

Inspiring the Generations: The Knitting Reference Library

Words by Linda Newington.

The Knitting Reference Library (KRL) is part of the University of Southampton Library, and is located at Winchester School of Art, a campus of the University. The KRL was launched at the first **In the loop** conference in 2008 and is founded on the bibliographic collections of Richard Rutt, Montse Stanley and Jane Waller. Each collector possessed a serious passion for knitting, their individual approaches are illustrated through the resources they collected and established as an essential part of their working lives.

The library comprises nearly 2000 books, 425 journal and magazine titles, an estimated 12,000 knitting patterns and hundreds of knitting pattern books. It includes many widely known classic books from the Victorian period through the decades of the twentieth century to the present day.

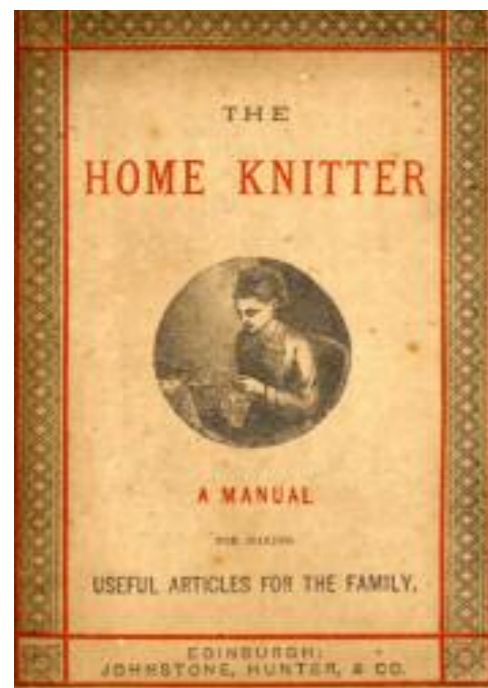
Richard Rutt and the history of hand knitting

Richard Rutt (1925-2011) once popularly known as the knitting bishop, was a scholar and knitter known for his classic book *A history of hand knitting* published by Batsford in 1987, it remains a key text on the subject.

I first met Richard Rutt at his home in Falmouth to discuss the generous donation of his library. Many return visits were made to discuss knitters and their books whenever I made a trip down to Cornwall. It was always a pleasure to meet with him and his wife Joan and to chat over tea and cake. I also saw many examples of his and Joan's knitting including hats, gloves, cardigans, jumpers and coats.

A particular distinction and strength of his library is the range and number of Victorian knitting books which commenced publication in the 1830s. These are small books that include recipes, more akin to guidelines rather than the strict instructions of patterns, sometimes with illustrations in either black and white or hand coloured. They promoted knitting at this time through their through mass publication. They are interesting antecedents to the contemporary printed knitting pattern and the "how to knit" books of today. Rutt devotes a chapter to *The Victorian age and the belle époque* in his book providing context and information about a number of the lady authors. He also gives a check list of *English knitting literature* published before 1910 which list these small works. He knitted a group of "pence jugs" from the Victorian patterns to test their accuracy and to learn the technique first-hand.

A further feature of his library is the back runs of magazines including *Weldon's*, *Stitchcraft*, and *Vogue Knitting*.



On the left: Examples of some of the vintage knitting patterns.

His knitting pattern collection is especially strong on menswear from the 1920s through to the 1980s including many gems of popular culture. A reference to the Beatles is made by Patons in a dark and moody image of a look-alike Beatle wearing an edge to edge cardigan under the title *Liverpool Look*. An unknown classic may be the book entitled *The manly art of knitting* by Dave Fougner, published in 1972 by Schribner which includes knitting patterns for dog and horse blankets, a hammock and cap. He also collected books on knitting from other countries including Korea and Scandinavia.

