

Knitting Sheathes and Why We Used Them

**Needlework Tool Collectors Society
of Australia - 2008 Conference
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Many glamorous, beautiful, exquisite tools and items seen this weekend.

I'm coming from the other end –

- sturdy,
- often hard-used,
- originally, an adjunct to earning

Then, with growth of the middle class, sheathes moved into the drawing room and the social scene

I'm talking about my research and my assumptions – happy to have any questions or challenges – great way to learn



- Knitting developed in early Christian era in middle East around 200-400 AD
- Moved into Spain, Italy and eastern Europe via trade and invasion
- Knitted fabric's great advantage is its malleability, the ability to mould it to round and tubular shapes – like gloves, stockings, and caps
- Technological innovation in about the 12th century – moved from 2 to 4/5 needles.
- The Buxtehude Madonna by Master Bertram of Minden – this image taken from the Internet.
- * One of about 4 or 5 such images of the Virgin knitting in the round, painted from the 14th century.
- Knitting was a luxury item – surviving pieces are mainly church wear. References to the Parisian knitters guild date from 13th century.
- Knitting reached Britain by late 15th century.
- By 16th century, knitting exploded commercially in Britain :
 - First wire mill established – knitting pins more available
 - First enclosures of common land – more wool from more sheep
 - Spinning wheel replaced the distaff or drop spindle – more yarn – first illustrations of a spinning wheel were in the 13th century
 - Fashion changed – men began to wear short trunks with knitted hose – previously hose were made of woven cloth cut on the bias.
- Also in 16th century, the knitting machine was invented in Britain.
 - At first, no match for an accomplished handknitter.
 - Owning a knitting machine required capital – found in urban areas.
 - Hand knitting over the centuries was gradually pushed further and further into rural areas.



Sheathes are the most collected of knitting tools.

Only 1 or 2 of my exhibits are marked “DO NOT TOUCH”. For the rest, please handle. Handling improves the patina on all the wooden sheathes, and they don’t get handled enough any more.

These are variations of the well-known “goosewing” sheath, the long sweeping vertical supposedly shaped like the extended wing of a flying goose.

There is real aesthetic appeal in the left (CC978) and second-from-right (CC 1273) sheathes, with the bone plaque and the brass heart insert, as well as the carved decoration and the bone ferrules to protect the hole. Notice that the ferrule on the second-from-right rosewood (?) sheath is a replacement. When you look at the physical specimen, you will see that it originally had a deeper cap. Repair and reuse was common with most such workaday items.

The right sheath (CC144) with its red paint, and the 1905 sheath (CC 555), second-from-left, are less refined. The 1905 is the most recent date I have, and is very late when the use of sheathes was dying out.



- This was probably me (and you) one hundred years ago.
- Photo taken about 1900, and used on the cover of Linda Fryer's 1995 book *Knitting by the Fireside and on the Hillside* – about the Shetland handknitting industry.
- Shows peat carriers – women for whom the few pence earned from knitting was so vital, they knitted even during this strenuous work.
- Photo doesn't actually show their knitting sheathes, but it does show why they would use a sheath.

