much, mainly because it was a grammar school, I didn’t feel that they were particularly interested in it, to be honest. And I don’t think anyone took it any further than the first year. So... I don’t quite – I think it was just in purely to make this, fill in the space in the timetable and make these tunics [laughs] as far as I could see. I could never see any particular reason for including it in the syllabus to be honest.

Susan’s experiences at her secondary modern school in the early 1950s stand in stark contrast. Secondary moderns were attended primarily by working-class children, and stressed a practical and vocational education rather than an academic one. Susan was raised in a solidly middle-class household. Her father was a headmaster, and her mother was a teacher. Yet due, she thought, to poor teachers rushed through training during the 1940s, as a schoolgirl in Reading in the 1950s she failed the 11+ exam:

I went to a secondary modern school, much to my parents’ disappointment, and craft was very important there. That’s where I learned to tat, and we learned to embroider, and we made clothes for ourselves at school.

The boys did wood work, but the girls had to do knitting, sewing and domestic things. We learned how to iron.

Although Susan’s needlework lessons had given her skills she used in her lifelong hobbies, she was nonetheless critical of the narrowed horizons her highly gendered secondary modern education gave her, and was acutely aware of widespread disdain for the practical and domestic skills she was taught:

I can still remember, what a waste of time, we had to learn how to scrub a wooden table. With these granite tops it’s just not relevant [laughs] how to scrub a wooden table and how to wash a hairbrush, that’s all the science we got, it’s very sad really, perhaps that’s why I’m not a scientist.

Well I think it was... I sometimes get a bit annoyed about being sex stereotyped. Girls did this, girls were domestic, and girls used their hands, and I always felt that we girls, you know, ‘we’re good with our hands but hadn’t got much between our ears’, you know, we were thought, it’s sort of an inferior intellect if you were good with your hands. And that does sort of make you feel not good about yourself, sort of as prestige, self-esteem bit. Girls were only fit for

cooking, housework, sewing, domestic stuff. Boys could have ambitions. I think that's the main problem, that I've never had an ambition.

Whilst needlework was a near-universal aspect of girls education, their experiences were not homogenous, and were highly dependent on class and attainment.

Many historians have argued that whilst being taught needlework girls were also learning femininity. Both Annmarie Turnbull and Vivienne Richmond have established that those who taught needlework to young girls sometimes aimed to simultaneously instil idealised feminine behaviour. Turnbull wrote that Victorian teachers hoped that needlework would act as a 'sedative':

The dampening of any high spirits on the part of girls was a quite explicit intention of the architect of the London School Board's scheme for needlework in the [eighteen-]seventies. Lousia Sara Floyer, the board's first salaried needlework inspector, found the image of the silent, motionless female, bent busily over her sewing a persuasive ideal of mature womanhood, and organized needlework instruction accordingly, believing that such a paragon could be moulded from infancy via the needlework curriculum.⁶⁶

Similarly, Richmond has shown that, unlike other domestic skills, needlework was taught for reasons beyond its practical use, in the hope of instilling 'patience', 'cleanliness' and 'discipline', a 'means of inculcating the feminine virtues of modesty and obedience.'⁶⁷

However, whilst this *intention* has been proven, its efficacy has not. Nonetheless, many historians have assumed that needlework successfully functioned as a tool for socialising girls into oppressive gender roles. Parker has claimed that:

The manner in which embroidery signifies both self-containment and submission is the key to understanding women's relation to the art. Embroidery has provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness. The presence and practice of embroidery promotes particular states of mind and self experience. Because of its history and associations embroidery evokes and inculcates femininity in the embroiderer.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Annmarie Turnbull, 'Learning Her Womanly Work: the Elementary School Curriculum, 1870-1914', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women 1850-1950* (Oxford, 1987), p. 88.

⁶⁷ Vivienne Richmond, 'Stitching the Self: Eliza Kenniff's Drawers and the Materialization of Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century London', in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and Things, 1750-1950: Gendered Material Strategies* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 45-46.

⁶⁸ Parker, *Subversive*, p. 11.

June Freeman has stated that in the unspecified ‘past’: ‘Girls were often plying a needle by the time they were three. This certainly helped to keep a woman’s mind narrow and her ideas unadventurous, so helping to ensure she knew her place.’⁶⁹ Pat Kirkham has also seen handicrafts as creating and reinforcing particular forms of gendered behaviour: ‘At the same time as emphasising creativity and joy in labour, however, the teaching of handicrafts remained part of a wider process of socialisation. For girls in particular, it continued to restrain them, to define “good” behaviour.’⁷⁰ Aimee E. Newell and Heather Pristash, Inez Schaechterle, and Sue Carter Wood have cited Parker’s suggestion that the bowed head of the embroiderer signifies obedience and submission.⁷¹ However, this same posture would be seen if writing a manifesto or building a bomb.

Such approaches can be simplistic and often rely upon the assumption of an archetypal unwilling, uninterested and sometimes unruly girl-child being disciplined into quietly stitching and, by extension, into restrained and submissive femininity. This approach does not fit with the pleasant memories of childhood stitching reported by some narrators, shown above. Gordon has offered a more nuanced approach:

Although sewing could support traditional gender ideology, it did not always or automatically do so. Sewing is a skill upon which reasons and goals are imposed by the user. If some women used sewing to support conservative ideas about their domestic and social role, others wielded needle and thread to challenge such ideas. Moreover, one individual could pursue multiple agendas with one project.⁷²

Evidence from oral history narrators’ childhood and adult memories of stitching reveal that this challenge and resistance need not stem from any form of conscious ‘agenda’. Girls and women brought their own personality to their stitching, and where these did not fit with idealised or stereotypical models of femininity, neither did their needlework practice. It was both fascinating and sometimes amusing to hear the personality traits that narrators associated with their own needlework experiences,

⁶⁹ June Freeman, ‘Sewing as a Woman’s Art’, in Gillian Elinor, Su Richardson, Sue Scott, Angharad Thomas, and Kate Walker (eds), *Women and Craft* (1987), p. 55.

⁷⁰ Pat Kirkham, ‘Women and the Inter-War Handicrafts Revival’, in Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (eds), *A View From the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design* (1989), p. 176.

⁷¹ Heather Pristash, Inez Schaechterle, and Sue Carter Wood, ‘The Needle as the Pen: Intentionality, Needlework, and the Production of Alternate Discourses of Power’, in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles: 1750-1950* (Farnham, 2009), p. 17; Aimee E. Newell, ‘Tattered to Pieces’: Amy Fiske’s Sampler and the Changing Roles of Women in Antebellum New England’, in Beth Fowkes Tobin and Maureen Daly Goggin (eds), *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles: 1750-1950* (Farnham, 2009), p. 56.

⁷² Gordon, *Make*, p. 28.

which were often at odds with submissive femininity. For Doreen, her earliest proper knitting experience, during her girlhood in 1930s Lee, was a tale of determination:

I started knitting when I was twelve, because my aunt was expecting a baby, and I said foolishly, 'I'll make you something', and my mother said 'no you won't because you don't knit', so of course I did it to show her, and I've never stopped since. So I started to knit when I was twelve, really serious knitting, and I've done it all my life.

For Audrey her needlework demonstrated her resolve and perseverance. As a young girl in Bromley she was told by her aunt that she must finish everything she started. She prided herself on doing just that, even when she became bored or found she had been overly ambitious, as when she decided that her first Aran knitting project would be a complete set of jumpers for her children. For Ghillian, her childhood stitching demonstrated her youthful independence, recalling her refusal to ask others for help when she struggled. Susan's memories of her 1940s childhood were strikingly at odds with the idea of needlework as an indicator of feminine submissiveness. Her tales of naughtiness demonstrate that at times it could be stitching, rather than refusing to, that was the act of defiance:

I can remember when we were little, we hadn't got any material to make dolls clothes, so we made ourselves some dolls out of the sheets of the bed. We cut a bit of material off the bottom of the sheet, and we sewed, my sister and I, we cut out some dolls, 'cos we wanted dolls and we hadn't got enough dolls, so we made them out of sheet material. My mother was absolutely furious, because fabric, you know you couldn't buy fabric, and bed sheets with a good foot of it cut out was a bit of a, that was one thing we got told off for, we made ourselves dollies.

