

The Evolution of Sewing Cotton in Britain 1798-1862

Needlework Tool Collectors Society of Australia

Sydney “Pearl Anniversary” Conference

19-20 October, 2023

- Research by Molly Pearce, Sheffield, United Kingdom
- Presentation by Susan Webster, Melbourne, Australia
- Photos by David Arnold, UK, and Susan Webster

Molly Pearce is long-time member of the NTCSA, living in Sheffield, England. Molly wrote this paper before the Covid lockdowns, based on her field research and complimented with institutional background study. With the cancellation of the 2020 and 2021 conferences due to the pandemic, the paper was held over until the conference in Sydney, 19-20 October, 2023.

The paper is also being posted on the NTCSA website.

The conference presentation is slightly different in construction, including more information on tools for managing loose thread, and was delivered by Molly's friend, Susan Webster.

“This cotton sewing thread was a great invention, a wonderful improvement on the flax thread in previous use, which it was difficult to get of sufficient fineness for some works and hardly possible to find evenly spun.”

Elizabeth Grant, a child in 1804

Elizabeth Grant wrote many years later about the conditions of her childhood in 1804.

Sewing supplies were purchased at the haberdasher in a larger town, or from a pedlar or small general store.

The early 19th century saw hand sewing of all household items before mechanical packaging and merchandising of equipment, and before the sewing machine.



Picture take from the internet

Hand sewing threads before cotton – up to 1800 or so

- Flax – grown locally
- Silk – grown locally and imported

Sold by weight.

Flax thread and the alternative silk thread were both expensive, so it is not surprising that around 1800 experiments were being made in several different places aimed at developing a cotton sewing thread.

These experiments were done in secret so it is difficult to find out the exact sequence of events; at present, this is what we know.

Mrs Lane by Paul Sandby, c 1765, showing a society lady using a lap distaff and spinning wheel.

Hand spinning from distaff was considered to produce a finer yarn more free from knots or lumps – and thus more suitable for hand sewing.

Drawing appears in *Style and Society – Dressing the Georgians*



Photo appears in *Style and Society – Dressing the Georgians*, the book accompanying the Royal Collection exhibition in 2023.

Cotton developed independently in several places in the world, as early as about 5000 BCE

Cotton entered Europe during medieval times from the middle east and through Muslim invasion of Spain

Renaissance and Enlightenment fashions included cotton garments imported from Mughal India – viz, chinz and, more broadly, Chinoiserie

European cotton textile industry started up in early 18th century, weaving cloth from imported raw cotton

Chinoiserie is the [European](#) interpretation and imitation of [Chinese](#) and other [East Asian](#) artistic traditions, especially in the [decorative arts](#), [garden design](#), [architecture](#), [literature](#), [theatre](#), and [music](#).^[1]

Early hand sewing cotton
sold in hanks or skeins

Before use, it had to be
hand-wound into a ball or
onto a card or a winder

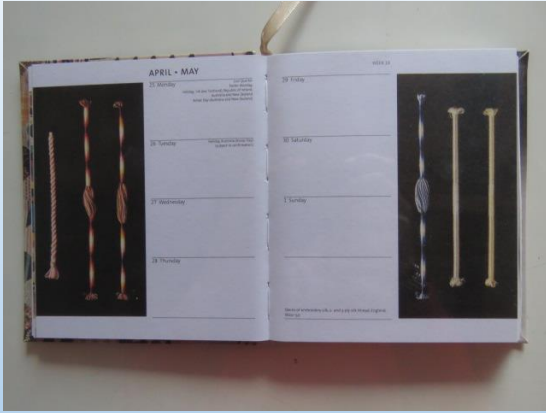


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There were many ways of keeping thread untangled and ready to use. Here are

- Plaid hand-made holder of square section with thread of various colours inside the flat cardboard slips
- “Straws” holding the thread – I believe these were items for sale.
- A tightly wound skein of silk, unopened after purchase.

I paid a fortune at Bleasdales for the “straws”



Left, the V & A's 2011 pocket diary, featuring a theme of needlework and needlework tools – here showing a number of tightly wound skeins of floss or thread.

Below, a Tunbridge ware skein holder, tessellations indicating a date after 1830.



Tunbridge ware changed in character in the last 1820s with the development of stickware and tessellated designs.

Inside the Tunbridge ware holder with its veneered tessellated designs are two skein holders with very thin wooden covers, front and back.