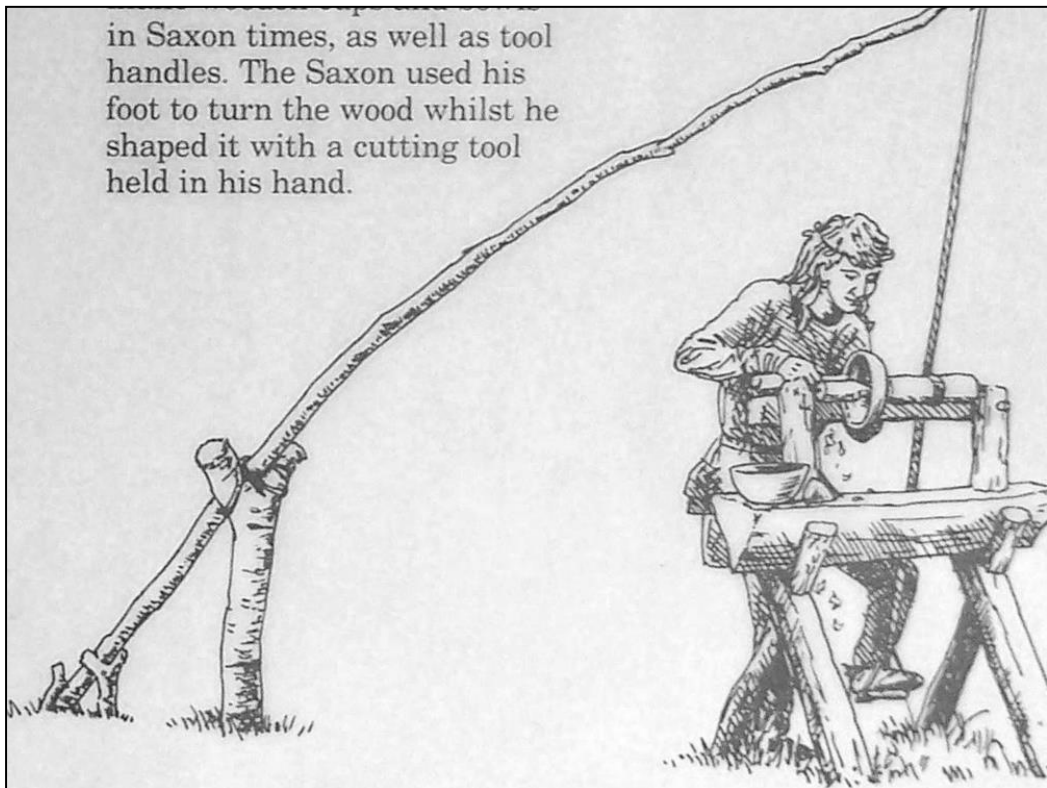


What did people knit with when using knitting sheathes? They used “wires” or “pins”.

This shot provided by the Hawes Folk Museum in the Yorkshire Dales shows the difference between the curved “pins” or “wires” on the right, and the later, regular sets of double-points on the left.

Rutt says the curve of these early needles was due to pressure of holding them against the sheath, but I don't think so. I feel The curve in the old pins or wires is due to the fact that they are just cut from the rolls of wire provided by the mills, rather than being straightened and tempered like the modern needles.





This image from the internet is of a foot-operated pole lathe –a rather primitive example of the mechanism used to create ALL turned wooden objects up to the start of mechanisation. Although this is a pretty simplistic example, such machines were used to create the glories of turned table and chair legs in the 18th century. So knitting sheathes and sticks were not much challenge.



British folk historian Peter Brears published research in the early 1980's establishing regional styles of sheath, based on well-proven museum holdings.

These three sheathes (CC1140, 1201, 640) fall into Brears' classification for Durham style (PB p. 23) – rectangular in section, tapering evenly in thickness from head to foot while maintaining the same width across the face. Not too much carving. The square-cut slot for the cowband runs diagonally across the face. Windows and inlays are probably second half of the 19th century.

I included these three sheathes because all are damaged :

- The cage sheath at the left with a free-moving ball carved inside the cage – CC 1140 – has been used to attempt to pry something open – similar to a modern struggle with a can of shoe polish or instant coffee.
- The mahogany sheath has its top inlay piece missing and an outline lower down where an inlay was planned but not provided.– maybe just a case of poor craftsmanship.
- The lighter sheath has a crack across the glass window and its inlaid window edging is buckling. Seen from the top, the shaft itself is cracking due to the pressure of carving and digging out a small big of wood. Nevertheless, the native character of the work is charming, and small nails have been driven into the top of the shaft to try to keep it together.



1. Petty chapman from Jost Amman and Hans Sachs, *The Book of Trades* (1568).

How did people get their wires or pins?

For those who couldn't reach a market or a town with a shop, wires could be obtained from the travelling petty chapman or peddler.

This photo from Margaret Spufford's 1984 book *The Great Reclathing of Rural England* shows a contemporary woodcut of a peddler or chapman. It originally appeared in *The Book of Trades*, published in 1568.

Although this image does not include any knitting needles, Spufford noted that knitting needles – variant spelling was nitin -- listed as part of the stock in the wills of several chapmen.