And the funny thing was [hushed] when my grandmother came to stay, we weren't allowed to knit on Sunday, because you don't knit on Sunday, you go to Church on Sunday, so we used to go up into the bedroom, and knit. I often wonder what she thought we were doing, why we weren't downstairs, we were up in the bedroom knitting secretly 'cos we mustn't do it on Sundays. We knitted mainly dolls' clothes. That was naughty to knit on Sundays. She was ever so old fashioned, very strict... sourpuss she was, my mother's mother that was. Sunday was not for doing things, you didn't do housework either, just got the food, but Sunday was not for crafts. You could read, but not knit on Sundays.⁷³

⁷³ Susan was not alone in her 'naughty' needlework. A youthful Rebecca Crompton, later a renowned embroiderer, was reprimanded at school for sewing in the back of class during a scripture lesson. Beryl Dean and Pamela Pavitt, *Rebecca Crompton and Elizabeth Grace Thomson: Pioneers of Stitchery in the*

We must be sceptical of attributing any inherent gendered meaning to needlework and needlework classes. It is clear that women were not passively moulded by this, but in many cases reshaped stitching in their own image.

We have seen that needlework formed a world of women – that stitchers were assumed to be women, and that women were assumed to stitch. Needlework was intertwined with key areas of women’s culture: appearance, domesticity and maternity. It could illustrate and reinforce relationships between women, and formed a shared but nonetheless varying aspect of girls’ education. Amateur needlework was clearly marked as a woman’s domain.

This gendering of needlework meant that there were considerable discursive barriers to male participation. A needleman might be expected to be met with surprise and even derision. Anne Macdonald has claimed that in America during the First World War: ‘So ingrained was the perception of knitting as a facet of woman’s sphere that men who knit during the war needed strong male psyches to tolerate jesting busybodies.’⁷⁴ In Britain, Mass Observation records one female factory worker in 1937 who was so amused when told of a school teaching boys to knit that she ‘exploded into her tea’.⁷⁵ The association between women and stitching was so strong that A.J. East, a prisoner of war in Germany, referred to cross-dressing gatherings in a neighbouring hut as ‘sewing parties’.⁷⁶

However, the most prominent history of knitting – written by a man – neatly sidesteps the issues faced and created by male interlopers. In writing *A History of Hand Knitting*, Richard Rutt (1925-2011), the knitting Bishop of Leicester, defended, even valorised, male knitters, but refused to view them in their wider cultural context.⁷⁷ For the purposes of this study, the importance of his book is twofold. Firstly, it still looms large for the popular reader in the limited historiography of knitting, and so, by extension, do his views on male knitting. Secondly, although not published until 1987, it

1930s (1996) pages unnumbered. For an example of ‘naughty’ sewing in 1930s Jamaica see Carol Tulloch, ‘There’s No Place Like Home: Home Dressmaking and Creativity in the Jamaican Community of the 1940s to the 1960s’, in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), p. 123 n. 10.

⁷⁴ Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (New York, 1988), p. 225.

⁷⁵ P Barlow, ‘Introduction to Winding’, in Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan (eds), *Speak for Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology, 1937-49* (1984), p. 156.

⁷⁶ IWM Documents 1493, 3 April 1944.

⁷⁷ ‘Obituary of Monsignor Richard Rutt’, *The Telegraph*, 22 August 2011, accessed 16 January 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/religion-obituaries/8716735/Monsignor-Richard-Rutt.html>

offers a glimpse of the opinions of a man who knitted in the period under study. He is dismissive of gender as a barrier to knitting: ‘There is nothing sex-linked about hand knitting. Yet in twentieth-century Britain it became unusual for men to knit.’⁷⁸ He describes himself and fellow male knitters as unusual, but does not reflect upon the reasons for their more general exclusion, and how or why they negotiated this. Initially taught to knit at the age of seven by his grandfather, a Bedfordshire blacksmith, ‘to keep me quiet indoors on a rainy day’, he continued his education ‘by pestering my mother and studying *Woolcraft*’.⁷⁹ He presents himself as an independent and intrepid boy knitter, designing his own glove pattern with extra-long fingers when he could not find shop-bought gloves to fit, and working out techniques through trial and error: ‘Fair Isle knitting was again in fashion, and, like most children, I preferred pictures to patterns: struggling to knit a picture of a pet guinea-pig, I discovered by rule of thumb the principles of intarsia knitting.’ When the Second World War came he joined the Navy and, although he did not go to sea, found the tradition of shipboard needlework made his stitching more easily accepted.⁸⁰

Rutt’s description of other male knitters downplays the generally feminine nature of knitting, presenting them as anomalies but not exploring the factors that kept other men from the workbox. He lists various groups of men who were more likely to know how to knit, including sailors, upper-class boys, surgeons (who, ‘with fingers accustomed to fine work with thread, often like knitting baby clothes’), soldiers, and, of course, members of the clergy like himself. He emphasises the ability of male knitters, saying that whilst upper-class boys generally lost interest before their teens, ‘By this time some had learned the mystery of turning a stocking heel, and not a few teenage boys were proud to use that skill to assist sisters, school matrons, aunts and other approved women who were less sure of the technique.’ He does not present male knitters as interloping amateurs, but as able to match or best the women around them. He is intriguingly silent on the matter of how men negotiated knitting with (or even without) their masculinity intact. For Rutt male knitters are a minority, but he does not reflect on the implications of this minority status.⁸¹ Rutt’s reluctance to engage with the gendered nature of knitting, attempting matter-of-factly to slide men into mainstream knitting history with

⁷⁸ Richard Rutt, *A History of Hand Knitting* (1987), p. 157.

⁷⁹ *Woolcraft* is a booklet of knitting instructions and patterns, first published by J. and J. Baldwin in 1914. Further versions were produced, and this continued after the 1920 amalgamation with Patons of Alloa which formed Patons and Baldwins. Rutt provides a history of *Woolcraft* up until 1985, and it is still published today. Rutt, *History*, pp. 145–146.

⁸⁰ Rutt, *History*, p. vi.

⁸¹ Rutt, *History*, pp. 157–158.

little comment, perhaps suggests a desire to avoid addressing any ideas of impropriety and effeminacy, or inviting ridicule.

Men were generally constructed as non-stitchers. A Second World War official guide to knitting ‘comforts’ for the RAF depicted men as poor or non-knitters.⁸² The cover showed three women of different ages and a young girl confidently knitting. A young boy knits whilst leaning over to copy his female companion and a middle-aged man focuses intently on the simple task of winding a skein of wool (fig. 5.4).⁸³ Inside is an image of an Airman mending his own socks, his concentration on the delicate task humorously suggesting that servicemen were not natural needle workers (fig. 5.5).⁸⁴ A 1940 comic leader in *The Times* described the lot of a man surrounded by comforts knitters, emphasising the ‘otherness’ of this feminine craft. The knitting has literally invaded his home, lurking in seats, a ‘fearful creature – porcupine or hedgehog or so, but with bristles pointing not naturally in one but most unnaturally in all directions’, so ‘Swiftly but cautiously he seeks another chair. Another beast is there’. At this point the knitting turns serpentine and ‘he has somehow got his feet entangled in coils of wool, thick dark blue wool and thinner khaki wool, which unwinds itself with malignant speed from balls that are hiding under the chairs’, and our hapless hero has to call to be rescued by a reproachful knitter. This feminine craft is clearly alien, almost hostile.⁸⁵ Four years later, another humorous *Times* leader, ‘Knitting for Sport’ dealt with male knitting as a possibility to be worked towards rather than a present reality. Lord Dudley, it claimed, had recently argued that servicemen should take up knitting and not ‘waste their time off duty playing cards’. Whilst noting that there is nothing ‘intrinsically absurd in men knitting’ the piece claimed that significant changes would be needed before men felt comfortable or inclined to knit. Men, it was argued, had ‘a distrust of amusements which might conceivably be of use’ and had long wasted their time on anything competitive, however pointless. It was suggested that if one man were to set a knitting record this would greatly encourage others to take up the activity. As matters stood, women were the ‘right and inconspicuous sex where knitting is concerned’, and ‘it is too much to expect a man to go so far as to produce a ball of wool’.⁸⁶ Whilst it is expected that the situation would be exaggerated for comic effect, this nonetheless suggests that there were significant cultural barriers for many potential male knitters.

⁸² For more on comforts, see above, pp. 124-127, 138-139, 141-148, 156, 162-167.

⁸³ *Knitting for the R.A.F.: Official Book of Instructions*, cover.

⁸⁴ *Knitting for the R.A.F.: Official Book of Instructions*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ *Times*, 8 February 1940, p. 9.

⁸⁶ *Times*, 7 October 1944, p. 5.



Fig. 5.4 (above): Males dabbling in knitting, *Knitting for the R.A.F.: Official Book of Instructions*, cover.



Fig. 5.5 (left): Airman darning, *Knitting for the R.A.F.: Official Book of Instructions*, p. 5.

