

Those crafty Victorians

Nowadays, it's fashionable to advertise things as 'Not your Nana's knitting' – but those Victorian knitters could still teach us a thing or two!

Victorian knitting patterns look terrifying. They're not really difficult, though. The knitting pattern as we know it was created during the 19th century, when knitting started to become a leisure, as well as a commercial, activity – and like any creative process, there were plenty of false starts before the whole thing came together and patterns became standardised.

Changing terms

Today it seems obvious that instead of writing out common instructions like 'knit', 'purl' and 'increase' in our patterns, it's easier to abbreviate them to 'K', 'P' and 'inc'. However, abbreviations have only been used since the 1840s, when Jane Gaugain introduced them in *The Ladies' Knitting, Netting and Crochet Book*. Even then, there were no standardised abbreviations, no charts, and often patterns were written out without using the space-saving asterisks (*) and 'rep's' we use today – as a result, Victorian patterns often look like secret codes.

Even where the author gives a key to her code, Victorian patterns still make little sense

to modern knitters, because the descriptions don't use the words we are used to. For instance, Jane's key to her abbreviations in her 1840-1 pattern for a 'Pyrenees Knit Scarf' include 'T, take-in, by knitting two together', where today we write k2tog. Stitches were called 'loops', and some of Jane's other abbreviations include 'O, make a stitch' (we would probably call this a yarn over), 'P, a plain stitch', (knit), 'B, a back stitch' (purl), and 'Ar, take in three' (k3tog, perhaps).

The fact that there was no standard terminology was a problem Victorian knitters were only too aware of. Mrs Hope, the author of the 1847 book *The Knitter's Friend*, warned against 'the use of two distinct terms to convey the same idea – a mode of expression which... is enough to drive the novice to despair'.

A common language

Historical knitting expert Joyce Meader notes that some terms, like 'K' and 'P', have been traced back as far as the earliest written patterns to mean Knit and Purl. "There is reference to K and P in *Mrs Beeton's Book of Needlework* from the 1870s, and also *The*



Knitting Teacher's Assistant, dated 1817." She believes that the terminology we use today dates back to around the 1880s-90s.

"Marjory Tillotson was commissioned by yarn manufacturer Baldwins to go around the country collecting patterns and stitches in the early 1900s, so this is most probably where this idea [of a standardised knitting glossary] came from," she explains.

According to Victorian lace knitting expert Jane Sowerby, the terminology we use today came into common use in 1906 when *Weldon's Practical Needlework* magazine started to use modern-style terms. If you look at a 1920s pattern today, such as the ones in *A Stitch in Time*, the collection of early 20th century patterns by Jane Waller and Susan Crawford, the terminology used is the same we have today, with 'm' firmly in use for 'make 1', 'inc.' for increase, and 'k2tog' for knit two together.

A respectable hobby

Before the late 1830s, knitting patterns were handed down orally rather than written down – probably because so many knitters couldn't read or write – and knitting was a major local industry all around Britain, with long traditions of knitting including Fair Isle

Needles

Double pointed needles, which could be made of materials as exotic as ivory or walrus tusk, were standard until knitting 'pins' – the long needles we know today – came into being in the 19th century.

Standardised sizing only came into being in the 1840s with the old range of

sizes, which ran from 1 to 26 (the metric needle-sizing system we use today has been around since the 1970s). A size 20, the needle often recommended by Victorians for lace knitting, was less than 1mm in width, and casting on hundreds of stitches was common. To create a shawl with such tiny needles was

a major endeavour. But even then, often authors didn't specify what size to use – instructions were as vague as: 'Use fine knitting needles', or '[U]se regular needles'.

As for circular knitting needles, it's believed that they first came into use around 1918, according to Joyce Meader.