These sheathes come from a variety of localities, with the highly refined left hand sheath (CC 487) showing beautiful carving including a date of 1866, a well-fitted ferrule, and a scroll-shaped bottom --

Second from the left (CC 1232) and far right (CC 405) are both more crudely carved and have no protective ferrule. But they have a lot of naïve charm and imagination.

Second from the right (CC 829) is probably West Cumbrian from the Esk valley, with its square cut head and slightly curving shaft tapering towards the bottom. From the face an L-shaped incision is cut to hang the sheath on the belt or cowband – not for insertion in the waistband.



Wooden sheathes were most common in Britain. But there were specialist areas and also some specialist carvers.

Left (CC 368) is a chain sheath with some Durham features. Chain sheathes (and other treen) were considered virtuoso creations – made from a single piece of wood with a heavy-columned cage and a second piece in which to catch a skein of yarn or some of the knitted fabric. The hole for insertion of the needle is at the top of this photo – and the skein-holder would dangle down or possibly be caught up in the wearer's belt or cowband.

The brass (CC 611) and tin (CC1102) sheathes come from the Kneightley Valley and are known as Airedale Hearts. This was an early industrial area where metal-working was common. The hearts don't look very comfortable. The wearer would sew the heart through the holes along the sides onto a pad of cloth or a cloth cowband.





Dutch knitting sheaths are actually better documented than the British, thanks to Kay Sullivan's magnificent 2004 book *Needlework Tools and Accessories – a Dutch Tradition*, and some other, earlier writings.

In addition to wood, the Dutch, a highly urbanised society since the Middle Ages, used many other materials, including a lot of silver

Cc 903 – ivory spindle shape

CC 1009 – an American whalebone scrimshaw sheath – a much dirtier colour, but elaborately carved, including a cage, a vase-shaped top to take the needle, and finishing in a hand – a very typical bottom piece in American scrimshaw. It has a very old repair or (possibly the original join).

CC 1037 – bone topped wooden sheath – probably West Cumbrian



There are very, very few English silver sheaths, although other countries created them. Notice the small size of these four – much more for drawing room use. (Note the Old Sheffield Plate heart-shaped knitting sheath shown in Bridget McConnell's book.)

CC 140 – French art deco pin-on sheath.

CC 976 – Silver escutcheon – tests near sterling, but no marks – Dutch or German

CC 1115 – US coin silver cornucopia

CC 142 – US coin silver fish

All these three have holes around the outside or rings soldered at the edges on the underside, so that they could be sewn to a pad of cloth or even to a skirt



“Combo” knitters chatelaine – probably Dutch or German – and if I say so myself – AWFUL !! I now have two examples of this structure – I cannot love them, but they are a unique approach.

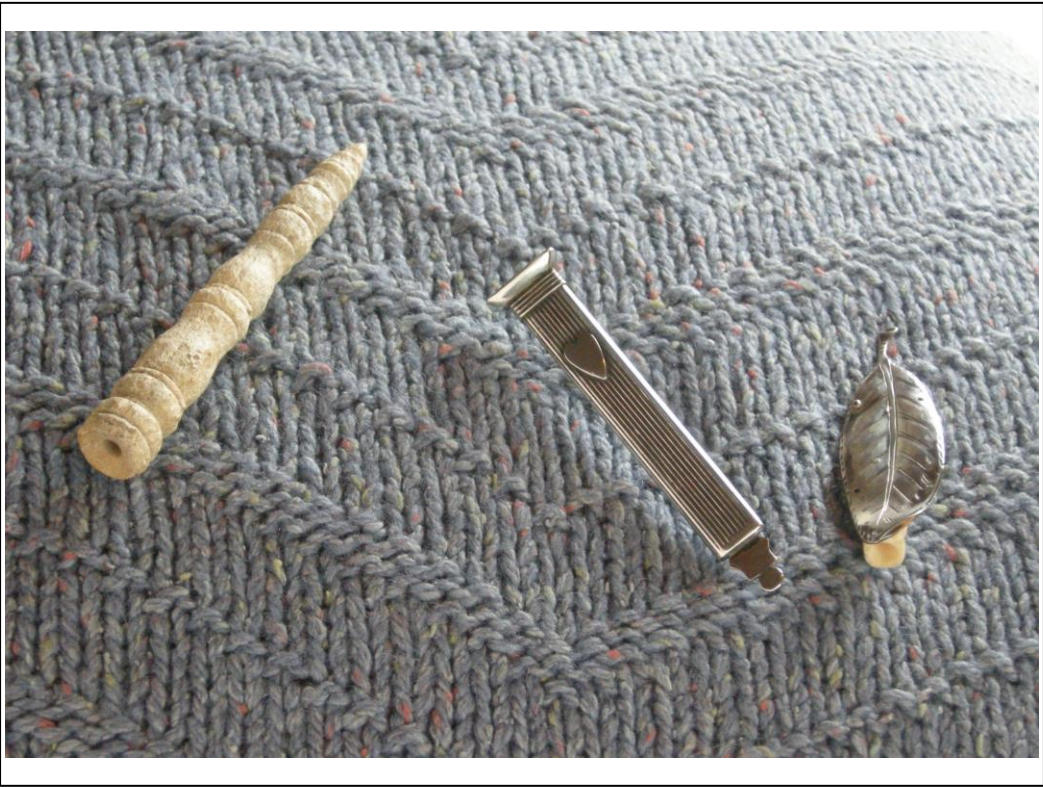
I think this falls under the heading of TOYS – those interesting gadgets which often incorporated many small objects.