Yet some men *did* stitch. Some forms of needlework were more acceptable for men, such as rug making.⁸⁷ The normality or otherwise of men stitching varied across occupations and situations. Sailors and men undergoing occupational therapy and physiotherapy to recover from wartime injuries were more likely to wield a needle.⁸⁸ In the Second World War, whether in Europe or the Far East, prisoners of war turned to a range of crafts in order to create needed or wanted items within the camp and stave off extreme boredom or even mental illness.⁸⁹ Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum have claimed that, from both a practical and a psychological standpoint, ‘creativity of one form or another was a central form of survival; it was a necessity – a pre-requisite for enduring and surviving captivity.’⁹⁰ Rather than undermining the gendered nature of needlework, such examples often illustrate it through the obvious efforts made by needlemen and those who interacted with and reported on them to reassure everyone that the art of needlework could indeed be manly.

Research into wartime gender suggests that normative masculinity was not as rigidly anti-domestic as might be supposed. Sonya Rose has argued that during the Second

⁸⁷ Molly recalled her father making hooked rugs, Jeanne’s parents worked rugs together, and Audrey made rag rugs as a child with her family, including her brother. Magazines and advertisers often commented on rug making being an activity for the whole family, sometimes explicitly mentioning men. *Stitchcraft*, Nov. 1940, p. 2; *Stitchcraft*, March 1955, p. 12; *NI*, No. 232 (1955), p.16; *NI*, No. 234 (1955), p. 3; *Stitchcraft*, September 1960, p. 12; *N&N*, No. 82 (1960), p. 29; *Stitchcraft*, January 1965, p. 33.

⁸⁸ There was a long tradition of needlework within the Navy. Historically sailors had a reasonable acquaintance with needle skills due to work making sails and maintaining their uniforms, and thanks to frequently prolonged periods of calm at sea had a great deal of time to fill. J. Welles Henderson and Rodney P Carlisle, *Marine Art & Antiques: Jack Tar: A Sailor’s Life 1750-1910* (Woodbridge, 1999), pp. 107–109. Emmanuel Cooper argues that the decline of sailing ships in the twentieth century led to the dwindling of sailors’ embroidered woolwork. Emmanuel Cooper, *People’s Art: Working-Class Art from 1750 to the Present Day* (Edinburgh, 1994), p. 164. Sue Prichard has highlighted the quilt making of tailors and soldiers in the nineteenth century, seeking to challenge the characterisation of the craft as ‘women’s work’. Although establishing that men in the British military in India created quilts, she offers little illumination on the circumstances in which they did so, or what it meant when they did. She neither analyses nor acknowledges the strategies needlemen used to separate their work from that of women, even when quite obvious – as in the case of John Monro’s work, which was given the title ‘Royal Clothograph Work of Art’, denying its categorisation as a quilt. Sue Prichard, ‘Precision Patchwork: Nineteenth-Century Military Quilts’, *Textile History*, 41:Supplement 1 (2010), pp. 214–226. The history of occupational therapy is somewhat neglected. One exception is Jennifer Laws, ‘Crackpots and Basket-Cases: A History of Therapeutic Work and Occupation’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 24:2 (2011), pp. 65–81. However, this contains little on needlework as one of the many occupations used. For a brief description of some organisational aspects of embroidery as occupational therapy in the Second World War see Suzanne Griffith, *Stitching for Victory* (Stroud, 2009), pp. 192–193.

⁸⁹ Midge Gillies, *The Barbed-Wire University: The Real Lives of Allied Prisoners of War in the Second World War* (2011), pp. 35–36, 78, 82, 134–143. Where the needlework of prisoners of war has been examined, female civilians have more usually taken centre stage. Bernice Archer and Alan Jeffreys, ‘The Women’s Embroideries of Internment in the Far East 1942-1945’, in Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum (eds), *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire* (New York, 2012), pp. 244–260; Gillian Carr, *Occupied Behind Barbed Wire* (St Helier, Jersey, 2009), pp. 18–21, 24, 33–37, 47, 50.

⁹⁰ Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum, ‘The Importance of Creativity Behind Barbed Wire: Setting a Research Agenda’, in Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum (eds), *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire* (New York, 2012), p. 3.

World War Nazism was associated with hyper-masculinity, and British military masculinity was constructed against this. Whilst physical strength, bravery and male bonding were important in this masculine ideal, so too were ideas of British men as emotionally reserved, home-loving and decent, with a keen sense of fair-play.⁹¹ Martin Francis has argued that the home was hugely important to men in the services, and has described pseudo-family relationships amongst men in heavy bomber crews.⁹² There may also be parallels to be drawn with research on life in the forces and prisoner of war camps in the First World War. Bourke has argued:

The absence of women had an additional component: gender roles were rendered more fluid in wartime as men were required to carry out many tasks that had formerly been the preserve of the opposite sex. They sat down together to darn their clothes. They washed their dirty trousers. Experienced soldiers boiled up cans of tea together with an ease that seemed “completely fantastic” to one new recruit. Another man reported incredulously that he had to cut and butter his own bread and wash his plate after use. [...] Men took over the roles of mother, sister, friend and lover. They held each other as they danced. They impersonated women at concerts and dances – and sometimes in their tents afterwards.⁹³

Jeffrey Reznick has highlighted the importance of rest huts as homes away from home, creating spaces for domestic recuperation near the front.⁹⁴ In rest huts domesticity was enjoyed by men, but created by female volunteers. In contrast, the work of Iris Rachamimov has explored the ways in male prisoners of war themselves created versions of ‘home’ within camps during the First World War, which ‘allowed them to access some of the emotional rewards that the word generated.’ These men created and decorated personalised domestic spaces, with some degree of intimate privacy for the family-like groups they formed with other prisoners.⁹⁵ Thus First and Second World War masculinities in general, and military masculinities specifically, did not preclude engagement with the domestic.

⁹¹ Sonya O Rose, ‘Temperate heroes: concepts of masculinity in Second World War Britain’, in Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann, and John Tosh (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester, 2004), pp. 177–186.

⁹² Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 96–98.

⁹³ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (1996), p. 133.

⁹⁴ Jeffrey S. Reznick, *Healing the Nation: Soldiers and the Culture of Caregiving in Britain During the Great War* (Manchester, 2004), pp. 17–26.

⁹⁵ Iris Rachamimov, ‘Camp Domesticity: Shifting Gender Boundaries in WWI Internment Camps’, in Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum (eds), *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire* (New York, 2012), pp. 291–305.

Yet many men were uneasy at the thought of taking up the feminine needle. A Penelope Needlework advertorial from 1941 related details of Beatrix Savage's work in occupational therapy with injured servicemen. She wrote:

I have often been asked how I managed to get the patients so keen, and I can only say that by using tact and common sense and with a personal love in the making of handicrafts one won them over. Naturally men who had never held a needle in their lives before were at first shy at commencing and wondered if they would be thought 'Cissies' at doing what to them had always seemed essentially women's work, but as soon as one or two in a ward started working the others quickly became interested.⁹⁶

This reveals both the common expectation that men would be reluctant to stitch ('I have often been asked'), and the reality of hesitant male stitchers. In a 1946 article in *Housewife* magazine on men stitching to aid their recuperation in hospital, the author, Kathleen Binns, also notes men's wariness of this 'sissy' pursuit, and their increased comfort with it when they saw 'the old lags bring out their embroidery as they would an evening paper'.⁹⁷ Men were clearly aware, and concerned, that stitching was far from manly.

Mere exposure to stitching males was not always sufficient to sway potential needlemen, and some only adopted this behaviour by distancing themselves from more usual understandings of needlework. Between 1940 and 1944 Margaret Lewthwaite, MBE, organised an occupational therapy programme for wounded soldiers across a number of military hospitals in Egypt. Although photographs clearly show that the men were doing embroidery, nowhere in her memoir of this time does she use this word. Instead she referred to it by the more scientific sounding and less feminine term 'frame therapy', and it is likely that this linguistic quirk reflected her practice at the time, denying the femininity of stitching by denying that this was needlework.⁹⁸ Some men needed to stitch for more practical and mundane reasons. In 1942 John Phillips, then a prisoner of war in Europe, wrote to family friend Phillipa Cook, of his struggle to sew on his buttons. He wrote that this task took him '12 minutes: 5 for threading the b-y needle, 2 for putting iodine on my fingers and 5 for sewing the button so that it stays on for about a week.'⁹⁹ Whilst Phillips may have been inexperienced, the likely exaggeration of

⁹⁶ *N&N*, No. 8 (1941), p. 29.

⁹⁷ *Housewife*, December 1946, p. 50. I am indebted to the 'Stitch for Victory' exhibition at the Redoubt Fortress & Military Museum, Eastbourne, 9th April-13th November 2011, for bringing this article to my attention.

⁹⁸ IWM Documents 690.

