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Dressmaking: How a clothing practice made girls in
New Zealand, 1945 to 1965

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Dinah Vincent

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Abstract

This thesis looks at domestic dressmaking to understand what the practice meant for practitioners beyond making garments. It focuses on New Zealand girls in the period from 1945 to 1965, when dressmaking was understood as a universal part of the female experience at home and school. Despite this assumption of ubiquity, little work has been done to document how dressmaking happened in homes and in schools and, more importantly, how it affected girls. The critical framework combines feminist historical and sociological thinking — including Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and cultural reproduction — with fashion studies, cultural studies, material culture and object studies. The methodology reflects this interdisciplinary approach by layering personal recollections gathered in 15 oral history interviews, with documentary evidence, image research, and object studies.

This thesis argues that dressmaking offers a new lens through which to view female experience in New Zealand at that time. Dressmaking not only shaped appearance: it affected the allocation of space and time within households; it established and reinforced shopping behaviours; it created inter-generational bonds as women shared their skills within family groups; it maintained relationships within extended family groups as a source of hand-me-down clothing; and it offered the possibility of paid employment either within or outside the home. Beyond the home, dressmaking was part of girls’ school experience, used to prepare them for a prescribed femininity, but perceived as second-rate subject because of the strong association with domesticity. Dressmaking also offered girls and women a means of engaging with change — in fashions, fabrics, patterns, and tools. Memory, place, objects, and people combined to influence dressmaking practice. For some, dressmaking became ingrained as part of their identity and can be understood as habitus. The thesis shows how dressmaking shaped girls’ identities as much as dressmaking was used to shape garments.

Preface and acknowledgements

I have completed this thesis as a part-time student over seven years. The work is mine, but I could not have completed it without support and encouragement from many others.

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Abbreviations

ANZ	Archives New Zealand
<i>EP</i>	<i>The Evening Post</i>
NatLib	National Library of New Zealand
<i>NZWW</i>	<i>New Zealand Woman's Weekly</i>
<i>NZH</i>	<i>New Zealand Herald</i>
<i>ODT</i>	<i>Otago Daily Times</i>
Te Papa	Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

Introduction:

“This vital activity”

Domestic dressmaking is the starting point for this research. This topic emerged from the realisation that both my grandmothers, my mother, and my aunts were all dressmakers, while in my generation I am the only one — neither my sisters nor my cousins make clothes. As children, my sister and I wore clothes made by our female relatives, from simple cotton dresses to crimplene suits (it was the 1970s). I had sewing classes at school when I was about 11, but I really learned to sew by observation and experiment at home. My daughters and my niece have no interest in learning beyond what they had to do at school and they have strong preferences for ready-made clothing over home-made. I thought about how quickly the practice had stopped being an everyday activity for the girls and women in my family, and how it would soon be relegated to memory and anecdote — supported by a few photographs. And I wondered what meaning would be ascribed to the now almost obsolete practice, and what qualities would be ascribed to those past practitioners. I therefore decided to investigate domestic dressmaking in New Zealand and settled on the mid-twentieth century as a time when the practice was widely used, integrated into girls’ home lives, education, and sense of self-fashioning. This also meant I could capture living memory of the practice at a time when it appears to have been commonplace.

Social conversation around this topic prompted many nostalgic reminiscences about the dressmaking prowess of female forebears. The accepted notion seemed to be that every New Zealand woman alive in the mid-twentieth century could sew. Richard Wolfe’s *The Way We Wore: The Clothes New Zealanders Have Loved* reinforces this idea.

In the 1950s, it was desirable for every home to have a sewing room, to house the electric or older treadle machine. Few homes may have had the luxury of a separate room for this vital activity, but a girl’s bedroom could have a dual purpose. While daughter was at school, mother could commandeer the space and

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catch up with the family's sewing. At school, girls were advised that while home dressmaking did not always save money, it was an ideal way of extending the wardrobe with individual and, hopefully, better fitting clothes.¹

Wolfe's summary raises several questions: why was the activity "vital?" What was the role of schools in teaching girls to sew? How important were the ideas of individuality and fit to home dressmakers? What was the appeal of home dressmaking if it did not save money?

I turned first to autobiographies for specific memories of dressmaking in the twentieth century. I found three by New Zealand writers: Katherine Mansfield, Janet Frame, and Ruth Park. All three use dressmaking as a way to describe themselves or their families, and all touch on the tools and processes of the practice as well as the end product. They introduce the idea of transmitted skill, the importance of space and time for the practice, and the role of things — both as tools and as touchstones for memory.

Writer Janet Frame recognised the role of dressmaking in her family's history. Frame was born in 1924 and lived in New Zealand for most of her life. Early in the first volume of her autobiography, *To the Is-land*, she recalls:

Grandma Frame began working in a Paisley cotton mill when she was eight years old; that her daughters Polly, Isy, Maggie spent their working lives as dressmakers and in their leisure produced exquisite embroidery, knitting, tatting, crochet; and that her son George Samuel, my father, had a range of skills that included embroidery (or "fancy work," as it was known), rug making, leatherwork, painting in oils on canvas and on velvet. The Frames had a passion for making things. [...] my father survives as a presence in such objects as a leather workbag, a pair of ribbed butter pats, a handful of salmon spoons.²

¹ Richard Wolfe, *The Way We Wore: The Clothes New Zealanders Have Loved* (Auckland: Penguin, 2001), 77.

² Janet Frame, *To the Is-Land: An Autobiography* (Auckland: The Women's Press / Hutchinson Group, 1983), 12-13.

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The excerpt suggests a transmission of skill within the family, and a genuine love for making. The most intriguing suggestion is that the maker survives in what they make. The autobiography traces Frame's realisation that she was a maker of stories rather than things — yet she does not privilege words over things. She is very mindful of the power of things, "Appearance has always been important, and the appearance of others, their particular clothes had brought a sense of comfort or loss."³ Fabrics and clothes are woven through her memories: the velvet of her favourite childhood dress,⁴ the stiffness of her "hand-me-down" tartan skirt,⁵ and searching for grey cotton to match the thread of her father's suit.⁶ She never describes using a sewing machine, but knows the machine in one of the houses where she grew up was in "that honoured place in the light of the dining room window."⁷ The sewing machine was an important tool for the household, and warranted a special place.

Writer Katharine Mansfield was born in 1888. She left New Zealand in 1903 but drew on her early life for her journals and her stories intended for publication. Dressmaking features strongly. In her early twenties she wrote a journal entry about her school sewing lessons.

I love Wednesday afternoons. I simply adore them. We don't have any real school, only sewing class and elocution lessons in the drawing-room for the girls who take private lessons. Everything is different on Wednesdays. Some of the older ones even wear Japanese silk blouses, and we change into our slippers and we all wash our hands at the lavatory basin in the passage. The ink-pots are put away by the monitors, the desks pushed against the wall. There is a long table down the middle of the room with two big straw baskets on it. The chairs are arranged in little groups.⁸

³ Ibid., 250.

⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁶ Ibid., 251.

⁷ Ibid., 211.

⁸ Laurel Harris, Mary Morris, and Joanna Woods, eds., *The Material Mansfield* (Auckland: Random House / Katherine Mansfield Birthplace Society, 2008), 84.

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This piece puts sewing and elocution together as examples of accomplishments that a young lady might be expected to master. Mansfield conveys the sense of pleasure and excitement about the opportunity to do something separate from “real school” but also part of it. In keeping with this position on the periphery of education, sewing did not warrant a dedicated classroom, so the girls had to rearrange the furniture. This rearrangement allows them to form groups, making the sewing class a social experience. The sense that sewing sits somewhere between home and school is reinforced by the acceptability of slippers, usually associated with home, as suitable footwear for the class.

Mansfield’s journal entry also describes the sewing projects, which were garments intended for Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand.

We are making cheap flannelette chemises for the Maori Mission. They are as long as night-dresses, very full, with huge arm-holes and a plain band round the neck — not even a lace edging. Those poor Maoris! They can't all be as fat as these chemises. But Mrs Wallis, the Bishop’s wife, said when she gave the newspaper pattern to the headmistress, “it is wiser to reckon on their being fat.”⁹

Mansfield’s own experience of finer things is suggested in her dismay at the lack of a lace edging. This kind of “cheap” sewing is something girls performed as a duty. It was part of their education as Christian ladies, “civilising” Māori through providing unattractive garments that conformed to an English sense of decency and propriety. While dressmaking for oneself or one’s family produces something intended to function as a garment, the type of school sewing project Mansfield describes produces a thing that functions as evidence of obedience and the intention to serve.

Mansfield came from a wealthy family, and it is unlikely she had to make her own clothes as a child. Another journal entry describes visiting a dressmaker who was unable to manage sleeves.¹⁰ Either through her school sewing lessons, or by observing dressmakers at work, Mansfield sewed throughout her life, using her skill to create an

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 83.

idiosyncratic personal style on a very tight budget.¹¹ Her descriptions of the act of sewing are positive — she associates it with excited anticipation, simple pleasure, and the comfort of home. Her journal entry for 21 January 1915 reads:

I have read and sewed to-day, but not written a word. I want to to-night. It is so funny to sit quietly sewing, while my heart is never for a moment still. [...] I have run the ribbons through my under-clothes with a hairpin in the good home way.¹²

Mansfield's writing suggests the physical act of sewing connected her emotionally to home.

The first volume of author Ruth Park's autobiography is about her early childhood in the King country in the North Island in the 1930s. Park recalls her parents argued about the prospect of her mother earning money from dressmaking:

My mother's ingenuity and skill with the sewing machine could have made our day-to-day life much easier, as well as giving her personal satisfaction. "But Mel, I'm a good dressmaker. If I have an accomplishment why can't you let me help out a little?" No, he wouldn't. [...] "I'd be so much happier, Mel."¹³

Park's father, Mel, prevailed; he was determined he would not be kept by a woman. Instead, Park's mother was limited to making clothes for the family. By doing this, she also created a powerful association in her daughter's mind between the machine, motherhood, aspirations, and home:

My mother's sewing machine — known in the household as The Singer — must have been a great consolation to her. It was a treadle machine, set in a wrought-iron pedestal so romantically ornamented with flowers and leaves of metal that I once managed to get myself shamefully suspended by a nostril from a tiny gilded vine tendril. Because I so often went to sleep while the machine hummed in the

¹¹ Ibid., 79.

¹² Ibid., 75.

¹³ Ruth Park, *A Fence around the Cuckoo* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1992), 57.

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next room, I thought it was called a Singer because it sang. My mother's Singer was second-hand when Wendela [sister] bought it; she sold it to Rosina [sister], who sold it to my mother. [...] Because of that Singer I was the best-dressed child in Te Kuiti. I had no new shoes for years, but I was well dressed.¹⁴

Park's family had to leave their home abruptly when her father declared himself bankrupt. Advised to get as many possessions as possible into the car, they loaded the vehicle, "with my mother's sewing machine, my father's tools, china and cutlery, rolled mattresses and no end of useful odds and bobs."¹⁵ In extremis, perhaps Park's father realised the potential the sewing machine held for helping the family rebuild its shattered economy.

For all three writers, sewing and dressmaking were part of home and family, or being a good Christian female. It is a quotidian practice that contributes to a sense of self, bridging private and public worlds. The writers dwell on details of the practice. They describe tools and spaces, anchoring the practice in the reality of a well-lit space, or the texture of a fabric. Yet while they describe the sound and feel of the activity, they rarely write about the results. But the finished garment is what springs to mind for most people: what a person looks like in their home-made garment when they are out in the world.

I turned to another form of representation: the visual medium of movies. New Zealanders were keen movie-goers in the mid-twentieth century;¹⁶ television was not broadcast until 1960 so movies and the preceding news reels were important sources of information about styles and fashions around the world.¹⁷ Three movies released between 1939 and 1965, all of which have a sequence that involves dressmaking, show

¹⁴ Ibid., 58.

¹⁵ Ibid., 100.

¹⁶ In 1950 New Zealanders saw an average of nearly 20 films per head of population. This figure held up for a decade until the competition from TV. Redmer Yska, *All Shook Up: The Flash Bodge and the Rise of the New Zealand Teenager in the Fifties* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1993), 110.

¹⁷ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/first-official-tv-broadcast>, accessed 27 August 2017.

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how contemporary observers saw dressmaking. They continue to inform perceptions of what dressmaking meant at the time.

Each movie emphasises the finished product and the transformative power of dress, rather than the business of making. None of the female leads has a mother, and the dressmaking sequences are presented as part of a creative or resourceful femininity rather than a nurturing maternal one. In all three, the eventual transformation is from a single girl to married woman.

Gone with the Wind was released in 1939¹⁸ and set in the American Civil War and its aftermath (1860s to 1870s). The heroine, Scarlett O'Hara, needs money to pay her taxes. She decides she must look successful to inspire confidence in her potential financial saviour. This requires a new dress, but she cannot afford to buy one. Scarlett realises her opulent green velvet curtains can be repurposed. She orders her maid to get the box of paper dress patterns from the attic and use them to make a dress from the green velvet.¹⁹ Scarlett herself cannot cut or stitch, but she does see how she can get what she needs from the available materials. The movie leaps over the maid's work to show Scarlett resplendent in the dress, emphasising the finished appearance instead of the construction process.

Walt Disney's animated version of *Cinderella* was released in 1950.²⁰ Fairy tales abound with female characters whose lives are affected, or morals revealed, by their mastery of sewing, spinning, or weaving. In Disney's *Cinderella*, the resilient heroine is seen to be competent in all the domestic arts, from cooking and cleaning through to dressmaking. She is so sweet-natured that birds and mice befriend her. Like Scarlett, when faced with the need for a new dress, she must make do. Unlike Scarlett, she can cut and stitch for herself. In this case, she plans to refashion her mother's old gown, but never gets time to work on the project. The mice and birds work together to make the gown for her, and the construction process is charmingly rendered on screen as a choreographed musical

¹⁸ George Cukor Victor Fleming, Sam Wood, "Gone with the Wind" (1939).

¹⁹ <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/web/gonewiththewind/costumes/scarlett/> accessed June 29, 2016.

²⁰ Wilfred Jackson, Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, "Cinderella," (1950).

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interlude. Sadly, the makeshift gown is destroyed by her jealous step-sisters and does not transform Cinderella's life — but the one conjured by the fairy godmother does the trick before it too vanishes. The fate of these two fantasy gowns captures what happens to real clothing: whether it is ripped to pieces or magically dematerialised, clothing is of the moment. What lasts is the skill that makes it, the tools that are used, and the memory of it.

In *The Sound of Music*, released in 1965,²¹ novitiate nun Maria becomes nanny to the motherless and rigidly disciplined von Trapp children. She also transforms curtains into clothing, in this case to make clothes for the children that allow them to act like children without fear of damaging their usual refined and expensive garments. The process of construction is again obscured; we simply see the children wearing the garments, but it is clear that Maria does the work of cutting and stitching. Dressmaking allows Maria to demonstrate thrift and resourcefulness in remaking the curtains; at the same time, she demonstrates empathy for the children by recognising how constrained they were in their other clothes. Most importantly, dressmaking is a maternal duty, and the episode shows Captain von Trapp that Maria is both competent and kind, and strengthens her appeal to him as a potential wife and mother to his children.

In all three films, dressmaking is strongly associated with resourcefulness. None of the dressmakers have access to new cloth and must make do with what is available. Dressmaking is also transformative, both in the sense that unlikely materials are transformed into garments, and in the way those garments transform the wearers. Duty is another theme: like Scarlett's maid, both Cinderella and Maria are essentially servants. Dressmaking is one of their duties, a way that they demonstrate obedience. Two of the films imply making is tedious; we do not see Maria or Scarlett's maid actually sew although we know the maid has paper patterns to refer to. Dressmaking itself is only interesting when performed by bird beaks and mouse paws, and set to music, as in *Cinderella*.

²¹ Robert Wise, "The Sound of Music" (1965).

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These fragments from autobiographies and movies show some of meanings ascribed to dressmaking in memory and fantasy. The themes they raise and associations they make sparked more questions for me about how and why girls and women practised dressmaking and what the practice meant to them as individuals. I set about finding out more about these questions in the scholarly literature, thinking about dressmaking as an expression of duty, obedience and resourcefulness. There it is connected to particular types of femininity, and especially to mothers. I thought about dressmaking as choice and necessity and the extent to which it was visible or covert. These themes were connected to the idea of thrift and economy. Neither the autobiographies nor the movies connected dressmaking to the idea of fashion, instead it was about personal style or transformation. I also thought about the tools and objects of the practice that were such powerful talismans for the writers. I saw that dressmaking could be seen from many perspectives, and I began to explore dressmaking as a practice that made practitioners as well as garments.

Chapter 1 begins with the literature review that further refines these thoughts and questions. It shows that domestic dressmaking remains the Cinderella of dress and fashion scholarship, kept largely out of sight. Domestic clothing production has been explored when it is used for a specific type of self-fashioning, particularly in times of crisis or celebration (war and weddings), or for specific pursuits (particular jobs or leisure activities), but the everyday is overlooked. Little work has been done on the role of dressmaking within families in New Zealand, despite its connection to the household economy and the appearance of individuals and families outside the home. The review shows that sewing and dressmaking as school subjects have been analysed from policy and school perspectives, but there has been little work on girls' experience of the subjects. These absences highlight the gap in understanding of the materiality of dressmaking, particularly the tools and spaces which are central to the practice. The critical framework is constructed from multi-disciplinary approaches, with each discipline shedding light on different aspects of the question of what the practice meant for makers. Bourdieu's theory of habitus was referenced in several fields and emerges as a potential meeting point for diverse aspects and approaches. The methodology is

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similarly layered, combining techniques that simultaneously recreate and analyse a practice both ubiquitous and invisible.

Chapter 2 provides the historical context for the study, drawing on magazines, newspapers, the school system, and how-to books from the time to convey a sense of how dressmaking was represented and understood.

Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on sewing and dressmaking practices within the interviewees' childhood homes, showing the extent to which these practices can be understood as contributing to individuals' habitus. Chapter 3 is primarily about recollections of maternal practice and standards, and what the interviewees understood from this. Chapter 4 is focused on interviewees' first interactions with the tools and objects of dressmaking, and their own early experiments with sewing.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore sewing and dressmaking at schools, calling on interviewees' experience as both pupils and teachers. Chapter 5 focuses on the regulation of the practice as a school subject — including the allocation of teachers, classrooms, and projects — and how this replicated or diverged from domestic practice. It considers how sewing and dressmaking affected the institutional habitus of schools. Chapter 6 examines the way sewing and dressmaking were used to inculcate girls with disciplines assumed to be essential to their futures as good women, such as discipline and patience.

Chapter 7 follows the interviewees' dressmaking practice as adults to identify the evolution of practice over their lifetimes, and their motivations for continuing to be dressmakers. Their recollections show that dressmaking continued to influence more than their dressed appearance.

I begin with a detailed discussion of the existing literature, which I use to frame my argument for seeing domestic dressmaking as a shaping influence in the lives of girls and women.

Chapter 1

A modern mechanism for fabrication of the self

Dressmaking appears in the literature as a subset of a wider range of dress practices, and it is often seen as a means of emulating or interacting with fashion. It sits at the outer edge of academic research (although growth in fashion scholarship is bringing dress practices closer to the centre). As Joanne Entwistle has argued, there is “a long-felt antipathy towards fashion and dress which are seen as frivolous and not worthy of serious, scholarly attention.”¹ In their study of clothing as material culture, Suzanne Küchler and Daniel Miller show that clothing has been overlooked as a topic because it literally lacks depth.

We struggle with what might be called a depth ontology, a very specific Western idea of being, in which the real person, myself, is somehow deep inside me, while my surface is literally superficial, a slight, transient aspect that is shallow, more contrived, somehow less real and certainly less important.²

When scholarly attention has been paid to Western clothing, it tends to be about the fashionable clothing of powerful or beautiful people — and is focused on the wearer’s appearance or the design of the garments, rather than on the making of them. Analysis of the materials, tools, and practices used to create garments is more likely for non-Western clothing, when it is treated as part of ethnographic or anthropological studies of the “other.”³ Clothes made domestically are for ordinary people and have neither the cachet of fashion, nor the fascination of difference. Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark acknowledge the gap in knowledge about the clothing of ordinary people and aim “to establish a new critical framework for the study of fashion and its history by examining

¹ Joanne Entwistle, “The Dressed Body,” in *The Fashion Reader*, ed. Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 139.

² Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller, *Clothing as Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 3.

³ One example is Sidney Mead’s analysis of traditional Māori costume, in which he argues that clothing teaches the beliefs and values of a society. Sidney M. Mead, *Traditional Maori Clothing: A Study of Technological and Functional Change* (Wellington: Reed, 1969).

its role in urban everyday life.”⁴ Their focus is on how fashion is constituted in everyday life, whereas I am looking at the meaning of making clothing as part of everyday life. My conception of the “everyday” is grounded in dressmaking as an unpaid female activity, and looks for meaning in the tools, spaces, and practices that are sometimes overlooked. Like Buckley and Clark, I am drawn to the “mundane or ordinary”⁵ which is a telling point of intersection between many fields of scholarship.

This chapter begins by looking for domestic dressmaking in fashion and dress history, before moving on to see how it is located as a distinct practice in the wider field of studies of dress and clothing. My reading of these texts was shaped by a discussion of theory and dress scholarship by Elaine Pedersen, Sandra Buckland, and Christina Bates.⁶ They point to caution about theory in dress scholarship, and offer various ways to grow theory. These include developing and linking mini theories, and integrating named theories. Pedersen’s definition of theory was especially useful for me as I looked for connections in an emerging field. She defines theory as “a set of statements that advances knowledge by describing, explaining, or predicting the relationship between two or more concepts”.⁷ I found a small body of research focused on dressmaking in specific times and places. I considered perspectives on the role of dressmaking in girls’ education, before looking at research into the material culture of dressmaking practice in both domestic and educational environments. Many of these studies are feminist, or place the topics within women’s studies: dressmaking is a gendered activity and that affects the way it is valued and understood.⁸ My review of the literature reveals that there is a gap in our understanding of dressmaking as a domestic design activity, how it affects decisions about the allocation of time and resources, what it means to the practitioner,

⁴ Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark, *Fashion and Everyday Life: London and New York* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Elaine L. Pedersen, Sandra S. Buckland, and Christina Bates, "Theory and Dress Scholarship," *Dress (Costume Society of America)* 35 (2008).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸ Cheryl Buckley argues that fashion is neglected by design historians because of the association with women. This neglect is even greater when it comes to dressmaking, which is more heavily gendered. Cheryl Buckley, “Made in Patriarchy: Theories of Women and Design - a Reworking,” in *Design Studies: A Reader*, ed. Hazel Clark and David Eric Brody (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 285.

and how dressmaking affects a sense of identity. It became clear I would have to develop a way of explaining the relationships between these concepts.

While my focus is on domestic dressmaking, it would be disingenuous to ignore the idea of fashion — although fashion history largely ignores domestic dressmaking. Clothing in wartime is a relatively well-documented exception. Julie Summers' survey of style in Great Britain during the Second World War is an example of this. A New Zealand example is Deborah Montgomerie's essay on how women dressed for glamour and duty in the same period.⁹ Both Summer's and Montgomerie's reference lists are dominated by personal memoirs, archival documents, and ephemera; either there is very little theoretical work for them to draw on or the caution about theory expressed by Pedersen et. al. is in play. Consequently, their work describes dress strategies to achieve fashionability in the context of war-time shortages and uncertainty, without taking a position on the meaning of those strategies.

Lou Taylor points to a strong bias in scholarship towards the aesthetic of high fashion: "It seems as if 90 percent of books at the start of the new millennium are about the clothes of the two or three hundred women who can afford these garments."¹⁰ Taylor's observation highlights the hierarchical approach. Expensive and elaborate garments attract more attention, although they represent the experience of fewer people. The clothing of the wealthy is the best made and best looked after — it is recorded in paintings, photographs, and moving images — and sometimes preserved for posterity.¹¹ Museological practice reinforces "a hierarchy within fashion," according to Cheryl Buckley, by focusing on a narrow range of clothing, and ignoring the home-made and the everyday clothing of the working and middle-class:

⁹ Julie Summers, *Fashion on the Ration: Style in the Second World War* (London: Profile, 2015). Within the confines of "fashion on the ration" Summers covers industrial, social and economic policy as well as the more obvious topics of design and marketing. Deborah Montgomerie, "Dressing for War: Glamour and Duty in Women's Lives During the Second World War," in *Looking Flash: Clothing in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Bronwyn Labrum, Fiona McKergow, and Stephanie Gibson (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 1.

¹¹ The Royal Collection Trust's 2016 exhibition "Fashioning a Reign" demonstrates this. Garments worn by Queen Elizabeth II were displayed in three of the royal palaces, including items from her childhood.

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Clothes made by women for consumption in the home by their families or for consumption in their local communities had only limited value — both in terms of exchange value and aesthetic value.¹²

Buckley is one of the scholars who has addressed this gap, revealing the value such clothing has in understanding how people responded to constraints of time and budget, and to changing social circumstances. Her research about dressmaking practice is critical for this study and is discussed later in this chapter.

As well as the bias towards elite clothing, Christopher Breward notes the absence of work on the “basic coordination of needle and thread” in histories of fashion.¹³ Every garment, whether it is intended to be fashionable or functional, is a result of that coordination. But the mechanics of garment construction have been of little interest to fashion historians, who have preferred to focus on the “elusive quality of fashionability,”¹⁴ represented by designers and those who wear their clothes. These comments confirm the dearth of scholarship on everyday clothing and, more specifically, on the act of making.¹⁵

The tendency for scholarship to focus on fashion and fashion designers can be seen in the New Zealand context in two projects. Jan Hamon’s thesis focuses on how home-based commercial dressmakers contributed to fashionability, and considers “the social and economic environment that led [them] to set up in business during the period from the 1940s to the 1980s.”¹⁶ Hamon’s work connects these businesses, and the women who ran them, to the story of fashion design in New Zealand without exploring the impact of the activity on the identity of the women who made or wore the clothes.

¹² Cheryl Buckley, “On the Margins: Theorizing the History and Significance of Making and Designing Clothes at Home,” *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 2 (1998): 165-66.

¹³ Christopher Breward, *Fashion*, Oxford History of Art. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Movies about couture houses in the early 21st century have included footage of making, with makers subservient to the genius of the designer. Examples of this genre are *Valentino: The Last Emperor* (2008) and *Dior and I* (2015).

¹⁶ Jan Hamon, “The New Zealand Dressmaker: Experiences, Practices and Contribution to Fashionability, 1940 to 1980: A Thesis Submitted in (Partial) Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy” (Ph. D., RMIT University, 2007), p.289.

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The story of New Zealand's larger fashion enterprises is told in *The Dress Circle*.¹⁷ Lucy Hammonds, Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins and Claire Regnault were motivated by the flurry of attention given to fashion as New Zealand designers achieved international success at London Fashion Week in 1999, and pervasive discourse that suggested New Zealand had never previously produced anything that might be described as fashion.¹⁸ Their stated goal is to produce a design history of New Zealand fashion.¹⁹ What is especially pertinent for my study is the description of New Zealand in the 1940s as "a land of few designers, many home sewers and a large, professional garment-manufacturing sector."²⁰ While the women in Hamon's thesis straddled all three of these categories, my focus is on the "many home sewers" who did not see themselves as part of fashion history. Yet, in his introductory essay, Lloyd-Jenkins acknowledges the possibility that dressmaking and fashion overlap: "if you could sew, you could have a version of the latest trend in a moment, copied from a magazine. If you could rent a little shop, a career in fashion design could be yours."²¹ In allowing for this overlap, Lloyd-Jenkins playfully collapses the activity of making to a "moment," in line with the magical and transformative nature of fashion. In doing so, he perpetuates the emphasis on the finished product of dressmaking rather than the process. He also infers the product of dressmaking, a garment, has greatest value if it conforms with a current understanding of fashion. My research explores the "moment," anticipating that it will yield valuable insights into how the practice shapes the maker, as it is used to shape fabric into a garment.

Breward and Caroline Evans side-step the problem of defining fashion by characterising it as a process:

¹⁷ Lucy Hammonds, Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins, and Claire Regnault, *The Dress Circle: New Zealand Fashion Design since 1940* (Auckland: Godwit, 2010).

¹⁸ Ibid., 6. An example of this is Maureen Molloy's statement that, "New Zealand fashion design seemed to burst from nowhere onto the international scene in the late 1990s." Maureen Molloy, "Cutting-Edge Nostalgia: New Zealand Fashion Design at the New Millennium," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 8, no. 4 (2004): 478.

¹⁹ Hammonds, Lloyd-Jenkins, and Regnault, *The Dress Circle*, 10.

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

²¹ Ibid.

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a useful mechanism for interrogating the subjective experience of modern life. Fashion is a process in two senses: it is a market-driven cycle of consumer desire and demand; and it is a modern mechanism for the fabrication of the self.²²

I will return to the idea of modern life later in the chapter, focussing first on the idea of dressmaking as a process within fashion. Those who use dressmaking, whether or not they aspire to fashion, are very much engaged with fabricating themselves. Patrizia Calefato's definition of fashion also captures this idea. For her, fashion is "a reproducible art form, and as a 'worldly' secular art."²³ Rather than talking about process, Calefato says fashion's "ceremonies" can be "performed equally in the atelier of the famous designer and in front of the mirror at home, though in each case they have a different aesthetic value."²⁴ If, as Calefato suggests, we all develop our own sign system for communicating the self through clothing,²⁵ dressmakers have a unique ability to manage each element within the sign system relative to what they see in the mirror as they fabricate the garment and themselves.

The focus on whether or not the clothing meets the threshold of fashion means the body is oddly absent from many of these discussions. Yet the body is central to dress practice, as the means of displaying the chosen garments. Entwistle's work on dress practice starts with the body, arguing that "Dress in everyday life is about the experience of living in and acting on the body, but this embodied aspect of dress has been little discussed in the literature."²⁶ Entwistle suggests a focus on the body can bring together analysis of the production and consumption of dress, rather than having economists and historians study production while sociologists, cultural studies scholars and psychologists study consumption.²⁷ Susan Kaiser integrates the idea of dress as "situated bodily practice" into a process she calls "minding appearances." This enables:

²² Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans, eds., *Fashion and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 2.

²³ Patrizia Calefato, "Fashion and Worldliness: Language and Imagery of the Clothed Body," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 1, no. 1 (1997): 71.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁶ Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

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the visual, embodied representation of “who I am and who I am becoming” [...] The process of minding appearances enables the construction of looks, as well as tentative understanding about the self in relation to others and consumer media cultures, at a specific time and place.²⁸

Dressmaking requires the individual to materially engage with the possibilities of dress in a different way than if they bought or acquired garments by some other means. Someone who does not use dressmaking constructs their imagined self with ready-made garments: their choices are about which garments to put on and how to combine them. The dressmaker moves from their imagined self through a series of decisions about patterns, fabrics, trims, tools, techniques, space, and time. The decisions align with Kaiser’s argument that minding appearances allows for various identities to “be consciously or unconsciously explored and evaluated.”²⁹

This exploration and evaluation of possibilities is central to domestic dressmaking and involves both the physical body and the concept of identity. Jennifer Craik brings these ideas together in a wider argument that is about extending the idea of fashion beyond Western constructs. She argues that while “not all clothing is fashion, all clothing systems have at least a distant relationship with fashion systems and stylistic conventions.”³⁰ She sets out to reconstitute the idea of fashion by focusing on the relationship between bodies and clothing. Craik uses Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to argue that dress practice is part of fashioning identity, wherever in the world one may live.

Bourdieu’s theory, variously interpreted, provides a connection between dress practice and self-fashioning; it is one that I will employ in this thesis. In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu describes habitus as:

²⁸ Susan Kaiser, “Minding Appearances: Style, Truth, and Subjectivity,” in *Body Dressing*, ed. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (2001), 80.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁰ Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

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systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.³¹

In a later article, he emphasises the possibility that habitus may be imposed and require submission, but promises “the obligated or elective submission to the conditionings of training and exercise” will lead to freedom through mastery thus achieved.³² Craik defines habitus as “specialised techniques and ingrained knowledges which enable people to negotiate the different departments of existence.”³³ Kenneth Allan’s interpretation focuses on the body:

Habitus is the durable organization of one’s body and its deployment in the world. It is found in our posture and our way of walking, speaking, eating, and laughing; it is found in every way we use our body. Habitus is both a system whereby people organize their own behaviour and a system through which people perceive and appreciate the behaviour of others.³⁴

But the body must learn the habitus before it can enact it. Liora Gvion captures this in her framework for the study of how opera singers are made.³⁵ Gvion identifies what singers learn to do in class as body capital or habit, which must then be turned into cultural capital or habitus when singers become professional.³⁶ The crucial step is the “internalization of cultural codes embedded in corporal practices.”³⁷ While outside the fields of fashion and dress, ‘this application of habitus offers a way of thinking about

³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 53.

³² Pierre Bourdieu, “Scattered Remarks,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 2, no. 3 (1999): 340.

³³ Craik, *The Face of Fashion*, 4.

³⁴ Kenneth Allan, *Contemporary Social & Sociological Theory: Visualizing Social Worlds*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013), 181-82.

³⁵ Liora Gvion, “‘If You Ever Saw an Opera Singer Naked’: The Social Construction of the Singer’s Body,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 2 (2016).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

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how girls learned sewing and dressmaking at home and at school: observing and repeating actions which shaped buying, making, and clothing decisions.

Within fashion scholarship, Entwistle uses habitus when she proposes “the idea of dress as situated bodily practice as a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding the complex dynamic relationship between the body, dress and culture.”³⁸ She positions dress as “a means of marking boundaries between the self and others and between individuals and society,”³⁹ and as “a means of managing identity in social situations.”⁴⁰ Entwistle says habitus offers a means of overcoming “either/or” analysis; combined with a proper regard for the social role of the dressed body, habitus provides:

“a system of durable, transposable dispositions” that are produced by the particular conditions of a class grouping [... and] enables the reproduction of class (and gender) through the active embodiment of individuals who are structured by it, as opposed to the passive inscription of power relations onto the body.⁴¹

Entwistle crystallises this thinking to connect dress to bodily social order:

understanding of the dressed body must acknowledge the social nature of it — how it is shaped by techniques, attitudes, aesthetics and so on, which are socially and historically located.⁴²

Entwistle’s approach opens the possibility for domestic dressmaking being understood as habitus. The dressmaker is developing a “system of durable, transposable dispositions”⁴³ and “specialised techniques and ingrained knowledges”⁴⁴ that become integral to her way of being.

³⁸ Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, 11.

³⁹ Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson, eds., *Body Dressing* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴² Entwistle, “The Dressed Body,” 138-39.

⁴³ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 53.

⁴⁴ Craik, *The Face of Fashion*, 4.