Skeins of thread are placed between a pair of paper slips and the whole wooden holder is placed inside the rosewood Tunbridge holder.

Hand sewing in the 18th and 19th centuries required a stronger thread than that used in weaving.

Two or more yarns were twisted together – “doubling” was a recognised trade in business directories of the period.

In 1798 Marsland, Son & Company started business as Spinners, Doublers and Sewing Cotton Manufacturers in Manchester.

By the early 19th century, Paisley in Scotland was another well-established centre of cotton sewing thread manufacture

Refer to Karen Kearney presentation at Melbourne Open Day in 2022.

Richard Arkwright’s water frame of 1769 produced a stronger, smoother thread than any other available, which was suitable for warp threads in weaving cloth, but it was not strong enough for hand sewing. To achieve a sewing thread, two or more yarns had to be twisted together (doubling) and then two or more doubled yarns had to be twisted together again in the opposite direction. This description simplifies a complicated process.

Still at this time, every item of clothing and every household fabric – towels, sheets, curtains, table cloths – was sewn by hand.



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This is one of my favourite workboxes – straw work and fitted with internal reels - which I generally think is late 18th/early 19th century.

I've used this photo before, and I bought the box from Genevieve Cummins after she finished her book on boxes. I think this box was too worn to include in her book, but I love it. Not only evidencing hard use but also all this delightful evidence of avoiding the dreary task of untangling the thread.



This montage shows another way of keeping track of one's threads – I think this book, about the size of a prayer book, was a home made project. The beaded design is glued onto the outside of the front cover, and inside the “pages” are have been folded into envelopes, with different colours and weights of thread folded safely away.

This “book” could have been a gift for a friend, but the creator might have kept it for her own use.

By 1802 well known engineer Marc Brunel invented a machine to wind cotton into balls.

The cotton balls were wound in the same way as a modern ball of string, with a small label giving the size of the cotton inserted during the winding. None of the early balls carry a manufacturer's name.





About the same time, around 1814, in Paisley cotton thread manufacturers wound thread onto wooden reels, for an extra half-penny charge.

Early wooden reels from Regency workboxes show thread size on the reels.

This reel is stamped 11. Molly has provided a lot more information on establishing the quality of the thread and the thickness.

1818 – Patent 4221 protected Patent
Diamond Cotton Balls

Inventor Edmund Naish began to include
his name on every diamond ball

Or he included the name of a wholesale
purchaser – merchandising began





Early mechanically wound ball on the right, a diamond-wound ball on the left, and an early reel – a size comparison

Brand names were also starting to be used on packets of sewing needles from about 1820 on. Much later in knitting needles.



Shops sold both balls and hanks for a while.

In this Regency workbox -

- Machine wound balls on the left
- Thread barrels and winders along the front (to carry thread wound from skein)
- Inbuilt winding reels toward the back
- Machine wound spools on the right

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For a while shops sold both skeins and ball cotton. An inventory of the stock of Cox and Hicks of Ringwood in Hampshire was taken in 1814. This shop sold everything from bonnet wire to snuff and barrels of herrings, but the stock included 2 lb (pounds weight) of sewing cotton in skeins at 5s 3d (five shillings and three pence) per lb and 4 ½ lbs of cotton balls at 5s 6d (five shillings and six pence) per lb.

By the 1820s, use of manufacturers' names on reels and on Diamond Cotton Balls showed the value of establishing a brand name in an increasingly crowded market.

Early books on haberdashery show that skeins were not being stocked after about 1826 or so.

In 1818 Edmund Naish, a Bristol hosier and glover, took out patent No. 4221 for his Patent Diamond Cotton Balls. Naish realised he could make money from his invention and his name was included on each label, or, sometimes by arrangement, that of another firm like Jonas Brook and Brothers of Huddersfield.

The centre of these cotton balls was wound like those already being produced, but the outer layers of cotton were wound in an attractive diamond pattern, and they soon became very popular.

In the early 1820s Miss Mitford described an imaginary country town of the period with one drapery and haberdashery shop run by Martha Deane. "I think I was never more astonished than when, on asking from mere force of habit for thread, I was presented instead of the pretty lattice wound balls or showy reels of cotton with which that demand is usually answered, with a whole drawer full of skeins peeping from their blue papers." The skeins reminded the author of her youth.