⁹⁹ Gillies, *Barbed-Wire*, p. 25.

this account and his choice to relate his incompetence suggests something other than a straightforward description of unskilled struggle. In his description of the time it took him to sew on buttons the humorous exaggeration relies on his supposed masculine ineptitude with the needle, safely distancing what he is *doing* (the feminine act of sewing) from what he *is* (a man, and a serviceman at that). For some men, needleworking was made acceptable by denying that this behaviour made them needlemen.

Men could stitch without disrupting the gender order by positioning themselves as lone individuals, non-threatening eccentrics. The most prominent needleman of this period was pattern designer and television knitting expert James Norbury (1904-1972). The knitting historian Richard Rutt has described him as ‘the strongest single influence in British knitting during the 25 years after the Second World War’.¹⁰⁰ In recalling his childhood, Norbury acknowledged the difficulties he had suffered as a young boy fascinated by the woman’s world of knitting:

Once upon a time (all true stories are like a fairy tale), a little boy sat dreaming of far-away places where blue skies, sunshine and laughter heralded in each new day as it was born. He was a very stupid little boy, at least that was what all the villagers said, because you never saw him without a ball of wool and a pair of knitting needles in his hands. Of such stuff are madmen made, so looneywise [sic] our hero, or villain, or madcap fool, call him what you will, wandered through fields and woodlands thinking out all the wonderful things he would make one day when he had mastered the knitter’s craft.¹⁰¹

Yet Norbury assumed his readership would not include other men. He described *Knit With Norbury* as ‘a practical book for every woman’s work-basket’. When introducing patterns for men’s garments he made it clear that these would be knitted *for* rather than *by* men, inviting knitters to ‘get out your knitting needles and make your menfolk happy’ by following patterns ‘Designed for the man in your life.’¹⁰² In writing 1953’s *Let’s Learn to Sew* he imagined that his readers would be young girls who might seek out their mothers for equipment and further guidance. Whilst he noted ‘In these days when everyone leads a busy life, it is a very good thing for boys to be able to mend their own socks’, he suggested that his female readers teach their brothers, not that boys

¹⁰⁰ Rutt, *History*, pp. 151–152.

¹⁰¹ James Norbury, *Knitting is an Adventure* (1958), p. 9.

¹⁰² James Norbury, *Knit with Norbury* (1952), pp. 7, 41, 107.

should read his book.¹⁰³ Thus Norbury did not challenge the idea that the default knitter or stitcher was female. His eccentricity framed him as a ‘character’ rather than threat to gender norms. In her 1952 foreword to *Knit With Norbury* Marjorie Proops, then ‘woman editor’ for the *Daily Herald*, presented him as an incongruous knitter:

The first time I met this large, bearded man he was wearing an enormous duffle coat over a hearty tweed suit.

I labelled him, the way women label men, the Rugged Type. I could never imagine that his big hands could handle fine knitting, nor indeed that such a Rugged Type could really be interested in this gentle art.

She went on to describe him as a ‘colourful man’ whose love of animals once resulted in him arriving at her office accompanied by a pet monkey.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the existence of Norbury is not entirely surprising. The dominance of women in home cookery has hardly prevented men from becoming world-class chefs and cookery writers. It was surely more transgressive for a man to *follow* knitting patterns than to *write* them.

Project choice could masculinize needlework, making male stitching less threatening. During the war-years, magazines occasionally featured projects which were claimed to be suitable for convalescing servicemen, including small embroideries, rugs, items sewn from felt, and, less convincingly, floral jewellery made from leather or moulded sealing wax: ‘Men like a sensible, manly hobby. Here is the very thing. Jewellery-making is a craft at which men excel and the art of this modern flower work, requiring few special tools, can be quickly mastered.’¹⁰⁵ When writing on ‘Our Knitting Forces’ the famous knitting and embroidery writer Mary Thomas (1889-1948) claimed that knitting pictorial Fair-Isles could display wartime masculinity, since ‘the up-to-date young soldier or sailor will select aeroplanes, ships, guns, initials, footballs, etc.’¹⁰⁶ Beatrix Savage saw the subject of embroideries as key to winning men around:

The most popular work with our Unit is the embroidering of regimental badges, and when a man has completed his badge he is delighted, especially when he can send it home to join the similar badge worked by his father in the last war, and

¹⁰³ James Norbury, *Let's Learn to Sew* (1953), pp. 7, 37, 46. See also James Norbury, *Knitting for a New Arrival* (1960), p. 13; James Norbury, *Counted-Thread Embroidery on Linens and Canvas* (Leicester, 1955), p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Norbury, *Knit with Norbury*, p. 6. His love of animals perhaps led to the somewhat surprising photography in this book, including an image of a knitwear-clad model draped by a python.

¹⁰⁵ *NI*, No. 164 (1941), pp. 20, 21, 34; *N&N*, No. 11 (1942) p. 8; *NI*, No. 174 (1943), pp. 12-13.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Thomas, ‘Our Knitting Forces’, *The Queen's Book of the Red Cross* (1939), p. 245; Rutt, *History*, pp. 148–149.

one can picture the friendly ragging father and son will have together when comparing the respective merits of their own handiwork and badges.¹⁰⁷

A similar regimental badge is shown in fig. 5.6, stitched by an unknown British serviceman whilst recovering from spinal injuries at the temporary hospital at St Hugh's College, Oxford. In 1943 *Needlework Illustrated* appealed to its readers to turn out their cupboards in aid of convalescing prisoners of war who were in need of materials and equipment for needlework. Readers were told that unfinished embroideries were particularly useful. The men, untrained in such crafts, could use the partially worked sections to deduce how the work was to be done, and then complete them. However desperate they were for entertainment it was thought appropriate to mention a preference for embroideries with more masculine subjects: 'More or less any form of embroidery is acceptable, but, of course, those with a "man's" appeal are best.'¹⁰⁸



Fig. 5.6: Occupational therapy regimental badge, IWM EPH 3206.

¹⁰⁷ *N&N*, No. 8 (1941), p. 29. Subject matter may have been less crucial to men who were used to the hobby.

¹⁰⁸ *NI*, No. 171 (1943), pp. 14-15.

When writing about needlemen, it was often felt necessary to demonstrate the different nature of their craftwork, presenting them as stitching manfully, minimising similarities to needlewomen, and reframing this potential gender-transgression as non-transgressive. These differences supposedly manifested themselves in the men's character, and also in their choice of technique. Mary Thomas described male knitters as skilled and independent, disliking written patterns and delighting in inventing their own Fair Isle motifs. Men like knitting in the round, and sailors hold their needles differently to women 'and generally knit with the yarn in the left hand!' Knitting sailors even, we are told, form their stitches differently, knitting into the back rather than front of the stitch and wrapping the yarn over rather than under the needles. Although this style is seen as stemming from experiences in the East where it is the norm, its continuation is not presented as a result of passive habit, cultural quirk or sentimental attachment but logical (and therefore masculine) concerns of efficiency.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Beatrix Savage stressed that the men were highly independent, reacted badly to any attempt to induce them to stitch when they did not want to, and often created their own designs. They were not to be confined by ideas of correct technique: 'I have found it is best not to worry the men over doing the exact stitches when embroidering and also in working tapestries, as they usually find a way of their own, which is often effective and suitable'.¹¹⁰ Kathleen Binns reassured readers that injured servicemen who stitched had not been doing feminising women's work, but had been embroidering in a thoroughly manly manner, and had 'proved beyond all doubt that sewing is not a woman's prerogative'. Once again men are presented as independent stitchers, having 'their own inimitable way of doing things'. Their quirks are claimed to be rational, 'based on strict common-sense principles, *with an engineering slant*'.¹¹¹ Male patients tended to sew backwards, 'For a man likes to see where his needle is going, and pokes it through very diligently from the near side to the far – he's not going to risk pricking his fingers.' They were portrayed as somewhat obsessed with the quantifiable aspects of needlework, measuring the exact size and required location of stitches, and how many knots would go into a macramé belt.¹¹² More unusually, this article allows the reader the occasional smirk at the needlemen's expense, acknowledging their initial 'ham-handedness', and baffling slightly at the men's 'passion for "filling in."' Women, on the whole, tend to

¹⁰⁹ Thomas, 'Forces'.

¹¹⁰ *N&N*, No. 8 (1941), p. 29.

¹¹¹ Original emphasis.