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The following section of the literature review considers the emerging body of research on the dress practices of women who used dressmaking skills in the mid-twentieth century to make their own clothing. In all these studies, dressmaking is linked to notions of femininity — with dressmakers mindful of the observer’s gaze. Writing about costume worn for performance or cultural tradition, Joanne Eicher notes that such dress “establishe[s] individual identity within a cultural context.”⁴⁵ In such a context, it is relatively easy to communicate identity, as Eicher suggests, “through sensory cues provided by dress without the observer asking questions.”⁴⁶ The observer’s ability to understand the sensory cues depends on shared knowledge. The women in these studies are seen as separate from the fashionable elite, and are primarily white, middle-class, and heterosexual.⁴⁷ Adam Briggs says individuals can be read by those “who share the same subcultural capital as the wearer and that this will be heavily context dependent.”⁴⁸ The literature suggests dressmakers in this time period were acutely aware of being “read” and were avid readers of others, looking for fashion, modernity, and skill.

Whether or not dressmakers were making fashion, they were making unique garments that shaped visual identity, so were arguably designers. Buckley describes the history of home dressmaking as being about “design as a mechanism for the material and visual representation of feminine identities.”⁴⁹ In her thesis about home sewing in inter-war Britain, Carla Cesare argues for home sewing to be seen as a design practice. She says it was “intrinsically bound up with ideas of who women were, how they imagined themselves, and how their feminine identities were represented.”⁵⁰ Cesare picks up on Buckley’s point about fashion history’s exclusion of the “clothes made by women for consumption in the home.”⁵¹ She describes the home-made objects as “the middle-class

⁴⁵ Joanne B Eicher, “Clothing, Costume, and Dress,” in *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2010), 152.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kaiser, “Minding Appearances,” 93.

⁴⁸ Breward and Evans, *Fashion and Modernity*, 80.

⁴⁹ Buckley, “On the Margins,” 168.

⁵⁰ Carla Cesare, “Sewing the Self: Needlework, Femininity and Domesticity in Interwar Britain” (PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2012), ii.

⁵¹ Buckley, “On the Margins,” 166.

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of fashion scholarship,” at threat of becoming “lost in the story of design, femininity and domesticity.”⁵²

The idea that dressmaking was a creative activity, not simply one of necessity, allows us to consider how women used it for specific ends. Like Cesare, Catherine Horwood⁵³ focuses on the role of home dressmaking for British women between the world wars. Horwood notes the increase in mass-produced clothing meant women no longer had to make clothing, “Nevertheless, home dressmaking was extremely popular and was another way middle-class women improved the quality and stylishness of their wardrobe.”⁵⁴ Dressmaking was a means of keeping up; Horwood cites *Vogue* magazine running articles about using it to improve one’s wardrobe, “visibly aimed at a readership from the middle classes struggling to maintain social standards.”⁵⁵ Despite this endorsement, some of the women Horwood interviewed expressed a preference for ready-made clothing over home-made, with one remembering the thrill of buying her first ready-made outfit: “I thought I was really dressed up because I had a bought dress on.”⁵⁶

This brings us back to Breward and Evan’s idea of the experience of fashion in modern life as the “market-driven cycle of consumer desire and demand”. They argue that “fashion is a metaphor for modernity itself”, using Marshall Berman’s three-stranded definition:

Modernisation is the process of innovation that eventually impacts urban, social and artistic life. Modernity is experienced as modernisation infiltrates everyday life and sensibilities. Modernism is the movements in society that respond to or represent the changes in sensibility and experience.⁵⁷

⁵² Cesare, “Sewing the Self,” 22.

⁵³ Catherine Horwood, *Keeping up Appearances: Fashion and Class between the Wars* (Stroud: Sutton, 2005).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Breward and Evans, *Fashion and Modernity*, 1-3.

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Writing about the inter-war period, Buckley emphasises women's increased access to fashion through sewing machines, paper patterns, shop displays,⁵⁸ and the advance of modernity.⁵⁹ Buckley argues that clothing was a necessary part of creating a modern femininity and that dressmaking can be seen as part of the way women responded to modernity.

Although stores such as Marks & Spencer brought better-quality clothing within the grasp of working-class and middle-class women, for the former, purchasing from such stores still represented a special investment, one not made regularly. For many working-class women, home dressmaking was the main way in which to acquire new clothes.⁶⁰

This continued to be true for women in New Zealand until after World War II. The country's geographic isolation meant sewing machines, fabric, and even the paper for patterns — not to mention ready-made clothing — were all in short supply and subject to rationing until the 1950s. This reality is evident in the literature, which emphasises a “do-it-yourself” mindset. Hammonds et al. are confident that New Zealand women had the dressmaking skills to translate displays and exhibitions of fashion to a personal reality.⁶¹ Fiona McKergow suggests dressmaking skills were highly valued in New Zealand. In her essay on dress in the 1940s and 50s,⁶² McKergow says that, whether bought or home-made, “dress was reaffirmed as an indicator of class differences.”⁶³ Home-made clothing was not associated with having lesser value, indeed it was seen as

⁵⁸ Writing about depression-era Toronto, Katrina Srigley also highlights the gap between what women wanted to wear — as displayed in shop windows — and what they could afford to wear. She emphasises the importance of clothing in maintaining respectability, and finding and keeping work. Katrina Srigley, “Clothing Stories: Consumption, Identity, and Desire in Depression-Era Toronto,” *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 1 (2007).

⁵⁹ Cheryl Buckley, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women's Fashion from the Fin De Siecle to the Present* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 88-116.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶¹ Hammonds, Lloyd-Jenkins, and Regnault, *The Dress Circle*, 13.

⁶² Fiona McKergow, “Opening the Wardrobe of History: Dress Artefacts and Material Life of the 1940s and 1950s,” in *Fragments: New Zealand Social and Cultural History*, ed. Bronwyn Labrum and Bronwyn Dalley (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2000), 163-64.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 178.

part of a carefully constructed appearance. Those uncertain of their ability to construct such an appearance for themselves might have paid a dressmaker.⁶⁴

Dressmaking has the potential to contribute to a highly managed appearance, and to create a visual manifestation of the inner person. These aspects of the practice are explored in Carol Tulloch's study of Jamaican-born women living in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s.⁶⁵ Tulloch identifies a strong preference for bespoke garments made by a dressmaker, in stark contrast to Horwood's subjects who attributed greater status to off-the-rack garments. Tulloch links the preference to the desire for well-fitting and individual garments to create an individual and very feminine identity.⁶⁶ The case study Tulloch uses is a confident dressmaker who had sewing lessons at school from the time she was eight years old. The woman relies on confidence to create the intended look from a piece of fabric without needing paper patterns, "if you aim for what you want, you just get it [...] whatever you're sewing, it's inside of you."⁶⁷ This statement signals a design process — combining accumulated technical skill with taste and an intuitive feel for what will work. It also suggests dressmaking is integral to the person, "inside of you," rather than a learned skill. The relationship between the person and their practice is central to this research.

The practice is also associated with fantasy, with mastery offering a way of making fantasy into reality. This is evident in Margarethe Szeless' analysis of the role of *Burda* magazines in home dressmaking culture in Austria 1950 to 1970.⁶⁸ The magazine was directed at middle-class women, and enabled them to emulate the latest fashions at a

⁶⁴ Jan Hamon's research focuses on "the social and economic environment that led dressmakers to set up in business during the period from the 1940s to the 1980s." Jan Hamon, "The New Zealand Dressmaker: Experiences, Practices and Contribution to Fashionability, 1940 to 1980" (PhD thesis, RMIT University, 2007), 289.

⁶⁵ Carol Tulloch, "There's No Place Like Home: Home Dressmaking and Creativity in the Jamaican Community of the 1940s to the 1960s," in *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*, ed. Barbara Burman (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁸ Margarethe Szeless, "Burda Fashions: A Wish That Doesn't Have to Be Wishful Thinking: Home-Dressmaking in Austria 1950-1970," *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 6 (2002).

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lower cost by making garments for themselves.⁶⁹ Szeless notes the potential for readers to go beyond the “socially accepted spectrum of female dressmaking” because “the actual possibilities of female self-expression and empowerment lying in this practice are extremely vast and various.”⁷⁰ Constrained fantasy is evident in Rachel Moseley’s essay “Respectability Sewn Up: Dressmaking and Film Star Style in the Fifties and Sixties.”⁷¹ Moseley brings together ideas of femininity, identity and respectability in her research based on case studies of British women who made their own clothes when growing up in the 1950s and 60s. The femininity these girls aspired to was influenced by the movie stars of the times, in particular Audrey Hepburn and Doris Day.⁷² Despite looking to the fantasy of cinema for dress inspiration, the girls chose movie stars who conformed to notions of respectability, “white, desexualised, hetero-feminine and middle-class.”⁷³ Moseley’s analysis again references Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, summarised as “a feel for the game.”⁷⁴ She uses it to reveal the emotional connection between making and wearing garments, and the transition the dressmakers made between watching (for style information) and being watched (for approval).

The Cinderella fantasy, of being swept off one’s feet by Prince Charming while wearing a perfect gown, is evoked by Eileen Margerum.⁷⁵ She analyses the Singer Sewing Machine advertising campaigns that encouraged girls to take up dressmaking as a means of attracting a potential husband.⁷⁶ The logic was that femininity is confirmed by masculine attention, that masculine attention is attracted by a dress, and a dress is achieved by sewing. Margerum says the campaign showed girls:

⁶⁹ Burda included paper patterns that readers needed to trace from a densely-printed master sheet. Ibid., 849.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 861.

⁷¹ Rachel Moseley, “Respectability Sewn Up: Dressmaking and Film Star Style in the Fifties and Sixties,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 4, no. 4 (2001).

⁷² Ibid., 487.

⁷³ Ibid., 476.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ In Walt Disney’s 1950 animated *Cinderella*, the ballgown is created by magic, rather than being stitched by Cinderella herself or the helpful mice and birds.

⁷⁶ Eileen Margerum, “The Sewing Needle as Magic Wand: Selling Sewing Lessons to American Girls after the Second World War,” in Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*.

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that charming a masculine heart was their ultimate happiness and that making their own “glamour” dresses as a result of taking Singer sewing lessons was the surest way to attract the Prince Charming on whom their whole future would depend.⁷⁷

That future is understood to be marriage and motherhood. At this point the motivation for dressmaking moves from creating a charming femininity to having a competent and domestic maternal femininity. The literature that focuses on dressmaking as part of this maternal femininity shifts the focus from fashion, design, and appearance, to the necessity of having skills, tools, time, space and resources for dressmaking. It situates the practice in the home and emphasises the tangible nature of the activity.

Sarah Gordon’s research about home sewing in the United States, 1890-1930, does not differentiate between domestic sewing and dressmaking.⁷⁸ Sewing is a catchall for both activities. Gordon suggests sewing was positioned as a means of demonstrating competence as a woman, wife, and mother, even when ready-made clothing was easy to get.⁷⁹ She asks why home sewing persisted when ready-made garments and items were so accessible, and believes the decision to sew rested on “a man’s money versus a woman’s time.”⁸⁰ The practice is presented as a battle in the gender war; one which modelled domesticity as a means of expressing love and fulfilling duty, including the duty to be thrifty.

Thrift also emerges as a factor in dressmaking practice in Alberta, Canada in the 1940s. Marcia McLean looks at how identity was constructed around the activity.⁸¹ McLean uses social positioning theory as a framework to analyse women’s expression of identity, and

⁷⁷ Ibid., 204.

⁷⁸ Sarah A. Gordon, “‘Make It Yourself’: Home Sewing, Gender and Culture, 1890-1930.” (PhD thesis, Rutgers University, 2004).

⁷⁹ Marguerite Connolly underscores the expectation that women in America in the nineteenth century were expected to sew “all or most of her and her children’s garments, including underclothing, plus some garments for her husband.” Marguerite Connolly, “The Disappearance of the Domestic Sewing Machine, 1890-1925,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 34, no. 1 (1999): 32.

⁸⁰ Gordon, “Make it Yourself,” 20.

⁸¹ Marcia McLean, “‘I Dearly Loved That Machine’: Women and the Objects of Home Sewing in the 1940s,” in *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework & Textiles 1750-1950*, ed. Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009).

finds “the discourse around home sewing was of feminine thrift, creativity and attractiveness.”⁸²

Sewing and dressmaking emerge as expected skills for wives and mothers in Helen May’s research about the lives of post-war Pākehā women.⁸³ Pākehā is the Māori word for a person of European descent in New Zealand. May cites her own experience as a girl born in 1947, one of New Zealand’s baby boomers, notionally educated in the same way as a boy:

We also carried with us traditional notions of femininity: motherhood as a career was our destiny. Employment was an interim step before motherhood and/or something to return to later [...] those of us who had passed our School Certificate examinations were supposed to choose “careers” like teaching, nursing or being a librarian.⁸⁴

May’s interview subjects are her contemporaries. Like her, they recall mixed messages about the value of education. When they became wives and mothers, sewing and dressmaking were part of their duties; women’s duties related to good household management and thrift rather than fashion or fashionability. The garments they made were symbols of their competence in their domestic roles.

While May does not explicitly use the idea of modernity to frame her study, it is implicit in the way her subjects’ expectations and experiences are transformed. Ideas about how girls should be educated and what work they could do changed rapidly in the twentieth century, and placed demands on the girls and women whose lives were affected by these changes. Habitus re-emerges as a way of understanding the impact of this change on a generational chain of women in mid-twentieth century Norway. Helene Aarseth, Lynne Layton, and Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen argue that “rapid social change and mobility

⁸² Ibid., 70.

⁸³ Helen May, *Minding Children, Managing Men: Conflict and Compromise in the Lives of Postwar Pākehā Women* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1992).

⁸⁴ Ibid., 3.

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produce misfit between embodied practices and social requirements”.⁸⁵ Aarseth et. al. use habitus to understand how the successive generations became modern but, like the fashion scholars, see limitations in the theory. Their solution is to supplement habitus with “a psychoanalytic relational concept of socialized subjectivity”.⁸⁶ The approach taken by Aarseth et. al. highlights the potential of generational chains to show the advance of modernity, and is an example of how to integrate theories to apply to specific concepts.

The literature discussed to this point has placed dress practices within a broadly ontological framework; dress is about being and identity. But dressmaking is a learned skill, and a manual practice; to be a dressmaker requires epistemological knowledge. This links back to Bourdieu’s idea of “obligated or elective submission to the conditionings of training and exercise.”⁸⁷ The following section of this chapter considers literature that looks at how girls were taught to sew and reintroduces the idea of needle and thread and other tools required for the practice. It shows that training and exercise was intended to shape how girls were, as well as adding to what they knew.

Those scholars who have looked at sewing and dressmaking specifically within the education system focus on it as a gendered activity to the almost total exclusion of its association with dress practice, apart from the sense in which it allows for conformity in dress. A review of Western education systems shows needle-based subjects provide a way to limit expectations for girls, especially girls from marginalised or subjugated racial or cultural groups.⁸⁸ The way subjects are included and offered in school curricula shapes expectations throughout society. In New Zealand, a separate school system was established for Māori children. By 1943, about half of Māori primary school pupils were attending “Native schools.” These schools taught practical skills at the expense of

⁸⁵ H. Aarseth, L. Layton, and H. B. Nielsen, “Conflicts in the Habitus: The Emotional Work of Becoming Modern,” *Sociological Review* 64, no. 1 (2016): 148.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸⁷ Bourdieu, “Scattered Remarks,” 340.

⁸⁸ Sarah Gordon makes the same point in the United States context, describing the role of sewing and domestic subjects in segregated schools for African American and Native American girls in the early part of the twentieth century as part of ensuring they were ‘Americanized’. Gordon, “Make it Yourself,” 91.

academic subjects, thereby limiting pupils' options for further study and employment.⁸⁹ In Australia, technical education was part of the democratisation of post-primary schooling in the early and mid-twentieth century, offering further education to children who were not intending or expected to attend university. Both Judith Biddington,⁹⁰ looking at Victoria, and C. M. Quinn-Young,⁹¹ looking at South Australia, note that technical education for boys prepared them for paid employment, whereas technical education for girls had a strong domestic focus. Girls were being prepared for managing their own domestic environment as wives and mothers, or to be ready for (low-paid) work as domestic help in wealthy households.

Domestic subjects were offered to the wider population of American girls as the field of home economics developed in the period from 1870 to 1940, according to Sally Helvenston and Margaret Bubolz.⁹² They say the home economics curriculum was developed in response to the idea that "families alone could no longer prepare girls for the responsibilities of a changing family and home life."⁹³ Sewing was part of the curriculum, understood as a necessary gender-based activity.⁹⁴ The curriculum had a contradictory consequence: while it emphasised educating girls for family and home life, it necessitated developing tertiary training programmes to produce suitably qualified specialist teachers, necessarily female.⁹⁵ Mastering school sewing could lead to a career in teaching. While noting this, Helvenston and Bubolz conclude the most significant impact of learning to sew at school was that it "made it possible for many girls, regardless of economic or social class, to conform to a middle-class ideal."⁹⁶ Sewing encouraged homogeneity, of dress and aspiration.

⁸⁹ "The New Zealand Official Year Book, 1945," Department of Statistics.

⁹⁰ Judith Lorraine Biddington, "Something to Fall Back On: Women, Work and Education in Seven Victorian High Schools 1905-1945" (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1993).

⁹¹ C. M. Quinn-Young, "Technical Education and Girls in South Australia in the Period between the Two World Wars: With Particular Reference to Girls and Domestic Service" (master's thesis, Flinders University of South Australia, 1983).

⁹² Sally I. Helvenston and Margaret M. Bubolz, "Home Economics and Home Sewing in the United States 1870 - 1940," in Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 310-11.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 313.

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Another of Bourdieu's theories, that of cultural reproduction, comes into play here. Chris Jenks says Bourdieu developed the theory in the context of education in modern society, the function of which he saw, "was to 'reproduce' the culture of the dominant classes, thus helping to ensure their continued dominance and to perpetuate their covert exercise of power."⁹⁷ Cultural reproduction, says Jenks, "allows us to contemplate the necessity and complementarity of continuity and change in social experience."⁹⁸

Scholarship about the United Kingdom education system shows sewing was a heavily gendered subject used to manage expectations. Penny Summerfield uses cultural reproduction to explain how schools in the United Kingdom transmitted ideologies to perpetuate the relationships between class, sex, and ethnic groups in the period 1850 to 1950.⁹⁹ Summerfield allows for the idea that girls might see education as fitting them for paid work, but suggests schools "teach girls that their main objective in life is to fit themselves for a caring role, primarily as wives and mothers."¹⁰⁰ Madeleine MacDonald uses theories of social reproduction and cultural reproduction of the class structure to explain the forms of women's education within capitalist and patriarchal societies.¹⁰¹ MacDonald's view is that classes in sewing and other non-examination courses were "oriented towards a future domestic role rather than waged labour."¹⁰² MacDonald suggests the goal of such an education is to construct a view of femininity that "does not encourage achievement or ambition in the academic world; rather it directs girls to external goals of being good female companions to men."¹⁰³ Ciara McDonald describes sewing classes in Irish Catholic schools as a way teaching nuns enforced a skilled and obedient Christian femininity in their pupils.¹⁰⁴ Learning sewing and dressmaking helped make girls into compliant women.

⁹⁷ Chris Jenks, ed. *Cultural Reproduction* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹⁹ Penny Summerfield, "Cultural Reproduction in the Education for Girls: A Study of Girls' Secondary Schooling in Two Lancashire Towns, 1900-50," in *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women 1850-1950*, ed. Felicity Hunt (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁰¹ Madeleine MacDonald, "Socio-Cultural Reproduction and Women's Education," in *Schooling for Women's Work*, ed. Rosemary Deem (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰⁴ Ciara McDonald, "Needlework – a Stitch in Time," *Thoughtlines* 6 (2002)

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The final part of this review looks at scholarship about the tangible things associated with the practice, and the spaces in which it is performed, both at home and school. The ordinariness of these things and spaces reintroduces the idea of everyday experience.

Material culture offers a perspective on dressmaking that connects it to how practitioners lived instead of what they made. Daniel Miller attributes an educative value to things that means a person becomes typical of their society through what they touch and do.

People do not need explicit education systems or schools in order to learn how to become a typical Berber or Inuit, because everything they touch and do is infused with that underlying order that gives them their expectations of the world, and which are characteristic of their particular society. The order of things — how to sit, be polite, play and dress — is their education, socialising them to become typical of their people.¹⁰⁵

While “things” may be educative in their time, and outlast those who use them, comprehension of their meaning is sometimes lost with the users. Mary Beaudry shows this in her work with needlework and sewing artefacts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁰⁶ As Beaudry explains, the objects are deemed trivial because of their association with women’s domestic work, an obstacle that stands in the way of the artefacts of twentieth century dressmaking. Beaudry shows how object analysis reveals “ways in which gender identity can be signalled and shift according to context.”¹⁰⁷ The objects Beaudry is working with must tell their own story; the people who used them are long dead. Some of the scholarship on twentieth-century dressmaking takes advantage of living memory to gain the user’s perspective on objects and the context in which they were used in everyday life. Together with Dan Hicks, Beaudry argues:

historians view things as alternative sources to complement documentary material; geographers use things to understand lived space; sociologists look at

¹⁰⁵ Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 287.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Carolyn Beaudry, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

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objects in social relations and develop constructivist or consumption studies; cultural studies uses thing theory.¹⁰⁸

The sewing machine and paper patterns are the dressmaking objects that have gained most scholarly attention, particularly as examples of innovation. Barbara Burman notes the acceptability of sewing machines as an object worthy of museum collection, theorising their status is enhanced because they can be interpreted as engineering or science, and connected to “male entrepreneurial innovation” rather than female creativity.¹⁰⁹ Marguerite Connolly looks at the tension surrounding the sewing machine in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. She argues that the idealised image of women sewing was of hand-stitching, rather than being at a machine,¹¹⁰ although machines made women’s lives easier by speeding up the endless tasks of maintaining the household’s clothing and linens.¹¹¹ Nancy Page Fernandez identifies the same time period as the peak of popularity for sewing machines and paper patterns, linking the peak to women being encouraged to use these tools and their dressmaking skills as a means of achieving stylish dress.¹¹² Connolly suggests sewing machines and obviously home-made clothing were stigmatised post-World War I because ready-made clothing was widely available, and well designed and constructed.¹¹³ Nevertheless, women continued the practice which suggests a motivation other than necessity. The relationship between the dressmaker and her sewing machine is such that the machine is anthropomorphised in Marcia McLean’s study of the practice in the 1940s.¹¹⁴ The dressmakers see their machines as an ally in the task, contributing to the success of their sewing.

¹⁰⁸ Dan Hicks and Mary Carolyn Beaudry, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁰⁹ Barbara Burman, ed. *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

¹¹⁰ Connolly, “The Disappearance of the Domestic Sewing Machine,” 38.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹² Nancy Page Fernandez, “Innovations for Home Dressmaking and the Popularization of Stylish Dress,” *Journal of American Culture* 17, no. 3 (1994).

¹¹³ Connolly, “The Disappearance of the Domestic Sewing Machine,” 45.

¹¹⁴ McLean, “I Dearly Loved That Machine.”

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While fashion patterns — as offered in *Burda* magazine — are the primary object of study for Margarethe Szeless, she also considers the sewing machine, noting how it was associated with fashion, modernity, and success in post-war Austria.¹¹⁵ Szeless also makes the point that the machine can be used by several generations,¹¹⁶ connecting practice between generations. The patterns themselves are ephemeral both in substance and time, intended to help home dressmakers interpret fashions that were expected to change. Szeless concludes that dressmakers did not simply use the patterns to emulate a watered-down version of the latest fashion. Instead, dressmakers saw the potential for self-expression and empowerment, and used the patterns to construct identity.¹¹⁷

Lilian Mutsaers settled on a crucial object for dressmaking with her investigation of the signifying potential of unsewn cloth.¹¹⁸ Mutsaers draws on work by Henry Glassie and Ian Woodward to suggest that fabrics are “cultural residue,” and embody personal, emotional, and cultural meaning. Like several of the studies mentioned in this review, Mutsaers’ work combines object analysis (of the fabrics, patterns and notions) with interviews. She connects this aspect of dressmaking practice to the individual’s response to the world, their way of being. Mutsaers’ approach rectifies what she describes as an imbalance in histories and theories of clothing that privileges clothing over fabric as a means of representing people. I believe there is another imbalance, whereby finished articles of clothing are privileged at the expense of their creation. This renders the process of design and construction invisible and limits the opportunity to understand the meaning of making.

The review of the literature in this chapter shows academic unease about fashion and dress as scholarly topics is being overcome as the twenty-first century progresses. An increasing number of topics are situated within specific historical enquiry, either of social movements or of design. Studies of dress practice are no longer confined to being anthropological perspectives of the “Other”; instead dress practice is being used to

¹¹⁵ Szeless, “*Burda* Fashions,” 851.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 854.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 861.

¹¹⁸ Lilian Mutsaers, “Unpacking Mrs Wood’s Suitcases: The Signifying Potential of Unsewn Cloth” (M. Phil. thesis, Massey University, 2009).

provide an enlightening reflection of who we are. Dress scholars are being encouraged to theorise by developing and combining mini theories and integrating named theories.¹¹⁹ Key studies confirm the role of dress as an act of self-fashioning beyond the merely physical, and suggest connection with the inner self through acculturation, education, and — importantly for this thesis — predisposition, or habitus.

These considerations point to a critical framework that anchors the practice in lived experience and encourages us to look at the practice and the associated material culture, distinct from what is made (garments). Daniel Miller's assertion that "material culture matters because objects create subjects much more than the other way around,"¹²⁰ supports my hypothesis that dressmaking and the associated tools and spaces "made" girls through becoming part of their way of being. Miller also admits material culture "has never really been a discipline — it is effectively an intervention within and between disciplines; translations from one realm into another."¹²¹ Some kind of translation is necessary, given the relative obscurity of dressmaking practice in the historical record. By including objects in this research, I gain what Ann Brower Stahl describes as an enriched historical understanding, "by taking inter-relationships between humans and materials into account."¹²² Understanding these inter-relationships helps reveal the meaning of the practice. As Brower Stahl says, material culture is "bound up in how history as socio-historical process was lived [and] its study can provide insights into past practices and processes."¹²³

Judy Attfield defines material culture as "the integration of artefacts into the social world," and finding "social meaning within specific cultural/historical contexts."¹²⁴ Attfield says material culture allows, "broader interpretive connotations beyond the object itself, homing-in much more acutely on less stable territory — on things and

¹¹⁹ Pedersen, Buckland, and Bates, "Theory and Dress Scholarship."

¹²⁰ Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, 287.

¹²¹ Victor Buchli, ed. *The Material Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 13.

¹²² Ann Brower Stahl, "Material Histories," in Hicks and Beaudry, *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, 151.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 35.

places where the interrelationship between people and the physical world at large is played out.”¹²⁵ The things and places of domestic dressmaking, like the end product, are often resolutely ordinary and perceived as having little value. Yet, as Attfield argues, “It is things, as opposed to design or craft, product or commodity, that make up the materialisations of the everyday.”¹²⁶

My critical framework privileges the everyday as crucial to understanding dressmaking as an integral and shaping activity in girls’ lives.¹²⁷ While the everyday is a growing field of scholarship, Attfield’s early articulation of its value remains pertinent here.

The “everyday” has a distinct place in historiography based on a political position that acknowledges the importance of taking into account the more mundane aspects of life which are ignored by official histories that only give the dominant point of view.¹²⁸

I propose using the everyday objects and spaces of dressmaking to recreate the practice and to consider that practice as a shaping set of behaviours — what Bourdieu calls habitus. A number of researchers, including Craik, Entwistle, and Moseley, have used habitus to understand dress practices as I have outlined above. I return to Entwistle who critiques Bourdieu’s theory for failing to account for embodiment in everyday life.

There is much potential in his idea of the “habitus” as a concept for thinking through embodiment. The habitus is used to describe the way we come to live in our bodies and how our body is both structured by our social situation, primarily our social class, but also produced through our own embodied activities. It is, therefore, a concept that can provide a link between the individual and the social. According to Bourdieu, our social class structures our “tastes,” which are

¹²⁵ Ibid., 40.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹²⁷ Ann Smart Martin is aware of the value of everyday things in gaining an understanding of consumer behaviour, “We must work hard to understand the people that made, bought, used, re-used, and witnessed everyday things. To understand these objects’ meanings is the toughest job. After all, the goal is not to study consumers but to understand people who consume.” Ann Smart Martin, “Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 28, no. 2/3 (1993): 157.

¹²⁸ Attfield, *Wild Things*, 51.

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themselves bodily experiences, but these structures are only brought into being through the embodied actions of individuals. Once we have acquired the appropriate habitus, we have the capacity to generate practice.¹²⁹

I will examine the notion that dressmaking is an embodied activity that shapes the practitioner as much as it shapes cloth. I will explore this by looking at how girls saw, learned, and practised dressmaking at home and at school.

The small body of studies of the topic in other Western societies demonstrates how other researchers have developed methodologies to consider the meaning of the practice. These studies variously draw on historical, sociological, material culture, and object theory methods, often with case studies and oral histories focusing on the individual experience of “ordinary” women. The methodology developed for this study combines documentary and image research, material culture, and personal recollections gathered in oral history interviews. Thomas Schlereth suggests material culture is not a theoretical standpoint at all but may be better framed as a mode of inquiry. It is:

an investigation that uses artifacts (along with relevant documentary, statistical, and oral data) to explore cultural questions both in certain established disciplines (such as history or anthropology) and in certain research fields (such as the history of technology or the applied arts).¹³⁰

The documents, images, and objects from public collections provide an external perspective for the personal mementoes and subjective memories of interviewees.

The first documents I analysed were the archived documents of the Department of Education. I looked at how needle-based subjects were positioned in the free, state education system, to find reference points both for the role of dressmaking in girls’ lives, and the expected techniques and levels of skill. I focused on the development of the Sewing, Needlework, and Clothing syllabi, and associated documents about resources,

¹²⁹ Entwistle, “The Dressed Body,” 148.

¹³⁰ Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 26-27.

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examinations, and teacher training. I looked for descriptions of rooms, tools, and equipment, and for the prescribed projects. This material serves two purposes: it provides benchmarks for proficiency with the component skills of dressmaking; and provides context for the physical experience of learning to sew at school. Knowledge of that physical experience informed my questions to the case study subjects, both of their school and domestic experiences. At post-primary level, I looked for connections between the curriculum and the examination papers. In the examination papers, I looked at the phrasing of the questions and what assumptions the questions made about the candidates' ambitions and prospects. Taken together, the Department of Education archives give insight into how the state regulated an activity that was part of domestic life, and equated girls' sewing and dressmaking skills with particular educational and lifestyle outcomes.

The next layer of research was a survey of dressmaking books that I refer to as "how-to" books. I looked at these books to see what they promised readers, and what they expected of readers — both in terms of equipment and expertise. My analysis of these books is informed by my own experience as someone trained in garment design, patternmaking, and construction. These books fell into two groups: those written for a general audience, and those written as text books to support school teaching. I found that the school syllabus recommended dressmaking books intended for a general audience as prescribed texts, and books written to support the syllabus were also aimed at a general audience. This suggested a blurring between home and school practice.

Taken together, the archives of the education system and the how-to books described benchmarks for dressmaking skill in the time period, and suggested what might be common practices.

From there, I needed to understand how dressmaking, both as a school subject and a domestic practice, was represented in society (other than in movies and autobiographies referred to in the introduction). I did this through a survey of the *New Zealand Woman's*

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Weekly (NZWW) and four metropolitan newspapers.¹³¹ I chose the NZWW because of its deliberate attempts to appeal to a range of female readers and its ubiquity. The magazine was in print continuously throughout the period and had North and South Island editions to meet the needs of readers throughout the country. New Zealand simply did not have enough the population to support magazines aimed specifically at girls, so the NZWW had features devoted to children and teenagers. In her analysis of how girlhood was constructed in English magazines for girls in the early twentieth century, Penny Tinkler identifies magazines targeted at specific types of girl.¹³² Tinkler refers to research from the 1980s which suggests female readers are conscious that magazines bear specific discourses:

It seems highly probable that girls in the period 1920 to 1950 similarly recognised the preferred readings embedded in their magazines. This was partly because these readings were framed so explicitly by editorials, feature titles, illustrations and techniques of repetition and enforcement.¹³³

Girls and teenagers reading the NZWW consumed “their” content in the context of a discourse that prescribed an industrious, domestic, maternal New Zealand womanhood. Writing about women’s magazines available in the United States in the 1980s, Ellen McCracken identifies the master narrative that urges readers to:

experience a sometimes real and sometimes utopian sense of community while reading these texts, confident of participating in normal, expected, feminine culture, [while] they are at the same time learning consumerist competitiveness and reified individualism.¹³⁴

The four metropolitan newspapers I surveyed each had special columns, sometimes whole pages, for women readers — women’s interests were distinct from news. *The Press*

¹³¹ *New Zealand Herald, The Evening Post, The Press, and Otago Daily Times.*

¹³² Penny Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood: Popular Magazines for Girls Growing up in England, 1920-1950* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995).

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³⁴ Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 299.

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had “Women’s News and Views” on page 2 every day, and was notable for the coverage of community and service organisations. *The Evening Post (EP)* had “Women’s News” daily, although the placement varied. The *New Zealand Herald (NZH)* had “Woman’s World” in three days of six, although the days and the page numbers changed over the 20-year period. The *Otago Daily Times (ODT)* had “Notes for Women” three days a week in the 1940s, and by the 1960s had “Mainly for Women” every day, supplemented with shopping and chat columns on Thursdays and Saturdays. The content aimed at women was broadly similar, covering clothing and fashion, social issues, health (particularly children’s health), education, and community service. The advertising in these sections or pages assumed similar interests, with many advertisements for clothing, fabric, shoes, hosiery, household appliances, convenience foods, beauty products, and patent medicines.

I surveyed summer and winter editions of all five publications at five-yearly intervals throughout the 20 years of the study. My approach was qualitative, based on analysis of the language and images. I looked at advertising, regular columns, features, and editorial for mentions of sewing and dressmaking. I considered the language and images to assess what assumptions were being made about dressmaking skills and knowledge. This methodology is similar to that used by Margarethe Szeless in her study of how Austrian women used the patterns in *Burda* magazine to fulfil their fashion wishes in the period 1950 to 1970.¹³⁵

The next layer was to see how individual schools recorded and rewarded needle-based subjects, and how visible these subjects were relative to academic ones. I chose secondary schools because they have records in the form of prize lists and school magazines. The choice of schools was dictated by the school having remained in operation and having a library or archive. I wanted both girls and co-educational schools

¹³⁵ Szeless deliberately chooses opposing theoretical approaches to position home dressmaking in the post-war discourse about femininity. Where I have looked at the curriculum, magazines and newspapers, Szeless focuses on *Burda* magazine and the *Austrian Journal of Sewing Machines and Bicycles* for context. Szeless conducts a structuralist and semiotic analysis of the magazines. She then contrasts this with a sociological approach to home dressmaking, inspired by Angela Partington. Szeless uses the findings from oral history interviews to challenge the idea of trickle-down fashion. Szeless, “Burda Fashions.”

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because both were available in the period of the study. I looked at prize lists, class notes, reports on trips and events, and photographs. I looked at placement and priority of this information. Where student contributions were included in these publications, I looked for writing and images that referred to sewing and clothing, both as school subjects and in life outside school.

Some schools had objects — items of uniform and student workbooks — which I photographed. Wherever possible, both at the schools and with case study subjects, I looked for objects or artefacts that showed me what girls used as students and home dressmakers, and what they made.