Montse Stanley: tradition and renewal an expert of construction and technique

Montse Stanley (1942–1999) was born in Barcelona and established her collection as the Knitting Reference Library in her Cambridge home before its acquisition by the University in 1999. Her collecting started in rather an unexpected way with photographs and postcards on the theme of knitting. They were acquired when attending postcard fairs with her husband Thomas Stanley who possessed one of the largest postcard businesses in the UK.

Montse Stanley is well known amongst the knitting community for her charisma, enthusiasm and knowledge which is clear from her many publications and the inherent legacy of her collection. The indispensable *The handknitter's handbook: a comprehensive guide to the principles and techniques of hand knitting* first published in 1986 by David and Charles has been reprinted and translated many times.

It is apparent that she worked closely with the collection of knitted objects which richly illustrate her approach to construction, design and technique especially in the third revised edition dated 1993. I detect that she considered knitting traditional yet inventive, aesthetically beautiful and utilitarian, every day and kitsch, fashionable also comforting, even humorous. This is seen in her copy of *Wild knitting* published in 1979 by Mitchell and Beazley with many surprising projects for unusual items such as an armadillo cape, unusual dresses and a selection of punk ties.

Her collection of knitted objects numbers about 1000 items. It comprises clothing, bags and purses, accessories, domestic items and novelties. The bags and purses date from the late 18th century through to the mid 20th century and are complimented by books detailing the techniques not only in Victorian publications but also in secondary sources for example, *Classic beaded purse patterns* by E. de Jong-Kramer, Lacis 1996.

Her library includes a run of the *Girls Own Annual* dating from 1881 to 1923. In some copies there are small markers with pencil notes in her hand writing all denoting references to knitting. She also collected fiction, again noting in pencil on the title pages of Agatha Christie murder mysteries all references to knitting.

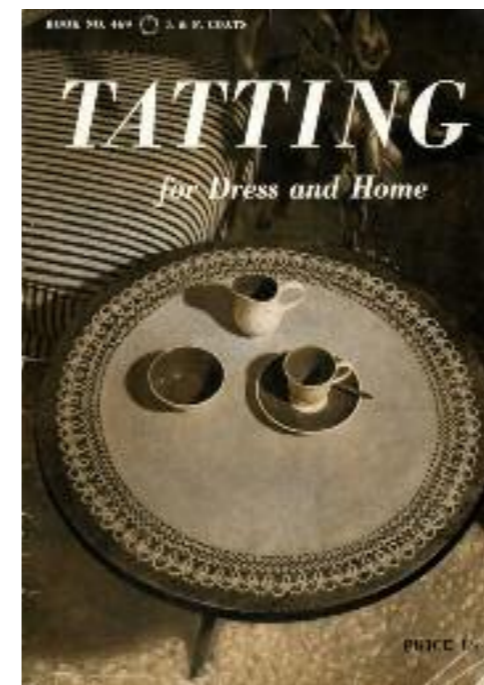
She reveals particular interest in her cultural back ground with books and knitting patterns books from France, Italy and Spain. They include some interesting works such as *Spanish costume of Extremadura* by Ruth Matilda Anderson published by the Hispanic Society of America in 1951 with many reference to knitting. There is also a copy of *Andean folk knitting: traditions and techniques from Peru and Bolivia* by Cynthia Gravelle LeCount, published by Dos Tejedoras in 1990 richly illustrated as yet to be superseded.

Her own expertise as related to the construction of garments and objects is clear in a further published work *Knitting your own designs for a perfect fit*, published by David and Charles in 1982 as it notably includes some of her own designs. The emphasis on construction was intended to encourage knitters to develop their own patterns by learning the appropriate skills and techniques through a European approach as illustrated in *Continental knitting* by Esther Bondesen published by Maurice Friedberg in 1948. This is the practice in Shetland and many other textile cultures where knitting is embedded in a way of life and construction is part of learning.

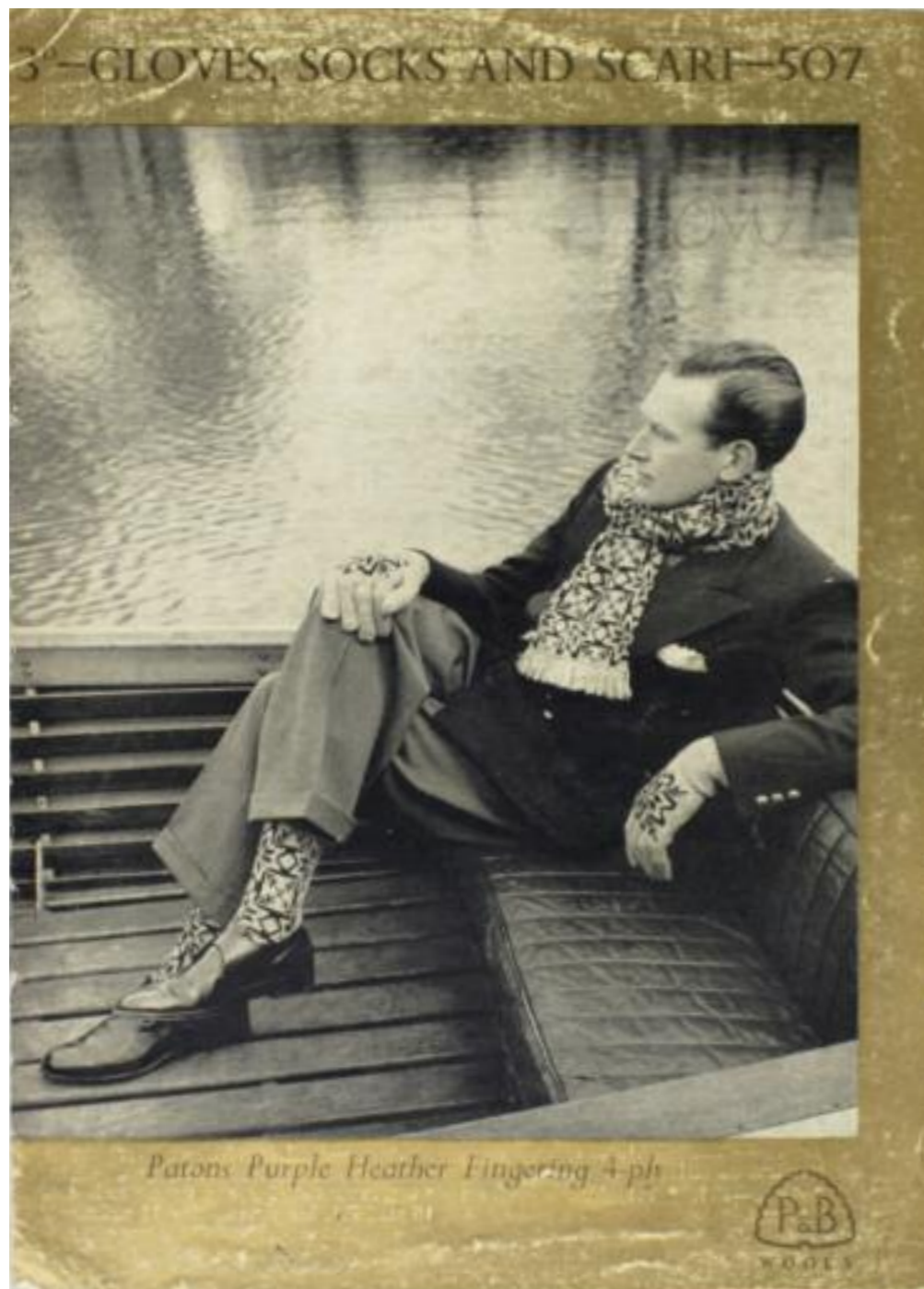
Jane Waller a vintage original

Jane Waller's first book on knitwear entitled *A stitch in time: knitting and crochet patterns of the 1920s, 1930s & 1940s* published by Duckworth in 1972 remains a classic of an earlier vintage knitwear revival. I remember visiting Jane to view the knitting patterns at her home in London. Whilst feeling quite excited about acquiring such an unusual collection I was also thinking rather nervously about the practical issues of sorting, cataloguing and storage.

Waller started her collection through a chance house clearance when she found and rescued a large number of knitting patterns and women's magazines. This was the start of her longer term project to recognise their relevance and special value to knitters. Waller also published a compilation of vintage patterns for menswear *The man's knitting book: classic patterns from the '20s to the '50s* published by Thames & Hudson in 1984, she describes the cardigan as "sensible and functional not fashionable." It is interesting that fashion designers have rehabilitated the cardigan for men as an alternative piece of clothing now seen as signifying urbanity and understated subversity.



On the right: Further examples of publications within the collection.



The extensive range and variety of knitting patterns, pattern books and women's magazines dating from the 1920s provide a rich resource for the fashion historian and contemporary designer. The image of knitting in the early patterns is remarkably glamorous and stylish. It is this quality that Jane Waller identified and brought to knitters in the 1970s which Susan Crawford has continued and refreshed. The many visitors to the KRL both professional designers and students continue to be inspired by the quality of these images and designs.

The magazine *Women's weekly* is also part of this collection. It is one title amongst many popular women's magazines held in the KRL unexpectedly retained given the academic context of the University. They richly illustrate the prevalence of knitting and dress making as thriving domestic activities over the decades with some notable peaks and troughs.

Are you in the loop?

I co-organised with Jessica Hemmings the first knitting conference entitled *In the loop: knitting past, present and future* in 2008 at Winchester School of Art. A constant buzz from the conversation amongst the generations of knitters who attended as delegates was heard throughout each day. The Knitting Lounge located in the Rotunda proving a popular venue. The conference resulted in a published book *In the loop: knitting now* edited by Jessica Hemmings and published by Black Dog in 2010.

In the loop 2: tradition and renewal took place at the Shetland Museum & Archives in September 2010 and was co-organised with Dr Carol Christiansen. A day trip on Sunday up to Yell and Unst in the far north of Shetland proved an unforgettable experience. Prior to the conference we had the opportunity to identify the constancy of knitting and the new generation of knitters through an interview on Radio 4 for Woman's Hour.

In the loop 3: the voices of knitting took place at the Winchester Discovery Centre in 2012 once again including a variety of themes. The themes of adornment, exploration and discovery, sport, voices and well-being were richly explored by the keynote speakers.

In the loop 3.5: making connections is at the planning stage and will be taking place as part of the Shetland Arts International Textile Festival 31 July to 5 August 2013.

And Finally

The Knitting Reference Library today comprises books, exhibition catalogues, knitting patterns, journals and women's magazines. It covers knitting, crochet, tating, macramé and netting. There is also contextual material broadly covering costume, dress and other aspects of textiles. The earliest printed works date from the Victorian period of the 1830s, the latest include the publications of today. New resources are acquired regularly to ensure the library reflects the diversity of approaches to knitting in the 21st century.

Montse Stanley's collection of knitted objects, knitting tools, postcards and photographs is located in Special Collections at the Hartley Library at the Highfield Campus, University of Southampton. This resource compliments the published material enabling the potential link between object and text.

Contact information

Our website is at www.soton.ac.uk/intheloop

The Victorian knitting manuals have all been digitised and may be accessed via our website link at www.soton.ac.uk/intheloop

A pilot project to digitise knitting patterns has recently been completed. The digitised patterns are available via www.soton.ac.uk/intheloop

E-mail enquiries to www.wsaenqs.soton.ac.uk

The books and journals are all catalogued and indexed on the University's online catalogue which is accessible via the internet at www.soton.ac.uk/library

Special Collections may be contacted in the first instance by e-mail at archives@soton.ac.uk

On the left:
More examples of patterns.

All images courtesy of the KRL,
University of Southampton.