¹¹² Earlier examples of men's obsession over quantifiable aspects of needlework can be seen in Prichard, 'Precision', pp. 215, 216, 221.

take the line of least resistance and keep meticulously to the lines of the transfer. But men have vision; they like to block in every petal and leaf and then they are all set to begin on the background!’ Any amusement, however, must be kept private, for fear of denting male pride: ‘Starting off a new soft toy, a patient will ask your experienced advice. In sober earnestness he’ll say, “Would you do it in horse stitch or rabbit stitch?” And you have to think quickly for fear of hurting his feelings.’¹¹³ Thus needlework was reshaped as masculine, when undertaken by men.

Yet it would be a mistake to see all male-stitching as constrained by concerns of gender. Isolated from home and family, needlework could and did afford opportunities for less guarded, more tender expressions, as shown in the testimony of Charles Hilton Roderick Gee who did cross stitch whilst a prisoner of war in Germany from 1940 to 1945:

I did a pram cover for my youngest daughter. The best and most valuable things I did, just as I was running out of wool, I wrote a letter to the daughter I’d seen, who was about a year old when I became a prisoner, and then I wrote one similar thing, with the very last bits of wool I had, that one was ‘Dear Sarah’ just carefully done like a letter, very carefully done, the lines ended in a straight row, it took a long time, but it’s hanging on the wall now in our house, and the other one, for the child I hadn’t seen was, er..., ‘greet the unseen with a cheer’, and some sort of decorative border. But one I had with twenty-thousand stitches in got lost on the way home. I was not good at it, but I did learn a lot of stitches. [Interviewer: and that was just to keep you busy?] just to keep me busy, it takes a long time.¹¹⁴

Despite the pressures of gender conformity, Gee was able express love for his distant children.

Needlework was assumed to be a feminine interest, and formed a women’s world. Needlework culture assumed and reinforced the norms of female domesticity, motherhood and interest in children, enabling women to create objects for their homes and children. It also helped to join women through both product and process, as they stitched items for each other, sometimes with each other, and created items in view of

¹¹³ *Housewife*, December 1946, pp. 50-52.

¹¹⁴ IWM Sound 13717, reel 17. This testimony also hints at the emotional value of the objects he made for those who eventually received them. Similarly, Mass Observation diarist Nella Last wrote when she received an embroidered jersey her son had stitched when serving in the Army: ‘The result, with its scrolls, names and badges, would have done credit to a girl! I gathered it up in my arms and felt it so much a part of Cliff, the thoughts and dreams, regrets and heartaches in every stitch. It felt a living thing.’ Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (eds), *Nella Last’s War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (2006), p. 260. For more on the emotional significance of stitched objects, see above, pp. 157-167.

and for the benefit of a knowledgeable female audience. Thus the consumption as well as the production of needlework was gendered. Learning the skills of needlework was a common feature of girlhood, and one which was typically experienced in relation to other women, as they were taught at home at the knee of mothers, grandmothers and aunts. Needlework lessons continued at school, led by female teachers and surrounded by their peers. Some level of formal textile craft education was universal for girls in this period, yet their experiences of it varied greatly depending on their position within the tiered educational system, divided along lines of academic achievement and class background. Although needlework was firmly coded as female, the implications for femininity are far from clear. Despite the hopes of Victorian educators that stitching girls would grow to be patient, obedient and industrious women, some narrators associated their own practice with characteristics far removed from idealised or stereotypical gender roles. Men, in contrast, were thought of as non-stitchers, or comical ones. Where men wished or needed to interlope, considerable effort was expended in minimizing the threat this posed to masculinity. Men's needlework was distanced from women's through language, character and subject-matter, softening or denying the transgressive nature of their stitching, and thus further underlining the position of needlework as, by default, feminine.

Conclusion

Until relatively recently, needlework has been an understudied area of women's historical experience. Yet these activities, including knitting, sewing, crochet and embroidery, were by no means obscure. They were an ordinary and ubiquitous part of most women's lives, and form both a valid subject of study in their own right, and an important window onto broader aspects of women's history.

Trends within the growing historiography of needlework have limited and distorted understandings of women's relationship with stitching. A fashion history approach has prioritised the products of needlework over processes, leading to a narrow view of needlework as primarily, even solely, a strategy for obtaining clothes. Others have approached needlework from the related field of design history. This has provided a limited scope for the study of the process of making in as much as, for some women, this constituted a design process. However, in highlighting and championing examples of professional and amateur design in needlework, this approach has obscured the more wide-spread practices of re-creation from commercial patterns. It has also often focused on the elite or the extraordinary at the expense of the ordinary, highlighting excellence instead of typical practice.

Breaking from these established approaches, this study has proposed and utilised a new framework for the study of needlework. It has drawn on a broad range of sources to examine the place of needlework within women's lives. Oral history interviews, objects, Mass Observation material, letters, diaries, and a survey of needlework magazines have enabled this thesis explore the everyday needlework of ordinary, amateur needlewomen. Eschewing the virtuoso presented its own challenges, but has resulted in a history of the more typical, and the domestic, which has previously been left in obscurity thanks to its very ubiquity. Whist still keeping the 'product' of needlework constantly in view, by exploring the conditions, motivations and emotions which surrounded women's stitching, this thesis has begun to reveal the meanings and significance of 'process', that is, the time spent in making. In doing so, it has asserted hitherto neglected 'process' and the ephemeral 'moment of making' as just as central to the full historical understanding of needlework as the more tangible 'products' of women's efforts. It has rejected Rozsika Parker's art history approach which has primarily valued needlework as ersatz-creativity in times of oppression, and instead respected it as an activity in its own right.¹

¹ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1996).

Whereas design history approaches have valorised the act of original ‘creation’ within needlework, this thesis has defended ‘re-creation’ from kits and patterns as more central to amateur needlework practice. It has both implicitly and explicitly respected needlewomen’s activities as historically significant and valuable when they involved following commercial patterns to replicate the designs of others, not only when they deviated from them. Linked to the prominent position of ‘process’ and the ‘moment of making’ within this thesis, it has also highlighted ‘recreation’, emphasizing the enjoyment many women found in needlework, and positioning this as a valid subject of historical research. By focusing on ‘process’, ‘re-creation’ and ‘recreation’ this study has produced a needlewoman-centred history of needlework which provides insights into the subjective ‘meanings of making’ which shaped women’s experiences of stitch.

This research is an important starting point, but does not pretend to be exhaustive, and much further research is needed for a full picture of British women and their needlework in this period. The oral history sources used skew towards London, and whilst this has been balanced with other local and national sources, future studies based on other areas could prove illuminating. The sources have provided information on women from across their life-cycles, and needlework as a life-long source of pleasure begins to redress the bias towards adolescence and early-adulthood in leisure history. However, age has not been taken as a primary category of analysis. As far as can be seen from the sources, this is a history of specifically white women in Britain. Whilst some research has begun on Black British and British Asian needlewomen, more work is needed in this area.² Chapters have begun to uncover issues of wealth and class in needlework, demonstrating the upward reach of thrift into the middle classes, differing experiences of needlework education across a school system divided by class, and the continuation of social barriers in wartime comforts knitting groups. However, the sources used in this thesis give a more full account of women from the upper-working and middle class. Further class-based research on women’s needlework is needed.

Needlework is both a valid and rich subject of study in its own right, and a window onto women’s wider experience. The findings of this thesis can be understood on these two levels. It forms a revealing history of this often hidden domestic activity and also supports or challenges broader assumptions within women’s history, which have been

² Carol Tulloch, ‘There’s No Place Like Home: Home Dressmaking and Creativity in the Jamaican Community of the 1940s to the 1960s’, in Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 111–125; Parminder Bhachu, *Dangerous Designs: Asian Women Fashion the Diaspora Economies* (New York, 2004). Rose Sinclair is working on a PhD thesis at Goldsmiths, University of London on Dorcas sewing clubs in the Windrush generation.

formed in the absence of detailed information on this ubiquitous aspect of women's lives.

The findings presented here can be understood in terms of three overarching themes: identity, pleasure and obligation.

Needlework reflected and reinforced gender identities. In this period, amateur stitching was overwhelmingly female. Assuming a female readership, needlework magazines were constructed as feminine spaces, both reflecting and policing gender boundaries. The things women made reproduced wider ideas of normative femininity, enabling and reinforcing the nurturing of children and an interest in the domestic and appearance. Learning to stitch was a near-universal feature of girlhood, and this education was provided by women in the home and school, often amongst other girls, further reinforcing ideas of needlework as a female activity. For some women, stitching amongst other women was continued in adulthood, when meeting relatives or friends, or in the more formalised setting of classes. The products of needlework were generally intended for female consumption – women stitched for themselves, or for other women as gifts – and were thought to be more fully understood and appreciated by a female audience of relatives and friends. The unusual image of the *needleman* threatened both the construction of needlework as female and the masculine identity of the man in question. This resulted in efforts to differentiate between masculine and feminine stitching, reassuring men and observers of the non-transgressive nature of this gender transgression, showing men as stitching manfully, and reasserting their gender conformity.