The oldest labelled reels are the Boar's Head crest of Walter Evans and Co of Derby printed in black on coloured paper and cut in a rectangular shape. Probably early 1820s, as later in the decade the Evans labels were printed in black on white paper and cut round to better fit the ends of the reels.

At the end of the 1830s the Walter Evans name was added.

1820s and 1830s, first haberdashery manuals and guides were printed.

Detailed advice given on qualities of thread.

Quality was reckoned by the whiteness of the thread and its freedom from fine down, which was removed by passing the thread quickly through a gas flame.

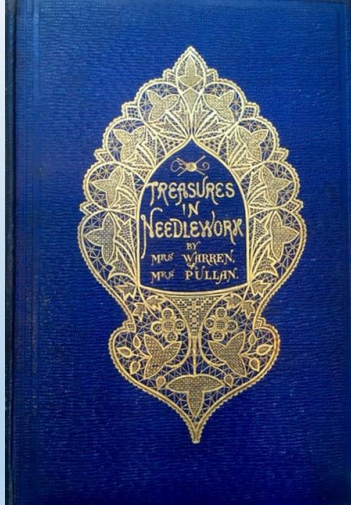
Thickness of the yarn came in about 30 variations

The thickness of the thread is referred to as the size or count; the lower the number the stronger and thicker the thread.

Different manufacturers developed different numbering systems – and different terminology . “... makers of sewing cotton appear each to have his own way of numbering the spools – some begin at No 1, others at 12, 14, and so on.”

So sewing guides usually recommended the thread of one specific manufacturer.

No surprises here ! The same situation developed in knitting needles, and possibly sewing needles.



In an example of early cross-marketing, this book, published in 1855, features “Little Mary” talking to her mother on various aspect of needlework :

“These <cottons> are, I see, the same as are used in the *Family Friend* – Evan’s Boar’s Head cottons.

“Yes, I see they have a boar’s head on the label. Why is that?” Mama explains it is the family crest of the manufacturers and extols the virtue of the Boar’s Head cotton.

But Mary continues, “But surely, Mamma, there cannot be any difference in the quality of the cotton. It seems to me that a reel of cotton is a reel of cotton, and one is as good as another.”

By 1830s and 40s, the sewing cotton field was crowded and profits sliding.

Manufacturers tried increasing the attractiveness and novelty of the reels



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Materials and manufacturers used included – starting clockwise from extreme left –

- Barbers Penny Reel with an edge of pressed brass
- a flower-topped bone reel
- a top with painting or print under glass, with a pressed metal edge to hold the glass in place
- a mother of pearl topped reel
- Barbers, Leicester 70 xx,
- Raworth's Nine Cord with a classical head in centre, pressed wood
- Excelsior, with the top of the reel cut in a Maltese cross shape – to allow the purchaser to see how much thread was being bought
- a smaller mother of pearl topped reel
- in the centre, IP Clarke Dorcas Six Cord

Such reels looked expensive, but often there was less thread on a reel or

thread of inferior quality.



Improved spooling machinery in the late 1850s made the decorative reels obsolete.

New machinery required wooden reels of uniform size and shape fixed in place, ready for winding.

The machine guided the thread onto the spool until exactly 200 yards were wound on, cut a nick in the end of the spool, drew the thread end into it and then discharged the spool so that the whole process could begin again.

Other developments –

- 1840s on – manufacturers worked to make sewing thread smoother (eliminating the need for waxers, although this obsolescent tool continued to be available up through World War One).
- Some firms dipped the thread in a weak gluey material, and then brushed it to achieve a lustrous or shining appearance.
- Godfrey Ermen of Manchester's Diamond Thread used a mix of soap and waxes – and then the thread was mechanically brushed under tension.
- In the 1850s John Mercer patented a process for treating thread with caustic soda, aimed at increasing dye take-up – this was the beginning of mercerisation which strengthened the cotton yarn.
- Mercerised threads were sold under names like Sylko, SylOsol, Skileena, Silcarn, and Silkee – playing on their silk-like appearance – or Perilustra, Glista and Armalustre – referring to their sheen.

Modernisation and contraction in the thread industry continued through the end of the 19th century and into the 20th. Only the largest firms with the newest technology survived.

References

- Molly's paper will be filed on the NTCSA website
- More information about winding reels is contained in *Winding Reels and Floss*, 2014, a presentation to the Victorian group of NTCSA, available on my website

www.knitting-needle-notions.com.au