The Myrtle Leaf shawl, one of the stunning patterns in *Victorian Lace Today*.

and guernsey knitting. But with the industrial revolution, the importing of fine wool from overseas, and the fading of the wool cottage industry, it became harder to make a living by selling one's knitting. The craft gradually turned into a leisured drawing room pursuit for educated, middle-class ladies with time on their hands, servants and charity work to do, who still had to appear productive: the devil makes work for idle hands. It was with the emergence of knitting as a middle-class hobby that educated

“The craft gradually turned into a leisured drawing room pursuit for educated, middle-class ladies with time on their hands and charity work to do.”

knitters started writing patterns down. Even Queen Victoria loved to knit.

The first English knitting pattern book was *The Ladies' Knitting and Netting Book*, published in 1837 by a Miss Watts. Often the designs in these early pattern books were not brand-new fashions but collections of designs which had been passed to the authors. So, like other pioneering pattern writers, Miss Watts referred to patterns as

'receipts' – because they had been received from someone else (just as in those days, recipes, since they were passed from person to person, were also called receipts).

Many patterns in early knitting books weren't carefully tested and were full of inaccuracies, so if you're following a Victorian pattern, you'll have to make your own sense of it. Some of these early books were illustrated, but in nothing like the depth we're used to today!

All-purpose yarns

As for giving readers details on what yarn and how much to use, this didn't become standard until the 1860s. For example, one of Jane Gaugain's patterns calls for two and a half ounces of 'blue Berlin wool', which was a lightweight yarn, and the same amount of white wool, although Jane also suggests 'glover's silk', presumably as an alternative to wool. Berlin wool work was a fashionable form of needlepoint, which gives you an idea of the weight of the original yarn. Today a 4ply or DK would work.

If the sock fits...


According to the knitting historian Anne L. Macdonald, in the 19th century, 'since garments seldom required a good 'fit' of chest or bust, few knitters brooded about final measurements. As for tension squares, before around 1870 patterns didn't suggest them, and they only became common much later. 'Do not knit too tight or too loosely' was often all the guidance given in Victorian times, so if you're knitting a vintage pattern you have the perfect excuse not to worry about tension!

Anne L. Macdonald points out that, 'In children's clothes, if the garment didn't fit, a child was found to fit the garment.'

Extravagant though this may sound, in fact knitters of this era took every care not to waste either yarn or time. Socks, for instance, were reknitted when worn through, or unraveled and turned into new garments.

When buying yarn, Victorian knitters could still take advantage of homespun wool; one 19th century book, *The Frugal Housewife*, advised readers to 'buy your woollen yarn in quantities from someone in the country,

Explore the era!



- * We love *Victorian Lace Today* by Jane Sowerby (XRX Books), and you can **SAVE £2** with our offer! To order your copy for just £17.99 (free p&p, UK only) call Search Press on 01892 510850 and quote Simply Knitting.
- * The Victoria and Albert Museum has an amazing collection of historical textiles, including some fine knitted Victorian lace – well worth a look if you have the chance. Visit their website, www.vam.ac.uk for more about their collections plus tips and ideas and even 1940s patterns.
- * Find fab old knitting books which you can read for free online at Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org
- * Visit 'The Victorians' group on knitting site www.ravelry.com to chat about all things Victorian, including patterns you're knitting.

whom you can trust. The thread stores make profits from it of course.'

Knitters carried their workbags everywhere they went, taking every chance to knit rows between household chores and while socialising (little girls were often expected to knit a set number of rows each day); and every scrap of yarn counted.

Into the future

As much as the Victorians helped shape knitting, they didn't start it and they certainly didn't perfect it. Every era brings something new to the craft. For example, the purl stitch, so basic today, came into existence probably around the mid 16th century, and prior to that stocking stitch was created by knitting in the round, after which the fabric was cut open if it needed to be flat. New ways of knitting are evolving all the time. The 'magic loop' appears to be a 21st century technique – it's believed to have been invented by Sarah Hauschka, who published a pamphlet explaining her new method in 2002. So perhaps our modern knitting isn't 'nana's knitting' – but let's not forget what those dedicated Victorian knitters did for us!

Knit a Victorian pattern

A Pretty Pattern for a Baby's Shoe

This Victorian pattern is taken from *Exercises in Knitting* by British designer Cornelia Mee and comes from an edition published in 1846. The full text is available from Project Gutenberg at www.gutenberg.org

We've translated the pattern for you, but have included some of the original text (the violet parts) so you can see how it was written. Just follow the pattern written in our normal style, not the violet text, to make your own Victorian booties.

“Cast on 30 stitches, knit 8 rows, increasing 1 at the beginning of each, knit 12 rows, increasing 1 at the beginning of every other row for the toe, knit 4 rows without increasing...”

Cast on 30 stitches using 2.5mm needles.

Row 1 Kfb, knit to end.

Rep this row seven more times. [38 sts]

Row 9 Kfb, knit to end.

Row 10 Knit.

Rep these two rows five more times. [44 sts]

Rows 21-24 Knit.

Working on first 12 sts only, knit 30 rows.

Place 32 unworked sts on st holder.

Row 1 Knit to end of row, turn, cast on 32 sts.

Row 2-4 Knit.

Row 5 K2tog, knit to end.

Row 6 Knit.

Rep these 2 rows five more times. [38 sts]

Rep Row 5 eight times. [30 sts]

Cast off.

Your knitting will now resemble a 'U' shape.

“This completes the foot part, except the little bit that is let in to shape it better, for which take up 12 stitches along the increased part of the toe, and knit 10 rows, decreasing 1 at the beginning of every other one at the end nearest the casting on...”

Pick up 12 stitches along the outside of the bottom of the 'U', along the section where you increased earlier.

Row 1 Knit.

Row 2 K2tog, knit to end.

Note: you should be decreasing at the edge closest to the side of the 'U' not the edge closest to the bottom of the 'U'.

Rep these two rows until you have 1 st left.

Cast off.

“For the instep:—Take up the 32 stitches on each side, and 16 across the toe, knit 2 plain rows all round, and cast off; then take up the same number all round, but from the bottom of these 2 rows...”

INSTEP

Pick up 32 sts down the leg of the 'U' (where you cast on additional stitches earlier) then 16 sts across the base of the 'U'. Knit across the 32 stitches on a stitch holder.

Optional frill (not shown):

Row 1 & 2 Knit.

Cast off.

Pick up as before at bottom of these two rows: 32 sts down one leg of the 'U', 16 across the bottom and 32 up the other leg.

Row 1 Knit.

Row 2 Knit 47 sts, k2tog, turn.

Row 3 Knit 15 sts, k2tog, turn.

Row 4 (RS) K2, *sl 1 knitwise, K1, pssso, yf, K1,

P1; rep from * twice more, K1, k2tog, turn.

Row 5 K2, P12, K1, k2tog, turn.

Rep rows 4-5 eleven more times. [54 sts]

ANKLE

Turn and knit to end.

Next three rows, knit.

Row 1 (RS) K1, *yo, k2tog; rep from * to last st,

“Make a stitch, seam 2 together, make a stitch, seam 2 together; this is to form a row of holes for the ribbon to pass through; knit 2 plain rows. Continue the plain and pattern rows as in the instep till 36 rows are done; knit 4 plain rows, and cast off.”

K1. (This makes a row of eyelets for a ribbon.)

Rows 2-4 Knit.

Row 5 K1, *sl 1 knitwise, K1, pssso, yf, K1, P1; rep from * to last st, K1

Row 6 K1, P to last st, K1.

Rep rows 4-5 eight more times.

Note: Cornelia Mee advises repeating these two rows 17 more times [36 rows total] but this would make very long shoes.

Next 4 rows, knit.

Cast off loosely.

MAKING UP

Sew seams. Thread ribbon through eyelets.