Whereas the popular imagination might picture needlewomen as perpetually outdated, and Joanne Turney has claimed that 'Home Craft is a genre, virtually untouched by fashion [...], existing in a nostalgic vacuum', needlewomen understood themselves and their hobby as modern.³ Whilst needlework toyed stylistically with the past, this engagement was superficial. In order to fully understand needlewomen's relationship with modernity and tradition we need to look beyond the crinoline lady. This reveals a profound sense of discontinuity from the past, precluding identification with stitching foremothers, and a disinterest in history and authenticity. Needlework was influenced by changes in home decoration, and especially in fashion, and enabled

³ Joanne Turney, 'Home Craft in Britain 1975-2002' (unpublished PhD thesis, Southampton, 2002), p. 305.

women to construct identities as modern (needle)women by reading about, making, using and wearing up-to-date items.

In wartime, needlework could also help women to perform national identity. During the Second World War, the bravery of everyday people became important to understandings of Britishness, as the country endured the Blitz, demonstrating that 'Britain Can Take It'. This 'Myth of the Blitz' was established during the war, and became a model to emulate.⁴ Through stitching, women were able to remain, or appear, composed in frightening situations, performing Britishness, preventing panic in their children, soothing themselves in the act of stitching, and others in their performance.

The second key theme of this thesis has been pleasure. Whilst the existing historiography has been heavily product-focused, the emphasis here on process has revealed enjoyment to be a central concern for many needlewomen. For some, the pleasures of process were so great that they led them to produce excess or unneeded items, continuing to stitch in spite of, rather than because of, the products of needlework. The pleasures of needlework were varied, depending on the individual and the project. Some women liked simple, relaxing needlework, reflecting Wendy Gan's concept of 'leisure as mental space'.⁵ Others sought out engaging challenges, mastering one technique after another, as explained in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work on 'flow'.⁶ Women valued needlework for providing a sense of 'creativity', which was found in acts of both innovative creation, and emulative re-creation from patterns. They also took pleasurable pride in their achievements, and enjoyment from the tactile processes of needlework. These pleasures are vital to understanding why many women stitched, and what it meant to them when they did. The existing historiography of needlework in the Second World War has generally presented stitching as an onerous necessity. However, for some women the enjoyable processes of needlework were desirable in their own right, and they struggled to continue their hobbies during wartime and post-war rationing and shortages. Echoing work by feminists within leisure studies in the 1980s, this study has explored the ways in which women fitted these pleasures around other obligations and commitments, integrating enjoyment into their day-to-day lives, and negotiating space for their interests within the home.

⁴ Angus Calder, *Myth of the Blitz* (1991), pp. 120, 125.

⁵ Wendy Gan, 'Leisure in the Domestic Novel between the Wars', *Women: a Cultural Review*, 17:2 (2006), pp. 215–218.

⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: the Classic Work on how to Achieve Happiness* (2002).

Linked to pleasure is a more general sense of psychological well-being. It has been shown that women used needlework to shape their own emotions in wartime. They self-prescribed needlework as relaxing therapy, soothing the stresses of war. Needlework brought comfort by enabling and creating continuities in this time of great change, allowing women to continue to beautify themselves and their homes. It provided a notion of comforts knitting as a wartime tradition, giving a sense of stability in unstable times. Women used needlework to invoke, rehearse and display patriotism, embroidering tributes to the nation, the forces and the allies, reinforcing the comforting conviction that Britain would prevail. The Second World War also highlights the emotional meanings of the stitched object, and the ways in which this benefitted the maker. By sending their knitting where many of them could not follow, away to war with their individual or collective menfolk, women were able to retain or create emotional and social links with those distanced by war.

Women's stitching must also be understood through ideas of obligation or duty. Obligations were varied, and could include the need to save money or obtain a finished item of a particular quality, the duty to finish a project that had been begun, the self-imposed obligation of creating a desired item, or the social obligation of creating a gift. These must be incorporated alongside pleasure to fully understand women's motivations in stitching.

Ready-made equivalents to the things women made were generally available, but making new items at home and mending old ones could save money or other resources. Across this period, thrifty needlework was the result of various obligations or duties. In peacetime it could be a necessity to save money, or it could meet a perceived moral obligation to avoid waste, either of money or resources. In wartime, thrifty needlework allowed women to stay within the constraints of their clothing ration, and also to perform the patriotic duties of avoiding waste, saving money to invest in National Savings, and doing their bit to limit price increases. The role of needlework in wartime obligations of thrift can be more fully understood with a thorough exploration of the position of knitting, sewing and embroidery within the rationing scheme, and in the context of shortages of both finished goods and of needlework materials.

In wartime, knitting could also fulfil some or all of women's duty to participate in war work, as many British women knitted comforts for those in the services. Shirking this national duty could have serious psychological implications, and so women who

took part in the ‘knits krieg’ served themselves as well as the war effort.⁷ In producing comforts, women fulfilled varying obligations. Some made comforts for the ‘common pool’ which were distributed, as needed, by the services’ respective comfort funds, serving a duty to the country. Some knitted for local organisations, providing men from their own area with comforts and expressing local loyalties. Others knitted comforts for known, individual men – friends and relatives – fulfilling their national duty through their own familial and social bonds and obligations.

Needlework also played a role in women’s more general sense of obligation to themselves and to others to remain busy and productive. The industrious nature of needlework formed part of its appeal, soothing concerns that time was being wasted or used self-indulgently. Stitching could justify sitting down and resting, perhaps watching television or listening to the radio.

This thesis has provided insights into women’s relationship with needlework in the twentieth century – valuable in their own right – and it has also both supported and challenged arguments and assumptions in the broader histories of women in Britain during this period. Needlework was not a niche interest, but a category of activities which touched the lives of the vast majority of women. Therefore, findings in this area must be taken seriously as reflections of mainstream female experience with the potential to contest historical understandings that have been formulated without taking stitching into account.

Feminist historians have often seen feminine activities and the domestic as constraining, oppressive and unpleasant. However, supporting more recent work in this field exemplified by Judy Giles and Joanna Bourke, this thesis has demonstrated the rich variety of pleasures and satisfactions a great many women found in needlework.⁸ The restrictive gender roles which prescribed who could and who could not stitch (women and men, respectively) were – and remain – oppressive and antithetical to the feminist project. However, needlework and other domestic activities were – and, similarly, remain – in no way inherently oppressive or un-feminist. This point was

⁷ *Stitchcraft*, August 1940, p. 14.

⁸ Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004); Judy Giles, ‘Help for Housewives: domestic service and the reconstruction of domesticity in Britain, 1940-50’, *Women’s History Review*, 10:2 (2001), pp. 299–323; Judy Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900-50* (Basingstoke, 1995); Judy Giles, ‘A Home of One’s Own: Women and Domesticity in England 1918-1950’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 6:3 (1993), pp. 239–253; Joanna Bourke, ‘Housewifery in Working-Class England 1860–1914’, *Past and Present*, 143:1 (1994), pp. 167–197; Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity* (1994).

demonstrated in the varying personality traits that oral history respondents brought to their stitching, often most clear in recollections of their youth. Stitching rarely reflected obedience or passivity for these women, but rather demonstrated their determination, disobedience or independence. This reveals the malleability of needlework and other 'feminine' activities, which have no intrinsic link to an idealised femininity.

This close examination of needlework has challenged the application of the categories of 'work' and 'leisure' to women's historical experience. Whilst the work of Claire Langhamer has, to some extent, problematized these categories, she has remained invested in 'leisure' as a field of study, which presupposes a group of experiences which can be drawn together to form a 'leisure history'. However, this thesis has demonstrated that 'work-like' attributes such as obligation, difficulty and struggle were in no way detrimental to 'leisure-like' pleasure. On the contrary, obligation could ease guilt associated with pleasure and rest, and difficulty could produce a satisfying state of 'flow'. Pleasure and obligation were not inversely proportional, but mingled, and this is key to understanding women's motivations in making. There is no continuum from 'work' to 'leisure' upon which women's experiences can be pinned. Instead, women's experiences of needlework – and perhaps all activities – can be seen as a complex grid, in which degrees of obligation/choice and pleasure/displeasure determined women's interpretations of and feelings towards their endeavours. These feelings varied, between women, between forms of needlework, and even within the processes of individual projects. A combination of obligation/choice and pleasure/displeasure determined whether stitching was begun, continued and completed. Although its seeming contradictions have often left it at the periphery, needlework is too common a female activity to be excluded from a women's leisure history. Yet its inclusion threatens to undo leisure as a category of historical analysis.

Whilst many histories of the Second World War have touched upon thrifty needlework in its wartime context, this thesis has demonstrated that the normality of peacetime thrift has been underestimated, obscuring the continued importance of production and economising within the home in the twentieth century. The war did not lead, as Arthur Marwick has claimed, to 'a return to the pursuits of pre-industrial society'.⁹ Rather, it saw an intensification of economical behaviours that had been normal in sections of the upper-working and middle class in the interwar years. Furthermore, continued mending and making in these groups in the 1950s and 1960s

⁹ Arthur Marwick, *The Home Front: The British and the Second World War* (1976), p. 92.

serves to temper ideas of the post-war boom with a more realistic view. This acknowledges the need for families/consumers/women to choose and prioritise their use of finite financial resources, saving in some areas in order to spend in others.

This study has demonstrated the importance of integrating the emotional backdrop of wartime into understandings of all aspects of life on the home front. The purpose for this is twofold. Firstly, emotion is, of course, an important consideration when examining individuals' motivations. Secondly, this can both avoid and counter the callous treatment of emotional pain seen in overly light-hearted accounts of Britain in the Second World War. This research has also contributed to understandings of quotidian strategies of emotional management in this period, as women used needlework to invoke feelings of optimistic patriotism, bravery and purposeful duty, and in so doing, banished others.

Finally, this thesis contributes to debates on women's engagement with modern design in the twentieth century. Previous histories have examined the ways in which women adopted certain, sometimes modified, versions of modern design, which enabled them to combine new developments in home decoration with deep-rooted beliefs that the home should serve as a comfortable site for cultural display.¹⁰ However, a large number of women enjoyed making things for their own homes, and they had their own reasons for adopting and adapting these forms of modern design. Needlework for the home was dominated by decoration in the form of embroidery, cutwork and crochet lace. Those forms of modern design which emphasised the sleek and the stark left little or no room for this kind of domestic embellishment, hindering women's pleasure in making and consuming decorative needlework. Thus, those forms of the modern which left scope for this kind of decoration were especially appealing to women who stitched, and needlewomen formed a sufficiently significant proportion of women for this to be an important consideration when interpreting women's relationships with modern design.

This research and analysis has provided valuable and needed contributions to the study of women and of needlework. It has demonstrated significant failings in existing approaches to needlework. In their place it has presented an alternative and fruitful

¹⁰ Penny Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (1995); Angela Partington, 'The Designer Housewife in the 1950s', in Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (eds), *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design History* (1989), pp. 206–214.

framework, in which re-creation, recreation, process and the moment of making are fundamental to analyses of what it meant when women took up their needles.

Appendix One: Letter of Introduction

Elizabeth Robinson

[Personal contact details removed]

Supervisors: Prof. Amanda Vickery (Queen Mary)

and Dr. Jane Hamlett (Royal Holloway)

I am a third-year PhD student in the Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London, researching the history of needlework between 1920 and 1970. I have been looking at a wide range of needlework including knitting, crochet, embroidery, tatting, needlepoint tapestry and sewing. I am interested in the history of women who practiced these crafts as hobbies, especially those who may not have felt that they were unusually active in them.

I am now starting the final stage of my research, conducting oral history interviews with women who did needlecrafts during this period and lived within what are now the London Boroughs of Greenwich and Lewisham. To take part you will need to have memories of doing these crafts as an adult in this time period, and to have been born before 1940. To help to focus my research on more typical or representative women I am sadly having to exclude women who, during the period 1920-1970 were needlework teachers, stitched professionally, studied art at university or were members of the Embroiderers' Guild. Instead, I am hoping to interview women who did a little of one, some or all of these needlecrafts but perhaps feel that this in no way makes them 'unusual'.

If you choose to take part in this research I would arrange to meet with you in a place where you feel comfortable (usually your own home) for a relaxed interview. This should take between one and two hours, and I will make an audio recording of this for my own research, which will later be deposited at the Greenwich Heritage Centre for other researchers and historians to use in the future. I hope to use your words (either the audio recording or typed extracts) in my own PhD, and may also use them in articles, presentations, books, broadcasts and other media, and other researchers may wish to do the same. After the interview you will be given a form to sign if you give permission for

this, and this includes a section in which you can explain any conditions or limits you would like to place on this.

We would talk about a range of subjects relating to how you felt about your needlework, as well as some details about your life in general so that I and future researchers can better understand your relationship with needlework. You can choose not to answer any of these questions, will be entitled to pause or stop this interview at any point during it and, if you wish, remove yourself from the study, without giving me a reason. I would love to see any projects you may still have that you made before 1970, speak to you about them, and, with your permission, photograph them, but you are under no obligation to agree to any of these requests – yours would still be a valuable interview without them. Any photographs taken of such items would be deposited in the archive alongside your interview.

You will also have the choice of whether to be referred to in the research by your real name or a false one, in which case your real name can be kept secret for up to 25 years by the archive and any forms with your name on will be kept separate from your recording. You will be entitled to have a CD copy of the interview, and will be kept up to date with the progress of my research. You will be given time to listen to this CD, and if you said anything you would like to be kept confidential, that section of the recording can be left out of my own research, and ‘sealed’ from other historians and researchers at the archive for up to 25 years. If the interview is particularly productive, or if I find there are certain points I would like you to clarify for me, it is possible that I may ask you to speak to me again. You are, however, free to decline this request.

Please keep this sheet for your own reference.

Elizabeth (Beth) Robinson

Appendix Two: Oral History Biographies

These short biographies were written in co-operation with the narrators.

Audrey Ringrose

Born in 1931, she grew up in Bromley. Her mother was a housewife and her father was a motor mechanic. She and her actor husband (later a charity fundraiser) married in Sunderland in 1954, and moved around the country as he toured. They later settled in Pimlico in 1957. Here she worked at the Royal Society of Medicine and later the Labour Party as a librarian. She had her first child in 1960, another in 1963 and her youngest was born in 1966. Her husband's employment was erratic, and so she took in paid sewing (alterations). She moved to Greenwich in 1966. She began training as a teacher in 1972, and began work in this field in 1977.

Audrey identified as middle class.

Doreen Maynard

Born in 1924, she was brought up in Lee by her housewife mother and policeman father. She attended Lee Church of England school and then Charlton Central. In September 1939 she was evacuated to Tonbridge with her school, returning to London the next year when her schooling finished. Her family were bombed out in the war, but were unhurt. She began work doing short hand typing, answering phones, and so forth in London for around 6 months. When air raids came she switched to working for Cave Austin's in Lewisham, a group of grocer's and wine merchants. She continued working there until birth of her daughter in 1949, having married her engineer husband in 1948. Her first son was born in 1953, after which she returned to clerical work until the birth of her second son 16 years later. She again returned to work when her younger son was 5 years old.

Doreen was unsure how she would classify her social class.

Ghillian Potts

Born near Mitcham in 1933. Her mother was a teacher, and her father a registrar in Epsom. He was also in the Territorial Army (a non-commissioned officer in the 64th Medium Regiment of Artillery) so was active in the war. She was evacuated with her mother's school to West Sussex. After the end of the war her family moved to Tooting in search of good quality schools for their children. She later obtained a BA in English. She married a civil servant in 1956. Their first daughter was born in 1958, their second in 1961, and their third daughter was born in 1963. Their only son was born in 1965. In 1960 they moved to Eltham. Qualified by her bachelor's degree, she worked as a school teacher between 1961 and 1963. In the early 1970s she completed formal teacher training. Now retired, she pursues her passion for writing as a published children's author.

Ghillian identified as middle class.

Jeanne

Born in 1932, she grew up in Bristol. Her father was a shipping clerk and her mother was a housewife. She came to London to start her nursing training in 1952, and became a health visitor and a fieldwork teacher. She married in 1958, and her husband worked as a sales representative and a clerical officer. They had three children.

Jeanne considered her class to be 'unclear'.

Margaret Lowry

Born in Woolwich in 1933, her mother was a housewife and her father was a civil servant. She spent her childhood in Plumstead, and was not evacuated. She went to John Roan Girl's Grammar School in 1945, passed her school certificate and went out to work in an office. She later worked as a library assistant, where she met her librarian husband. They married in 1959. They could not work together, so she then moved into bookselling, and later into the civil service.

Margaret identified as lower-middle class.