Such objects or artefacts were few and far between because of their low status and consumable nature. My goal with these things is to follow Mary Beaudry and, “construct a rich contextual analysis of how women and men used objects of needlework and sewing and to consider the multiplicity of meaning these everyday items conveyed.”¹³⁶

Unlike Beaudry, however, I have been able to ask people to provide their own narrative about the use and creation of things. The documentary, image, and material culture research created a context in which I could place and analyse individual experience. I investigated individual experience by recording oral history interviews. Several of the sources cited in the literature review use oral history for research about clothing practices and how these relate to identity and the imagined self.¹³⁷ Lou Taylor describes the value of oral history as “its ability to clarify the individuality of each human life and yet to reveal the individuality of each human life and the contribution of each person within their wider community.” At the same time, Taylor warns, “What is left out or forgotten may be as important as what is remembered.”¹³⁸ The earlier layers of research gave me a

¹³⁶ Beaudry, *Findings*, 7.

¹³⁷ Examples include Buckley, “On the Margins,” Hamon “The New Zealand Dressmaker: Experiences, Practices and Contribution to Fashionability, 1940 to 1980,” McLean, “‘I Dearly Loved That Machine’: Women and the Objects of Home Sewing in the 1940s,” Moseley, “Respectability Sewn Up: Dressmaking and Film Star Style in the Fifties and Sixties,” Tulloch, “There’s No Place Like Home: Home Dressmaking and Creativity in the Jamaican Community of the 1940s to the 1960s.”

¹³⁸ Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 260.

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sense of what was left out or forgotten by some of the subjects, and a means to assess when absence had meaning.

The interviewees are the backbone of the thesis, a unique data set that provides remembered experience of the practice, supported by photographs and objects. In the context of the other layers of research, the interviewees illustrate the development and evolution of dressmaking habitus and its role in creating the self at a particular time in New Zealand's history.

I interviewed women who experienced sewing in the New Zealand free education system¹³⁹ between 1945 and 1965, mostly as pupils, but with scope to include some teachers. The scale of the project (n = 15) means I could not get a representative sample. I could, however, get a geographical spread. The women went to schools throughout the country, both single sex and co-educational schools. I found the first women by word of mouth, then developed a vetting questionnaire to assist the geographical spread and check for objects to support the memories.¹⁴⁰ I preferred women who had sewing machines, equipment, photographs, or handmade items I could ask them about and photograph. I also preferred women who had continued dressmaking throughout their lives so I could ask about how their practice changed over time.

The interviewees are Pākehā, most of whose forebears were from the United Kingdom. This reflects the New Zealand population of the time. New Zealand had net migration increases throughout the 1950s of people from the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ The state education system provided separate schools for Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand), with a curriculum intended to prepare boys for manual and agricultural works and girls for factory or domestic work. This is a separate topic of research.

¹⁴⁰ Helen May talked to 25 Pākehā women about their lives during their childrearing years. She put the spoken material in context provided by the *NZWW* and *NZ Listener*. She used a "snowball" method to choose subjects, and when a sameness was beginning to occur, she would start in a new town or from a new contact. May, *Minding Children*, 10.

¹⁴¹ <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/culture-and-identity/birthplace-and-people-born-overseas.aspx>, accessed July 7, 2013.

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The questions covered five main areas: biographical details, education, sewing and dressmaking in the family home, sewing and dressmaking at school, and dressmaking since school. If the subjects were teachers, I asked about their training for and experience of teaching sewing and clothing. The questions (see Appendix 2) provide the basis for analysing the data — an evolving process of grouping, coding and categorising.¹⁴²

The methodology yielded a rich dataset. The following chapter, “A life-long asset to every woman,” uses some of the primary sources — newspapers, magazines, books, and archival documents — to introduce representations of the practice in the time period. The subsequent chapters use the memories, information, and objects from the 15 interviewees. The chapters consider how the interviewees experienced dressmaking in their childhood homes, how tools and spaces influenced dressmaking practice in homes, how and where dressmaking was taught in schools, how girls experienced dressmaking at school, and how dressmaking practice evolved over the interviewees’ lifetimes.

¹⁴² Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013).

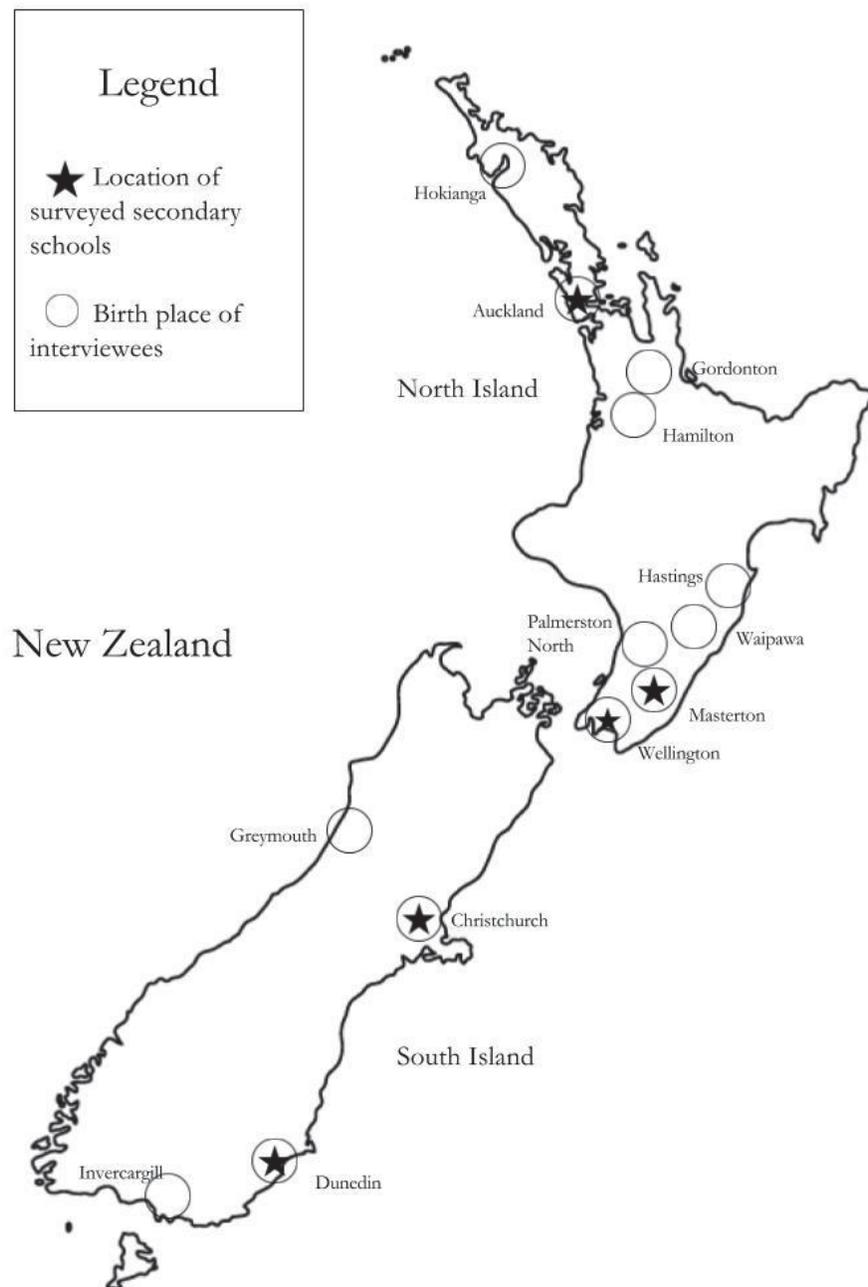


Figure 1. Map showing birthplaces of interviewees and locations of schools visited. Map created by Alice Funnell.

Chapter 2

Dressmaking in society: “A life-long asset to every Woman”

Any reader of a metropolitan newspaper in New Zealand between 1945 and 1965 would, consciously or unconsciously, recognise that sewing and dressmaking were associated exclusively with girls and women. This chapter provides context for the findings of the thesis by examining the discourse about these activities in newspapers, magazines, and in the education system, to show how they were represented. At the same time, it introduces the material culture of the period — the things that girls and women used as part of their dressmaking practice.

In 1945, a womenswear business called Reslau Limited advertised in the *Auckland Star*, using the phrase in the title of this chapter. The advertisement read:

To girls who are now released through the lifting of certain manpower restrictions: we would advise you to reply to Reslau Limited. While in our employ you will learn and keep in touch with the always useful and interesting art of Dressmaking, which is a life-long asset to every Woman. There is no piecework. You machine and finish each garment yourself, thus making it more interesting.¹

This thesis is concerned with dressmaking as a personal practice, focusing on a specific period. The Reslau advertisement provides a useful marker for the beginning of that period, 1945. It shows that society had changed because of the war, and was beginning to readjust to the possibility of peace: “girls” only have this opportunity because of the lifting of man-power restrictions. The Reslau job, which is never given a title, is advertised as a way for girls to learn an art that will be an asset to them as women. Described as an “art,” dressmaking is elevated from a domestic task to something that

¹ Reslau Limited. Advertisement. Papers Past, *Auckland Star*, Vol. LXXVI, 30 June 1945: 2.

Dressmaking in society

requires a certain amount of creativity. The word “useful” suggests being able to sew for oneself and one’s family. “Interest” comes from being able to work on complete garments, rather than enduring the repetition of piece work.² The advertisement specifies that girls will use a sewing machine, which places the work firmly in the modern, commercial world, and assumes technical expertise. At the same time, there is scope for hand-stitching with the phrase “finish each garment.” Reslau’s advertisement declares that dressmaking is a mutable practice — both domestic and commercial. In both spheres, it has the potential to change the practitioner. Girls can use their experience as domestic dressmakers to secure a paid position with Reslau, then apply those skills to improve their domestic practice (which will make them better women).

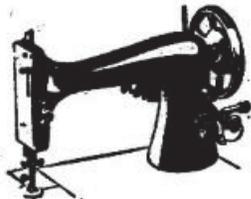
In the same year that Reslau advertised for female staff, the *Auckland Star* reported that a total of 800 sewing machines had been granted to New Zealand from the annual pool, although the whole number might not be available. Paper dress patterns were being made in New Zealand in an attempt to make up for the “unavoidable reduction in imports.”³ Dressmakers had limited access to two of their most important tools, although the story offered no comment on what this might mean for practitioners, or when supply would improve. The *ODT* and the *NZWW* both ran advertisements for 3-in-one oil that addressed the short supply of sewing machines by encouraging women to look after the machine they already had (see fig. 2). A sewing machine was a tool, like the vacuum cleaner, and something a woman needed to use to keep her household functioning throughout the privations of war.

² Piece work is a production system where machinists assemble a specific section of a garment and become quick and efficient through repetition of the same operation.

³ “Sewing machines.” *Papers Past, Auckland Star*, Vol. LXXVI, 5 April 1945: 6.

January 4, 1945

**You
can't replace it**



SO PROTECT IT

Your sewing machine, your vacuum cleaner, in fact most of your household tools must last you for the duration. Protect them from wear and rust with 3-in-One Oil. Keeps them working smoothly.



3-IN-ONE OIL

Figure 2. 3-In-One Oil advertisement.

The war meant material goods were in short supply and that maintaining household appliances was critical. Sewing machines were a woman's responsibility as this advertisement for 3-in-1 oil makes clear. *NZWW*, 4 January 1945: 52.

In July 1945, *EP* reported the New Zealand Retailers' Federation protest about the Controller of Customs' decision to refuse extra licences to import paper dress patterns, or to bring the tax on imported fabrics down to the same level as that on imported clothing. The retailers argued that the decision exacerbated "man-power shortages and clothing shortages" which could be alleviated if "the home clothes-maker could be encouraged rather than discouraged." The retailers spoke of "latent womenpower in the homes," ready to "give their time and sewing talents to the matters."⁴ Dressmaking was a

⁴ "Paper Patterns – Protest by Retailers." *Papers Past*, *EP*, Volume CXL, Issue 3, 4 July 1945: 6.

way women could contribute to post-war recovery. The story emphasises the way that dressmaking has economic value, at the same time as linking it to fashion and taste through access to appealing imported patterns. Dressmakers needed certain things — machines, tools, patterns, fabrics, and sewing cotton — in order to make this economic contribution and to achieve the desired aesthetic result. The difficulty of having the right things for dressmaking was underscored by advertising which was explicit about scarcity and shortages (see figs. 2 and 3). Rationing continued until the early 1950s, so coupons were an integral part of shopping. Would-be dressmakers had little chance to forget that “things” were hard to get, and they had to make the best of what was available.

RATIONING  CONTROL

COUPON CALENDAR

The following coupon calendar corrects the errors in dates appearing in the calendar printed on the backs of the current ration books. These errors affect all dates beginning with the coupon week February 23 to February 29, 1948. Accordingly the new calendar should be used as a complete replacement for the earlier one as from Monday, February 23.

WEEK	EGGS	MEAT	BUTTER	SUGAR	TEA
Feb. 16 to Feb. 22	17	16 & 17	17	17	17
Feb. 23 to Feb. 29	18	17 & 18	to	to	to
Mar. 1 to Mar. 7	19	18 & 19	20	20	20
Mar. 8 to Mar. 14	20	19 & 20			
Mar. 15 to Mar. 21	21	20 & 21	21	21	21
Mar. 22 to Mar. 28	22	21 & 22	to	to	to
Mar. 29 to Apr. 4	23	22 & 23	24	24	24
Apr. 5 to Apr. 11	24	23 & 24			
Apr. 12 to Apr. 18	25	24 & 25	25	25	25
Apr. 19 to Apr. 25	26	25 & 26	to	to	to
Apr. 26 to May 2	27	26 & 27	28	28	28
May 3 to May 9	28	27 & 28			
May 10 to May 16	29	28 & 29	29	29	29
May 17 to May 23	30	29 & 30	to	to	to
May 24 to May 30	31	30 & 31	32	32	32
May 31 to June 6	32	31 & 32			
June 7 to June 13	33	32 & 33	33	33	33
June 14 to June 20	34	33 & 34	to	to	to
June 21 to June 27	35	34 & 35	36	36	36
June 28 to July 4	36	35 & 36			
July 5 to July 11	37	36 & 37	37	37	37
July 12 to July 18	38	37 & 38	to	to	to
July 19 to July 25	39	38 & 39	40	40	40
July 26 to Aug. 1	40	39 & 40			
Aug. 2 to Aug. 8	41	40 & 41	41	41	41
Aug. 9 to Aug. 15	42	41 & 42	to	to	to
Aug. 16 to Aug. 22	43	42 & 43	44	44	44
Aug. 23 to Aug. 29	44	43 & 44			
Aug. 30 to Sept. 5	45	44 & 45	45	45	45
Sept. 6 to Sept. 12	46	45 & 46	to	to	to
Sept. 13 to Sept. 19	47	46 & 47	48	48	48
Sept. 20 to Sept. 26	48	47 & 48			
Sept. 27 to Oct. 3	49	48 & 49	49	49	49
Oct. 4 to Oct. 10	50	49 & 50	to	to	to
Oct. 11 to Oct. 17	51	50 & 51	52	52	52
Oct. 18 to Oct. 24	52	51 & 52			

NOTE: Butter coupons 20, 24, 28, 32, 36, 40, 44, 48 and 52 are not available unless otherwise officially announced.

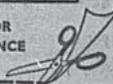
CLIP FOR REFERENCE 

Figure 3. Coupon calendar.

Editorial and advertising content in newspapers and magazines reminded readers about shortages and rationing. This advertisement corrected an error in the calendar printed on the ration books because it was essential shoppers (mostly women) could keep track of what they were entitled to. *The Press*, 19 February 1948: 9.

Tel. 41-440. Post. Trussardi, 236 LAMBTON QT.

JAMES SMITH'S

'UNDIE' SPECIALS!
Ribbed Cotton Briefs with Elastic Low Waist. W. fitting. Peach shade. Usually 6/11. SPECIAL 2/11.
Ribbed Wool Panties. Pink only. S.W. fitting. Usually 7/3. SPECIAL 3/11.

thrilling friday scoop!

8500 REELS OF SCARCE LONG-SOUGHT-FOR
'silko', sheen, white and
coloured sewing cottons

Hurry! "Silko" and "Sheen" Cottons in a wonderful colour range and Black and White. Shop early! Price **6½** D. Reel

Coloured Sewing Cottons—you've been wanting these for years. Splendid colour range. Shop early! Price **6** D. Reel

White Sewing Cotton No. 40. Another scarce cotton. Hurry into James Smith's tomorrow. Price **7** D. Reel

NEW SHIPMENT AOTEA WOOL
At James Smith's tomorrow! Another shipment of Famous Aotea 4-ply Knitting Wool goes on sale. 200 pounds in a big range of shades. Price **1/1** a skein



JAMES SMITH LIMITED - CORNER CUBA AND MANNERS STREETS - WELLINGTON

Figure 4. James Smith's advertisement.

Shipments of sewing supplies were cause for excitement in the years following the end of World War II. Something as simple as sewing cotton could be described as "thrilling" because potential buyers were acutely aware they could not mend or remodel garments without it. *EP*, 18 August 1949: 3.

The women's pages of newspapers balanced messages about frugality with tantalising glimpses of a post-war normality. The *ODT* "Notes for Women" pages for 1946 included a regular report from a London correspondent. In February, the report stated:

Women's new fashions — for export — are attracting much interest [...] there is a tendency towards "swish and softness" as a contrast to the severe military styles of the war years. [...] These export models have no austerity restrictions.⁵

While this may have given Otago readers some cause for hope as an export market for new British fashion, the advertising on the page reflected that the daily reality of dressing was still about looking after what you had rather than getting something new. A hosiery

⁵ NZPA Special Correspondent "Fashions and Faces: Post-war hopes and trends: Frocks, theatres, and food," Men-da Ladder and Snowflakes advertisements. *ODT*, 1 February 1946: 8.

Dressmaking in society

repair service promised a 48-hour service for “precious” silk stockings, and a brand of soap flakes promised daily rinsing in the product would stop runs in stockings and make them last longer. Imported clothes were advertised in the *ODT* in August,⁶ but advertisements for fabric dominated. Women readers were targeted as being interested in fashion, but more likely to make or mend clothing than to buy it. Advertisements for fabric included width and price per yard so the cost of a garments could be calculated at home. In an era of black and white print, colour was evoked with words and created in the dressmaker’s imagination.

02
CCH
VG
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and
Otago
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sweat
s. hat
velvet
s. lin
s. of
Otago
sweat
s. hat
s. of

84
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44
1
15
2
33
2
31
212
for 50
for 48

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THE NEW ZEALAND HERALD, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 1947 11

MILNE & CHOYLE

New

WOOL CREPES
colour-smart . . . a credit
to English post-war looms

Fine, soft woollens, wonderfully sheer, surprisingly light,
designed to drape with ease in new feminine styles. Colours are
varied as the changes of a chameleon, inspiration for smart ideas.

Your choice of ten different shades as well as black
and navy . . . vintage wine, green haze, sunset, flag red,
horizon blue, april green, border brown, old gold, mist green
or heath green. All are English-made and worth more than
a glance . . . 5/10, 17/- a yard . . . **M & C's Second Floor.**
Write for Samples to P.O. Box 19.

THE MAPLE THE MAPLE THE MAPLE THE MAPLE THE MAPLE

Figure 5. Milne & Choyle advertisement.

New Zealand women looked to overseas for fashion inspiration, often citing English style as aspirational. Dress fabrics, as well as styles, were imported. Dressmakers who could not imagine the difference between “green haze,” “mist green,” and “heath green” could write for samples. *NZH*, 1 February 1947: 11.

⁶ Fashionbilt. Advertisement. *ODT*, 30 August 1946: 3.

The Otago Daily Times, Thursday, August 18, 1946—Page 3

Sing a Song of COTTONS

in a gay symphony of colour

And this year the D.I.C. have certainly something to Sing about. It's a long time since we have had cottons in such varied colours and definitely unusual designs. Just take a peep at them for yourself in our Princes Street Windows.

Floral Ritzo 5/8
This fabric is guaranteed fastness and is showing in small floral and daisy designs suitable for ladies' wear. Also of over length for beach frocks, etc. 36in wide.

Gay Seersuckers 4/11
That fabric that washes so beautifully and needs no ironing. It's showing in a gorgeous array of brilliant colours fashioned into stripes and checks of Red, Blue, Brown, Green or Gold. 36in wide.

Floral Tobralco 7/-
This really is introduction for it is always a fine favourite each summer. Gay floral in small or large designs, and of course you know always in guaranteed colours. 36in wide.

Floral Lincns 9/-
Large flower designs in White or backgrounds of Navy, Brown, Scarlet, Sea, Green, Green, Azure and Forest Green. And here's a special—7/- comes matching. 36in wide.

Canadian Cottons 3/4
Novelty flower designs are featured mostly in 44 design but, for those who prefer, there are some lovely large-spaced florals. 36in wide.

Printed Haircords 4/11
What more could you wish for than some of the unusual designs floral or checked designs featured in this group? Cottons are too numerous to mention—see in following. 36in wide.

Organdi Muslins 5/8
What could be more suitable for a dressy, casual retreat than some of Printed Organdi Muslin? It's showing in floral and spotted designs, and in shades of Pink, Powder Blue, and White. 36in wide.

see the window displays at . . . *The D.I.C.*

Figure 6. D.I.C. advertisement.

All dress fabrics were imported, and shipments were eagerly awaited in the post-war years. The possibility of having new fabrics and therefore new garments was a cause for celebration. *ODT*, 15 August 1946: 3.

Newspapers generally left it to businesses to encourage women to practise sewing and dressmaking through the messages in advertisements. Editorial content about clothing was either from an economic perspective, as in the examples above, or described new trends or the garments of celebrities. When newspapers did include instructions for sewing in editorial content, they assumed a high degree of skill on the part of readers. In 1947, the *NZH* explained how to make a “sack dress”:

Dressmaking in society

one buys a shoulder-to-hemline length of tubular-knit woollen jersey, which is about 38in in circumference. All large shops which deal in yardage sell the fabric and offer directions for its sewing. The jersey costs from 18s to 24s a yard, and an average length is one and one-third yards; thus, the fabric combined with findings is usually about 30s.

This tubular length is then seamed across the top except for the gap left at the neck. Slits are cut below the ends of the seam, for armholes, and these slits and the bottom edge are hemmed—and there is the “sack dress” itself. A wide belt — which most women already have — draws it in at the waist.⁷

This assumes readily accessible shops selling “yardage,” staffed by helpful assistants who know how to sew. The *NZH* relies on readers’ own knowledge to complete this project and achieve a fashionable look. It also assumes she has time to shop and sew, and has no more lucrative way to spend her time. If readers were perplexed by these scant instructions and had not struck a helpful assistant, they would not have to look far for an advertisement for dressmaking classes or in-store demonstrations; all the newspapers ran them throughout the period of the study. In the 1940s, the language implied dressmaking was primarily an economic choice. The Ross Hynes College promised “lovely clothes at so little cost,” that it was possible to “save pounds upon pounds on children’s clothes,” and “you can re-make and renovate” (see fig. 6).⁸ The emphasis on economy and thrift persisted throughout the period. In 1964, one of Wellington’s department stores hosted sessions to help customers “create professional and quality-looking spring clothes in a minimum amount of time, effort and money” (see fig. 8).⁹ Saving money was still an important motivation, but dressmakers were now thinking about season-specific garments. Fabric, trims and accessories were readily available so dressmakers could make something entirely new, and in fashion.

⁷ “Woollen Jersey ‘Sack Dress.’” *NZH*, 12 February 1947: 4.

⁸ Ross Hynes College. Advertisement. *NZH*, 11 February 1947: 3.

⁹ Kirkcaldie & Staines. Advertisement. *EP*, 4 August 1964: 8.

THOUSANDS LEARN DRESSMAKING

THE WORLD'S EASIEST WAY!

JUST arrived from Sydney! Amazing NEW SIMPLIFIED METHOD brings expert HOME DRESSMAKING ability to EVERY woman and girl.

So new—so streamlined—so simple—it teaches you in **FEW WEEKS**, in your **OWN HOME** by latest **SHORT-CUT METHODS**, all the **SECRETS of DRESS-MAKING—MEASURING, DESIGNING, CUTTING and PROFESSIONAL FINISHING.**

The Home Dressmaker is not just a book on dressmaking. It is a complete course which shows you everything in a new, practical, step-by-step way. No matter where you live, Mr. Ross Hynes' remarkable new Home Dressmaking Course brings Sydney instruction right to your own fireside. Everything is explained for you. There are 100 readers' illustrations. You cannot make a mistake. Mr. Ross Hynes is a Dressmaking 'celeb' of International repute. He has discovered the amazingly simplified and practical methods of instruction after 20 years' experience. There is nothing like it in New Zealand. It is the very latest from Australia, proven simple, practical, and easy to understand and follow.

Nothing Like it in New Zealand.

THE ROSS HYNES FAMOUS AUSTRALIAN HOME DRESSMAKER 15/-

NEW 1946 EDITION FOR ONLY

YOU can start today to possess a wardrobe full of lovely clothes at so little cost. Something NEW for every occasion. You can save pounds upon pounds on children's clothes. You can re-make and re-wear. ANYONE can learn the fascinating art of Modern Dressmaking by these astonishingly Simplified and Practical Methods.

FREE ADVICE SERVICE

The Ross Hynes College in Sydney offers you a FREE after advice service, explaining personally and patiently your own plans. No other course in New Zealand can give you this Australian service.

Oh so easy!



10,000 ALREADY SOLD

It's New! Yet 10,000 Australian women and girls have already bought this amazing course. Never before has so much been offered for so little. The "Home Dressmaker" is superior to any five guinea course. The discount fee for personal instruction would be 42/7/6. Yet this course is offered at only 15/- complete. The value is an exceptional one. It makes dressmaking as easy as learn.

HURRY—SEND COUPON—LIMITED SUPPLY!

The Ross Hynes College, A.M.P. Building, 40 Chancery Lane, Wellington.

Please send me under your money back guarantee the complete and fully illustrated Home Dressmaking Course together with Free Master Foundation Pattern, and send me so that I may participate in your after advice service without cost. I enclose 15/- the complete cost of this course.

NAME

ADDRESS

If more convenient, you may send 4/- and 1/- change will be returned to you. Cash delivery guaranteed. R.H.S.

Figure 7. Ross Hynes Dressmaking Course advertisement. Dressmaking was portrayed as a normal and useful activity for girls and women. Those who did not sew were reminded of the benefits of competence, which included having more clothes to wear because of the lower cost of making them yourself. NZH, 11 February 1947: 3.

OUR 101st SPRING
Kirkcaldie's

WEIGEL'S
WEIGEL'S
WEIGEL'S

**LEARN
EASY SHORT-CUTS
TO PROFESSIONAL QUALITY
HOME DRESSMAKING!**

SPECIAL DEMONSTRATIONS
By Weigal Pattern's Home Sewing
Demonstrator, Mrs. Eileen Pablecheque,
TOMORROW UNTIL FRIDAY at 11.15,
12.30, 1.30, 3.0, 4.0 p.m., PLUS FRIDAY
EVENING at 7.15, 8.15 p.m.

You'll pick up a host of handy hints from Mrs. Pablecheque's sewing demonstrations! You'll learn how to eliminate the frustrations of existing "old time" methods of home sewing. You'll learn how to create professional and quality-looking spring clothes in a minimum amount of time, effort, and money. All with the expert, proper use of Weigal patterns, Lightning Zips, Korbond sewing aids, Vitene linings and Kirkcaldie's fabulous Spring dress fabrics!

PATTERN DEPT., STREET FLOOR

Figure 8. Kirkcaldie & Staines advertisement.

Although dressmaking was portrayed as a traditional domestic skill, it was not immune to the advance of modernity. Dressmakers were encouraged to keep up to date by ensuring their practice included the increasing variety of patterns, trims, and notions. *EP*, 4 August 1964: 8.

Dressmaking in society

Advertisements for sewing machinists, like the one from Reslau Limited, were a constant in the period. Dressmaking was a popular choice of employment. In January 1945, the *Auckland Star* ran a story on the results of a survey of girls' preferred jobs on leaving school.¹⁰ Dressmaking came fourth, with hairdressing topping the list, followed by shop work, then office work. The classified advertisements in the same newspaper confirm this, with home dressmakers offering to make garments to measure. For those who could not work outside the home, dressmaking was an achievable and appropriate way for women to earn money. By 1964, advertisements for machinists for ladies' coats, suits and dresses asked for applicants who were "experienced," "fully-qualified," and "top-flight operators."¹¹ There was no mention of training or of womanly arts, as in the Reslau advertisement; this was strictly business. It had become more commonplace for women to work outside the home, and the pool of available workers was large enough for these businesses to specify experience.

Unlike newspapers, the *NZWW* seldom acknowledged sewing and dressmaking could be part of a paid job.¹² The *NZWW* appealed directly to a readership understood to be primarily concerned with maintaining families and households, and devoted to work in the home or the community. The *NZWW*'s regular features were about domestic skills and concerns: knitting, gardening, sewing, and cooking. Readers contributed household hints, shared funny stories, and asked for advice on family matters. The magazine had a brisk, practical tone that suggested readers could turn their hand to any task. This was exemplified in the pattern service.

While the newspapers ran stories about shortages of paper for dress patterns, the *NZWW* offered a free pattern service, "specifically designed to meet the requirements of this Dominion. Its aim is to make it possible for New Zealand women to be smartly

¹⁰ "Hairdressing Tops List." Papers Past, *Auckland Star*, 25 January 1945: 4.

¹¹ Top Flight and M. Shapiro Limited. Advertisements. *The Evening Post*, 4 February 1964: 7.

¹² The magazine did run features on women who worked in fashion. One example is a profile of Chinese-born New Zealander who opened a clothing business after leaving Epsom Girls Grammar School. The article presents the business woman as an example of the exotic other, foreign and unmarried, maker of cheongsams as well as "Western styles." "Kim Sews a Nifty Cheongsam." *NZWW*, 1 February 1960: 44.

dressed.”¹³ One of the week’s patterns was available at no charge other than a stamped self-addressed envelope. Extra patterns were available for ninepence worth of stamps. The instruction sheet in the magazine included a cutting layout, and advised:

owing to the shortage of paper it is often impossible to extend patterns of skirts, coats, dressing gowns, etc., to their full length. When this is the case, the fact will be mentioned in the description of the patterns so that readers may extend it to the desired length.¹⁴

The *NZWW* was confident readers would have sufficient skill and experience to manage the truncated patterns and make the necessary adjustments. The *NZWW* pattern service assumed that women would make clothes for their children too, regularly offering patterns for girls’ and boys’ clothes. In 1950, as more girls started secondary school because of the increase in the school leaving age,¹⁵ the *NZWW* included patterns for girls’ school uniform clothes: gym bloomers, blouses, gym tunic and blazer.¹⁶ This meant girls would go to school as walking evidence of maternal competence at dressmaking.

¹³ “Pattern Service.” *NZWW*, 12 July 1945: 47.

¹⁴ “Pattern Service.” *NZWW*, 12 July 1945: 47.

¹⁵ “The New Zealand Official Year-Book, 1946,” ed. Statistics (1946).

¹⁶ “Pattern Service.” *NZWW*, 12 January 1950: 48; “Pattern Service.” *NZWW*, 2 February 1950: 48.

July 12, 1945 THE N.Z. WOMAN'S WEEKLY 47

WARNING! CHANGE in PATTERN SERVICE Regulations

IN future subscribers must enclose one stamped, self-addressed envelope for EACH pattern ordered. One penny stamp is sufficient for one envelope containing one pattern. This condition is necessary to comply with postal regulations. Failure to send separate envelopes may result in orders not being fulfilled.

Patterns are available for one month from date of issue. None can be supplied after six months.

The service has been specially designed to meet the requirements of this Dominion. Its aim is to make it possible for New Zealand women to be smartly dressed.

Always lengthen or shorten skirt below the hips, and the sleeve above and below the elbow. This keeps the curve for the elbow in place.

Mark notches with coloured thread rather than cut them.

Make up the back and front of the frock, fitting the waist and side seams last.

Subscribers to "The N.Z. Woman's Weekly" are entitled each week to one of the patterns published in the current issue, without charge. Important—To ensure prompt Pattern Service it is essential that your correspondence be addressed to THE PATTERN DEPT., "The New Zealand Woman's Weekly," P.O. Box 1469, Auckland, C.I., stating size required.

Be sure to send an addressed envelope, with a penny stamp, when making application. Extra patterns are available at 9d (10 stamps) each.

DIAGRAMS OF OUR PATTERNS

Indications

- — ○ MEANS GATHER HERE
- — ○ MEANS PLEAT HERE
- ← — → MEANS STRAIGHT OF MATERIAL

HALF-INCH TURNINGS ARE ALREADY ALLOWED FOR

General Directions

Before cutting material, each pattern piece should be placed against the figure to judge if any alterations are required. The pattern may be cut for a longer or shorter figure.

READERS NOTE

Readers sending for Free Patterns are reminded that they must affix sufficient postage to their letters, and that they must enclose an addressed envelope with a penny stamp.

Unless these conditions are complied with, we regret that we cannot send patterns asked for.

PATTERN No. 5A.—The pattern of this frock and bolero is cut in eight pieces and is designed in three sizes. Four years: 23in chest, 21in length. Six years: 24in chest, 23in length. Eight years: 26in chest, 27in length. To make it you will require 1½ yards to 2 yards of 36in wide check material and 1 yard of 36in wide contrasting material.

PATTERN No. 5B.—The pattern of this pinafore frock is cut in twelve pieces and designed in three sizes. Six years: 24in chest, 26in length. Eight years: 26in chest, 27in length. Ten years: 28in chest, 29in length. To make it you will require 1½ yards of 36in wide material for the blouse, and 1½ to 1¾ yards of 36in wide material for the skirt.

PATTERN No. 5C.—The pattern of these shorts and shirt is cut in six pieces and designed in two sizes. Two years: 22in chest. Four years: 23in chest. To make it you will require seven-eighths of a yard of 36in wide material for the shorts, and three-quarters of a yard of 36in wide material for the shirt.

Over the Teacups

I saw a very neat trick put across the other afternoon, as I was homeward-bound, in the tram. A lady got in, fumbled in her purse, and produced three pennies. These she held up at a ridiculous angle and gazed dreamily out of the window. Shortly afterwards, the man sitting behind her got up, took the three pennies and pushed his one-section ticket into her hand; then, with a grin, left the tram. The incident left me wondering as to just how many other free rides he had enjoyed by the use of these same methods.

—"Shirl."

My sister and I were leaving with a party of schoolgirls for a day in town. Dad, seeing us away, heard one of the ladies present telling her daughter to be sure and have plenty of pennies. Thinking of ice creams, dad put his hand in his pocket and showered pennies on one and all, saying, "You have one, too." After the laughter had died down, the lady told dad what the pennies were for. Not a bit embarrassed, dad said, "Well,

I've shouted ice creams and afternoon tea many a time and this is the first time I've shouted one of those."

—"Peg."

If any other readers are typistes they will understand just how easy it is to change the meaning of a document or form by just one small error in typing. On many occasions we have laughed over errors made by members of the staff of the firm I work for. A few days ago I arrived at work to find my workmates laughing at an accident claim form I had typed the previous day. It appears that instead of typing the words, "Claimant's foot became jammed under a bale of wool," I had used the word "ball."

—"Typiste."

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Please send me a Tablet Character Analysis. I enclose 6d in stamps and stamped addressed envelope.

Name

Address

Where born

Birth date (year, month, day)

Post to "Maoriander," c/o "N.Z. Woman's Weekly," P.O. Box 1469, Auckland, C.I.

Figure 9. Pattern Service, NZWW.

Fashion pattern services like the one offered by the NZWW were described as a service to readers. Publishers balanced the shortage of paper with the necessity of making and remaking clothes. Readers could get patterns in return for stamped addressed envelopes and use them to fulfil their duty to be well presented. NZWW, 12 July 1945: 47.

The NZWW had a feature called "War Economy Hints," with ideas submitted by readers. These ranged over the entire spectrum of household management — from cleaning products to extending the life of pencils. Readers demonstrated their own mastery of tools and materials and assumed others would have similar levels of skill.

Dressmaking in society

“Economy” submitted simple instructions for table napkins, “take the best parts of linen or cotton frocks or blouses which have had their day and cut into the required sizes and hem,”¹⁷ with no advice on the depth or style of hem or the best stitch to use. In the same edition, “Betty” offered instructions for a waterproof raincoat, “make the collar and cuffs of double material and strengthen inside the buttonholes with soft leather,”¹⁸ without elaborating on how to sew leather to fabric, or what type of needle or thread to use. Readers were expected to know how to do these stitching tasks. Editorial content also assumed the need to make garments last longer, and offered ways of doing so through the clever use of buttons¹⁹ or dye.²⁰ Such features again assumed readers were motivated and confident with managing cloth and tools.

The *NZWW*'s advertising struck a tone between empathy and stricture about shortages in the immediate post-war years. The previously discussed advertisement for “3-in-one” oil was about taking care of what you had. In 1945, a children’s clothing company reassured readers by saying, “We can’t all have ‘Childswear’ just yet!!! But soon there will plenty for everyone.” (see fig. 10)²¹

¹⁷ “War Economy Hints,” *NZWW*, 15 February 1945: 32.

¹⁸ “War Economy Hints,” *NZWW*, 15 February 1945: 32.

¹⁹ “You can remodel with buttons,” *NZWW*, 13 July 1950: 49.

²⁰ “Glamour from a packet of dye,” *NZWW*, 17 February 1955: 13.

²¹ Childswear. Advertisement. *NZWW*, 1 February 1945: 33.



**WE CAN'T ALL
HAVE
'CHILDSWEAR'
JUST YET!!!**

**BUT SOON THERE WILL BE
PLENTY FOR EVERYONE**

The shops now have 'CHILDSWEAR,' but not in large quantities. Soon, however, their stocks will be increased. Keep on asking for 'Childswear.' It offers exciting wardrobes for Kiddies from Tots to Teens. These adorable kiddies' garments are expertly designed and comfortably cut in a range of correct sizes for every child of any age. Remember 'Childswear,' whether for Frocks, Slumber-wear, Coats, Millinery, Nighties or 'jamas. 'Childswear' quality and finish ensure longer wear.

Childswear

Look for the label, "A Childswear Product," 7.4

Figure 10. Childswear advertisement.

Shortages were such an accepted part of life that manufacturers could advertise the promise of stock. Such advertisements about the shortage of ready-to-wear clothing reinforced the value of being able to make and remodel clothes at home. *NZWW*, 1 February 1945: 33.

Waiting was part of life and expectations for material goods were not set too high. By the middle of the 1950s, sewing machines were heavily advertised in newspapers and the *NZWW*. The *NZWW* advertised tools to help with sewing too. In 1955 it ran advertisements for ironing boards, irons, shoulder pads, pinking shears, dyes, fabric, and patterns, along with a dress-sense quiz which encouraged readers to keep up with rapidly

changing fashions.²² Women's problems with dressing went from not having any choice, to having too much choice — which increased the chance of getting things wrong.

The magazine's assumptions about its readers' lifestyles are evident in an editorial from 1960, called "Children and Accidents."²³ It expected readers to be wives and mothers who are responsible for the health and safety of their children. Maternal sewing tools come in fourth on the list of dangers, behind frayed electric cords, electric power points, and matches: "If you have a young child keep your scissors, pins, needles etc., safely in your sewing basket." Readers were expected to have such a basket and use those tools as part of their household work.

The ability to make was often associated with being thrifty, which was challenged in an article from 1965. The *NZWW* reported on an English survey which found home-sewn or knitted articles were not always cheaper than ready-made.²⁴ Nevertheless, readers still valued these skills for their own sake, if not for their budgeting value. The same month, the *NZWW* published a letter from "Dawn":

I would like to see classes of cooking and sewing for all courses. It does not seem to be generally realized that many secondary school courses do not include cooking and sewing, that it is only the commercial and homecraft courses that enjoy these classes. To me it seems something is lost to young girls who cannot continue these classes from intermediate school to secondary school, especially as at this stage they begin to be very interested in their clothes.²⁵

Dawn makes a direct connection between school sewing and the ability to produce items of clothing that will be used outside school. Dawn does not tell us about herself, but her letter shows she understood the post-primary education system, which had changed significantly in 1945.

²² "How's your dress sense?" *NZWW*, 17 February 1955: 57.

²³ "Children and Accidents," *NZWW*, 1 February 1960: 1.

²⁴ "Sewing survey shocker," *NZWW*, 19 July 1965: 20.

²⁵ "Homecrafts," *NZWW*, 5 July 1965: 81.

Dressmaking in society

Girls' experience of sewing and dressmaking in the education system is another way that we can see how essential these skills were in the post-war decades. Every girl who went to a state school in New Zealand had some sewing classes, most often between the ages of 8 and 12 (see Appendix 5). The way sewing and dressmaking skills were taught at school provided a benchmark for practice and expertise in private life. For girls whose mothers did not sew, school was an opportunity to be taught according to a prescribed syllabus. For girls who grew up in households where women sewed, school classes created a point of intersection between regulated public practice and idiosyncratic private practice.

The belief that sewing and dressmaking skills were vital to girls' education is evident in letters to the Department of Education as well as those like Dawn's to the *NZWW*. Letitia Sidford wrote to the Governor General in 1942, asking that "our girls on leaving school should go through a compulsory training at a university or college where they could study the ancient arts of womanhood." Her letter was penned as girls and women had been mobilised into work to do the jobs previously done by men then serving overseas. Letitia Sidford's concern was about what would happen when "our men take up their old positions and girls trained for office work are called upon to become wives and mothers."²⁶

Twenty years later, anxiety remained about the status of the subject within the education system. Joan M. Bryan wrote to the Chief Inspector of Post-Primary Schools, citing her experience as an Assistant Examiner for School Certificate Clothing and as a teacher of Homecraft and Clothing. She wrote "it is obvious that the majority of schools encourage only pupils of low ability to take these courses. The examination therefore can only be planned and marked with this in mind, hence the standard is not comparable to other subjects."²⁷ Miss Bryan's letter highlights a fundamental conflict over the role of

²⁶ Letter 30 June 1942 from Letitia Sidford to the Governor General. R7208918 Secondary education - Courses of instruction - Domestic Science. ANZ.

²⁷ Letter 18 December 1962 from Joan M. Bryan, Senior Home Science Tutor on letterhead of Victoria University of Wellington Regional Council of Adult Education to Chief Inspector of Post Primary Schools, Department of Education. R7208918 Secondary education - Courses of instruction - Domestic Science. ANZ.

Dressmaking in society

Clothing as a subject in the post-primary system. As an examinable subject, it had some sort of academic weight, yet schools saw the subject as a time-filler for the less academically able. At the same time, sewing and dressmaking continued to be presented as necessary skills for girls and women.

If girls did not learn to sew at home, or at school, and did not go to any of the classes advertised by magazines or newspapers, they could teach themselves to sew from a book. “How-to” books are an important source for understanding the meaning of dressmaking in the period because they often go beyond the mechanics of construction to instructions about how to be as a person. All assume female readership by addressing girls or women. The books link dressmaking to economy, femininity, and duty, as well as to producing clothing. They prescribe equipment and techniques, give guidance on materials and space, and advise on matters of style and taste. I looked at 14 books published between 1945 and 1966, all available in New Zealand. Five of the books were written in New Zealand for the New Zealand school sewing curriculum, while the remaining nine were international and include three written to support sewing or clothing teachers without being aligned to a particular curriculum.

The dressmaking books for a general audience presume readers want to see themselves as creative and that they wish to use that creativity to produce garments uniquely suited to themselves. In *Clothing Construction*, Evelyn Mansfield describes making good clothes as “a form of artistic expression,” and assumes readers will have sufficient self-awareness to produce garments that are “well suited to the wearer.”²⁸ *And So to Sew*, from the British Needlework Development Scheme, explains that:

The making of a garment is never considered as an end in itself, but, as the final chapter on “Grooming” indicates, the art of dressing is more fundamental and “gives the clue to the character.”²⁹

²⁸ Evelyn A. Mansfield, *Clothing Construction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953).

²⁹ Needlework Development Scheme, *And So to Sew: An Introduction to Sewing* (London: University of London Press, 1956).

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Allyne Bane makes the connection by titling her book *Creative Clothing Construction*, in which she invites the reader to “get acquainted with yourself”³⁰ and therefore be able to create “the intimate and distinctive touch that makes the costume a very personal thing.”³¹ Similar ideas are presented in *Modern Sewing Techniques* by Frances F. Mauck, who characterises home sewing as both a creative outlet and an economic asset.³² The dressmaker is presumed to be a person who wants to be creative, and to make the best of herself.

These books show dressmaking as a means of achieving a desired or idealised visual identity, assumed to be a very feminine one. The foreword of the 1947 edition of the *Simplicity Sewing Book* suggests dressmaking is about more than just physical appearance:

Making your own clothes can be as exciting and as much fun as painting a picture. For, using fabrics instead of paints, the clever dressmaker really creates a picture — a portrait of her own personality — and her own most charming self.³³

Dressmaking, by this definition, does not merely clothe the body — it creates a representation of the maker. This image foreshadows the argument of this thesis, that dressmaking itself contributes to the practitioner’s sense of self and becomes part of her habitus.

The books do not limit the dressmaker’s creativity to her own dress, but assume she will be a mother and responsible for dressing her children. The cover of K. D. Woodgate’s 1945 book *Dressmaking and Cutting Out* has the words “A guide for every woman” above the title.³⁴ The book is aimed at the ordinary woman, not a trained or specialised

³⁰ Allyne Bane, *Creative Clothing Construction*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Frances F. Mauck and Dorothy Stepat-De Van, eds., *Modern Sewing Techniques* (New York: Macmillan, Collier-Macmillan, 1963).

³³ Simplicity, *Simplicity Sewing Book: Helpful Hints for Beginners and Experts* (New York: Simplicity Pattern Co., 1947).

³⁴ K. D. Woodgate, *A Guide for “Every Woman” to Dressmaking and Cutting Out: A Simple and Effective Method of Pattern Drawing and Dressmaking for Post-Primary and Adult Workers* (Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1945).

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dressmaker. The title page further proclaims “This guide is for the use of Every Woman — school girl or matron — who wishes to make garments for herself or others.” The states of female existence are simply defined: one is either a school girl, or a matron. The purpose of dressmaking is to dress one’s self or others, signalling a strong service aspect to the activity. The book is also clear that it is about making garments, not fashion. The emphasis is on simplicity and efficiency:

This book is the result of years of working as a mother, teacher and commercial dressmaker. It aims at supplying a simple, efficient method of cutting and making garments. It is simple enough to be taught in schools, but efficient enough to be used all through the pupils’ lives. It should be specially useful to young teachers, mothers with young children and girls wishing to make their own clothes.³⁵

Woodgate wrote the book using her experience teaching at a girls’ school, but what she is teaching is intended to be used in a domestic environment:³⁶

This scheme of dressmaking is a practical method for use both in schools and at home. It has been tried out at the Waitaki Girls’ High School and Oamaru Technical classes.³⁷

The book confirms the interplay between domestic and school experience, and that mothers’ knowledge will shape their expectations of classroom teaching. A section aimed directly at teachers stresses the importance of measuring well and cutting accurately, “remember if the garment is not very well made some allowance is made for the work of a child, but if it does not fit well the teacher is blamed.” Woodgate believes that mothers expect their daughters to produce wearable garments at school, even if they are not perfectly made.

³⁵ Ibid., 1.

³⁶ When Sister M. Benedict of St Mary's College in Ponsonby wrote to the Department asking about the favoured system on pattern designing, she was advised to write for a copy of this book. Reply from Director of Education dated 13 November 1944. R19235789 Manual and Technical - Dressmaking Systems. Chart System of Dressmaking. ANZ.

³⁷ Woodgate, *A Guide for “Every Woman”*, 85.

Clothing: A Practical Course for Post-Primary Schools is aimed directly at teachers. The author L. E. Eason is mindful that not all women sew, and some of those who do are not highly skilled. Eason identifies poor domestic practice as a potential problem and warns teachers about maternal intervention.

No alterations in cutting out are to be done at home without permission. Kind friends and mothers sometimes give very harmful “help” without understanding exactly how the garment is being made. The child should understand that while sympathetic interest is welcome the work must be the child’s own.³⁸

This approach creates a division between domestic and school practice, seeming to suggest that women who have not been taught at school cannot be doing things the right way.

Eason’s book was one of three that were directly related to the Regulations for Clothing as a post-primary subject, although it does not appear to have become a set text.

Geraldine McDonald’s *You and Your Clothes*³⁹ was a set text, although it had a more conciliatory approach to the relationship between home and school sewing. Geraldine McDonald was one of the women interviewed for this thesis and her personal experience is used in later chapters. In the preface to *You and Your Clothes* she states: “To the best of my knowledge this book covers all the work prescribed for the School Certificate Examination in Clothing with the exception of the mechanics of pattern drafting and practical sewing techniques (although some of the latter are included).” In her interview, McDonald stressed how important it was for her that girls got some academic credit for their knowledge of sewing and garment construction. She says her intention was to help girls achieve School Certificate by getting a good pass in Clothing.

McDonald’s text is imbued with a sense of morality, about the right way to do things, and the importance of duty and hard work. It emphasises the fact that the girl is part of a family, and the clothing budget of each individual must be seen in relation to the family

³⁸ L. E. Eason, *Clothing: A Practical Course for Post-Primary Schools* (Christchurch, N.Z.: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1953), 87.

³⁹ Geraldine McDonald, *You and Your Clothes* (Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1959).

budget. McDonald uses a family of five to explain the role of dressmaking in a family, positioning it as an economic activity, firmly connected to the household income and the clothing needs of the individuals within it. The text is explicit about the allocation of the clothing budget, calculated at 14 per cent of household income, with most going to the father because — as the mother explains to Betty — “his clothes are expensive and I cannot make them at home.”⁴⁰ The female readership is expected to accept that more money will be allocated for menswear, and that savings can be made on clothing for women and children through domestic activity.

Writing about post-war Austria, Margarethe Szeless notes that home dressmaking was seen as a survival strategy and a female contribution to the tight post-war family budget,⁴¹ something McDonald perpetuates in the way she calculates the relative costs of making and buying clothing. Although sewing is seen as a way of extending the budget, and therefore a useful and legitimate activity, readers are advised that it must not intrude on other family members. The finished product of dressmaking may be seen, but the working must be done out of sight.

About the same time McDonald was writing for the post-primary course, Audrey Thomas produced a workbook to support the 1958 syllabus for Forms I and II. *Clothing: A Workbook for Forms I and II with a Special Section on Clothes Consciousness and Personality Improvement*⁴² looks like an annotated exercise book, clearly intended to be written in and have samples affixed to it. The book is in three sections, with the first focused on developing the necessary skills for dressmaking, working safely, and maintaining equipment. The second section is about understanding textiles and their uses. The third and final section, the Self Improvement Plan, starts with “Your personal appearance is very important to you and the people you meet. If you are sure that you are looking your very best, you feel more confident and you are able to work more efficiently.”⁴³ The Self

⁴⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁴¹ Szeless, “Burda Fashions,” 857.

⁴² Audrey Thomas, *Clothing: A Workbook for Forms I and II with a Special Section on Clothes Consciousness and Personality Improvement* (New Plymouth: Thomas Avery & Sons, n.d.), Work book for 1958 primary school clothing syllabus.

⁴³ Ibid., 48.

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Improvement Plan includes value statements about clothing and dress habits. The plan for Form I includes cleanliness, “No matter how old your clothes may be, there is no excuse for them being dirty. If mother is busy, wash and press your own clothes.”⁴⁴ Clothing and appearance are firmly associated with judgement, and the opinions of others. The book implies that girls must take responsibility for this part of their lives, yet it also suggests girls may not have complete control of their appearance, advising girls to “Ask if you can help to choose any new clothes Mother is planning for you.”⁴⁵

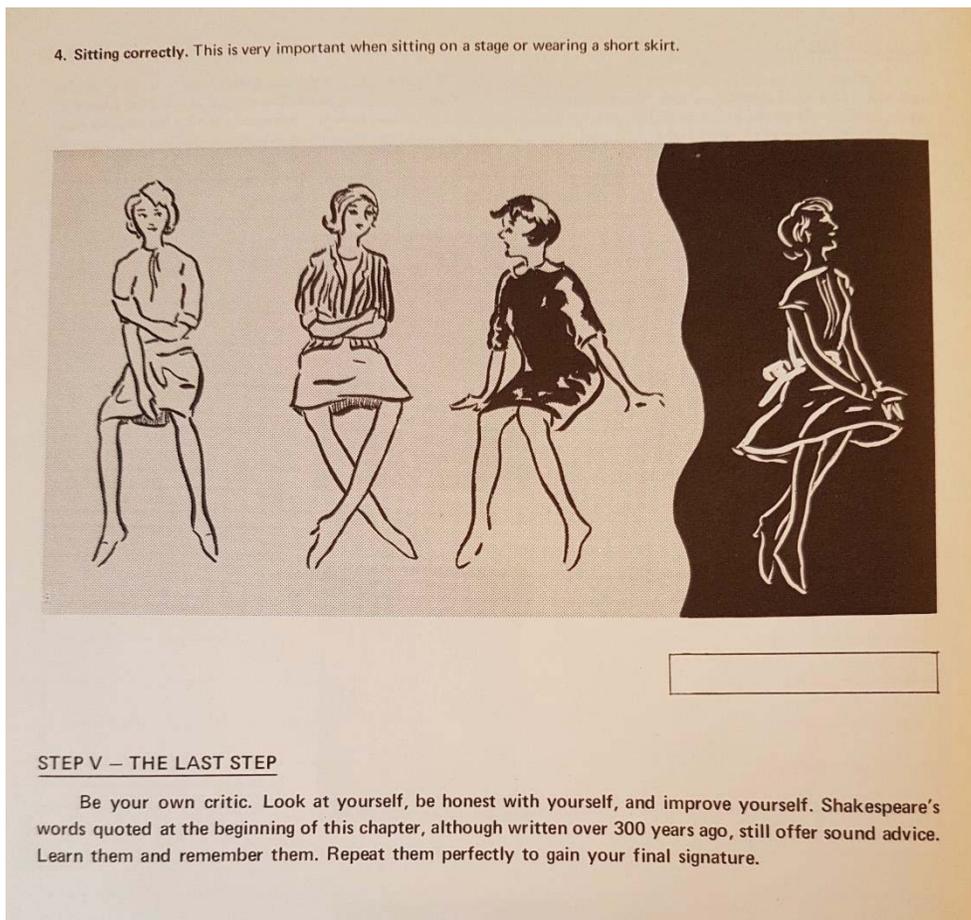


Figure 11. “Sitting correctly.” Illustration.

Girls were not just taught to make clothes at school, they were also taught how to wear them. Sitting correctly was a necessary skill for those planning to wear a short skirt. Audrey Thomas. *Clothing*, Thomas Avery & Sons, n.d.: 56.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 53.

Dressmaking in society

This brief survey of newspapers, women's magazines, the education curriculum, and clothing manuals shows how dressmaking was part of everyday life for girls and women in the period, and an important dress strategy for many. Several themes are repeated in these sources: dressmaking is specifically feminine, often maternal, and firmly associated with home. It is a means of gaining approval, saving money, and engaging with fashion. Writing about dress, rather than dressmaking, Joanne Entwistle describes it as an embodied practice, "an inter-subjective and social phenomenon, an important link between individual identity and social belonging."⁴⁶ This chapter shows that when dressmaking is a key dress strategy, the practice can be seen to link the individual, her identity, and her social belonging. In this period, women were encouraged to see sewing and dressmaking as part of their collective identity as wives and mothers, which was central to their social belonging. The next chapter focuses on how individual girls experienced dressmaking in their homes, and it explores the various ways they attributed meaning to the practice.

⁴⁶ Entwistle and Wilson, *Body Dressing*, 47.

Chapter 3

Dressmaking at home: “She’d never had a piece of bought clothing in her life”

Val, born in 1948, is the youngest of three girls. Her mother began working in the garment industry straight from school and was keen that her daughters learn dressmaking — which two of them did. Val took to it early, and her interest and aptitude meant she and her mother spent time working together.

I remember when my eldest sister got married, mum and I spent a weekend. And she and I made the two bridesmaid’s dresses, the bride’s dress, and an outfit for myself one weekend. And my second sister down had been away and come back and was absolutely livid. [...] She [mother] had found a label somewhere, it was a label for an English garment with a very good name, Gainsborough or something like that. And we sewed it into this suit we made for myself. And to this day she [middle sister] still argues that we didn’t make that — mum and I had gone and bought it. And it wasn’t fair because she’d never had a piece of bought clothing in her life.¹

Val’s story introduces several of the major themes discussed in this chapter, which uses interviewees’ stories to understand how girls saw dressmaking practised in their childhood homes and what meaning they attributed to it. An underlying question is whether the practices they observed, part of their history, became part of their own habitus “in accordance with the schemes generated by history”.² The themes that emerged from these stories include maternal duty; inherited skill; being judged — both for competence and appearance; the responsibility to be thrifty; and having a sense of ease. These themes confirm the more general discussion in the previous chapter and are similar to the ones that Sarah Gordon found in her research into domestic sewing in the

¹ Val, born 1948.

² Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 54.

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early twentieth century in the United States of America. She found that sewing “represented a set of ideas about women and their roles: it evoked ideas of discipline, thrift, motherly love, beauty, and production.”³ Individual experience also confirmed the external messages conveyed in the primary sources discussed in the previous chapter. But for some of my interviewees, these themes emerged as counterpoints — to a lack of skill, or a situation where money was no object. At the individual level, the themes were strongly tied to relationships, mostly with mothers and sisters. Interviewees were also seeing modernity unfold; the period of this research was one when New Zealanders were experimenting with how to present themselves visually in a modern world.⁴ Interviewees were aware that their mothers and grandmothers adapted textile and dressmaking practices in response to changing tools, fabrics, fashions, and attitudes. I use the interviewees’ early experiences as benchmarks, both to show change over time and to illustrate the extent to which maternal practice was formative in the interviewees’ own practice.

One of Val’s earliest memories is of being on her mother’s lap as her mother used a Singer treadle machine.⁵ She says the rhythm of the treadling action is in her body. Val is clear that her mother was a highly-skilled dressmaker, and that this skill was a source of pride. Val’s mother used her skill to manage her own appearance and her family’s, and to contribute to important events such as her daughter’s wedding. The story of the wedding shows dressmaking had the potential to strengthen relationships; in this case, mother and daughter worked together on the project. Fiona McKergow cites a similar example — also from New Zealand — of Yvonne Marsh, who needed a new dress for her twenty-first birthday in 1956:

³ Gordon, “Make it Yourself,” 111.

⁴ Bronwyn Labrum, “The Female Past and Modernity: Displaying Women and Things in New Zealand Department Stores, Expositions, and Museums, 1920s-1960s,” in *Material Women 1750-1950: Consuming Desires and Collecting Practices*, ed. Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009).

⁵ Val, born 1948.

Dressmaking at home

Mother and I made it in a joint effort. After the war years, probably about 1950, she went to pattern cutting classes. She'd always made my clothes... she took different styles from pictures and adapted them to be a bit different.⁶

Dressmaking created opportunities for working together with a joint purpose; several of the interviewees talked about mothers and daughters, or sisters, sewing together.

While Val is clear that her mother was proud of her dressmaking skills, and that she aspired to a similar level of skill, her sister's response to the trick with the label shows conflict about how the skill was valued. Val's sister's jealousy about the idea that Val had a piece of "bought clothing" echoes Cheryl Buckley's comments about the clothes made by her mother and aunt in the mid-twentieth century:

These designs did have special qualities which gave "added value" for their wearer — they were exclusive in that the unique combination of design elements, materials and colour was distinctive to that one particular garment — however, in a period in which shop-bought clothes had a great deal of cachet, there were looked down upon as "home-made."⁷

For Val, the suit represented time, skill, and a joke shared with her mother. For the other sister, the suit was evidence of unfair treatment because she believed it was shop-bought. The label marked the garment as somehow superior to one made at home.

Val's mother had been paid to make clothes with labels in them when she worked in the garment industry. She trained as a tailoress and worked for a department store in Wanganui (a provincial town in the North Island of New Zealand) before she married and moved to the Hokianga (a rural settlement in the Far North). While she was working, Val's mother won a competition to attend the School of Design in Sydney. Whatever career may have been in the offing stopped for marriage and motherhood. As a wife and mother, she made clothes for herself, her husband and son, and her three daughters. She also entered one of the dressmaking competitions run by some retail

⁶ McKergow, "Opening the Wardrobe of History," 179-80.

⁷ Buckley, "On the Margins," 166.

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businesses (see fig. 12). Val's mother's entry was rejected because the judges believed it was a shop-bought garment from which the label had been removed.

Val also saw her mother use her dressmaking skills to be thrifty, unpicking garments to re-use good parts of the fabric, or to make patterns. In the midst of all this activity, Val believes she first started using needle and thread when she was about four years old — using scraps and off-cuts to make clothes for dolls. Val's mother taught her to sew gradually, “it was mostly trial and error as a little kid. And as I got older she'd show me how to place the patterns on the fabric and pin it on and cut it out.” Both mother and daughter seem to have got pleasure from this transfer of knowledge. Val recalls that her mother loved that two of her daughters sewed, going as far as to say, “My eldest sister doesn't really like sewing and she was a bit of a disappointment. But she's not very crafty either.”⁸

⁸ Val, born 1948.

14 THE NEW ZEALAND HERALD, MONDAY, AUGUST 5, 1957

BETESH FABRICS MAKE A FROCK COMPETITION

**£300
IN CASH
& PRIZES**

OPENS MONDAY, AUGUST 5 — the greatest of all sewing competitions. Hurry to procure your **FREE** official entry form from your favourite fabric or Department Store, or at any Singer or Sewing Machine Centre. If unable to procure a form locally, please write direct to the Competition Organiser, Fashion Fabrics Ltd., P.O. Box 9584, Newmarket, Auckland.

Make a BETESH cotton frock from A SIMPLICITY PATTERN

1st Prize £105 Plus a SINGER SEWING MACHINE to the value of £100

2nd prize £50

3rd prize £30

BEST ENTRY FROM A SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPIL £15

ALSO ELIGIBLE FOR MAJOR PRIZES

The competition is open to women of all ages—any dress made from a Simplicity Pattern in Betesh Cotton may be entered. Prizes will be awarded to the persons who best choose the Betesh fabric to suit the Simplicity Pattern style—only in the event of a draw will the decision be made on workmanship.

The three prize-winning frocks, together with nine other Competition models which gain the Judges' decision will be shown at special parades in the main centres.

Free official Entry Forms setting out the rules of the Competition are available NOW from your favourite fabric or Department Store, or at any Singer sewing machine centre.

CLOSES SEPTEMBER 12th 1957

Announcement of the winners will be made on Thursday, September 26, 1957 in this newspaper.

BETESH MAKE A FROCK COMPETITION

Sponsored by Fashion Fabrics Ltd., Elliot Street, Auckland. A Division of M.C. Manufacturers Ltd.

Figure 12. Betesh “Make a frock competition” advertisement.

Dressmaking competitions were an opportunity for dressmakers to demonstrate their expertise beyond the confines of home and family. Such competitions underscored the fact that the products of dressmaking were subject to scrutiny and judgement even when no prizes were at stake. *NZH*, 5 August 1957: 14.

Dressmaking at home

While Val has life-long memories of her mother's expertise, stemming from the rhythm of the treadle, she also saw her mother learn new skills. When Val was 12, her mother had an engine added to the treadle machine, bought a fitting form, and trained as a Homecraft teacher (this is explored further in chapter 5). The decision to do the training and get paid employment outside the home sent strong signals about what was possible for a woman, wife, and mother to do — and it stemmed from her skill as a dressmaker.

The idea of inherited skill is implicit in Val's stories. She credits her mother with giving her the confidence and competence to be a dressmaker herself, and acknowledges that one of her sisters also learned from their mother. The idea of inherited skill is more pronounced in Velma's description of her mother. Velma, born in 1934, is the youngest of two girls. She says her mother's great love and skill was fine handwork and knitting, but she was also a competent dressmaker.⁹ One of the objects Velma showed me was a copy of *The Girl's Own Annual* inscribed with her mother's maiden name and dated 25 December 1922 (see fig. 13). It was apparently a well-received Christmas gift. The previous chapter considered books as part of the discourse about sewing and dressmaking, and looked at how they prescribed tools and spaces. Velma's mother's book does that too, but, more importantly for this discussion, it is an object that links mother's and daughter's sewing practices and forms a memento of their relationship. *The Girl's Own Annual* was edited by Flora Klickmann,¹⁰ and was one of a series of publications that positioned sewing and needlework as feminine and maternal activities.¹¹ Readers could find suggestions for knitting, crochet, and other handcrafts, in between fiction and non-fiction articles. Velma can look at it and recall various projects she and her mother made and remember those projects in the world, as well as inside the pages of the book. The book is tangible proof of interest in handcraft and sewing; its survival suggests the contents were valued.

⁹ Velma, born 1934.

¹⁰ Penny Tinkler notes the *Girls' Own* series survived from 1880 to 1950 in various guises. The publications were inspired by a strong Christian ethic and aimed at an educated middle-class. Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood*, 48-51.

¹¹ Younger girls were introduced to these skills in *The Little Girl's Sewing Book* which used instructions for making dolls clothes to instil these values. It supposes girls see themselves as mothers and links the ability to dress a child [doll] with being a good mother.

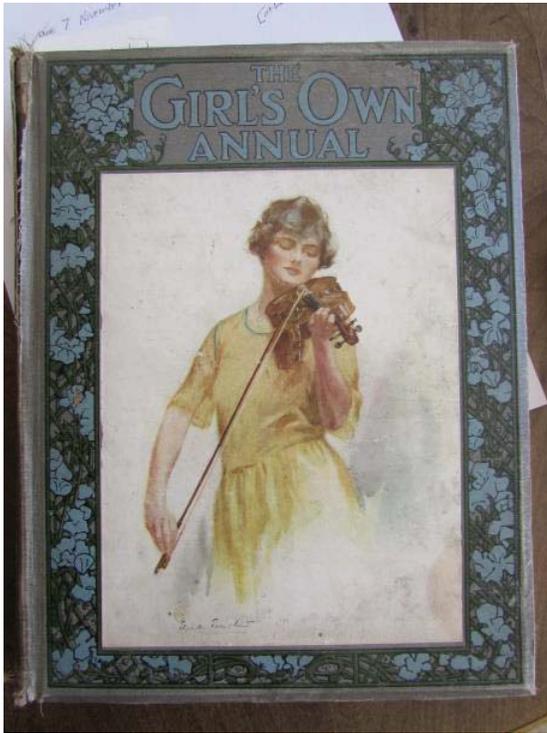


Figure 13. *The Girl's Own Annual*, 1922 edition.

Velma has kept her mother's 1922 edition of *The Girl's Own Annual*. Mother and daughter both made projects from the book. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

Velma's mother was one of five girls and several boys who grew up in Waipawa (a rural New Zealand town), although they were born in England. The family is an example of several generations of women engaging in textile-related activities, and using those activities within relationships. Velma knew her mother and aunts won prizes for their handwork (knitting, crochet lace and oil painting) at the Waipawa Horticultural Society show, even though this was before she was born.¹² Girls in the family started making things early in life. Velma has a photo of her mother, aged under five, sitting on a doorstep knitting:

It just was part of growing up, as it was with us [Velma and her older sister]. I think we did French knitting first, with cotton reel with the four [...] I think that was the first thing we learned. Pre-school.¹³

¹² *Hastings Standard*, 24 November 1916, 2.

¹³ Velma, born 1934.

Dressmaking at home

Velma's maternal grandfather opened a shop in Waipawa which operated as a newsagent and haberdashery. The daughters worked in the shop, selling goods for sewing and knitting, and providing advice to customers. The family shop was a safe place for daughters to work, surrounded by family and focused on productive, creative, and essentially feminine practices.

Velma's memory of her mother is built on the idea that she came from a family with specific expertise in needle-based skills, and that those skills were developed early in life and practised throughout it. Teaching the skills was part of raising children. Velma did not have children herself, but she did make clothes for other people's children, "somebody I thought was cute,"¹⁴ showing Velma was motivated to hand on the skills, at least by example.

The theme of thrift came through strongly in Velma's memories too. She cannot remember her mother buying clothes, either for herself, or for Velma and her older sister. Velma had just started school when World War II started, so her memories of those first years at school are caught up with war-time shortages. One of her mother's older sisters would send clothing her daughters had outgrown, thus maintaining family connections in a visible and material way. These parcels of home-made hand-me-downs were tangible evidence of the family aptitude for knitting and dressmaking, and a way of being thrifty and helpful.¹⁵ New Zealanders had a well-established tradition of adapting and passing on clothing, both within families and through churches and charities.¹⁶ Sheena and Alison also talked about clothing being handed on within the household, to maximise wear from garments that had been outgrown rather than worn out. Val said her mother sent clothing to cousins, while Cathie's family received clothing. Another way of being thrifty was to unpick garments, both to re-make, or to create a pattern:

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hilary O'Kelly describes the way Irish families in America sent clothing parcels home from the 1930s to the 1980s, describing it as "part fulfilment of filial duty and quite a personal way of representing yourself 'at home.'" Hilary O'Kelly, "Parcels from America: American Clothes in Ireland, c.1930-1980," in *Old Clothes, New Looks: Second Hand Fashion*, ed. Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005).

¹⁶ Bronwyn Labrum, Fiona McKergow, and Stephanie Gibson, eds., *Looking Flash: Clothing in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2007), 126-27.

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both Val's and Velma's mothers did this. The garments in these exchanges are material evidence of taste, skills, standards, and status within families.

Margaret, born in 1938, readily described the dressmaking skills of previous generations — but could not see that she was part of the continuum.¹⁷ Margaret says her maternal grandmother was in service for a wealthy family in Canterbury (a province in the South Island of New Zealand) and learned many fine needlework and dressmaking skills as part of her job. These skills were passed to Margaret's own mother, whom she described as a perfectionist. Margaret's mother won a dressmaking prize at secondary school. Like Velma's mother, Margaret's mother — or some other family member — must have reported these prize-winning skills to the daughter, which implies pride in the achievement. Margaret says her mother tried to pass on her skills, “She was a good teacher. She taught me as much as I was prepared to follow the instructions.”¹⁸ Margaret's husband, then fiancé, was a more compliant pupil, and made two garments for her under the supervision of his mother-in-law. These were not simple garments, “a Chinese dress with piping. And a black velvet coat.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Margaret, born 1938.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

LOOK GIRLS!

A man in a nightie!

A MERICAN men always go in for loose-fitting clothes. To us, their suits look like pyjamas—they're just as loose. In the summer, when they wear lightweight suit materials, you can't tell the difference.

So it boils down to this: they wear daytime suits that look like pyjamas—so at night they have to get into nighties for a change. *And the looser the better.*

They have them in all colours, plain or patterned—but always in flannel. *Red is the hot favourite.*

So here it is, a pattern for man only.

If you are handy with the sewing machine or nimble with the needle, men, I'm giving you something to make for yourselves.

My guess is as good as yours. But I wager it'll be the wife or the girl friend who'll run up in 40 minutes this 40-winks nightshirt.

To make the cap and shirt set, you will need four and a half yards of 36-inch wide material; quarter of a yard of contrasting material; 8 inches of 1-inch-wide elastic; three buttons; one tassel.

Make your paper pattern from diagrams on the right. Each side of each square represents 2 inches. Allow for turnings. (It is up to a 40-inch chest. Allow an extra half-inch all round pattern for large sizes.)

Fold your material and cut A (front), B (back) and D (collar). On double material cut C (sleeves). Using contrasting material on the fold, cut D (collar) again.

FORTY WINKS NIGHTSHIRT

1. Join shoulder seams. Join side seams as far as X marked on diagram.
2. Join sleeve seams, and insert sleeves.
3. Slit centre front of nightshirt as marked in diagram. Cut a strip of contrasting material measuring 14 inches long, 5 inches wide, and join to left-hand side edge of centre front opening to make an overlap for button through opening. Work three button-holes down overlap. Face right side of opening, and stitch three buttons to correspond.
4. Place two collar pieces together, right side facing, and stitch together around out-

side edges. Turn inside out. Stitch on collar, contrasting material on right side.

5. From remaining material, make a pocket measuring five and a half inches wide. Trim top with band of contrasting material. *Stitch as left-side breast pocket.*
6. Top-face sleeve edges with two-inch wide band of contrasting material.
7. Hem remaining edges.

CAT-NAP CAP

Fold material and cut E twice.

1. Join side seams.
2. Using a one-and-a-half-inch-wide band of contrasting material, top-face edge of cap,
3. Stitch tassel to point of cap, inserting elastic at the back.

Who said night shirts were out of fashion? Gay ones like this are sold in the smartest shops on New York's Fifth Avenue.

THE N.Z. WOMAN'S WEEKLY. — April 19, 1956 **Page 33**

Figure 14. "A man in a nightie!"

Sewing and dressmaking were gendered activities, commonly understood as feminine. This feature shows the idea of a man sewing was not impossible, but it assumes that a woman would be more efficient. Margaret's fiancé was at least one exception to this. *NZWW*, 19 April 1956: 33.

Alison, born in 1942, lived in a house with her maternal grandmother and a maternal aunt, as well as her parents and sisters. She saw evidence every day that the women of her family sewed and did other textile activities. She remembers her grandmother embroidering and making lace, her resident aunt Beryl knitting, and that her mother

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made clothes for her and her sisters, and herself as well. Her mother had a treadle machine, but Alison was one of several interviewees expressly banned from using the sewing machine at home.



Figure 15. Alison and her sisters as children.

Alison (left) with her sisters in outfits that were the same but different. All their garments, including their underclothes, were stitched or knitted by female relatives. Photograph supplied by Alison.

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Alison can remember one favourite dress her mother made her on that machine:

Flocked nylon must have come in and been very fashionable or something. Kids wouldn't look at it now. [...] It was a yellow dress with white flock on it. It was lovely. Little narrow belt, black velvet belt.²⁰

Alison also remembers another aunt being an extremely good dressmaker.

Aunty Freda used to sew. She didn't live with us, but she used to sew for us as well. Because Aunty Freda was a woman who could knock up a dress in an afternoon. She'd come and she could always do this. Just throw the material down on a surface and cut into it. And pin it on you and sew it up.²¹

Alison's description of her aunt's approach to dressmaking illustrates Bourdieu's own reflection that habitus offers "the only durable form of freedom, that given by the mastery of an art, whatever the art."²²

This mastery did not come easily to Alison or Margaret. Alison remembers her sisters learning almost automatically, "Dorothy could sew. Dorothy could always sew. She took to it like a duck to water. And Milly did too."²³ Both Margaret and Alison were sent to dressmaking lessons, separate from school lessons, by their mothers. This suggests the mothers felt an obligation to ensure their daughters learned to sew. For Margaret, these lessons happened in the first year after she left school. She does not remember them being hugely successful because, "This lady would whizz along — things didn't have to go right. I probably learnt some bad habits. My mother would tack things."²⁴

Alison's mother sent her to lessons when she was 18, by which time she was married and had her first child:

and mum realised there was a gap in my domestic canons and so she sent me off.
At that time a company called Singer, Singer Sewing Machines had a sewing

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bourdieu, "Scattered Remarks," 340.

²³ Alison, born 1942.

²⁴ Margaret born, 1938.

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school in town. [...] and mum paid for me to go to a six-week course and I went every morning for six weeks to learn to sew.²⁵

Alison's recollection suggests that her mother felt it was part of maternal duty to ensure that her daughter could sew, although she had never sat with her to teach her. Alison's experience at that course is discussed in chapter 7.

Cheryl, born in 1951, has recollections that combine the sense of inherited aptitude for sewing with some more deliberate learning. Cheryl's mother grew up in rural Manawatu and from age 14 she went to sewing and textile classes at the Country Women's Institute with her mother.²⁶ Like Margaret and Velma, Cheryl had stories of making prowess from before she was born. She gave the example of her mother being able to cover shoes with fabric to match a dress, which she did for her self-made wedding outfit. Cheryl's mother had a treadle machine, for which she also had many attachments. This suggests someone who enjoyed technical challenges. Cheryl's mother bought an electric Singer in 1960, which coincided with making the dresses for her eldest daughter's wedding. After that, Cheryl remembers her mother using the treadle machine for spinning yarn, using an attachment called a "lazy Kate". Cheryl's first experiments were on the electric machine, and she feels she learned "by osmosis."²⁷

²⁵ Alison, born 1942.

²⁶ Bronwyn Labrum notes this organisation for rural women was popular and influential. Bronwyn Labrum, *Real Modern: Everyday New Zealand in the 1950s and 1960s* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2015), 291.

²⁷ Cheryl, born 1951.

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Figure 16. Singer sewing machine owned by Cheryl's mother.
Cheryl remembers her mother using an attachment to adapt this treadle machine as a spinning wheel.
Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

Sheena, born 1951, described a variation from the pattern of maternal skill transfer. Her mother grew up on a farm, and saw her mother (Sheena's maternal grandmother) sew on a treadle machine — which Sheena now has in her living room. But Sheena's grandmother did not teach her daughter to sew on that machine. That task fell, almost by accident, to the mother at the neighbouring farm, who became Sheena's paternal grandmother. She must have been a good teacher, because Sheena says her mother was a competent dressmaker who used her skill to clothe herself and her four daughters.

Sheena does not recall her mother winning school prizes or entering competitions for sewing, but her attitude to dressmaking shows she felt she would be judged in the result. Sheena remembers, "For summer, she would often do this hard-out sewing spree of 12 dresses, three each. You got a new best dress every year which got relegated to not-best the next year."²⁸ Sheena associates the new best dress with summer, and says they wore

²⁸ Sheena, born 1951.

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them for the Hawkes Bay Agricultural and Pastoral Show.²⁹ Sheena remembers this routine as part of her mother's standard of dress for her daughters, and as being an economic necessity when her father started up his accounting practice. Her father became deputy mayor of their town, and this seems to have further constrained their dress strategies. Along with the need for "best" dresses, was the understanding that the girls would not wear shorts to school. Other girls might, but those sisters did not. In their study of appearance socialisation in childhood and adolescence, Johnson, Kang and Kim identify various influences on dress, including family, peers, community and media³⁰. They also identify seven categories of rules: aesthetic, context, role, social position, hygiene, modesty, and functionality.³¹ Mothers emerge as "an important source of influence on daughters' appearance management behaviours," and "appearance gatekeepers of the family."³² Sheena's mother's routine for producing appropriate clothing seems to have been linked to social position and modesty, and had a powerful influence on her daughters' dress and dressmaking practices.

Sheena and her sisters all learned to sew at home; she absorbed the skill in the same way Cheryl did.

Mum had been teaching us to sew at home. Rather, when you're third in a line of four girls you're watching it all the time. And I understand that with our parents, they could leave any sort of nails or hammers, that sort of thing, lying around, but they couldn't leave needles and thread or knitting needles. We would be into them. So I had some understanding.³³

The phrase "watching it all the time" says that sewing and dressmaking activity were part of life in this household. Sheena's words echo Daniel Miller's idea that children become typical of their people, "because everything they touch and do is infused with that

²⁹ Shelley O'Brien tells a similar story of new "town" dresses being worn for the first time at agricultural shows. Labrum, *Real Modern*, 136.

³⁰ Kim K. P. Johnson, Minjeong Kang, and Jae-Eun Kim, "Reflections on Appearance Socialization During Childhood and Adolescence," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 32 (2), no. April (2014).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

³² *Ibid.*, 83.

³³ Sheena, born 1951.

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underlying order.”³⁴ Sheena’s parents reinforced dressmaking as a necessary skill by making their daughters responsible for their own clothing budget from the time they started secondary school.

And we got the family benefit³⁵ which was \$6.40 a month — some bizarrely small sum of money — and that was for us to buy our clothes. Parents provided the school uniform, school shoes, school socks. And we had to buy everything else ourselves out if it. So that was undies and whatever gorgeous dress you wanted. So of course, you sewed. And mum would give us gifts of material she’d bought so it was really enough for one new dress for summer and one dress for winter.³⁶

While Sheena’s parents actively encouraged their daughters to manage their appearance through sewing, they also defined this as a purely domestic pursuit. Sheena knew she was expected to go to university, and says her parents discouraged her from doing sewing at secondary school because that would not help gain University Entrance. One of Sheena’s older sisters took Home Science at university, “And at that time it was just a Diploma. A three-year full-on course and it was just a Diploma. And the skills she learnt were just phenomenal.”³⁷ This sister, Ali, shared her expertise with Sheena and their mother, further embedding the family’s vision of itself as being able to make their own clothes to high standards — of both skill and social position. The course Ali chose, and her success, contributed to modernising dressmaking in the household. Sheena’s sewing had been modelled on her mother’s practice. Under Ali’s supervision, Sheena did things by the book, “I had to iron out the seams, I had to have a piece of material alongside. And I was not allowed to iron on the right side.” Both Sheena and her mother deferred to Ali’s knowledge. The simple task of clipping seams was never the same:

I remember one pattern I had, like in the T shape, and I had green and pink gingham in the top and pink on the bottom and you had to clip under the arms

³⁴ Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, 287.

³⁵ Family benefit was a universal government payment made to mothers for every child living in their care.

³⁶ Sheena, born 1951.

³⁷ Ibid.

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and mum was like “no, no, no dear” because she thought it would rip the seams. But Ali made me clip the seams and mum respected her.

This story suggests that Sheena’s mother did not see herself as expert, although she had appeared that way to her youngest daughter. Sheena describes her mother “letting go” of sewing when the girls had left home, and reverting to her real loves: spinning and weaving. Her dressmaking practice, impressive as it had been, was part of her job as a mother.³⁸

Jocelyn, born in 1932, is the only one of my interviewees who experienced paid sewing within the family home. Whereas Val’s mother stopped working when she married, Jocelyn’s mother continued to do so. Like Val’s and Sheena’s mothers, Jocelyn’s mother was conscious of how her dressmaking skills would contribute to the way her family was seen in public. She took great pains over Jocelyn’s clothing. Jocelyn was often embarrassed about the clothes her mother made her because people looked at her so closely.

I remember she did something with lapel type sleeves, she buttoned on. Instead of sleeves, she buttoned these strips, and hand worked strawberries, in beautiful hand-stitching over and around the square neck. [...] Oh, but I was embarrassed. I didn't have a lot of clothes, but anything I had you could've bought in the top shop anywhere. In fact, the farmers’ wives would see me down town and they'd come around and ask, could she make the same for their daughters.³⁹

A few years after I interviewed Jocelyn she found the photograph reproduced here, of mother and daughter on a Wellington street in the early 1950s. It shows what Jocelyn had described to me in the interview.

I was always terribly embarrassed about how outstanding she looked. She would come along to the school sports. Everybody else’s mother would be in a frock and sandals. My mother would arrive in a black suit, pearls, choker, you know,

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Jocelyn, born 1932.

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high neck white blouse, big rose on her lapel. And she would have made the blouse, made the suit, made the bouquet, made her hat. She didn't make her gloves.⁴⁰

At first glance, Jocelyn's dress is a simple, full-skirted cotton frock. A close look shows it is cut on the bias with inverted pleats in the skirt, and a professional precision to the contrast collar and cuffs. Managing appearance was clearly important to Jocelyn's mother. She saw herself and her daughter as walking demonstrations of her expertise, but she did not feel driven to teach her daughter.

No, no, she never suggested it and neither did I. I think she was too busy. [...] I can remember asking her, this frock that I tried to make, [...] I was being bridesmaid, and it was too big down the back or something. [...] I said, look it's too big, and I can't get it to go right. And I'd turned it in down the back. And she said you must never ever touch that straight line, that's what the darts are for. You take it in there. So that's about the only advice I can remember her giving me.

Jocelyn did learn to sew (and sewed for most of her life), but she learned in spite of, rather than because of, her mother.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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Figure 17. Jocelyn and her mother.

This street photograph of Jocelyn and her mother confirms Jocelyn's description of her mother as someone who dressed to be noticed. Both mother and daughter are entirely clad in home-made garments. Photograph supplied by Jocelyn.

While it is not possible to see a correlation between a mother's skill as a dressmaker and the ease with which she passes those skills on, those interviewees who noted unease in

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the transmission carried that feeling with them for years afterwards. While a few of the interviewees talked about projects that had not gone well or were never finished, three described themselves in the most negative terms, and compared themselves unfavourably with others. Thinking of her mother, Jocelyn said, “I think I was put off because she was so good at it.”⁴¹ Margaret said, “I don’t think I’m very good.”⁴² Alison’s self-assessment was even more harsh, “And I couldn’t ever sew. I couldn’t ever cut out things. I was hopeless.”⁴³ All three grew up to sew, so must have reached a point where necessity or increasing confidence overcame these mental pictures of incompetence.

The ease with which Velma, Cheryl, Sheena, and Val learned from their mothers was also evident for two other interviewees: Lyndsay and Lynne. Lyndsay, born in 1940, remembers being able to use her mother’s treadle sewing machine, in her case, “fiddling with doll’s clothes.” Learning at home was supplemented by visits to the house of a friend:

This friend was really important because her mother was widowed and it was a household of women. And one of them was a dressmaker who produced fabric and we made dolls clothes. And all these women were really happy to help us kids. They were wonderful really.⁴⁴

Lyndsay’s memories of sewing and dressmaking are firmly connected to women, both in her home and that of her friend. Her mother was a confident dressmaker who had trained as a Home Science teacher in the 1920s. The Home Science training did not include tailoring or patternmaking, and Lyndsay’s mother would not attempt tailored garments. However, she did learn patternmaking when Lyndsay was growing up. She went to “The Hollywood School of Dressmaking to learn pattern drafting and they had their own special rulers.” As well as this special ruler, Lyndsay remembers her mother using white newsprint for patternmaking, and having two pairs of scissors, “pretty expensive and pretty special.”

⁴¹ Jocelyn, born 1932.

⁴² Margaret, born 1938.

⁴³ Alison, born 1942.

⁴⁴ Lyndsay, born 1940.

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Her mother's patternmaking skills had a positive consequence for Lyndsay and her sisters:

we could go into town and look in Ballantyne's [a high-end department store] window and see a dress we liked, take mother to have a look at it and she would draft a pattern for it and make it.⁴⁵

Lyndsay remembers one of her school friends was very envious, because:

I could go to Miller's [a drapery store], choose material, mother would make a dress, it wasn't a great drama, and there it was — it didn't matter that it wasn't expensive material. Whereas her mother went to Ballantyne's, fussed over what she was buying and the stuff never got made, or got made far too late.⁴⁶

The recollection reveals that dressmaking was not merely to be clothed, it was about being in fashion. The symbolic consumption of fashion is an idea that Katrina Strigley explores in her analysis of how women consumed clothing in depression-era Toronto. One of her interview subjects describes similar window shopping expeditions, to “check out their expensive clothes and run home and my mother could cut it free hand.”⁴⁷ Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark note that increased access to displays of glamour throughout the 1930s — in movies or shop windows — “contributed to the democratization of fashionable styles and looks.”⁴⁸ The ability to consume through gaze was central to the advent of modernity. Bronwyn Labrum describes how New Zealand women were confronted by modernity through techniques of retail display and events in department stores.⁴⁹ Shoppers were browsing the newest goods, displayed in the latest style — and changing with the seasons.⁵⁰ Dressmakers could then convert the picture in their mind's eye to fashionable clothing.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Strigley, “Clothing Stories,” 97.

⁴⁸ Buckley and Clark, *Fashion and Everyday Life*, 119.

⁴⁹ Labrum, “The Female Past.”

⁵⁰ Ibid., 317.

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When asked if her mother enjoyed sewing, Lyndsay said, “I think she got satisfaction from the fact we were well clad.” The mention that “it didn’t matter that it wasn’t expensive material” implies that thrift was a factor in achieving the desired look. Thrift is also implied in Lyndsay’s description of her mother “splashing out” on a dressmaker from time to time.⁵¹ In addition to being thrifty, Lyndsay’s mother was a practical woman — she stock-piled fabric before the war in anticipation of rationing:

and she kept all the lengths of fabric in a box ottoman and we could choose what she was going to make. But by the time I came along – I was number three — the choice was very limited, I got the dregs. That went through to 1950, ‘51 those fabrics would have lasted us.

In the uncertainty of war, her mother had decided it would be more important to have some fabric than to try and get the latest fabric. Being in fashion was a secondary consideration, but her willingness to window shop and her patternmaking ability meant her daughters appeared in modern styles.

Lyndsay was aware that her mother sometimes stayed up late into the night to complete garments, and this was accepted as part of family life.

And the treadle sewing machine got brought out and she was always a last-minute artist and she could be sewing until two in the morning so that you could wear it the next day. She was a real beaut at that. And you took over doing the cooking and providing the meals while she sewed.⁵²

Lyndsay must have been paying attention because, when she was 21, her mother was sick and unable to sew. Lyndsay “just set to, bought material and laid it out on the floor and mother was absolutely amazed. I had a bought pattern. She was amazed that I just set to and sewed.”

⁵¹ Lyndsay, born 1940.

⁵² Ibid.

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Lynne, born 1946, also enjoyed an easy transfer of knowledge. Like Val, she has vivid memories from her early years of her mother sitting at the treadle machine. As the mothers went about their tasks, their daughters were forming “their basic beliefs about the natural order of the world.”⁵³ Lynne progressed from observing her mother sew to trying for herself by the time she was about six:

I remember my mother used to disconnect the cord so I could learn the action of the treadle. And when I could do that, I was allowed, with guidance — I’d be given scraps of material to sew. [...] We were just allowed to puddle.⁵⁴

Being permitted to “puddle” aligns with Miller’s idea of everyday ritual; Lynne’s mother did not make a big thing about her learning to use the machine, but simply let it happen. Unlike Alison’s mother, she did not make any rules about what Lynne and her siblings could touch:

We would be able to play with the things in the sewing box while she was sewing. [And the] Buttons – a box of beautiful buttons. And we were allowed to play with that often. All sorts of threads and darning and wool and pins, scissors, elastic.⁵⁵

Lynne remembers her mother using pinking shears, “Just to cut out [...] she didn’t have an overlocker, and that would stop it fraying.” Lynne was allowed to use her mother’s scissors, under supervision, “We were given our own pieces to do. We were allowed to be in on everything.” Lynne has continued to sew throughout her life, and when her sons were small she used the same approach her mother did. The boys saw her sew, and one of them used the machine quite early. When asked if she was consciously doing what her mother did, she said she supposed so.

⁵³ Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, 287.

⁵⁴ Lynne, born 1946.

⁵⁵ Ibid.



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Figure 18. Pinking shears advertisement.

Pinking shears were a popular choice for seam neatening when many dressmakers only had the option of a straight stitch on their machines. Lynne's mother used pinking shears to neaten seams, but Lynne was able to do so using the zig-zag stitch on her Elna sewing machine. *NZWW*, 3 February 1955: 71.

Vera, born in 1945, remembers sewing as part of her mother's work. Her parents were orchardists, who set up a motor camp on their property when Vera was 12. She was the youngest of six children and the only girl, so her mother had lots of people to feed and clothe, as well as running the businesses.

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And they had a shop, and a swimming pool, and motels — and she did all those sorts of things as well. So she'd look after the shop and she did all the catering, all the servicing of the motels, and the linen. She was a busy woman.⁵⁶

Vera's mother does not appear to have been troubled by the need to be the best or look the best. Instead, she used sewing to manage the cost of clothing a large family and maintaining the linens for the family businesses. In Vera's house, the sun porch served as a sewing room; it had lots of windows and looked over the orchard. Vera's mother could sew there, while also keeping an eye on what was happening on the property. Sewing was work in that household and doing it did not diminish Vera's mother's control of the household. Vera remembers this room as “definitely” being her mother's space, and being forbidden to touch the machine as a young child; chapter 4 reveals that Vera was less obedient than Alison. Perhaps as a result of this, Vera's mother did not teach her to sew but expected her to be able to. “I wanted something and she said, well you can make it. That's when I first started to sew.” Vera made pyjamas, and says it was hard to do the collar and set in sleeve, “They weren't very well made but I finished them and I wore them.”

Until then, Vera's mother had made all her clothes. Vera remembers a trouser suit she had, which was an unusual choice for a girl at that time. The decision to make trousers for her only daughter is in keeping with her mother's practical approach — with five sons, she was used to making trousers. Vera enjoyed wearing it, “it was really lovely in the wintertime. Brown colour, browns and golds.” But when she outgrew the trousers, her mother lengthened them with a band of contrast fabric that Vera did not like. Her mother explained that this was a necessary economy, and talked about being used to this sort of thing from her own childhood. Vera also learned from an early age that fabric must be of a certain quality to be worthy of the effort of making and mending. Vera says her mother was not stylish, but only bought good quality fabric.⁵⁷ “She always bought

⁵⁶ Vera, born 1945.

⁵⁷ An American study of fabric quality in the 1990s confirmed quality is the most important consideration for individuals buying fabric for home sewing. Sherry Schofield-Tomschin, “Home Sewing: Motivational Changes in the Twentieth Century,” in Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 100.

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the best in material, whatever she made. So it would last. She wouldn't buy a cheap piece of material."⁵⁸

Geraldine, born in 1926, has early memories of her mother sewing at home, using a treadle machine. Like Lyndsay, Geraldine's memories are associated with a sense of ease. She has no specific memory of her mother teaching her to sew. Geraldine's mother sewed throughout her life, which Geraldine believes suggests it was an activity of choice. But little value was ascribed to the activity at the time, "Just like making a batch of scones. You did things. If you didn't knit, then you probably sewed." Nevertheless, Geraldine also described her mother's habit of using dressmaking to make her garments as gifts at Christmas. This suggests a sense of thrift, because new garments were for special occasions rather than something created on impulse. It also elevates the practice to something more than utilitarian — it was a means of creating something special enough to be wrapped and labelled as a gift. Geraldine's daughters benefitted from this habit too.

My mother every Christmas would make them matching outfits. They loved them, they still talk about them. Mum would get a Vogue pattern, a children's pattern and she would make it up in matching fabrics, not exactly the same.

She'd also try to get something for the son but he wasn't at all keen on things.⁵⁹

Geraldine's son instinctively understood the protocol that Barbara Burman describes, "Clothes made at home by mothers are for little boys." Big boys wear clothing made by other men, or by women who are anonymous and invisible; this was part of becoming a man.⁶⁰ This distinction is another way in which dressmaking is gendered: both producers and consumers of the product of dressmaking are understood to be female.

Of the 15 women interviewed, three — Railene, Caroline, and Cathie — said their mothers did not practise dressmaking. Nevertheless, all three had memories of their mothers relating to sewing or broader dress practice.

⁵⁸ Vera, born 1945.

⁵⁹ Geraldine, born 1926.

⁶⁰ Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 13.

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Railene was born in 1934, the same year as Velma, but to a very different family. She has no memory of her mother sewing at home, other than a little mending. Railene's mother came from a highly-educated Otago family. She had been to a private school for girls in Dunedin before marrying Railene's father and moving to a farm in Manawatu. The couple had three daughters. Railene remembers her mother fulfilling the obligation to dress her daughters by spending money on dressmakers and ready-made garments. Meanwhile, "Mother was always beautifully dressed because they could afford it. She bought hats and gloves. She had fur coats." Unlike most of the other interviewees, Railene could recall her mother in shops, selecting clothes and accessories. Much of her mother's clothing was made by a dressmaker, who also sewed for the girls, "When we were small — we were all dressed the same. We had Viyella dresses made in the winter, all the same."⁶¹

Despite the family's financial security, they were not immune to war-time shortages. Railene and her sisters went to boarding school at Iona College in Hawkes Bay. When Railene started at Iona in 1946 she had first-hand experience of not having much choice about what she wore. Her eldest sister had already been at the school for a few years and had a uniform made to measure, but by the time Railene started the clothes had been recycled over and over, and the regulation uniform fabric was not available. She and her peers started school with a makeshift outfit:

I was conspicuous in this funny made costume. I had a worn-out gym tunic. I remember it being really worn out. It was all right because you were like the other girls. But the walk to church — I was in this jolly thing. When you are young you like to conform don't you?⁶²

For the first part of Railene's life, conforming had meant matching Viyella dresses, so the sense of deprivation was acute. Sewing was part of the curriculum at Iona, and Railene and her sisters learned to make and mend their own clothes. Their mother

⁶¹ Railene, born 1934.

⁶² Ibid.

Dressmaking at home

supported this activity, buying a portable electric sewing machine for her daughters to use at home in the school holidays.

Railene's older sister did Home Science at Otago and learned more advanced design and construction techniques. As Sheena's sister did some years later, she shared her knowledge with her sisters during holiday sewing blitzes. It is only in these two families, where a sister went to Otago to do Home Science, that interviewees spoke specifically about inter-generational skill transfer. Alison talked about her sisters being natural sewers, and many of the others had older sisters who also sewed, but none of them talked about their sisters helping or teaching them. Both Railene and Sheena have definite memories of their trained sister sharing expertise. Sheena said her mother deferred to the trained daughter's view; in Railene's case, there was no maternal knowledge to supplant.

The family's spending and clothing habits returned to normal as more goods became available in the shops. Once again, Railene's mother was instrumental in clothing her daughters by spending money.

In 1948 I was invited to a dance and we went into Collinson & Cunningham. The man called us over and got out a roll of nylon material. It was new sort of material. He held it up to the light and it was a special sort of material, a glazey one. She [mother] bought me enough for a dress. It was the most exciting thing. Most people were sort of wearing a sort of sateen — satiny stuff — lining taffeta, moiré taffeta. I had this nylon frock and I was the envy of my friends.⁶³

⁶³ Ibid.

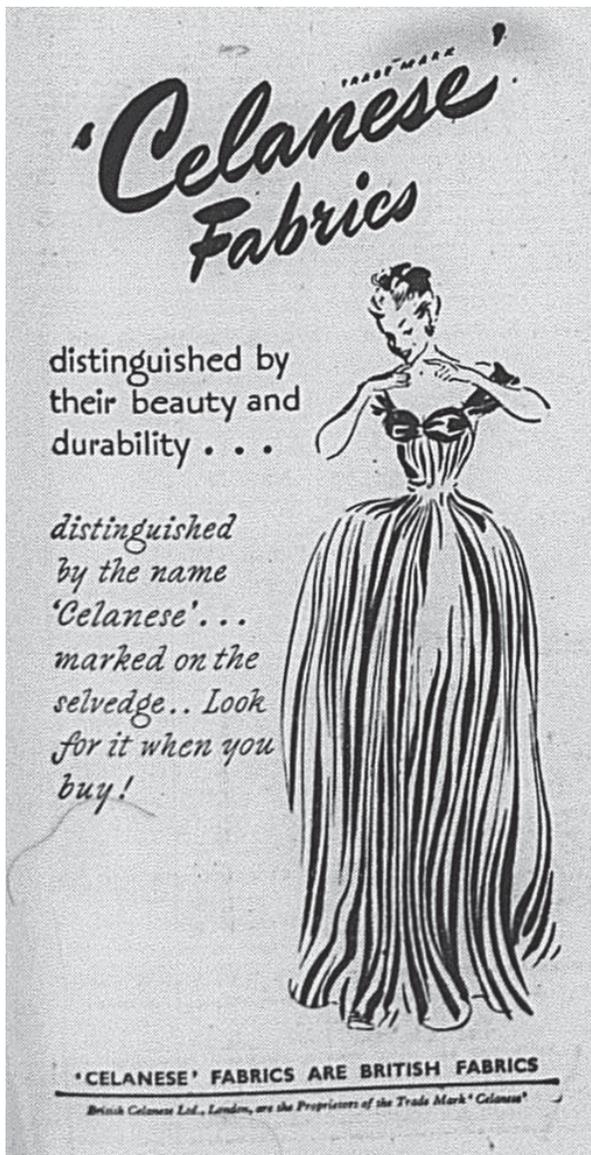


Figure 19. Celanese fabric advertisement.

Railene's mother grew up wearing clothes made to measure and had the means to have her daughters dressed the same way. This tradition was updated by the introduction of new fabrics that pushed dressmakers towards modern techniques and styles. *The Press*, 23 August 1948: 9.

Railene remembers her father being involved in purchasing decisions too:

I remember after the war when the Horrocks' frocks came from England, my sisters and I got three each and we paraded them at home to see which one daddy liked best, and he said keep the lot. They were expensive. The sort of

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thing other kids would love to have one. I didn't realise until I got older, the difference having money made.⁶⁴

When Railene turned 21 she was allowed to name her desired gift. She chose a Singer machine, and her parents bought her the top-of-the-line model.

Caroline, born in 1941, says her mother grew up accustomed to having elegant, well-made clothes – and perhaps did not realise the significance of her good fortune until later in life. Caroline's maternal grandfather was a tailor, and his connections in the trade gave his daughter access to high-quality clothing. She did not learn her father's trade and had little aptitude for dressmaking. Any maternal lessons were cut short by her mother's death when she was 15. Caroline has an early memory of her mother trying to hem a dress for her, but it was so crooked that one of Caroline's great aunts had to take over and make it straight.⁶⁵

When Caroline was about 10, her mother bought a treadle sewing machine and was persuaded to go to sewing classes by a neighbour who was a tutor at the Risingholme community centre. Night classes in sewing and dressmaking were offered by many district high schools, technical colleges and the Workers Education Association throughout the period, and commercial courses were also heavily advertised.⁶⁶ Caroline's mother made identical dresses for her and her sister. Caroline says they had a lot of fabric gathered in at the waist and deep hems that could be let down as they grew, and they were uncomfortable to wear. Caroline's mother's experience illustrates that dressing well and dressmaking well are entirely different skills, although both create visual identity. Her mother knew what a good garment looked like, and wore clothes well. These attributes did not help her sew, nor did they relieve the weight of expectation that she should be able to.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Caroline, born 1941.

⁶⁶ Druleigh College of Dressmaking. Advertisement. *NZWW*, 26 January 1950: 3; Ross Hynes College. Advertisement. *NZWW*, 6 July 1950: 65; Wellington Technical College Evening School. Advertisement. *The Evening Post*, 9 February 1949: 2; "W.E.A. Classes Popular." *The Press*, 18 August 1953: 2.

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Cathie, born in 1940, says her grandmother's treadle machine was in her house for as long as she can remember, but she never saw her mother use it. Instead, her mother taught her to darn socks. Cathie eventually learned to use the machine, and has it still. The family was poor and Cathie's clothes were "mainly hand-me-downs from my cousins. My aunty was a good sewer, that was mum's sister. And they had nice clothes and it was like Christmas when I got them."⁶⁷ Cathie's mother bought her own clothes on lay-by, and she knitted cardigans. Without the hand-me-downs, and careful buying, Cathie's family may have had to try and get a special assistance from the state. The Department of Social Security at the time provided payments to allow the family to "maintain a wardrobe at a reasonable standard."⁶⁸ Cathie's mother seems to have been very aware of the impact of appearance, and strived to manage her own appearance within her limited means, "She liked to look nice. She vacuumed the house every day and got changed at lunch time."⁶⁹ For Cathie, learning to sew was a powerful tool for appearance management that gave her far greater choice than she would have had if she had to buy ready-made clothing. She learned to sew when she did Clothing as part of her School Certificate course at secondary school. Cathie's experience of that subject, along with that of the other interviewees who took it at secondary school, is examined in chapter 6.

Joy, born in 1936, had no maternal example in either skill or dress. Joy's mother left the family home when Joy was five years old. A housekeeper moved in and did the domestic chores for Joy, her father and brother. The chores included mending the father's and brother's clothes, and making clothes for Joy. When asked if she knew where the housekeeper learned to sew, Joy said, "No, she didn't like me. She'd never had kids of her own. And it was very hard for her."⁷⁰ The housekeeper made decisions about what she would make for Joy, and produced the garments out of sight. Joy does not recall being asked what she wanted, or having any choice. Joy was not alone in this: several of

⁶⁷ Cathie, born 1940.

⁶⁸ Labrum, McKergow, and Gibson, *Looking Flash*, 123.

⁶⁹ Cathie, born 1940.

⁷⁰ Joy, born 1936.

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the interviewees mentioned having no choice about their clothing until they were in their teens.

But all the other subjects, even those whose mothers were not dressmakers, saw sewing in the home. Joy even found it hard to be certain whether the housekeeper had a treadle or electric machine. She does remember the woman was very good at sewing and made “classy” dresses for herself, “slim fitting frocks with peplums and the beadwork down them.” The housekeeper did not attempt to teach Joy to sew. While dressmaking and mending were apparently part of the housekeeper’s duties, sharing her skill was not. And she managed to keep the practice invisible within the house, even though the resulting garments were evidence of her fulfilling her duties. Joy had no model to follow, no practice to emulate.

The housekeeper was still making Joy’s dresses when she first left school and was still living at home. Joy still had no say in what was made, but would be presented with the finished garment, “And I used to be quite envious of my best friend who had nicer looking things than I did.” The following chapter looks at what happened when Joy had a space of her own, and was able to use dressmaking to create her own visual identity.

The family experience of the interviewees shows some key common strands. All of them, except Joy, saw their mothers using sewing and dressmaking to fulfil what was accepted as a maternal obligation to clothe, or at least mend the clothing of, their children, particularly daughters. They also witnessed pleasure, pride, and creativity. In some families, the mothers continued to make their daughters’ clothes until they were adults. In Geraldine’s case, her mother sewed for the following generation as well. Daughters were aware of their mothers working within constraints of money and time and they were (mostly) pleased to be the recipients of their mother’s efforts — Caroline’s bulky seams and Jocelyn’s ostentatious details aside. Girls began sewing as play and imitation; some, like Velma, Vera, Sheena, and Val were encouraged to develop their skill as a way of increasing their wardrobes. Mothers with daughters who had difficulty with sewing sought extra tuition for them, as Margaret’s and Alison’s mothers did, to ensure the young women were equipped for life. The mothers who did not sew

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supported their daughters by making fabric and tools available. It is clear that, despite the idiosyncrasies of different households, dressmaking was common to all of them. Girls saw, and were encouraged to see, dressmaking as a necessary and valuable dress practice. The following chapter looks at the objects and processes of dressmaking in homes by focusing on material culture.

Chapter 4

Experimenting with tools: “I sat down at the machine”

When Vera, born in 1945, was about ten years old, her mother replaced her Elna sewing machine with a new model — one that had an automatic buttonhole feature. The machine was set up in the sun porch that served as Vera’s mother’s sewing room. Vera says the room had a single bed, rarely used, and a wardrobe and drawers for storing materials and patterns. More importantly, it had the Elna. Vera’s mother told her the machine was out of bounds, “I wasn’t to play with it, I wasn’t to use it.” Despite this warning, Vera could not resist experimenting. This covert operation had a good outcome; Vera was within earshot when her mother first attempted to sew a buttonhole.

She was sitting there doing it, and she said, “ohh I can’t do this.” [...] and I said to her, “No, no, no, you don’t do it like that mum, you do it this way. And you do this, this and this.” And she said, “You’ve been playing on my machine!” And I said, “No mum — I read the instructions.” [...] Then she wasn’t making a very good job and I said, “Can I have a go?” and then I sat down at the machine and I did it. But little did she know I had been playing on it.¹

Chapter 3 looked at how dressmaking was positioned and practised in girls’ homes, and focused on relationships and attitudes. This chapter examines the objects of dressmaking, the material culture, to see how girls and women experimented with available tools, materials, and spaces to develop their dressmaking practice. I argue that tools and materials, or things, are a link between habit and habitus. According to Judy Attfield, “It is things, as opposed to design or craft, product or commodity, that make up the materialisations of the everyday.”² Joanne Entwistle says things are part of the practitioner’s embodied experience.³ Habitual use of certain things enables practice, becomes evidence of practice, and allows for reflection and recall of practice. Lynne’s

¹ Vera, born 1945.

² Attfield, *Wild Things*, 50.

³ Entwistle, “The Dressed Body,” 148.

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recollections of being able to “puddle” with her mother’s machine and sewing equipment foreshadowed this idea.

Helene Aarseth et al. believe that “habitus forms through concrete relationships,”⁴ and allow for these relationships to be with things as well as people.

From the very beginning conflicts in the habitus are entwined with the child’s relations to loved and hated, internal and external objects. And it is the way these relationships are negotiated that, in part, determines whether and what kind of change in habitus may occur.⁵

This concept helps to understand Vera’s experiment, which signals a dressmaking habitus distinct from that of her mother. The machine is the key object in the space: the most important dressmaking tool and a manifestation of modernity. The promised efficiency of an automatic buttonhole function may well have been what motivated Vera’s mother to upgrade her Elna machine — after all, she had a husband and five sons to make shirts for. Vera’s incursion into the space and experiment with the machine was both imitation of her mother’s habitual activity, and the beginning of her own practice. Where Vera saw her mother sew for reasons of thrift and efficiency, Vera used the space and same objects to achieve technical mastery. The experiment coincided with Vera being told she would have to make new pyjamas if she wanted some. By revealing her interest and aptitude, she had signalled to her mother that she was ready to begin making herself. She had earned the right to be in the room and touch and work the machine.

⁴ Aarseth, Layton, and Nielsen, “Conflicts in the Habitus,” 151.

⁵ Ibid.

16 THE NEW ZEALAND HERALD, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 21, 1957

I make my buttonholes the new supermatic way ON MY **ELNA**



I just drop in my buttonhole disc, and in seconds . . . perfect buttonholes pour out. My ELNA sews the first side of the buttonhole, bartacks, sews the second side, and bartacks again to complete the buttonhole.

I don't even have to turn the fabric around to make the second row of stitches.

ELNA is the first household sewing machine to offer you "Turkish Hemstitching" and "Point de Paris".

The ELNA is never outdated. As new stitch designs become available, you add them to your ELNA collection.

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ROBERTSON REVERSIBLE SEWING MACHINE CO. LTD.

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Bank Street, WHANGAREI. Beside the Town Hall. Telephone 3531. 144 Victoria Street, HAMILTON. Telephone 81-785. 50 The Strand, WHAKATANE; Pukar Fabrics Ltd., Maniapoto Street, OTOROHANGA; Sewing Machine Repair Services, Cameron Road South, TAURANGA; in all main centres throughout N.Z. Also at Sydney, Albury and Melbourne.

SM.87

Figure 20. Elna Supermatic advertisement.

Advertisements for sewing machines implied modern features replaced the need for skill. Vera's experiment with her mother's machine showed the dressmaker still had a part to play, both in mastering the machine and in producing garments. *NZH*, 21 August 1957: 16.

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Vera's story is set in a dedicated and notionally private space: her mother had claimed a room in the house as a sewing room for her particular use. None of the interviewees grew up in homes with a designated sewing room. Instead, rooms or spaces were appropriated for the purpose, such as the sun porch in Vera's home. The decisions women made about dressmaking signal the value ascribed to activities and relationships, and the patterns of consumption. Tim Putnam's idea of the home "as a socially constituted space" is relevant here because it considers:

the various forms of communication which take place between occupants of different households in the construction of identity; the interplay between objects sharing the same domestic space; and the place of the actual and imagined home in life histories and projects.⁶

Vera's mother, like the mothers of some other interviewees, was making a statement about the value of her sewing and dressmaking by claiming a room in the house. In this case, sewing and dressmaking were work, and contributed directly to the household's income through the connection with the accommodation businesses they ran. Margarethe Szeless identifies "the sewing machine, paper patterns and fabrics" as the three material prerequisites of home dressmaking.⁷ These are the three things Vera referred to her mother having in the sun porch sewing room, and that I see inextricably bound to the spaces in which they are used.

This chapter reveals that dressmaking space in homes had varying degrees of visibility; it was often negotiated and necessarily adaptable. As Cheryl Buckley puts it:

Throughout the twentieth century women have made clothes by hand, aided latterly by a sewing machine finding space on the kitchen table, and squeezing sewing between other domestic responsibilities.⁸

⁶ Tim Putnam, "Regimes of Closure: The Representation of Cultural Process in Domestic Consumption," in *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, ed. Roger and Eric Hirsch Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1994), 199.

⁷ Szeless, "Burda Fashions," 850.

⁸ Buckley, "On the Margins," 157.

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Despite these amorphous qualities, the way space was used for dressmaking also created patterns of behaviour that endured — sometimes over decades. Dressmaking books from the period give a broad picture of how spaces and things could be managed in homes, and confirm the rarity of domestic sewing rooms by focusing on tools and techniques while glossing over space. This general advice provides context for how other interviewees managed space in their homes and developed their own relationships with the material culture of dressmaking.

In how-to books, dressmakers were encouraged to be organised and efficient, which aligned the activity with the feminine and domestic attributes of good women, wives, and mothers. The 1947 edition of the *Simplicity Sewing Book*⁹ is typical: it pictures essential equipment under the advice to “be well organized when you start to sew,” but has no mention of where the tools will be stored or used. A cutting table is under the list of “Desirable Aids.”¹⁰ The 1957 edition headlines a photograph of essential tools with “Have proper tools” and “Be well organised.” The book still does not assume the reader will have a space for a cutting table, which is now listed under the “Additional Aids.” None of the interviewees reported having a dedicated table in their homes; instead they made space for the activity by clearing kitchen or dining tables. Geraldine said she lived in a small flat with her mother after her father died, “there wasn’t much space for anything much. The main thing was to have a large table you could use for cutting out patterns.” Like most of the women interviewed, Geraldine often did her cutting out on the floor, and she confessed to covertly using the board table in her workplace later in life.¹¹

Successful Dressmaking,¹² also a recommended text for primary school sewing, notes that “A large table is useful for cutting out,”¹³ but the drawing opposite reflects the reader’s

⁹ Simplicity, *Simplicity Sewing Book*.

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹ Geraldine, born 1926.

¹² Ellen Resek and Marietta Resek, *Successful Dressmaking: The Complete Book of Dressmaking, Fully Illustrated with Step-by-Step Instructions* (Melbourne: Colorgravure, n.d.).

¹³ Ibid., 7.

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likely reality by showing cutting out being done on the floor.¹⁴ Another drawing shows a woman using a sewing machine at a fold-out sewing cabinet, but there is no advice on where to sew or how to store equipment.¹⁵ Again, the reader is left to imagine how this might work in their own home. The equipment necessary for sewing is also illustrated without specifying space (see fig. 21). A full-length mirror and a dress stand are at the centre of the illustration; the mirror is described as “essential for fitting the garment,” while the dress stand is “a help for draping.”¹⁶ The reader is invited to visualise themselves in the finished garment — which may take whatever form they imagine.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹⁶ Draping is technique for garment design, more used by designers than home dressmakers. The designer uses muslin (or cotton duck) to drape the garment on a form, capturing design lines with pins and thread markings. The muslin (or cotton duck toile) is then unpicked and the shapes and design lines are transferred to a paper pattern, used to cut the actual fabric. Experienced designers may drape and cut the fabric directly.

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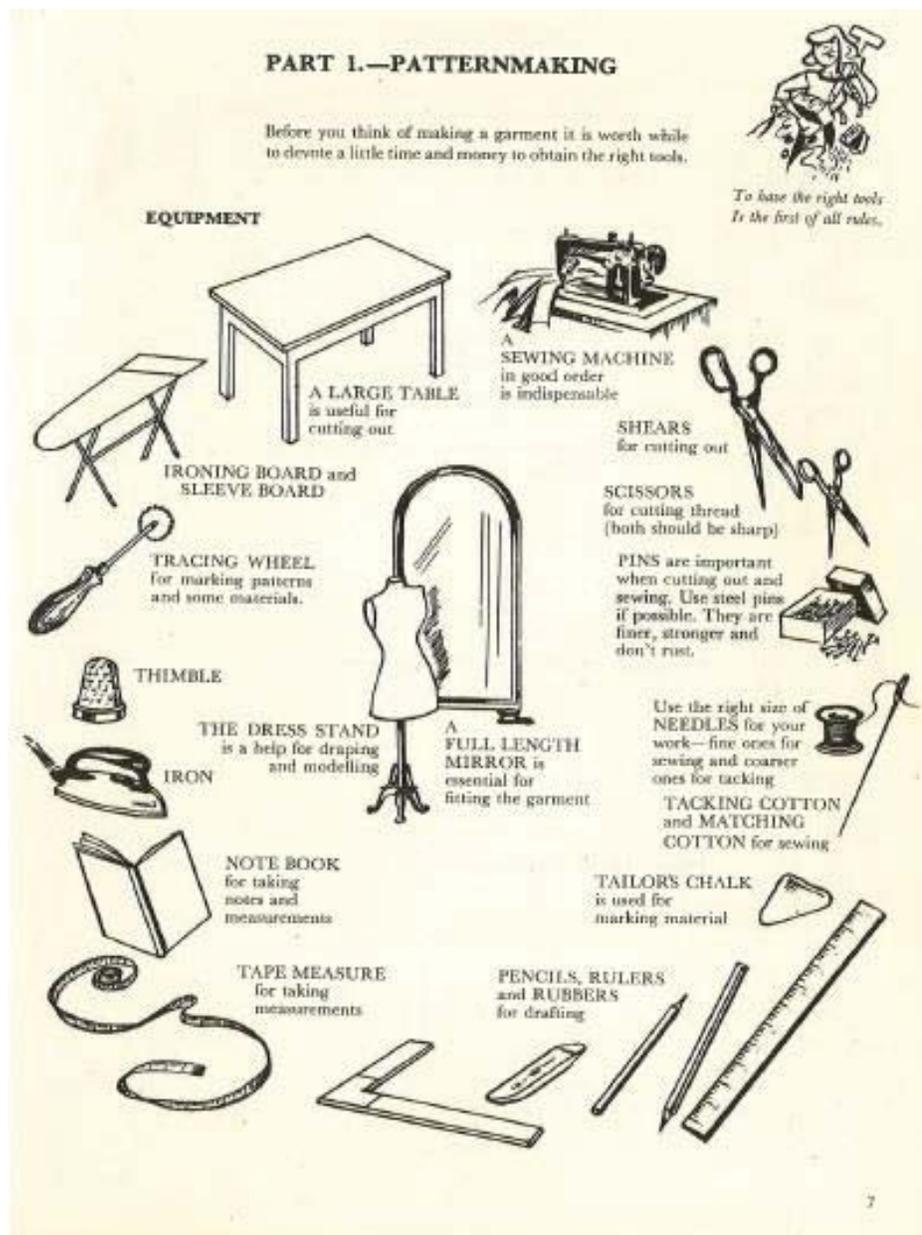


Figure 21. Dressmaking tools.

Dressmakers used the same tools to achieve very different outcomes. This illustrated list of tools shows what is necessary to make any garment, while leaving the specifics of style to the maker's imagination. Resek and Resek, *Successful Dressmaking*, 7.

This imagery recalls Carol Tulloch's investigation of the dressmaking practice of Jamaican women in the 1940s and 1950s, where "Clothes represent a definition or statement of difference, independence and autonomy. [...] Such definitions may be

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illusory, but dressing well places women in the centre, as creators of the illusion.”¹⁷ Jocelyn’s mother used her dressmaking ability to create a look that matched her desired identity as a fashionable woman. Newspapers and magazines suggested fashion was something that happened in England or America,¹⁸ and New Zealand women could achieve fashionability by emulating overseas style. In 1950, one of the *NZWW*’s regular features was “Test your Clothes Sense”: this was intended to increase “fashion know-how.”¹⁹ Jocelyn’s mother seemed to have “know-how,” and used her expertise to create a fashionable identity.

She managed space and tools in their family home to support this identity, along with her paid tailoring and dressmaking work. Most of her work was hand-stitching the buttonholes on men’s suits, or making bespoke suits. The suits were transported to the family home in Masterton, from Wellington by train, sent from the menswear tailoring business where she had started her working life as an apprentice. Jocelyn described this expertise as a double-edged sword.

Men’s tailoring and that, it just meant money I think. She was good at it, didn’t mind it. She would have preferred to be in high fashion — she would have loved to have worked in a high fashion house. Try to do that in Masterton!

Relative to Putnam’s notion of the actual and imagined home, Jocelyn’s mother seems to have reimagined the actual family home as that high fashion house. She made clothes to measure for paying customers,²⁰ and did alterations for womenswear retailers in Masterton. Jocelyn, her father, and her brothers were all aware of the level of her

¹⁷ Tulloch, “There’s No Place Like Home,” 120.

¹⁸ In 1949, women in Wellington could see a collection of “exclusive model frocks created by world famous designers,” and buy the fabric the frocks were made from. The parades would enable women to see “how best to make up the materials. Which materials are suitable for one kind of dress, and how to achieve the best effect.” “Model frocks flown from England for James Smith’s Fashion parade,” *EP*, 18 August 1949: 10.

¹⁹ “Test your clothes sense,” *NZWW*, 6 July 1950: 32-33.

²⁰ Writing about dressmakers in post-war Toronto, Alexandra Palmer notes: “Taking in home-sewing work often involved no startup expenses other than the initial cost of a sewing machine and so provided an easy and affordable means of furthering or creating income.” This was true for Jocelyn’s mother, who already had a machine and expertise. Alexandra Palmer, “Virtual Home Dressmaking: Dress-Makers and Seamstresses in Post-War Toronto,” in Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 218.

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mother's activity because of the way space was used in the house, which changed with the seasons. In summer, Jocelyn or one of her brothers would sleep in the sun porch, a closed-in veranda. This meant a bedroom was available for their mother to use as a sewing room. "And then when it got too cold in the winter, she had to clear out of that and just use the sitting room." Whatever the season, people who came for fittings were ushered to the sitting room, where a screen preserved their modesty while they changed their clothes. Jocelyn also remembers trestle tables for cutting out being moved in and out of the house. The trestle tables were a visible sign to customers that fabric was being cut on special surfaces, and implied a dedicated space for dressmaking. But Jocelyn said, "I think she just quietly did that [cutting out] on the kitchen table, and no one knew."

The household worked around the demands sewing and dressmaking put on their shared spaces. In her final years at school, Jocelyn started to occupy those spaces with her own dressmaking. One day when her mother was away, Jocelyn started a dress on her own:

I cracked into it, but I got tired and went to bed with it not finished. [...] something had gone wrong for the neck and I'd undone it, and tried it again and [...] I thought I'll have another go in the morning. [...] she must have arrived home about 10.30, saw it sitting there and finished it off. Lovely little surprise for me when I got up, and I can remember being quite pipped.

Jocelyn's experience ran counter to the scenarios imagined by dressmaking books, which advised dressmakers to pack up their work so it did not impose on the family. Jocelyn might have been better to have cleared away her work so her mother could not impose on the space and the garment.

Evelyn Mansfield's *Clothing Construction*, published in 1953, suggests that dressmaking should be kept entirely separate from the rest of the household. Mansfield treats dressmaking as an expression of individual style and creativity rather than an activity that shapes a household's dress practice. This attitude is reflected in the uncompromising advice about space.

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While you are making a garment, keep all your sewing equipment close at hand and do the whole job in one room. A studio or guest room equipped for cutting, pressing, stitching, and fitting is always ready for use and can be left undisturbed between work periods.²¹

Mansfield would clearly prefer that sewing space not be shared at all, and inquisitive daughters like Vera would not be able to experiment with the machine. *Clothing Construction* includes a photograph of an ideal room, showing a draped mannequin between two mirrors which means we see three views of the draping. The dressmaker who uses this space is constructing an identity dedicated to perfection in stitching and fit. Mansfield's mention of work periods acknowledges the dressmaker may have other demands on her time, but the separate room means it is easy to pick up the work where it was left off, using tools designed for the purpose. Cheryl, born in 1951, explained her mother's technique for managing projects in between working on the farm: she rolled them up in a clean sheet.²² This practical technique confirms Cheryl's description of her mother as someone who solved problems.

²¹ Mansfield, *Clothing Construction*, 1.

²² Cheryl, born 1951. This unusual use of an everyday item shows a feminine equivalent of the "number 8 wire" mentality usually associated with the ability of New Zealand men to make anything work using whatever was available (often a length of number 8 wire).

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Fig. 1—1 Double mirrors either on double doors or a swinging door and a wall make it possible to fit one's own clothes successfully, since they show the garment from every angle — front, side, and back — without requiring any twisting and turning which distort the lines of the dress and the figure.

Figure 22. An ideal sewing room.

A dedicated sewing room was a fantasy for most interviewees. While the image shows a dress being created by draping on a form, all of the interviewees reported using paper patterns to cut fabric on a flat surface. Mansfield, *Clothing Construction* frontispiece.

Apart from a few fathers who helped with marking hems, interviewees scarcely mentioned fathers when they talked about sewing and dressmaking in their family homes. This can be attributed to the fact they are recalling a period when men were usually in paid employment outside the home, and women managed what happened inside the home. A consequence of this is that women could easily claim space in the home when men were at work. This idea is raised in a 1949 edition of the *Singer Sewing Machine Manual* edited by Mary Brookes Picken. Yet even in the absence of the observing

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male gaze, Picken seems to want the act of making to be invisible. She places dressmaking in the domestic environment as a discretionary, almost self-indulgent, task — not to be undertaken before necessary work.

Never try to sew with the sink full of dishes or bed unmade. When there are urgent housekeeping chores, do these first so that your mind is free to enjoy your sewing. [...] When you sew, make yourself as attractive as possible. Go through a beauty ritual of orderliness. Have on a clean dress. [...] Have your hair in order, powder and lipstick put on with care. Looking attractive is a very important part of sewing, because if you are making something for yourself, you will try it on at intervals in front of your mirror, and you can hope for better results when you look your best. If you are constantly fearful that a visitor will drop in or your husband will come home and you will not look neatly put together, you will not enjoy your sewing as you should.²³

The advice implies it is less than desirable to be caught in the act, at the same time as it confirms the end result is for public display. While engaged in making, the dressmaker's identity as a wife must be fully evident; if she is discovered, the act of dressmaking should be invisible, or be seen as a controlled part of her wifely identity. In Lyndsay's home, the family accepted their mother would sew until late at night, having traded the promise of a new garment for having other housework done.²⁴ Margaret described similar trading of tasks in her home, and neither described their mother dressing up to sew.

Two New Zealand books, published between 1959 and 1965, offer specific advice on how to manage space for dressmaking, both of which perpetuate the ideal of almost covert activity. Geraldine McDonald's *You and Your Clothes*, and Florence Davies and S. B. E. Hatherton's *Materially Yours* were both written to support the secondary school Clothing syllabus, but addressed a general audience as well as the school one. Neither suggests the activity can be invisible, but both offer ways to minimise its impact on other

²³ Accessed 29 June 2016 <http://www.snopes.com/history/document/sewing.asp>

²⁴ Lyndsay, born 1940.

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members of the household. McDonald is firm on the idea that the dressmaker must not disturb others.

When you sew do you disrupt the family's activities by spreading your work all over the living-room? If you want to make dress-making a pleasure for both yourself and others you should give some thought to the planning of your sewing area.²⁵

These questions confirm that space is a resource that needs to be allocated in the home, and implies that allocation will be relative to the value of the activity. The kitchen and laundry are fixed places because what happens in them is necessary; “your sewing area” is understood to be transient space, in which the dressmaker may produce something for her own benefit. McDonald has already established that the benefit is for women and children and has little value for men.²⁶ McDonald’s approach does not allow for the happy integration of sewing into family life, as described by Velma, Cheryl, Sheena, and Val — and hinted at in her own early memories. Instead, the book suggests ways to create space for four different dressmaking activities: cutting, sewing and pressing, fitting, and storage. For storage, she gives instructions to make a portable sewing screen (see fig. 23), and suggests a tea trolley is also an option for storing a portable machine and pressing equipment.²⁷ None of the interviewees recall making such deliberate efforts themselves to create storage space, although Sheena’s and Margaret’s fathers did home renovations with this goal in mind (of which more, later).

²⁵ McDonald, *You and Your Clothes*, 40.

²⁶ When the fictional family in the book is discussing its clothing budget, Mrs Brown says, “Your father needs the most money because his clothes are expensive and I cannot make them at home.” *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

Experimenting with tools

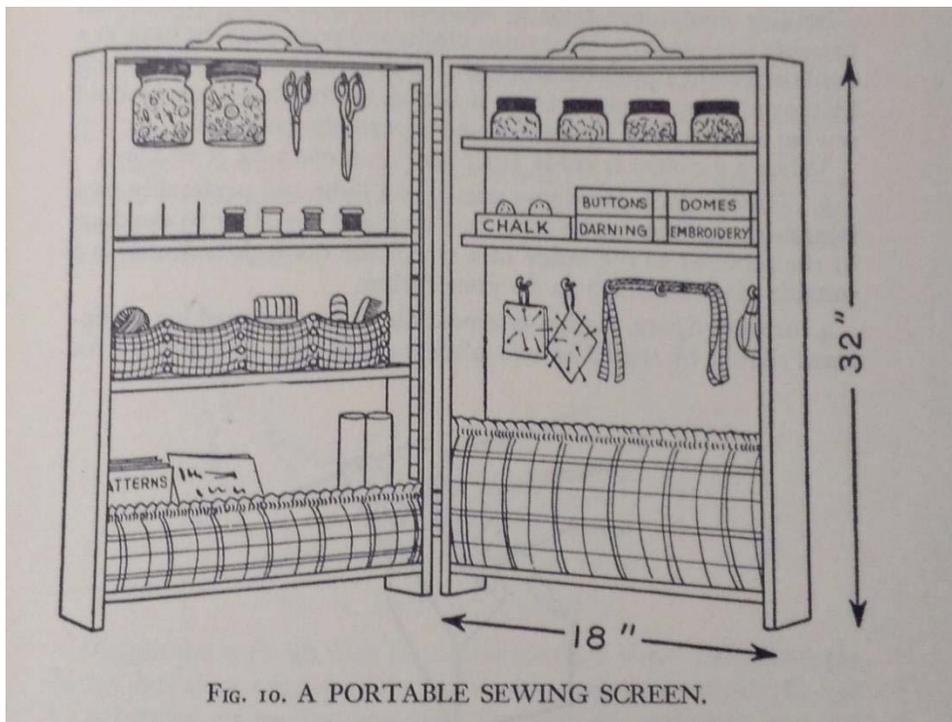


Figure 23. Portable sewing screen.

Girls were encouraged to create special places for their sewing tools, mostly to keep them out of others' way. Beneath this illustration, Geraldine McDonald assures girls, "The floor makes a satisfactory cutting surface as long as it is clean and smooth." McDonald, *You and Your Clothes*: 41.

Davies and Hatherton address the challenge of space in the first lines of *Materially Yours*:

All people who sew require equipment that will be reliable and a pleasure to use. Not many women are fortunate enough to have a room specially for sewing and most have to work in a room used by other members of the family.²⁸

The wording clearly divides equipment from the room, or space, in which it is used. And while equipment is associated with "pleasure," which suggests modern and easy to use, space must be negotiated. Even when dressmaking is being treated as a necessary skill, readers are reminded to keep expectations realistic. Davies and Hatherton stress the importance of having good light and storage space for "all sewing needs."²⁹ While the

²⁸ Florence Davies and S. B. E. Hatherton, *Materially Yours: A Handbook on Dressmaking, Textiles and Related Topics for Secondary Schools*, 3rd ed. (Wellington: Price Milburn for New Zealand University Press, 1977), 1.

²⁹ Ibid.

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activity itself cannot be invisible in the home, at least the tools, fabrics, and patterns can be hidden away when not in use.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Joy had the unusual experience of growing up in a house where the dressmaking really was invisible — presumably done in the housekeeper's bedroom, or when no one else was home, and scrupulously tidied away. Joy's first experience of sewing at home was not in a traditional domestic space. When she left her father's house, she moved to Wellington and got a live-in job at a hotel. Her room-mate had learned to sew at school and had a portable sewing machine. She encouraged Joy to use the machine and make her own clothes. The presence of a sewing machine helped transform the room from a shared lodging in a city hotel into a safe, domestic environment where the young women could experiment with fabrics and styles. For the other girl, this environment may have been a recreation of her home life; for Joy, it was a novel experience. In the absence of any parental figures, they did not have to negotiate the space for the machine. Joy said, in retrospect, it was lucky they had something to keep them occupied in the security of their room within the hotel. In this safe place, Joy embarked on an ambitious project:

I tell you how bloody stupid you can be, I bought velvet, red velvet, and made myself a coat and lined it. [...] It was ambitious. And I loved it. Yes, I wore it everywhere. It was a swing back coat.³⁰

At 18, Joy was beginning to be a dressmaker. She embraced her new-found skill and got to know the fabric and haberdashery shops in Wellington. She presumably shared her room-mate's other tools as well as the machine, because she had not seen herself as capable of making anything until this time.

³⁰ Joy, born 1936.

The Evening Post Fashion Supplement, Monday, August 16, 1954 . . . Page Seven



M.A.C.'s

Springtime

fashion forecasts

COAT

SUITS

M.A.C. Ltd., No. 4, 6 and 8 Manners St., Wellington
TELEPHONE 44-224 OR 47-547.

This is just a bird's-eye view of M.A.C.'s Spring Fashion Story . . . see the fabulous new all pure proofed wool Gabardine Coats with the Million Being easy in winter, cool in summer.

At M.A.C.'s we are all arrayed for Spring with the most fascinating selection of outstanding Suits and Coats imaginable. We do hope you'll accept our cordial invitation to see these spring fashion style successes—maybe you'll want to buy them NOW but our aim at the moment is to show you the authentic Spring Fashion Story. Do come in!

As sketched—Stitch or Shower Twp. Furrow Coat can be worn in three ways—as a Duster with ball concealed beneath the lapel, as a Raincoat with or without belt, made in proofed Self-backed Faille, in the beautiful new Spring Shades.

As sketched—two examples of Suits for Spring. Top sketch is an impeccably tailored worsted with an unusual ocean wave back effect. Lower sketch sponsored the new Svelte Silhouette in black silk contrasted with new cotton fused finish.

Figure 24. MAC advertisement.

Dressmaking gave girls of limited financial means the ability to dress in the latest styles. The swing back coat Joy made in 1954 was right on trend, as shown in this advertisement from the same year. *EP*, 16 August 1954: 7.

Experimenting with tools

A sewing machine is arguably a dressmaker's most important tool, and the one that often defines a dressmaking space. Most interviewees remember Singer sewing machines, reflecting Singer's dominance of the New Zealand market. For the interviewees who had portable sewing machines, space was likely to be created by placing the machine on the kitchen (hotel room) table.³¹ Those whose families had a treadle machine remember sewing spaces evolving around the machine. Velma's mother sewed on a treadle machine in the covered-in entrance porch to their family home. In Velma's memory, the machine was "always there."³² She thinks the place was dictated by a lack of space elsewhere in the small house, rather than a conscious selection of the best place to sew. This aligns with Velma's recollection of her mother cutting garments out on the floor because there was no table large enough. Velma's mother used the little drawers on the machine table to store equipment, and her scissors were in one of the bottom drawers. This is etched in Velma's memory because she used them to cut her teddy bear's hair and wept at the news that it would not grow back.

Cathie, Sheena, Cheryl, and Val all have treadle machines used by a mother or grandmother, some of which date from the early twentieth century. Lyndsay's mother got a treadle machine from her brothers as a wedding gift when she married in the 1930s; Lyndsay's daughter now has that machine. These machines link textile and domestic practice through generations. The choice to keep them reflects Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's observation that textiles have long been associated with women and have become a "gendered form of heritage."³³ Writing of the mechanisation of the sewing machine in the mid-nineteenth century, Tim Putnam says women were quick to claim the sewing machine as their own, even though it was intended for commercial workshops.³⁴ Once in the home, a machine, "could help maintain a culture of sewing in the home, with all that implied for the transmission of gendered identity and skill."³⁵ The

³¹ Railene, Caroline, and Sheena all described this scenario.

³² Velma, born 1934.

³³ Mutsaers, "Unpacking Mrs Wood's Suitcases," 29.

³⁴ Tim Putnam, "The Sewing Machine Comes Home," in Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 269.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 279.

Experimenting with tools

machine itself is a touchstone for this transmission, even though it requires an operator to be of any use.

The treadle machine that Val remembers her mother using had a motor added to it in the 1960s, taking away the necessity of the treadling action that imprinted itself on Val's infant memory. The Singer was replaced by a Bernina in the late 1970s, but Val kept the older machine. It is in the foyer of the fashion school she runs. A framed photograph of her mother sits on top of it, showing her mother beautifully dressed in self-made garments. Val's middle sister now has the Bernina. The machines connect the daughters to their mother — tangible evidence of their shared interest, and of the time their mother spent practising the craft.



Figure 25. The Singer sewing machine used by Val's mother. Val's earliest memory is of the rhythm of her mother's treadling on this Singer sewing machine. The machine is in the foyer of Val's design school, with a photo of Val's mother on it. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

Experimenting with tools



Figure 26. Trims in one of the drawers of Val's mother's machine. Val, like other women who had their mother's machines, had not thrown away any of the items in the drawers of the cabinet. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

Sheena, like Val, had not emptied the drawers of the treadle machine she inherited. The miscellaneous items in the drawers (machine attachments, darning thread, shirring elastic, scraps of ribbon and lace, wooden cotton reels) are connected to their idea of the sewing machine and its original user. Cathie inherited her grandmother's treadle from her mother, who did not sew herself. Cathie keeps the darning mushroom her mother used (and taught her to use) in one of the drawers of the machine, so the objects link the generations even though the machine itself was not used by all three women. The drawers of Cheryl's mother's machine contained the boxes of attachments used to achieve different effects such as blind and rolled hemming, decorative stitches, and buttonholes. Cheryl sees the attachments as evidence of her mother's mastery of the machine. As Daniel Miller observes, material culture enables "apparently mute forms [...] to speak more easily and eloquently to the nature of relationship than can those with persons."³⁶ For all these women, the inanimate object of the sewing machine and associated items provide a focal point for remembering generations of sewing practice.

Railene still uses the machine her parents bought her for her twenty-first birthday. Because her mother did not sew, there is no connection to a previous generation, other than her parent's financial ability to buy the machine, and their generosity in choosing to do so. Railene sees the machine as a constant companion in her sewing life:

³⁶ Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, 287.

Experimenting with tools

We took it Palmerston North a couple of years ago [for servicing]. It purrs. It made every curtain in this house. I could have ordered these curtains — but I think I made them better. Recently made cushions for a great niece — modern creamy things. It has earned its life. [...] I've got a whole box of things that make it do this and that. We were taught on straight sewers.³⁷

Railene's attitude to her machine is like those of the women Marcia McLean interviewed for her analysis of home dressmaking in Alberta, Canada in the 1940s — captured in the quote used in the title of the piece, "I Dearly Loved that Machine."³⁸ Women who sew a lot see the machine as an ally. Both Margarethe Szeless, writing about Austria in the 1940s,³⁹ and Eileen Margerum, writing about America at the same time,⁴⁰ identify this as a marketing technique used by the Singer sewing machine company. Szeless points out that slogans "seemed to substitute the sewing women by the machine," and included phrases like "wishes come true; the sewing machine does all the needlework of the household."⁴¹ Margerum notes that Singer's advertisements for an 8-week sewing course gave the act of sewing "short shrift," with clothes appearing magically.⁴² Singer and other manufacturers used similar techniques for advertising machines in New Zealand, emphasising automatic features and ease of use (see figs. 20 and 29). Sewing machine technology advanced rapidly over the 20 years of this study, but Railene, in charge of her Singer treadle, was unmoved by these innovations:

I could never quite work out why anyone needed a zig-zag [stitch type]. A couple of years ago I bought a second-hand one. And it is very handy for mending jeans. I'm probably not the average person.⁴³

³⁷ Railene, born 1934.

³⁸ McLean, "I Dearly Loved That Machine."

³⁹ Szeless, "Burda Fashions."

⁴⁰ Margerum, "The Sewing Needle as Magic Wand."

⁴¹ Szeless, "Burda Fashions," 851.

⁴² Margerum, "The Sewing Needle as Magic Wand," 199.

⁴³ Railene, born 1934.

Experimenting with tools

Lynne no longer has her mother's treadle machine, but she has a rich sensory memory of it. She paints a picture of a household in which sewing and dressmaking were integrated with everyday activities, and created happy, productive spaces.

The sewing machine was in the living room and I remember sitting on the arm of the chair beside it watching her sew [...] just hunched over working away. I can see her there. [her feet] constantly on the treadle. Because it was a quite a mesmerising thing [...] the noise, and the things, and we used to talk and so on and sit in the sun.⁴⁴

As well as talking about what she could see — her mother's posture, and the activity of sewing — Lynne talked about feeling the warmth of the sun on her skin, the “mesmerising” noise of the treadle, and that they talked. Lynne's perception was that sewing “wasn't a chore,” indeed, it seems to have been part of maternal identity. Lynne's mother does not appear to have thought too much about the need for dedicated spaces for the four dressmaking activities defined in *You and Your Clothes* (cutting, sewing and pressing, fitting, and storage). She did her cutting on the dining table, which was also in the living room. Lynne says her mother did not have an ironing board. She used the electric iron on the table in the kitchen, which she covered with woollen blankets and an old sheet. Lynne's recall of being fitted is limited to her mother checking hem lengths, “I remember she used to stand us on the table. We'd have to turn round and round and she'd measure and put the pins in.”⁴⁵

Lynne's description was notable for the number of sewing tools she mentioned, and also for the adaptive use of items: tables were used as flat surfaces for cutting out and ironing, and as elevated platforms for marking hems. There was also the box of buttons that became a plaything. Lynne's description highlights the difference between suggested dressmaking practice in books from the period, the inanimate evidence of the objects, and the remembered experience which explains how other items were adapted or appropriated for dressmaking. Cheryl's mother using a sheet to store work is another

⁴⁴ Lynne, born 1946.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

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example of adaptation, as is her novel use of Sellotape. On the day of her eldest sister's wedding, Cheryl complained the netting ruffle on the neckline of her flower-girl dress was scratching her skin, so her mother used Sellotape as a smooth facing on the inside edge of the garment.



Figure 27. Cheryl in a dress made by her mother. Girls who wore home-made clothes understood that dressmaking required innovation and adaptation. Cheryl enjoyed being a flower-girl at her sister's wedding in this home-made dress after her mother used Sellotape around the inside of the neckline to stop the edge of the netting feeling scratchy against Cheryl's skin. Photograph supplied by Cheryl.

Val confessed to using Sellotape on hems when she was in a hurry to wear a new garment out for a party (and also recalls having her mother stand over her while she stitched hems before being allowed to leave the house). Mary Beaudry laments the absence of such first-hand accounts in her investigation of the objects of seventeenth and eighteenth-century dressmaking.⁴⁶ Without these accounts, the meaning of objects is overlaid with assumptions about the context in which they were used. Beaudry uses pins

⁴⁶ Beaudry, *Findings*.

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as an example, understood by twenty-first century archaeologists as sewing items used by women, yet revealed to have several uses by both men and women in previous centuries. One hundred years from now, will kitchen tables, living room floors, and Sellotape be understood as part of home dressmaking?

Lynne says her mother's smaller sewing tools were stored in a hinged wooden box that was permanently in the living room, along with treadle machine. Lynne's mother had to reorganise things so she could use the dining and kitchen tables for cutting and ironing, and this activity is captured in Lynne's statement about observing "all the things that happened." Lynne's father was not present for any of this activity and she supposes he was at work. While this implies sewing did not happen at the weekend when he was at home, Lynne's recollection does not suggest any anxiety about the visibility of the practice.

Spaces and tools were inseparable in Sheena's memories, indicative of the role sewing played in the family's clothing strategies. Sheena's father altered the family home to accommodate his wife's sewing. First, he built extra cupboards which stored her mother's dressmaking materials. Stock-piling fabric, as Lyndsay's mother did before the war, puts pressure on storage space. After the war, Sheena's mother did the same thing — buying fabric at sales so she had plenty to choose from as she embarked on a round of new dresses for her four daughters. Sheena says her father eventually adapted the laundry in the family home as a sewing space for his wife.

Mum was out this afternoon and he said to me, can you just come. And he was making a cupboard to set up for a sewing room. [...] He had the old dining table and he'd put in there. [...] And he'd put shelves up the side and he was going to have this as a sewing room and mum really wanted it because she liked things very tidy. Dad asked me to stand there so he knew where to put the window. He'd taken where I was standing to put the window, so when you sat at this

Experimenting with tools

sewing thing, you only saw the wall and the window was way up. Mum loved that. That's where she sewed.⁴⁷

Sheena was keenly aware of how she was different from her mother, noting her mother was very tidy and she is not: "So I'm a huge disappointment to her on the tidiness." Although the daughters were given free access to the sewing room, Sheena and her sisters preferred to use the kitchen and dining room, as they had seen their mother do all their lives:

because you could spread out over the Formica table. You could have the iron and stuff. We didn't have an ironing board. You put down about four layers of old blankets, then you put the sheets, the pillowslips, the hankies.⁴⁸

Sheena's father had also modified the kitchen to make ironing safer, putting a hook in the ceiling to minimise the risk of ironing over the cord. Did the next family who lived in that house understand the function of that hook? Did other users of that Formica table recognise its history as a sewing tool? Sheena's father was an accountant, but it was his second choice of profession. He'd wanted to be an engineer but could not get a cadetship. She described her father as "someone who always liked making things," recalling again Janet Frame's idea of the family of makers. His innovations in the family home were his way of supporting his wife and daughters as they made things from fabric.

⁴⁷ Sheena, born 1951.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

discourages the growth of the red will give good results, while a well- 18/8/54.

DO IT YOURSELF By TRADESMAN

No. 44: A Neat Ironing Board Cabinet

OUR suggestion this week is a neat cupboard to house a built-in ironing board. It could be built into your kitchen, or even your living room—for why not have the comfort of pleasant surroundings and even a fire to work by?

The ironing cabinet we suggest is really quite an easy one to make as it can be nailed together and then puttied up and polished or painted, as desired, to match the surroundings.

If the door is of the flush type and nicely grained it can easily become an added attractive piece of furniture in the most convenient room.

The cabinet illustrated here is designed to take the full size ironing board, a sleeve board, the iron, and the ironing blanket. The door is fitted out in the upper half to take a few reels of cotton, a shelf for scissors of various types, and a tray for tins of buttons, pins, etc.

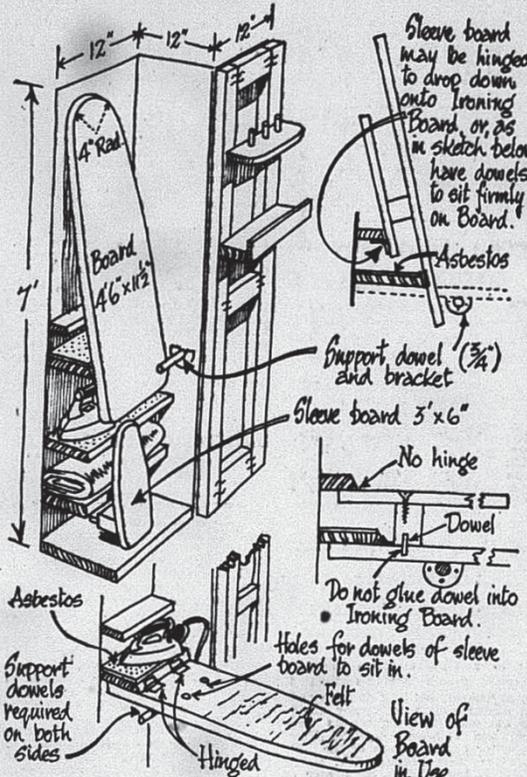
To use, simply open the door, lower down the ironing board, and when necessary, take the sleeve board out from the lower part of the cupboard and fit it on top of the ironing board as shown. It really is a splendid unit.

If you wish to save every bit of space then this cupboard being only about 12in wide could fit back into the wall between two studs by removing a strip of wallboard from between two studs and up to the height of the top of the cupboard—about 6ft 6in or 7ft high. Doing the job this way the cupboard will only project into the room about 7 inches.

ACTUALLY this cabinet could be rearranged by an enterprising person or handyman. For example, the lower portion of the cupboard could have a bin instead of shelves to accommodate the washing. Again, if the cupboard were made about 2ft wide, then the ironing boards could be housed in one half and in the other half a set of shelves could be built all the way up to take the folded washing ready for ironing. Now you may begin to see its many possibilities.

Give this cabinet some serious thought as it is only hammer and nail carpentry really. It does not require a great deal of skill. The door could be framed up and fastened with corrugated jointers and covered with a ply or hardboard panel. Surface hinges could be used on the door, they being the easiest to fix with no chopping out or fitting required. Back flap hinges 2in wide are used to pivot the ironing board, which drops down and is supported on a 1/4in dowel rod, which is supported again at each side of the cabinet by a bracket fastened to the sides of the cabinet itself.

THE block the board is hinged to is made wide enough to take the iron when in use. It need only be



about 1in thick and can be further strengthened to take the upward thrust by placing a couple of glue blocks on top of it and against the side of the cupboard. A piece of asbestos sheet is screwed to this board to protect it from the heat of the iron. A similar sheet of asbestos should be placed on the shelf of the lower cupboard to take the hot iron when storing it away after use.

The lowest shelf is for the ironing blanket. A batten is nailed at the back of the cupboard in a suitable position to take the upward thrust of the end of the sleeve board when in use. Two dowels are located in the supporting block for the sleeve board, and corresponding holes are

bored in the top of the ironing board to receive them.

Now all is quite rigid and ready for use. Round the edges lightly of the sleeve and ironing boards and then cover them with a sheet of white felt or similar material. Fold the felt under and tack on the underside of the boards.

Finally, for the ambitious person, a seat can be installed in the wider type of cupboard and can be pivoted in the same manner as the ironing board—but only about 18in to 20in from the floor instead of 28 in to 30in for the ironing board.

Suggested sizes are given as a guide.

Much Broken Glass On Petone Streets

There had been an increasing amount of broken glass, including beer and milk bottles, on the borough streets, reported the Petone sanitary inspector (Mr. V. Abraham) at last night's meeting of the council.

Eastbourne Buses Wanted In Jackson Street

The desire of Petone business men to have Jackson Street served by Eastbourne buses when the new Hutt

Figure 28. "Do it yourself." Men could support their wives and daughters to sew by modifying the house to accommodate the practice. These instructions for an ironing cupboard include the detail of a sleeve board, which would be useful during garment construction or for regular ironing. EP, 18 August 1954: 17.

Experimenting with tools

Margaret told a similar story of the home being altered to create a special place for sewing. But by the time her father had boxed in the veranda to create a sewing room, her mother was no longer spending as much time sewing. Margaret's memories are similar to Lynne's and Sheena's, where sewing was a highly visible part of maternal activity within the family home. Whereas garments materialised from nowhere at Joy's house, these interviewees could see their mother sewing. And like Jocelyn's mother, Margaret's mother used different spaces at different times. Margaret can remember her mother sewing at tables in the kitchen, the dining room, and by a window in the living room. These arrangements reflect Margaret's mother's enjoyment of sewing and dressmaking. Whereas the dressmaking books said to avoid disturbing other family members, in that household dressmaking was a service to family members, not something to hide. Dressmaking was also an activity that could displace other household tasks. Margaret said her mother could easily be encouraged to complete a sewing task if Margaret offered to cook or take over any other housework.

Margaret's mother had a Singer machine, but longed for a Husqvarna sewing machine because her maternal grandfather was Swedish, and the family had a saying that "if it was Swedish, it must be good."⁴⁹ She eventually got a Husqvarna, which was used as a "best" machine for fancy work. The Singer was kept for heavy work. It is possible to see this behaviour as a result of advertising that suggested sewing machines were more important than their operators. For whatever reason, Margaret's mother deferred to the Husqvarna as superior, and Margaret — who deferred to her mother's superior ability — preferred to use the Singer.

⁴⁹ Margaret, born 1938.

where generally were a great variety, of Adelaide, South Australia. [CAKE SHOP, 123 Cashel st.]
Best writer: —Advt.

Husqvarna

**SEWS SLOWER, SEWS FASTER,
THAN ANY OTHER MACHINE
DOES IT AUTOMATICALLY
KEEPS BOTH YOUR HANDS FREE**

NO OTHER SEWING MACHINE HAS THE FEATURES THAT MAKE HUSQVARNA THE EASIEST AUTOMATIC TO OPERATE

Built-in Reduction Gear Operates Like a Push-Button For straight sewing you can operate your Husqvarna faster than any other machine. Immediately you go in to intricate work or fancy embroidery, you can cut to a speed slower than any other machine. You do it with a single control like a push-button. You don't touch the balance wheel. You keep both hands free. That's reason alone for buying Husqvarna—but there's much more...

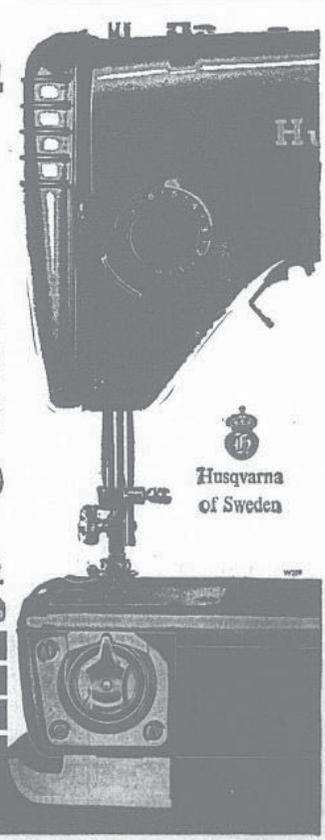
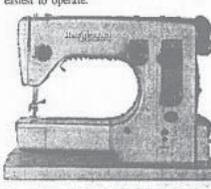
Non-Jam Shuttle It's impossible to jam the Husqvarna shuttle. No other sewing machine in the world is truly non-jam because no other has eliminated the shuttle race. And you never oil the shuttle, cannot get oil on your work.

Fancy Stitches—Automatically Without changing any cams, consulting any charts or working out any combinations you can switch from straight sewing to zigzag, blind hem, double blind hem, scalloping, button holing, darning, quilting and many others.

You change only for automatic embroidery. Micro-control sets stitch lengths and thread tensions.

Slimmest Free Arm The slimmest the free arm, the easier you can do tubular sewing—and Husqvarna has the slimmest of free arms.

These and many other wonderful Husqvarna features make it the most modern fully automatic sewing machine in the world—and because it is the most modern it is the easiest to operate.

FREE

TO EVERY WOMAN PLANNING TO BUY A SEWING MACHINE: EXTENDED PLAY RECORDS "THE HUSQVARNA STORY" AND "SWEDISH ISLANDS", THREE COLORFUL PICTURE BOOKS REVEALING INFORMATION ABOUT THE MOST MODERN FULLY AUTOMATIC SEWING MACHINES IN THE WORLD AND POSITIVE PROOF OF ALL THE EXCLUSIVE HUSQVARNA FEATURES LISTED AT RIGHT. MAIL THIS COUPON:

TO HUSQVARNA OF SWEDEN, C/- P.O. BOX 248, CHRISTCHURCH

I would appreciate receiving your offer, without cost or obligation.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CP24/8

AVAILABLE FROM YOUR NEAREST HUSQVARNA SHOP.

Chas. Beag and Co., all branches. Ian Aldridge and Co., 159 High St., Christchurch. E. Richards and Co. Limited, 88 Seaview Rd., New Brighton. Austin Bros., Riverdale. Byers Limited, 259 Hardy St., Nelson. Trumans Limited, Greymouth. Macpherson and Drummond, Motueka. D. Smellie, Hanmer. Morrison Bros., Geraldine.

Figure 29. Husqvarna advertisement.

Margaret's mother bought a Husqvarna sewing machine because of family connections to Sweden, suggesting she saw her choice of sewing machine as a statement about who she was. *The Press*, 22 August 1963: 2.

The human body is a vital object in dressmaking practice. Joanne Entwistle sees dress as “part of our epidermis — it lies on the boundary between self and other,” and suggests we are more conscious of dress “when something is out of place.” This may be related to not having the right clothes for a situation, or be about the fit of the clothes on the body — when they are too tight or too loose.⁵⁰ Clothing made by dressmakers, unlike clothing made by manufacturers, is made for a particular body: sometimes it is the

⁵⁰ Entwistle, “The Dressed Body,” 138.

Experimenting with tools

dressmaker's own body, other times that of a family member. The layout of dressmaking books reinforces the importance of fit, with many beginning with advice on measuring.⁵¹ Interviewees remember their mothers measuring their bodies and fitting clothes on them. Jocelyn knows her mother fitted garments on clients. But what of the clothes they made for themselves? For girls and women making their own clothes, one's own body is often not as accessible as necessary — particularly for fitting sleeves, or any features on the back of a garment. Dress forms were heavily advertised as the solution to this problem.

While Lynne at first struggled to recall her mother making clothes for herself, she realised she must have because she had a dress form. The dress form was stored in the back of a wardrobe; how often it was used for the intended purpose remains a mystery, although Lynne remembers dressing it up. This relegation to a plaything seems typical of experience of dress forms. Cheryl says her mother was particularly good at fitting garments on her, and could place darts at the most flattering angle. She gave Cheryl a dress form as a gift, but Cheryl seldom used it because she never felt the cardboard form matched her shape. When asked how they managed fitting their own garments, most interviewees said they got in and out of half-made garments, and stood in front of a mirror pinning as much as they could. Some recalled their mothers doing the same thing. This makeshift solution, like the appropriation of the kitchen table or the living room floor, seems to have been the preferred technique.

⁵¹ Simplicity. See also: Resek and Resek., Needlework Development Scheme., E. Lucy Towers, *Standard Processes in Dressmaking: A Book to Help Students in Dressmaking and Women Interested in the Subject* (London: University of London Press, 1948)., Alice Violet White, *Concise Manual of Sewing* (Leeds: E. J. Arnold & Son, n.d.).

4 N.Z. Herald, Thursday, August 14, 1962 ★ SECTION 1

Milne & CHOYCE
AUCKLAND HAMILTON PALMERSTON NORTH



**HOME DRESSMAKERS
NOW YOU CAN SEW
LIKE PROFESSIONALS**

**PROFESSIONALS NOW
YOU CAN EASILY
ATTAIN PERFECTION**

with a
**"PURFEX"
ULTRA
EXPANDING
DRESS MODEL
YOUR FITTING
TROUBLES ARE OVER!**

"Purfex" is your answer

This light, easily transported dress form expands at 40 places giving exact fit for any figure variation in 32 to 39 bust measurements. Purfex is sturdily constructed from a simulated Fibreglass material. For easy pinning Purfex Ultra is covered with a double layer of fabric. The shaping and balance of this model is excellent. It has neck adjustment and waist adjustment lengthwise. For instance, hips can be expanded, leaving waist as is. Same applies to the bust. Shoulder measurements can be varied—one wider than the other if necessary.

Get in line with N.Z.'s top designers . . . order your Purfex Ultra today.

CASH PRICE £21/10/- or 40/- dep., 8/5 weekly

ADJUSTAFORM, CASH PRICE, £11/10/-, 20/- deposit, 5/- wkly.
TRUFORM - - CASH PRICE, £12/19/6, 25/- deposit, 5/3 wkly.

All models complete with stand and full instructions.

SEWING CENTRE, SECOND FLOOR

P.O. Box 19.
Telephone 33-800.

Milne & CHOYCE

Figure 30. Milne & Choyce advertisement.

Good fit was a marker of success for a dressmaking project. In theory, a dress form makes fitting easier by enabling the dressmaker to check the garment from every angle. In practice, dressmakers wriggled in and out of half-made garments. *NZH*, 16 August 1962: 4.

Hemming a garment is the final stage of fitting, and is a stage where help is often required. Men sometimes provided this help. Lyndsay said, "Dad was very good at

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measuring hems. [...] We would stand on the kitchen table. Mum held the yard stick and Dad did the marking.”⁵² Margaret says her husband (who was taught to sew by her mother) was the one who pointed out that their daughter should be wearing her shoes as Margaret marked the hem of her wedding dress.⁵³

Cheryl remembers her mother having a wooden floor-to-hem stand-alone ruler for marking hems. This object, like some of the treadle machines, connected practice through three generations:

For that meticulously straight hemline we were up on the kitchen table while she [Cheryl’s mother] sat on a chair and measured the floor-to-hem distance and marked it with a pin. Her mother [Cheryl’s grandmother] used the same method and mum recalls it feeling like hours she had to stand and if sighing and changes of stance occurred a reminder on the leg was duly applied! I don’t remember [my mother] doing that to us, she seemed pretty good at it so didn’t seem a long time to me, after all, it was the means by which I was getting a nice skirt or dress.⁵⁴

Cheryl’s sense of standing in her mother’s footsteps and seeing her mother’s attention to detail shaped her own careful practice.

⁵² Lyndsay, born 1940.

⁵³ Margaret, born 1938.

⁵⁴ Cheryl, born 1951.



Figure 31. Fitting a garment at home.

Making a garment for someone means spending time with them. This drawing captures the intimate domesticity described by interviewees, with the machine in a living room, the basket on the floor, and hemming stick ready. Needlework Development Scheme. *And So to Sew*, frontispiece.

For most domestic dressmakers, the process of fit begins with choosing a pattern, and comparing the measurements of the body with the measurements of the pattern. This is not as straightforward as it might seem, because patterns have ease built into them, without which the body would be unable to move inside the garment. The amount of ease varies according to the style of the garment, increasing the chance the dressmaker may not understand how the measurement of the body and the measurement of the pattern should relate to one another. The patterns readers sent for from the NZWW in the 1940s and early 1950s were unmarked tissue, navigated by relating the shapes to the

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suggested layout and using any notches at the edge of the pieces. The dressmaker had to understand what the seam allowances were before beginning to calculate how much ease might be in the pattern. Yet this was better than nothing.

Velma, Lyndsay, Margaret, Vera and Lynne all mentioned themselves or their mothers making or adjusting patterns. Sheena talked about her mother cutting patterns wider to fit Sheena's round childhood tummy. Vera's mother altered finished garments to prolong their use, which suggests some degree of patternmaking ability. Mostly, dressmakers wanted a guarantee of success, particularly when fabrics or money were in short supply. Publishing houses and pattern companies capitalised on women's need to get things right by including free patterns in magazines and producing low-cost, multi-style patterns.⁵⁵ Geraldine McDonald, despite being trained in pattern drafting, said of her own practice in the 1950s, "I never bothered much with [drafting] patterns, you could buy very good patterns by then."⁵⁶

None of the women I spoke to had the confidence of Carol Tulloch's subject who used freehand dressmaking: drawing or even cutting directly on to the fabric, "from your knowledge."⁵⁷ The nearest anyone came to this was Alison recalling her highly-skilled aunt Freda cutting into cloth and making things work. Alison said when her aunt did use patterns, they were a tool that enabled her to get a dress out of a short length of fabric:

She made me a black and white harlequin cotton everglaze and it had a roll neck collar and cut-away shoulders and it was a Vogue pattern and I can remember her using the pattern, and it was a lovely pattern, it was a princess line, zip up the back. And I can remember her placing that pattern round and round on that material to get it out. But she did it.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Joy Spanabel Emery, "Dreams on Paper: A Story of the Commercial Pattern Industry," in Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 248-50.

⁵⁶ Geraldine, born 1926.

⁵⁷ Tulloch, "There's No Place Like Home," 114.

⁵⁸ Alison, born 1942.

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Alison's story ties dressmaking to fashion, with patterns as a vital link in this relationship. She says her influences in dress came from movies and pattern books.

Audrey Hepburn was a great influence. Everyone aspired to that black dress and her coats, those coats by Balmain and Givenchy. But that was later. Vogue patterns were a great influence, going into the shops and looking at the pattern books.⁵⁹

Rachel Moseley talks about the role of patterns in helping young English women achieve movie-star style in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁰ Pattern companies had been exploiting dressmakers' desire to emulate movie styles since the 1930s, a strategy that "allowed young working-class women to visualise their dreams particularly through the consumption of fashionable clothes."⁶¹

Margarethe Szeless contrasts the durability of the sewing machine with the fragility of paper patterns in her analysis of the role of *Burda* patterns in home dressmaking in Austria in the 1950s to 1970s.⁶² Unlike sewing machines, "patterns on thin paper illustrate the volatility of rapidly changing fashion trends."⁶³ Women might be using the same machine their mother or grandmother did to create very different garments. The picture Szeless draws of dressmaking in post-war Austria has many parallels with New Zealand in the same period, with women adapting techniques to cope with shortages and restrictions. *Burda* is a magazine dedicated to home dressmaking that mainly consists of pull-out patterns. Szeless says it managed three things: to provide patterns at low cost, to target a broad spectrum of middle-class women, and to create a style that was related to the latest Paris fashion and relatable for readers.⁶⁴ What made *Burda* different from other magazines and commercial patterns was its expectation of the reader's expertise and patience. The New Zealand women interviewed for this thesis cited ease of use as a

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Moseley, "Respectability Sewn Up."

⁶¹ Buckley and Clark, *Fashion and Everyday Life*, 107.

⁶² Szeless, "Burda Fashions."

⁶³ Ibid., 854.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 849.

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major reason to use patterns. *Burda* patterns are not easy to use. Szeless describes them as:

A dense and entangled web of black lines interspersed with numbers and symbols, which might easily be mistaken for an aviation or navigation map by the layman.⁶⁵

Once a reader has chosen the pattern they want, they must trace off the necessary pieces, following whatever line corresponds to their chosen style. Szeless assumes “a certain familiarity with and transfer of the skill of home dressmaking within families in the post-war era,”⁶⁶ nevertheless *Burda* was not an easy option.

Vera was the only one of the interviewees who regularly uses *Burda* patterns. Chapter 7 looks at some of the interviewees’ adult dressmaking practice, but some of Vera’s story belongs here. Those early experiments with the buttonhole feature on her mother’s latest Elna machine set Vera up for a lifetime of mastering the technology of dressmaking, including the “dense and entangled web” of *Burda* patterns. The shelves above her machines hold *Burda* magazines and sewing manuals. She cuts facings with a rotary cutter on a special cutting mat, often used by quilters to cut precise pieces for patching. Vera bought her own Elna sewing machine in the first years of her working life. When her mother died, she used some of her inheritance to buy herself a new Elna machine, overlocker, and press. The machine and overlocker are in a modern version of the foldaway sewing cabinet advertised in newspapers since the 1950s, but now designed with space for an overlocker as a well as a “portable.” Vera uses the sun porch of her home as a sewing room, in much the same way as her mother did. From where she sews, she can see a planter made from the legs of her grandmother’s treadle machine — stripped back, painted with red enamel, and affixed to a brick wall.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 855.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

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Figure 32. A planter made from a Singer sewing machine table. Vera's sews on an Elna machine, just as her mother did. And as her mother extended the life of garments by adapting them, Vera extended the life of a treadle sewing machine by adapting it as a planter. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

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This chapter shows how girls' experiences of dressmaking space and things reinforced their understanding of their mothers' practice, and laid the foundations of their own practice. Despite advice in books and magazines that suggested dressmaking should be regarded as an imposition on others, and kept out of sight, it seems to have been a highly visible part of family life. The adaptation of spaces, objects, and routine that accompanied dressmaking was not seen as good or bad, but simply normal if girls and women were to be clothed. In homes, the things of sewing were both commonplace — because they were seen every day — and special — because they were associated with a specific individual. Tools, particularly machines, were powerful talismans of connection, usually with a mother and sometimes a grandmother. Choices about machines and the space in which they were used can be seen to repeat over time, as does the value attributed to the skill. The emphasis on objects has supplemented understanding of practice. This and the preceding chapter have remained mostly within homes, and support Bourdieu's assertion that:

Through the economic and social necessity that they bring to bear on the relatively autonomous world of the domestic economy and family relations, or more precisely, through the specifically familial manifestations of external necessity [...] the structures characterizing a determinate class of conditions of existence produce the structure of the *habitus*, which in their turn are the basis of the perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences.⁶⁷

The following two chapters look at sewing and dressmaking at school, examining the interviewees' experience as pupils and as teachers.

⁶⁷ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 54.

Chapter 5

The regulation of sewing at school: “A room in the basement has been fitted out”

The preceding chapters have shown that girls often saw sewing and dressmaking as necessary activities at home, and associated them with the exercise of individual choice, taste, and values. They saw practice evolve through experimentation — with materials, tools, and space — all of which took place in the privacy of their homes in whatever time was available. The following two chapters shift the focus to examine how girls experienced sewing and dressmaking at school, where the practice was public and uniform. What, where, when, and how they sewed was regulated by the government, the school, and the teacher, and associated with compulsion and discipline. This chapter looks at how teachers were trained, how the subject was connected to domestic practice, how space for it was created, and how the subject was positioned in the life of the school.

The introduction to this thesis includes Katherine Mansfield’s account of sewing at school in the early twentieth century. Mansfield describes a break in routine, achieved by rearranging furniture, and stitching as an act of Christian charity. Sewing and needlework were seen as a necessary part of girls’ primary education from 1877. From 1945, a newly created subject called Clothing became an option for girls to include in a course of secondary school study for the terminal qualification called School Certificate.¹ As an examinable subject, Clothing — and the other needle-based subject of Embroidery — now warranted defined and dedicated space within schools. The tools and space schools provided said something about how the subjects were viewed in the school, as well as affecting how girls experienced them.

¹ See Appendix 5 for a timeline of the New Zealand education system.

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The inspection report for Otago Girls' High School from 1947 describes the tools and space the school provided for these subjects.

A room in the basement has been fitted out as a dressmaking room and is in full use throughout the week. Some Embroidery lessons have to be taken in the ordinary classrooms. The dressmaking room is well equipped with cupboards, fitting rooms, and twelve treadle machines but as yet there is no electric machine, a distinct lack in these days of when electrical appliances are so widely used in the home. The room is spacious and has been made as attractive as possible. Conditions for working would be considerably improved by the installation of better lighting system and by the replacement of the present seating forms with stools which could be put under the tables when they were not in use and would permit greater freedom of movement.²

The inspection report shows that Otago Girls' High School was fulfilling its obligation to offer subjects that were part of the curriculum, but what it provided suggests these subjects were not highly valued in the school. The report could be summarised as saying a big, dark room that wasn't being used for anything else had some treadle sewing machines and awkward benches in it. While the subject was called *Clothing*, the report talks about the "dressmaking room," suggesting a carelessness even on the part of the inspector. The room serves both Clothing and Embroidery classes, but some of the latter are "taken in ordinary classrooms" — possibly a better option given the comments about the lighting. The report confirms the link with domestic practice with the reference to electrical appliances being widely used at home. The school magazine from the same year shows that "needlework" was being taught by two unqualified part-time members of staff.³ Taken together, these factors suggest the subject is being offered under sufferance, rather than from a desire to give girls a choice.

² R15291731, Inspection Reports – State Schools – Otago Girls' High School, 1911–1947. ANZ.

³ *Otago Girls' High School Magazine*, 1947, staff list.

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Figure 33. Sewing room at Wellington Girls' College, 1947. The treadle sewing machines, large tables, and pictures on the blackboard suggest the room was dedicated to the subject rather than being a makeshift space. Photograph from Wellington Girl's College archive.

Just as material considerations contributed to the formation of habitus at home, so too did they at school. Sue Middleton references both cultural reproduction and habitus when she interprets Bourdieu as arguing that:

each family transmits to its children, indirectly rather than directly, a certain cultural capital and certain ethos. When children go to school, they take this habitus with them, and it must work alongside the school's habitus, which has assigned value to subjects.⁴

⁴ Sue Middleton, "Family Strategies of Cultural Reproduction: Case Studies in the Schooling of Girls," in *Political Issues in New Zealand Education*, ed. John A. Codd, Richard K. Harker, and Roy Nash (Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press, 1990), 100.

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At school, individual experience is constrained by what was prescribed in the syllabus, and the embodied experience takes place in shared spaces using common tools. I argue that sewing and dressmaking were used in schools to effect cultural reproduction. While schools attempted to replicate what they understood to be domestic dressmaking habitus, the domestic was subsumed by the institutional habitus which privileged traditional academic achievement. Writing about the interplay of individual and institutional habitus, Bourdieu suggests the institutional habitus will revise and transform.⁵ That transformation did not take place within the time period I have focussed on. The idea that all girls might stay at school past 15, let alone aim for university entrance, was still new. Likewise, Clothing had only just become an examinable subject at post-primary level. The society in which schools operated was ambivalent about the roles girls might play upon leaving. These factors combined to maintain an institutional habitus geared to support and celebrate academic achievement in established disciplines. The curriculum may have been modernised, but modernity had yet to take hold in schools.

The training and recruitment of sewing and dressmaking teachers provides a clear statement about the status of these subjects. Three of the interviewees taught sewing at primary school or Clothing at secondary school, and their individual experiences illustrate the evolution of the curriculum over the period. The environment in which their experience occurred was shaped by the Education Act of 1877, which enshrined “Sewing, needlework, and the principles of domestic economy” as part of girls’ primary school experience. At that time, it was taken for granted that female teachers would be able to provide tuition simply because of their gender. The idea that a woman did not need formal qualifications to teach girls to sew lingered into the second half of the twentieth century. It is evident in the practice of recruiting mothers to teach sewing where a female teacher was not available. An exchange of letters in 1933 shows the Department of Education endorsed such recruitment. The Taranaki Education Board queried how the Department might respond to “meet the demand for sewing teachers

⁵ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 57.

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for sole teacher schools in charge of male teachers.” The Director of Education annotated the letter thus:

Mr Boyle reports that in Canterbury local committees are using the services of ladies in their districts to do the work without charge. Perhaps a similar arrangement would be possible in Taranaki.⁶

The implication is that the ladies would be willing and able to teach for no pay. Sewing was of sufficient value to girls to be included in their formal school education, but not of sufficient value to warrant training, recruiting and paying specialist teachers.⁷

Geraldine McDonald⁸ was born in 1926, so her own school experience predates the time of the study. But she is an example of someone who was trained as a specialist teacher, ready to deliver the Clothing syllabus when it was introduced after the war. Geraldine’s path to becoming a Clothing teacher in the 1940s is an example of “continuity and change in social experience.”⁹ When she started at her urban secondary school for girls in the late 1930s, such schools were understood to be “training grounds for aspiring entrants to university or the professions.”¹⁰ Geraldine was determined to go to university and was 16 when she passed the examination. But her youth, her gender, societal norms, and the planned changes to post-primary education affected her plans. Geraldine’s application for Teachers College at Victoria University in Wellington was rejected because she was too young.

The careers advisor [...] found that a new course was being set up to train teachers for Homecraft subjects. They would accept me. This involved going

⁶ R19234720 - Public School Syllabus - Needlework 1913-1946. ANZ.

⁷ Correspondence from 1936 shows that even paid teachers did not always deliver the necessary level of skill or enthusiasm for sewing in the classroom. A memorandum to Senior Inspectors of Schools and Principals of Training Colleges refers to complaints that girls “have not received adequate instruction in hand-sewing while in the primary schools.” The Principals of Training Colleges are asked to see that “students in training receive regular and competent instruction in this subject.” Circular No. 1936/57, 26 May 1936. R19234720 - Public School Syllabus - Needlework 1913-1946. ANZ.

⁸ Geraldine McDonald is the only one of the interviewees to be named in full because she went on to write *You and Your Clothes*, used as a textbook for School Certificate and cited in this thesis.

⁹ Jenks, *Cultural Reproduction*.

¹⁰ Brian T. O'Rourke and Graham H. Robinson, eds., *Schools in New Zealand Society: A Book of Readings* (Sydney: Wiley, 1973), 254.

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first to Dunedin Teachers College. After two terms [...] the Wellington candidates were transferred to the Wellington Technical College.¹¹

The year after returning to Wellington, Geraldine enrolled for education at Victoria University. Geraldine believes she was filling a quota for enrolment in the newly-established Homecraft teachers course¹² simply because she was a girl.¹³ As a consequence of those first years of training, she learned patternmaking and tailoring by a woman who had trade training, and began her teaching career confident of her ability to sew and to teach the post-primary syllabus. By then, secondary schools were adjusting to the requirements of delivering the common core curriculum to increasing numbers of pupils because the school leaving age had been lifted to 15 in 1945.¹⁴

Geraldine worked as a Homecraft teacher at Hutt Valley Memorial Technical School for four years and later joined the panel of examiners for School Certificate Clothing. Geraldine saw that girls doing courses that included Clothing often only stayed at school for two years so did not sit the School Certificate examinations. She says they saw dressmaking as a practical skill, not an academic achievement.¹⁵ As someone whose own sense of self was linked to academic achievement, Geraldine was “keen for girls to get some recognition for the work they had done.” That impulse drove her to write *You and Your Clothes* to support teachers and pupils taking the School Certificate Clothing course. *You and Your Clothes* makes the link with other school subjects explicit. The preface points out, “Clothing, besides being a study of practical arts can lead us into such subjects as history, geography, aesthetics, psychology and chemistry, to mention a few.”¹⁶ Geraldine wanted girls to see the possibilities from getting a broad understanding of clothing, and not limit their options and interests.

¹¹ Geraldine, born 1926.

¹² The Homecraft teachers certificate was first offered in 1944 and discontinued in 1961. Numbers peaked in 1957 and 1958 with 74 candidates per year. “The New Zealand Official Year-Book, 1962,” ed. Statistics (1962).

¹³ Yearbook tables showing probable destinations of school leavers show that in 1944, nearly three times as many boys as girls went to university college, whereas nearly four times as many girls as boys went to teacher training college. “The New Zealand Official Year-Book, 1951-52,” ed. Statistics (1951-52).

¹⁴ “The New Zealand Official Year-Book, 1946,” ed. Statistics (1946).

¹⁵ Biddington, “Something to Fall Back on”; Quinn-Young, “Technical Education.”

¹⁶ McDonald, *You and Your Clothes*, 9.

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Sewing and clothing were an imposed continuity in Geraldine's life. Having learned to sew as a child at home and at primary school, she consciously abandoned it at secondary school. The tertiary course she was steered towards required her to learn the patternmaking and sewing techniques necessary to become a teacher. As she gained teaching experience, she used her expertise to become an examiner and author. Helene Aarseth et al. note that "rapid social transformations or social mobility may entail conditions that are markedly different from those conditions in which the habitus was produced."¹⁷ They cite Bourdieu's observation that such changes may "produce dispositions towards lucidity and critique."¹⁸ Geraldine's experience reflects this. To use a dressmaking analogy, she found a way to cut the cloth of her life to a garment that suited her.

Two of the interviewees, Jocelyn and Margaret, trained as primary teachers in the period when the primary syllabus was being revised to match the post-primary regulations. Both felt ill-equipped to cope with this part of the curriculum. To qualify for entry to teachers' college (often called Training College), they had to achieve at the same academic level as the boys against whom they were competing.¹⁹ Neither of them excelled at sewing at school (or home), and both did academic courses at secondary school which minimised their exposure to the subject. Once they became teachers, they were expected to teach sewing to girls. Like Geraldine, they had little choice but to have sewing as part of their professional lives.

Jocelyn trained in the early 1950s, and was expected to deliver the primary syllabus revised in 1948. Her only preparation for this was to produce a stitched sampler, a requirement she met by paying someone else to produce the work. That she was able to achieve this subterfuge suggests little attention was paid to the subject at the teachers'

¹⁷ Aarseth, Layton, and Nielsen, "Conflicts in the Habitus," 150.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The entry requirements for teacher training were the same for men and women. Division A trainees needed School Certificate as a minimum requirement, while Division C trainees needed a university degree as a minimum requirement. Division A trainees had two years of training plus a year of supervision. Division C had one year of training and were expected to teach in post-primary schools. By 1965, Division A candidates were expected to have an Endorsed School Certificate as a minimum requirement. "The New Zealand Official Year-Book, 1967," ed. Statistics (1967).

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college. By the 1960s, Jocelyn was head teacher at a primary school and, by default, head of sewing. The primary syllabus had been revised in 1958 and now aimed to “fit girls for their lives as homemakers and provide them with a creative and useful occupation for their leisure hours.” Jocelyn decided the best way to do this was to get help:

I organised the mothers to come in. We only had one machine at school — the mothers brought theirs, I took mine. We made shifts and had a fashion show. They were called muu muus, straight, sleeveless, fringing at the hem.²⁰

Jocelyn did what male teachers had been doing for nearly a century, using mothers’ skills to deliver a prescribed but under-resourced part of the curriculum. This solution collapsed the division between home and school and reinforced the idea that school was preparing girls for lives centred on domestic activity.

Margaret, born in 1938, went to teachers’ college after her mother stood over her while she filled in the application form. Margaret had left school in the sixth form with no sense of direction. She helped look after her maternal grandmother, worked in a photography studio, and went to extra sewing lessons. She also completed a Diploma of Fine Arts at night school, and that qualified her to apply for teachers’ college.²¹ Her experience aligns with Helen May’s description of the expectations for female baby boomers in New Zealand:

motherhood as a career was our destiny. Employment was an interim step before motherhood and/or something to return to later [...] those of us who had passed our School Certificate examinations were supposed to choose “careers” like teaching, nursing or being a librarian.²²

Part of Margaret’s preparation for her career in teaching was more sewing lessons. Unlike Jocelyn, she and her fellow female trainees had specific training in implementing the 1958 primary syllabus for Sewing. The revised primary syllabus was now for girls from Standard 4 to Form II and led more smoothly to the post-primary course. The

²⁰ Jocelyn, born 1932.

²¹ Margaret, born 1938.

²² May, *Minding Children*, 3.

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emphasis put on training teachers to deliver it suggests a shift in the way the subject was being integrated into schools. Margaret has evidence of her training in the sample book she produced, which includes samples of techniques from woollen stitches on sacking to fine smocking. She says her mother stitched the sample of a bound buttonhole in the book.²³ Margaret notes connections with other parts of the syllabus, as Geraldine did in *You and Your Clothes*. She connects the subject to Art and Craft, History, Geography, Science, Mathematics, Drama, and Music — although for the last two, the connection seems to be in the provision of costumes. Trainees were being encouraged to see the subject as having scope to teach girls about something other than the construction of clothes and the maintenance of household textiles. This is at odds with the personal recollections of interviewees, for whom domestic sewing and dressmaking was connected to family practice, appearance management, and thrift. The academic aspects of dressmaking were incidental to the necessity of making.

Margaret's book includes an essay titled "Criticism of the Sewing Syllabus," in which she describes it as:

"sound" and practical. It is good to see that individual differences in ability and taste are catered for and that articles suggested for the three classes are merely guides to help the teacher rather than a list of work to be selected regardless of the circumstances. It seems to me that the suggestions for the three classes are for the "brighter" average and the bright child rather than one who is a little backward.²⁴

²³ Margaret, born 1938.

²⁴ Sample book created by Margaret when she was a trainee at Ardmore Training College.

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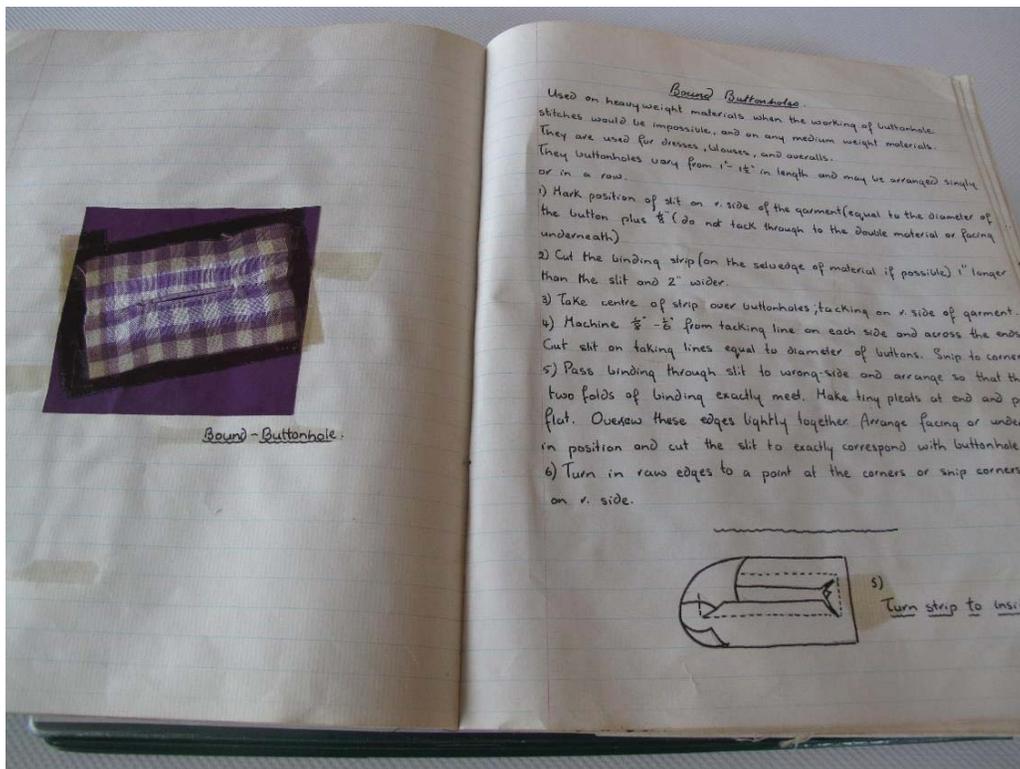


Figure 34. Instructions for a bound buttonhole.

Margaret's sample book was supposed to be proof of her competence to teach the skills described in the primary syllabus. She was more comfortable drawing a bound buttonhole than stitching one, and her mother made the necessary sample. Margaret's sample book from teacher training. Photograph: Dinah Vincent

These comments are rather poignant in light of Margaret's acknowledgement that she felt rather backward as a dressmaker herself, despite her mother's expertise, and the lessons she had at school and privately. Both Margaret and Jocelyn managed to make their lack of confidence as dressmakers invisible as they conformed to the requirement for visible evidence of skill expected of primary school teachers.

Departmental records suggest that the increased emphasis on training that Margaret experienced was "too little, too late." Primary schools were employing part-time staff to teach needle-based subjects throughout the 1950s.²⁵ Needlework, later renamed Sewing,

²⁵ 6 Sept 1957 Circular memorandum No T57/26 Extension of authority to employ part-time teachers of sewing in primary schools. Men were clearly not expected to teach sewing and female teachers were diverted from junior classes to help. R17926626 Primary Education: Syllabus: Needlework, 1957-1966. ANZ.

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had become more important as a primary school subject because it connected to the examinable post-primary subject called Clothing, yet primary schools were still treating the subject as something women would be able to teach instinctively, using an inherent feminine skill set.

The shortage of trained teachers created opportunities for women who had these skills and wanted to work outside the home. For Val's mother, training as a specialist sewing teacher was an opportunity to integrate her trade training and her personal enthusiasm to recreate herself as a qualified teacher. Val was 12 when her mother became a certified Handicraft teacher,²⁶ so it must have been in the early 1960s.²⁷ Women with this qualification were in the unusual situation of being able to work in both primary and secondary schools, whereas most teaching staff at secondary schools had at least a Bachelor's degree.²⁸ The yearbooks of the secondary schools show unqualified women and women with Homecraft and Handicraft certificates teaching alongside staff with degrees.²⁹ This anomaly perpetuated the stop-gap measure that allowed untrained women to teach at primary schools; whether intended or not, the message was that practical ability could stand in for academic achievement. For women like Val's mother, the Handicraft Certificate was a way of using her expertise and previous experience to return to the paid workforce after the enforced hiatus of motherhood.

Any woman teaching a needle-based subject in the period was working in an educational environment shaped by the Thomas Report, which took effect in 1945.³⁰ The central

²⁶ The Minister of Education announced measures to combat the teacher shortage in 1961, including special training courses for 120 Homecraft teachers, 70 Woodwork and Metalwork, and 68 Commercial teachers. *Otago Daily Times*, 9 August 1961: 1.

²⁷ Val, born 1948.

²⁸ In 1957 the Department was offering courses for untrained teachers of Homecraft subjects in manual training centres, district high schools, intermediate and post-primary schools. R7242368 Training of Teachers and Training Colleges – Refresher Courses—Teachers of Homecraft and Clothing, 1957–1967. ANZ.

²⁹ The Papanui High School Yearbook shows Miss Nicol joined the staff in 1954, teaching Cookery, Needlework, and Homecraft, with no qualification against her name. By 1960, she is listed as having a Homecraft Teachers Certificate. At Epsom Girls' Grammar, Wellington Girls' College, and Otago Girls' High School, most staff who taught Clothing or Dressmaking had B.H.Sc. degrees, but were sometimes assisted by unqualified women.

³⁰ The actual title of the Thomas Report was "The Post-Primary School Curriculum." O'Rourke and Robinson, *Schools in New Zealand Society*, 248.

idea of the Report was a common core curriculum, which meant all pupils would take certain subjects and be able to specialise in areas of interest without being tied to the goal of university entrance.³¹ While the Report's recommendations concerned the secondary school curriculum, the primary syllabi were subsequently amended to ensure continuity through the education system. Sue Middleton concedes it is possible to see the Thomas Report as "an enlightened statement of the aims of a liberal/progressive education," but shows that a feminist reading reveals the "ideology of domestic femininity was clearly embodied in the thinking of educational policy makers."³² This is evident in the explicit sex-differentiation in the report, which states, "the course of every girl attending a post-primary school should contain studies and activities directly related to the home."³³ Manual subjects for girls were firmly aligned to home-making, and included "mothercraft, housewifery, house planning, dress design and patternmaking, clothing, laundry work, cookery and meal planning."³⁴ Boys did manual subjects too, such as Woodwork and Metalwork, but these were described as leading to hobbies or a trade.³⁵

Another reading of the Thomas Report might position it as an expression of modernity. The push for a greater choice of subjects and courses of study was a deliberate break from the past that intended to make secondary school more accessible and relevant to a wide range of pupils. Schools that offered Clothing were expected to provide modern rooms, furniture, and tools for this new subject, and were castigated for failing to do so — as Otago Girls' High School was in the 1947 inspection report. Along with the

³¹ For schools like Otago Girls' High School, that meant a shifting from courses designed to help girls achieve University Entrance, to offering a range of courses. The 1947 Inspection Report chides the school for not offering "a Home Life Course for girls who do not wish to specialise in either languages or commercial subjects." R15291731 Inspection Reports – State Schools – Otago Girls' High School, 1911–1947. ANZ.

³² Sue Middleton, ed. *Women and Education in Aotearoa* (Wellington: Allen and Unwin: Port Nicholson Press, 1988), 79.

³³ Quote from the Thomas Report *ibid.*, 78.

³⁴ "Some commentators, however, saw manual and aesthetic subjects (Music, Arts, and Crafts, for example) to be especially useful for the citizenship training of less academically-minded pupils in general and young women in particular; they were a form of social insurance." Massey University Department of Education and Educational Research and Development Centre, "Delta Research Monograph" in *Examinations and the New Zealand School Curriculum: Past and Present*, ed. G. Lee (Palmerston North: Massey University, 1992), 13.

³⁵ Middleton, *Women and Education*, 78-79.

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modern facilities, schools had to have a modern attitude, to embrace the changes. One of Marshall Berman's three strands of modernity is when "modernisation infiltrates everyday life and sensibilities."³⁶ On one hand, the secondary school subject called Clothing gave girls a necessary introduction to the study of appearance, design, and textiles, all of which were influenced by modernity. Courses that included Clothing were often called "Modern," reinforcing this connection. On the other hand, a "Modern" course seemed to prepare girls for a life similar to that their grandmothers might have lived, but now they would have a qualification for that life.

³⁶ Breward and Evans, *Fashion and Modernity*, 1.

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Figure 35. "The Modern's Best Friend." Drawing.
Clothing was often included in courses called "Modern." This drawing by Dianne Darley in IV M (Modern) captures the idea that dressmaking was a means of creating another version of oneself. *St. Cutbert's Chronicle*, 1958: 73.

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The changes to the system increased the pressure on pupils to take a course of study to present for the School Certificate examination. The pupil who wrote the editorial for the *Wellington Girls' College Reporter* in 1948 understood this well:

Third-formers have the choice of a general, a professional, a homecraft or a commercial course and this should be sufficient to suit all types of girls, provided that they choose wisely in the first year subjects they afterwards like to specialise in.

Secondary school was no longer the preserve of a particular type of pupil, it was available to “all types,” but there was definitely a hierarchy in place.

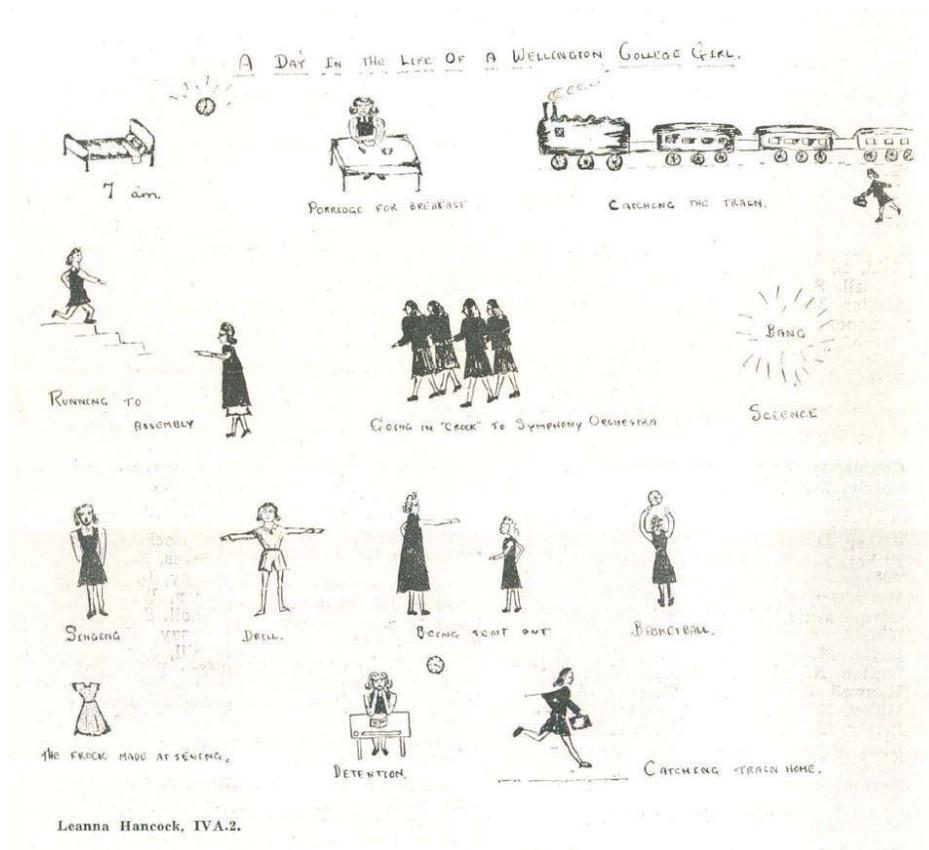


Figure 36. “A day in the life of a Wellington College girl.” Drawing.

This drawing shows sewing sitting between basketball and detention as one of the many things a girl might do in a day at secondary school. In 1949, making a frock at school was an unremarkable activity. *Wellington Girls' College Reporter*, 1949: 56.

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No matter what course of study a girl did at secondary school, she was highly likely to do some sewing in her first two years, because these subjects satisfied the requirement for “art and craft” in the curriculum.³⁷ The home-making subjects for girls were also seen as substitutes for Science,³⁸ following the earlier tradition that had seen sewing as a more suitable subject for girls than Mathematics.³⁹ As Mark Sheehan notes, “The school curriculum is a socially constructed artefact that is shaped by the actions of individuals and groups to sustain their view of the social world.”⁴⁰ I argue that, from 1945, sewing and dressmaking were used in the education system to promote a particular view of the social world in which some girls would experience secondary school as a training for an idealised maternal and domestic “career.”

This training began in primary schools, with syllabi that emphasised the connection between home and school. This connection was made tangible by the expectation that tools and materials would be supplied by home (in reality, mothers) for use at school. The 1958 primary school syllabus makes this connection explicit. Teachers are advised to:

Discuss the sewing programme for the whole year and let each girl know which garments are to be made so that there need be no waste of time while material is being obtained, and so that parents may plan their daughters’ wardrobes with school sewing in mind. The cooperation of parents can be enlisted by circularising them, and explaining carefully exactly what materials are required and why, by choosing useful articles to make, and by ensuring they are completed within reasonable time.⁴¹

³⁷ O’Rourke and Robinson, *Schools in New Zealand Society*, 249.

³⁸ Middleton, *Women and Education*, 79.

³⁹ Reforms in 1929 gave head teachers discretion to exempt girls of Standard 5 and 6 (Forms I and II) who took needlework, from elementary mathematics. Ian Cumming and Alan Cumming, *History of State Education in New Zealand 1840-1975* (Wellington: Pitman Publishing, 1978), 234-35.

⁴⁰ Mark Sheehan, “‘Defending the High Ground’: The Transformation of the Discipline of History into a Senior Secondary School Subject in the Late 20th Century: A New Zealand Curriculum Debate” (PhD thesis, Massey University, 2008), 47.

⁴¹ R3850837 Primary School Syllabuses - Sewing, Standard 4, Form I, Form II. ANZ.

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The statement expects the worlds of home and school would overlap. Sewing at school required fabric that had to be paid for by the family, so sewing at school was an expense. Schools were trying to reassure parents that sewing at school would be productive, and that parents could expect their daughters to produce wearable garments that will fit within a planned wardrobe. The domestic habitus was exposed, made visible, in the school environment by choice of fabric and pattern. The 1948 syllabus had talked about girls producing practice pieces as exercises. By 1958, the syllabus was geared towards producing something that would move between home and school, starting as a piece of material and ending as part of a girl's wardrobe.

Lyndsay's experience is evidence of synchronisation between home and school. When she reached Standard 4, she was expected to make a cooking apron and cap. Her older sisters had already made aprons, which Lyndsay could use, so she just made and embroidered her cap. And to keep her occupied in class, her mother cut out a baby blouse in white Viyella because a friend had a baby, and "I smocked a sort of a blousy top for this baby. I think I hand sewed it all. I don't think it was machined." This variation to the syllabus seems to have been easily managed between her mother and the teacher.

"How can it be warm
and cool,
Mummy?"



Here's a small daughter
with lots to learn about
"Viyella" and "Clydella."
These natural fabrics keep
in the body's warmth in
winter and keep out the
heat of summer. They breathe, and absorb
moisture without clamminess or felting.

And there's more to "Viyella" and "Clydella" than that.
They are also:

- hard-wearing and long-lasting
- soft to tender skins, even after repeated washings
- light in weight. (That's the high quality wool-content.)
- available in a wide range of wonderful colours and patterns
- colour-fast in the wash and in sunlight
- The fabrics with the unqualified guarantee:

IF IT SHRINKS WE REPLACE

It's well worth the extra to buy the year-round comfort of

'Viyella' and 'Clydella'



FREE The "Viyella" Baby Book . . . to help you plan for baby. Easy-to-make patterns and hints. Just send 3d in stamps to cover packing and postage to H. FETTIT LTD., P.O. Box 1446, Wellington.



Figure 37. Viyella and Clydella fabric advertisement.

These fabrics were marketed as ideal for mothers to use for clothes for babies and children. They were both traditional, because of the association with mothers and sewing, and modern, because of their shrink and fade resistance. Lyndsay's project with Viyella straddled the domestic and school spheres of her life. *NZWW*, 8 February 1960: 39.

For Cheryl, at a small rural school, the boundary between home and school was blurred. The principal's wife, Mrs Wise, came into the school to teach the girls sewing — bringing her machine with her. Cheryl was the only girl in her year, so effectively got private lessons. Cheryl says her mother and Mrs Wise discussed what she would make and, between them, provided fabric for the projects. She knows she made a black skirt

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with rick-rack braid at the hem but cannot remember whether the fabric was from her mother or Mrs Wise. Mrs Wise appears to have been following the syllabus which suggested a “half-slip or peasant skirt” as a suitable project for teaching machining in Form I.

Implicit in both these recollections is that sewing was for girls. Gender was in play in the presence of female teachers or mothers as teachers, and the absence of boys as pupils. These presences and absences are significant in the formation of habitus because they reinforce the idea that dressmaking is a feminine activity that must be practised as time and space allow without disturbing male activity.

While boys were absent from sewing classes, they were still present at school. The 1948 syllabus included as suggestion 21, “That in the organization of this needlework scheme the skills of all teachers should be employed to provide alternative occupations for the boys.”⁴² Val thinks they dug in the garden and Jocelyn assumed they did Woodwork. By the middle of the 1950s, boys were sewing at primary school as part of the Arts and Crafts syllabus⁴³ — which Vera remembers in the sewing class at her primary school in Hawkes Bay a few years earlier. She does not recall making any garments at primary school despite the syllabus suggesting girls make a skirt, rompers, and frock in Forms I and II. At her primary school, Vera said boys and girls:

had to do blanket stitch and chain stitch and in and out stitch. That sort of thing. And we had to make pot mitts and oven mitts [...] We used to spend one day, afternoon I suppose, a period of time just doing that sort of thing.⁴⁴

⁴² R3850860 The Primary School Curriculum – Revised Syllabuses – Health Education, Oral/Written Expression, Spelling, Arithmetic, History/Geography, Needlework – May 1948. ANZ.

⁴³ In 1956 the Education Gazette advised teachers to “regard sewing in Standards 1 to 3 as one of the optional crafts in the arts and crafts course to be taken by both boys and girls under the guidance of the class teacher.” By 1962 a pictorial supplement to the syllabus illustrated what pupils might do in these classes. School Publications Branch, “Basic Activities in Art and Crafts: A Supplement to the Primary School Art and Crafts Syllabus,” ed. Education (Wellington: R. E. Owen, Government Printer, 1962).

⁴⁴ Vera, born 1945.

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The message was that when boys use a needle and thread, it is to develop creative and artistic endeavour that they will develop in other media. For girls, using a needle and thread is the beginning of learning practical sewing that will enable them to clothe themselves and their families.

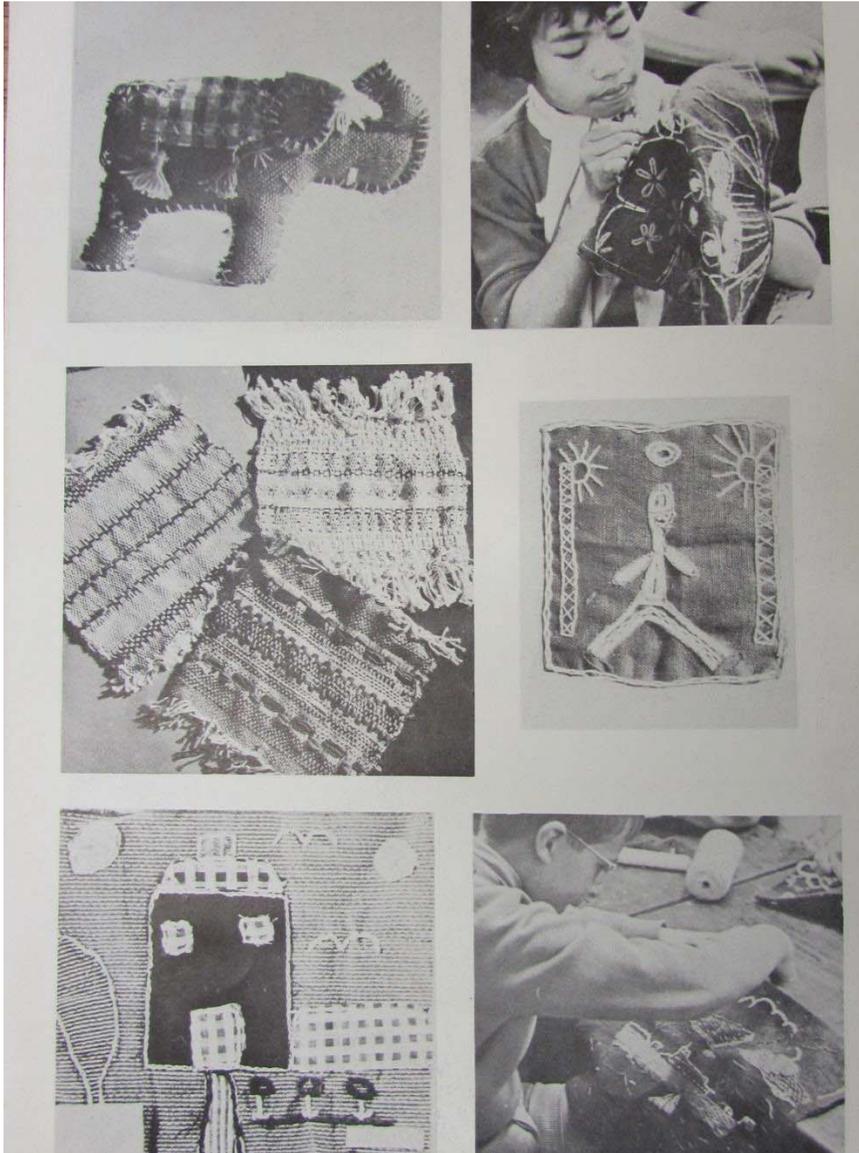


Figure 38. Arts and Crafts projects at primary school.

By 1962, needlecraft was integrated into the arts and crafts lessons for boys and girls up to Standard 4. The Department of Education produced guidance for schools to help this integration. Meanwhile, a book to support the Needlework syllabus for girls had been promised since 1946. School Publications Branch, "Basic Activities in Art and Crafts: A Supplement to the Primary School Art and Crafts Syllabus": 30.

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Margaret taught the 1958 Sewing syllabus when she and her husband, Adrian, were the principal and sole teacher at a small rural school in the early 1960s. While Margaret taught the girls Sewing, Adrian taught the boys Woodwork in a shed specially set up for the purpose. Adrian says the Department of Education provided a tool box with tools for the teacher and boys, whereas Margaret was expected to provide tools and equipment for sewing lessons and to adapt the ordinary classroom. Fathers were not expected to make woodwork tools available for boys, but mothers were expected to make sewing tools available for girls. In Margaret and Adrian's school, the boys took possession of a dedicated space for an activity from which girls were excluded. The arrangement mirrored a domestic one, where girls and women had to make the most of whatever space they could claim for their sewing.

Alison went to the same Thorndon schools that Katharine Mansfield attended 60 years before. By Alison's time, the primary school had a manual training room, and pupils came from all over the city. But that room was for cooking, not sewing. Alison cannot recall a special classroom for sewing at primary school, although she knows she sewed at primary school (an apron, that she thinks her mother probably finished for her).⁴⁵ As in Mansfield's time, the sewing room was a notional space — created by activity rather than architecture.

The combination of a woman teacher and sewing tools, along with the absence of boys, redefined the classroom as a sewing room. As girls progressed through school, the expectation of machine sewing increased, which meant schools had to provide more space because machines take up more space than a hand-held needle and thread. The 1948 Needlework syllabus⁴⁶ acknowledges that space, and other resources, are at a premium, "Consideration has been given to the difficulties existing in schools with regard to equipment, staffing, space, and time." The message is that even though

⁴⁵ Alison, born 1942.

⁴⁶ R3850860 The Primary School Curriculum – Revised Syllabuses – Health Education, Oral/Written Expression, Spelling, Arithmetic, History/Geography, Needlework – May 1948. ANZ.

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resources are scarce, this subject is important and must be taught to girls. The advice on managing space is under the heading “Equipment”:

A separate sewing-room, with tables, chairs, and suitable equipment, is ideal; failing that a portable classroom suitably equipped is desirable. Where it is impossible to obtain either of these, it is suggested that trestle tables or portable table tops and a sewing machine be provided as a temporary measure.⁴⁷

My evidence suggests this was aspirational for primary schools.

The Education (Post-Primary Instruction) Regulations 1945 (the Regulations) introduced the common core curriculum for secondary schools.⁴⁸ The Regulations were silent on the matter of rooms for Clothing, although the inspection reports were clearly a way of holding schools to account. The School Certificate examination included questions about where sewing might happen in the home, acknowledging the importance of space for the practice. The questions were predicated on the idea that girls would have special places for sewing in their homes as they did at school. Question 9 in the 1955 paper was, “If you were given the opportunity to plan an ideal sewing room in your own home, describe the equipment you would like to have in it.”⁴⁹

The provision of specialised classrooms became expected for secondary schools, standing as proof of their commitment to providing choice in education, and embracing the modern curriculum. All six of the schools visited for this study had specialised classrooms for sewing and clothing, and most of the interviewees recall dedicated rooms at the various schools they attended. The construction or allocation of these rooms was reported in newspapers,⁵⁰ mentioned in school magazines and in principals’ reports because they represented capital expenditure at the schools. They showed the school was serious about preparing girls for their roles as wives and mothers, but it did not mean the

⁴⁷ R3850860 The Primary School Curriculum – Revised Syllabuses – Health Education, Oral/Written Expression, Spelling, Arithmetic, History/Geography, Needlework – May 1948. ANZ.

⁴⁸ R19237274 School Certificate Examination Regulations. ANZ.

⁴⁹ R17873617 Department of Education, School Certificate Examination, 1955. ANZ.

⁵⁰ The construction of the building at Epsom Girls’ Grammar School, which included the dressmaking room, was reported in the *Auckland Star*. Papers Past, *Auckland Star*, Volume LXXVI, Issue 17, 20 January 1945: 6.

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schools took the girls who did these subjects seriously as scholars. Girls who did Clothing at secondary school spent two-and-a-half hours per week in these specialised rooms — half the time required for English and the same as what was required for Mathematics.⁵¹



Figure 39. Papanui High School sewing room.

This purpose-built room came close to the ideal described in the primary syllabus and implicit in the Regulations. The room features large windows, tables big enough to lay out pattern pieces, ironing boards, and well-spaced sewing machines. The school included pictures of this and other specialised classrooms in the yearbook two years running. Photograph from collection at Papanui High School.

Pupils understood specialised classrooms were places of restricted entry. What they may not have realised at the time was that being a student in those classrooms restricted choice. Geraldine knew there was a sewing room at Wellington East Girls' College when she was there, but she did not enter it. "The Latin girls, they couldn't take over the equipment that was there for another course. You've got to keep these things separate."⁵² Geraldine deliberately confined herself to spaces at school that were in

⁵¹ R19237274 School Certificate Examination Regulations. ANZ.

⁵² Geraldine, born 1926.

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keeping with her vision of herself as a “Latin girl.” