

# It's smart if you made it

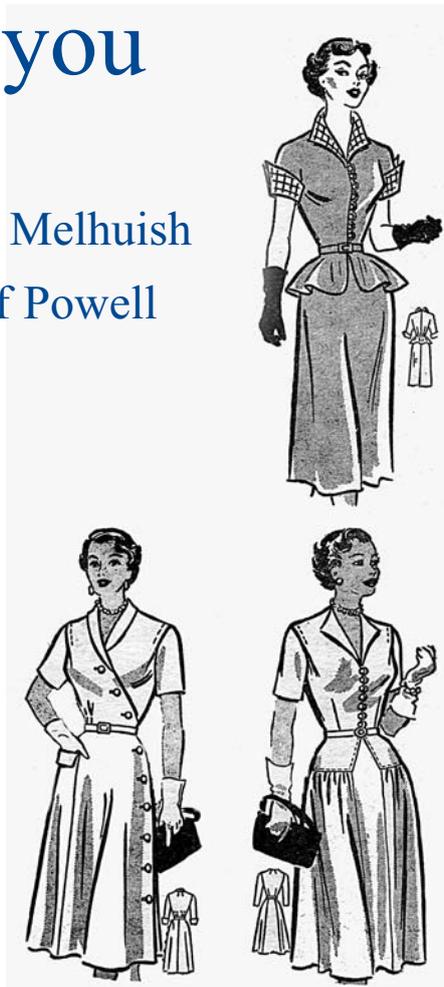
Written by Heidi Melhuish  
Images by Geoff Powell

The modern dressmaking and needlecraft boom started during the Second World War. Before, homecrafts had been popular: during the War they became necessary. Clothing coupons were precious and materials became scarce, so women began to 'make do and mend'. Magazines from the period give instructions for do-it-yourself powder compacts, shoes and handbags. When clothes rationing ended, dressmaking continued unabated. New clothes were expensive, and if you lived in a rural area the nearest dress shops were miles away. Money was tight for many families. Women who wanted the 'New Look' clothes popular from the late 1940s often had to make them themselves, so they bought paper patterns by Vogue, Simplicity, and Butterick, amongst others. Vogue patterns brought the possibility of wearing high couture garments to ordinary housewives. Achieving the look was not simple, however, as the patterns had their own system of punched shapes which was difficult to follow. If you did manage to work it out, you ended up with a high fashion designer outfit and the satisfaction of knowing you had 'made it yourself'. These patterns can today form a colourful and attractive collection.

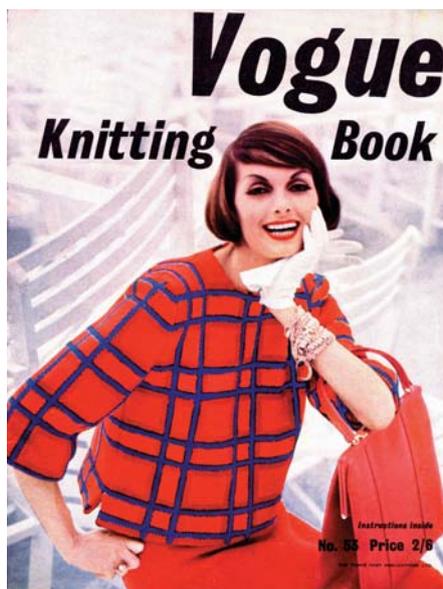
Other sources of patterns and ideas were magazines. There were several devoted to sewing and needlecrafts, and these carried pages of tempting outfits. These magazines and others like *Woman* and *Home Notes* sent out thousands of paper patterns throughout the decade. *Woman's Illustrated* featured the creations of Christian Dior and ladies could write to him for advice regarding clothes and style. The Queen's dressmaker, Norman Hartnell, and French designer Pierre Balmain also contributed. Magazines from the 1950s are readily available today, and are inexpensive and fun to look through.

Sales of sewing machines rose swiftly. Thrifty mothers 'made over' their old clothes to fit their young daughters. Toys were also a popular 'make', and hordes of strangely-shaped animals and dolls filled the pages of needlecraft magazines and books.

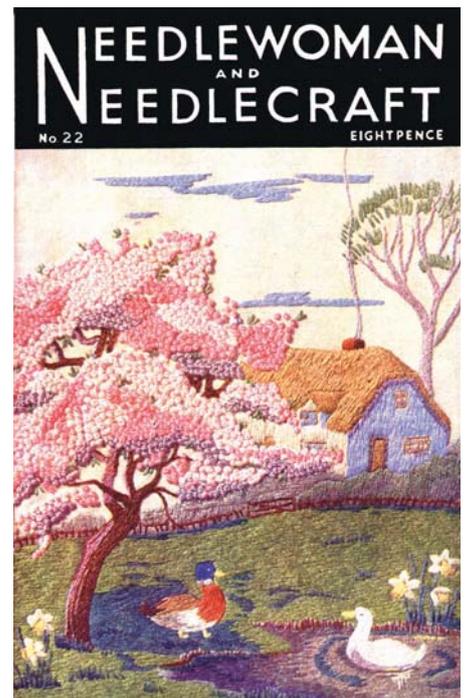
As parties and dancing became more popular with young girls, so did home dressmaking. They quickly realised that they could have a new dress for the party at the weekend



Dress styles from a 1953 needlework book. These books are worth £5-£8.



From 1958, this copy of 'Vogue Knitting Book' contains smart, high fashion designs. £5-£7.



Dated April 1945, this small magazine includes patterns for leather sandals, a handbag and knitted items. £1-£2.

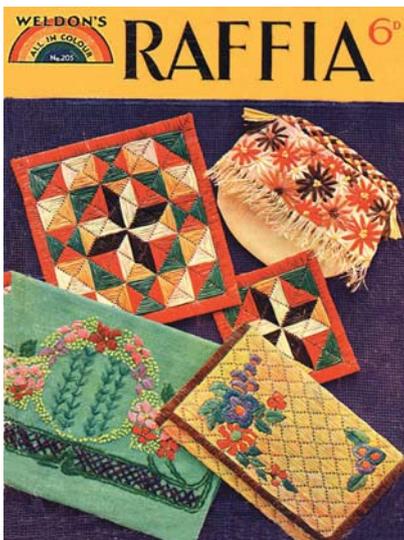
## COLLECTING INFORMATION

Collecting needlework patterns, books, and tools from days gone by can be an interesting hobby. It can give a vivid picture of what life was like sixty, seventy or eighty years ago, and especially illustrates what women wore and how they spent their spare time.

It can also be an inexpensive hobby too, in these days of rocketing prices for collectables. All the items shown in this article are priced very modestly. At auctions you may find a large amount of needlecraft magazines, patterns and books which have come from house clearances, most of which should sell quite reasonably. Some items can be found in charity shops but these are generally not very old. Some antique shops may carry old sewing books and patterns.

It may be a little harder and more expensive to build up a collection of vintage clothing. However, some dealers specialise in clothes from certain eras, and others sell embroidered table linen.

It is surprising how quickly a collection can grow, and how fascinating needlework literature can be.



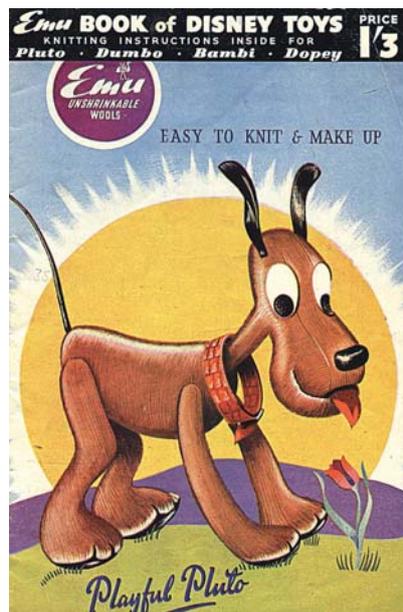
Weldon's 'Raffia' magazine, with lots of colourful ideas. 1930s. £3-£4.



Ideas for gifts from a 1953 needlework book. These books are worth £5-£8.



1930s knitted swimsuit pattern. £3-£4, in good condition.



Disney knitting designs booklet, late 1940s. £5-£8.



Patterns from 1961 and 1958. These are difficult to find in good condition. McCalls, £2-£3. Vogue £5-£6, in good condition.

## COLLECTING & PRICING INFO

at a much reduced cost if they bought the material and ran it up themselves. Many of the party dresses from the 1950s found today are the creations of young seamstresses.

In the 1960s the attitudes of the young towards homemade clothes changed. Now able to afford off-the-peg, they saw these as being fashionably superior to mother's own creations which they now rejected. Older women, however, continued to enjoy running up their own suits and dresses.

## Knitting

Knitting was an immensely popular craft in the 1950s. Magazines overflowed with knitting patterns, supplements and extras. Again Vogue came to the aid of those who desired high fashion but had to practise economy, with their *Knitting Book* (actually a magazine). They featured chic Continental fashions and garments with interesting combinations of styles and materials. Magazines like *Woman's Own* published more traditional patterns, including dozens for the ever-popular twin sets. Children were still suffering from knitted swimsuits, which were popular before the Second World War, emerging from the sea to find their water-heavy costumes down around their knees. Many people, now middle-aged, remember having to wear scratchy woollen vests and knickers, as well as tight jumpers and bulky socks. Later in the decade the poodle look became the rage and 'poodle wool' went on sale. Chunky cardigans and baggy jumpers were popular. In the 1960s yarns were made from the new artificial fibres such as Bri-Nylon, Airvel, Orion and Tricel.

## Embroidery and other crafts

Embroidery has been popular for many hundreds of years and interest lasted through the Second World War and after. In the 30s, scenes of rural cosiness such as thatched cottages and pretty gardens were favourites, as well as exotic birds and the eternal crinoline lady. Pieces of table linen can be found in antique shops and centres, many decorated with these designs. The latter image continued to be stitched well into the 1950s. In 1953 various magazines carried Coronation embroidery designs.

Raffia work was a 1930s and 40s pastime particularly for children who made lampshades, tea cosies, waste paper baskets and place mats. Coloured raffia was used to embroider linen handbags and mats.

Many people made rugs in the 1950s. Various contraptions for quicker rug-making were advertised, one being the 'Airlyne' rug maker for only 32/6d. It was 'quickly fitted to any table by the means of clamps'. Rag rugs, rugs made of old stockings, knitted carpets, all were being made in the 1950s. Cross stitch projects were featured in needlework magazines, but it was not as popular as it is today, by any means. Examples of all these kinds of work from years gone by can be found today.