Here the sheath at the top is really too small to hold a needle securely.

A chain with a yarn hook descends from the waist clip, with its baby head scrap. The yarn hook chain is a different linkage to the rest of the item – don’t know if it is a replacement.

Finally a pair of tip guards or needle holders can be controlled through the central ring.

It might have looked good without any of the actual knitting needles or yarn – perhaps just mean as a dangle – so AWFUL, I knew I would fight to own it !





Sheathes made of other objects –

CC 937 – an antler finished in silver at both ends and with a silver belt clip pinned on – probably German, as they seemed to make a lot of needlework tools from antler.

CC 1324 – a silver finished sheath decorated with natural and coloured quill work – Kay Sullivan says these were popular at the end of the 18th century, mainly coming from Friesland.

CC 1076 – This is a copper ship's nail, with the pointy end beaten into the lover's heart and the "head" of the nail worked to create a belt slot and the hole to take the needle. Possibly the work of a sailer, but it does have a very fine engraving of a woman's name – presumably it would have to be engraved on land. Georgian ?



More unusual sheathes –

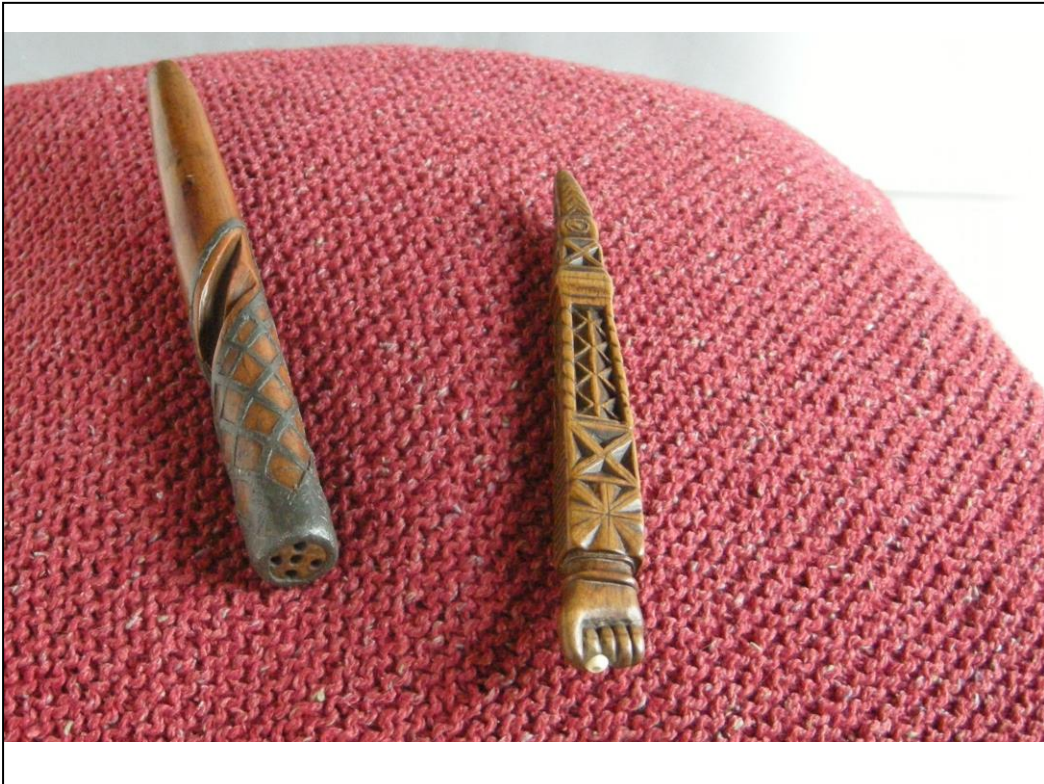
On the left, a Scottish wisk – a belted pad to hold any number of needles – Rutt in *The History of Handknitting*: mentions that sometimes up to 16 needles could be stuck into sheathes all around the knitters waist. CHECK THIS.

Above, a silver armpit-sheath (CC 315) – Dutch – with its rounded “bottom” heavily waited to help hold it snugly in the armpit.

Below, a tree bole studded with tacks or nailheads and a metal rim. Similar nails are used on such objects in Kay Sullivan’s book, so Dutch.

Right, (CC 1323) Dutch twig-based sheath. Note the lathe turning as the insertion end. Kay Sullivan says these are probably 18th century.





- Left, multi-holed sheath decorated and protected with pewter drizzled into slits, from the Pinto Collection. Diagonal slot into which the apron strings or cowbung would be crossed.

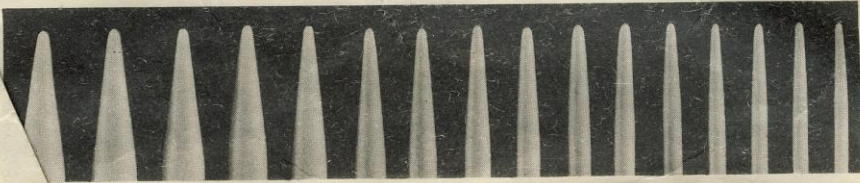
- Right, carved waistband sheath, finished with the very common clinched fist and a **BONE ??** ferrule to hold the needle or pin. This sheath is dated 1770, the zero visible at the top of the sheath near the taper. One number is carved on each side of the shaft which is angular at this point.

- Why was the sheath used ?

- Prevent stitches slipping off the needles
- Free up one hand for other work
- Aid to speed

- Just the thing for poorer people – people who could not afford to stop knitting, and people who had to knit on their feet.

These **AERO** Circular Twin-Pins are made in the following sizes :



	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
	7	6½	6	5½	5	4½	4	-	3½	-	3	-	2½ - 2 my/m.

The Lengths available are

	16"	20"	24"	27"	30"	36"	42"
ENGLISH	40	50	60	70	75	80	90
TRICOT							100 c/ms.

BEFORE USE
THE SET OR TWIST WHICH THE NYLON MAY TAKE UP WHEN COILED IN THIS ENVELOPE FOR ANY LENGTH OF TIME CAN BE REMOVED EASILY BY PLACING IN HOT WATER FOR A FEW MOMENTS THEN HOLDING OUT STRAIGHT. DO NOT STRETCH THE NYLON. SIMPLY PULL OUT STRAIGHT.

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What was the end ?

Knitting sheathes died out for a number of reasons :

1. Schools began teaching a different style of knitting that presented a more elegant appearance.
2. Women sat down to knit more often, didn't need to knit as swiftly as previously, knitting became a leisure pasttime, rather than a necessity.
3. Double points were replaced in many cases by twin-pins, with the connecting metal or plastic rope between the needles. No stitches falling off on that device.

Like other knitting tools such as the yarn basket and point protectors, the knitting sheath has reappeared in recent times – more, I suggest, as an object of study than of use.

This packet for circular knitting needles – Twin Pins – in the 1930s, uses the word "sheaths" but in fact it refers to point protectors, taking the German usage.