Molly Bartlett

Born in Poplar in 1931, where she lived with her extended family until 1940, when they were bombed out. Her father was a haulage contractor, and her mother was a housewife. She was evacuated to Swindon at the start of war, but had returned, and was later evacuated to Wellingborough. She returned to London, living in Charlton, where she attended a local school for around a year, before joining a selective school at 11. She left school at 16, working as a junior secretary at Merryweather & Sons, a local fire engine manufacturer, and pursuing a career as a personal assistant. In 1954, she married. Her husband started his career as a telegraph boy, and rose to the position of post office executive manager. Their first child, a boy, was born in 1956. Their daughter was born in 1962, and they had a second son in 1968. The Greenwich new-build home they moved into in 1954 was subject to a compulsory purchase order in 1966, as the council cleared the way for a new flyover. The family bought a then-dilapidated Victorian home in a nearby street, which, with much expense and personal effort, they renovated.

Molly identified as 'classless – working class roots'

Muriel Bingham

Born in 1930 in Woolwich, she moved to Eltham aged 3. Her father was a painter and decorator for the council. Her housewife mother supplemented this income through fostering, which also paid for the family's annual fortnight holiday. Her school closed at the outbreak of war, and she attended makeshift schools and sometimes none until winning a scholarship, aged 11, to Eltham Hill School which was then evacuated to Aberystwyth. She later returned to London and attended Greenwich Girls, before resuming her studies at Eltham Hill when it returned to London at the end of the war. After school she completed teacher training at Goldsmiths College. In 1950 she began working as a teacher, and married her husband, an architect. Amidst the continuing post-war housing shortage they lived with her mother for two years, before moving to Mottingham where they still live. Five years into her marriage she had her first child. She continued to work as a supply teacher until having her second child.

Muriel identified as middle class.

Pat Fawcett

Pat was born in 1931. She lived in Plumstead until she was 7, when her family moved to Woolwich, an area she lived in until very recently. At the start of the war, she was evacuated with her one-and-a-half-year-old sister and their mother to Kent. They later returned to London, and her mother worked in munitions. Pat was later evacuated again to South Wales. Her father had been on reserve in the Navy before the war, and was called up. He served as a submariner, and was killed when his submarine was sunk. After leaving school Pat became shorthand typist. In 1954 she married Tony, a design engineer for the Ministry of Defence. Her daughters were born in 1957 and 1960, and she had a son in 1963. After having children she left work, returning briefly to train her replacement as a secretary. When her son was old enough to join nursery school she commenced training to become a teacher, and began teaching primary school children in 1974.

Pat identified as middle class.

Susan Cushen

Born in 1938 in Lincolnshire. Her mother was a teacher. Her father, a headmaster in peacetime, was in the RAF during the war, and so the family followed him around the country. At the end of the war they settled in Reading, where she had most of her schooling, before moving to London in 1954. She attended Kidbrooke School for two years, then trained in nursing at the Brooke Hospital and in midwifery in Beckenham and Lewisham, before starting her career as a nurse and health visitor. She married an engineer, and moved to Letchworth in Hertfordshire, where she had her first son in 1965, and then moved to Canada, having her second son there in 1969. She returned to Eltham in 1973.

Susan identified as middle class.

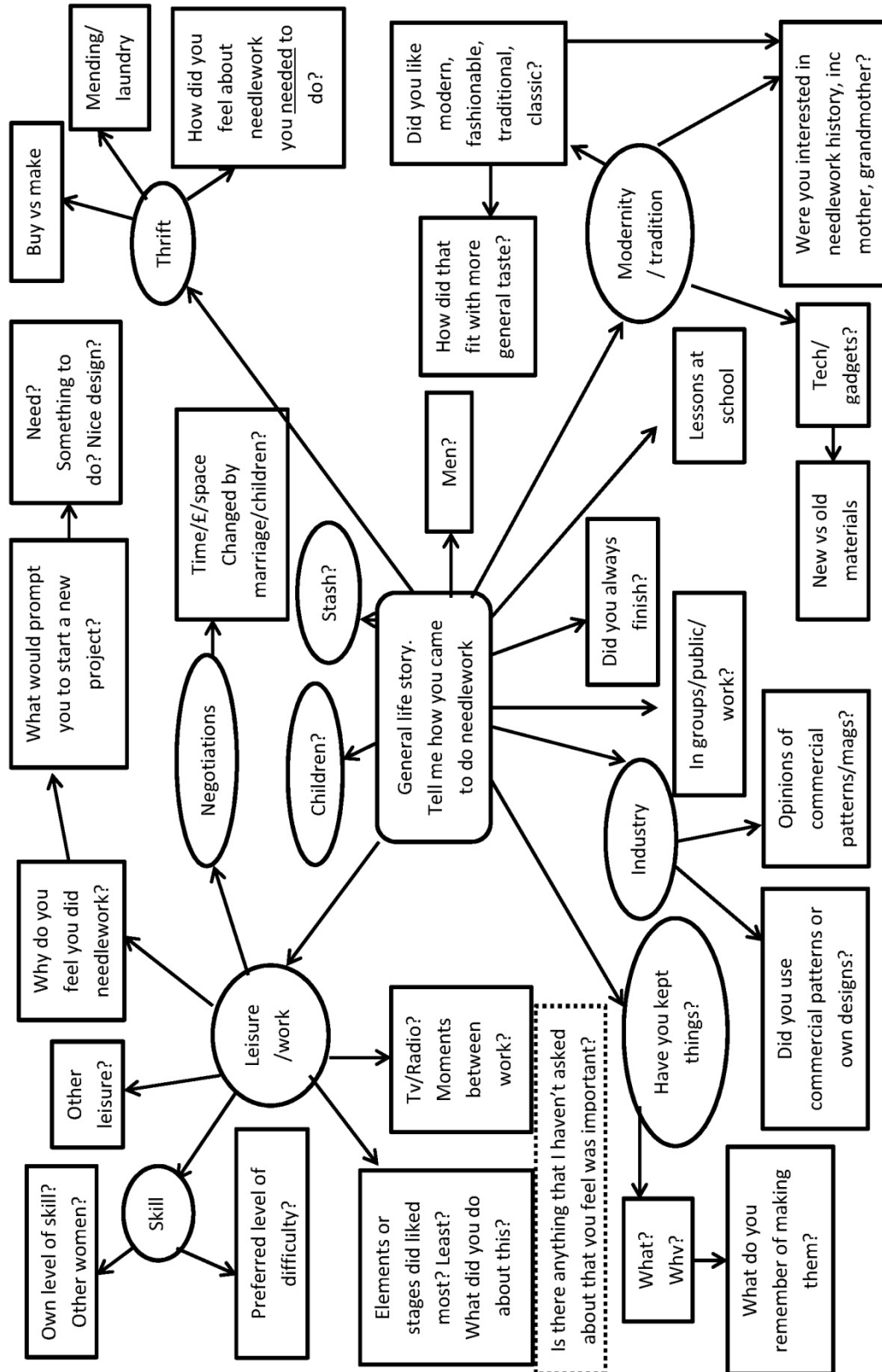
Tony Fawcett

Born in 1930, Tony's father was a printer, and his mother was a housewife. He grew up in Woolwich, and was evacuated with his school to Wrotham, Kent. Tony remembered mending his own uniform when doing his national service in 1952. He

became a designer for the Ministry of Defence, and married Pat, then a secretary and later a teacher, in 1954. Their daughters were born in 1957 and 1960, and they had a son in 1963.

Tony identified as middle class.

Appendix Three: Interview Diagram



Appendix Four: Wool Requirements, *Stitchcraft* Magazine, 1944

This table shows the quantities of wool required for women's jumper and cardigans featured in *Stitchcraft* magazine. It excludes sleeveless garments. Where a choice of size and/or sleeve length were offered, it shows the quantity required for the largest size and long sleeves.

Issue	Page	oz., colour a	oz., colour b	oz., colour c	Total of all garments	Total, long sleeve only
1944 January	10	8			8	8
1944 January	10	4	3	0.5	7.5	7.5
1944 January	11	8	2		10	10
1944 Feb-March	3	7	2		9	9
1944 Feb-March	8	7			7	
1944 Feb-March	10	9			9	9
1944 Feb-March	11	8			8	8
1944 April-May	4	4	1		5	
1944 April-May	5	6			6	
1944 April-May	6	8			8	8
1944 April-May	7	1	(1,1,1,1,1)		6	6
1944 June-July	3	7	1		8	8
1944 June-July	4	6			6	
1944 June-July	7	9			9	9
1944 June-July	12	8			8	8
1944 August	10	8			8	
1944 August	10	7			7	
1944 August	11	8			8	8
1944 September	3	6	5		11	11
1944 September	8	9			9	9
1944 September	11	4	3		7	
1944 September	11	10			10	10
1944 Oct-Nov	6	8			8	8
1944 Oct-Nov	7	9			9	9
1944 Dec	11	8			8	8
1944 Dec	18	6	1.5	1.5	10.5	10.5
Mean average					8.076923	8.631579

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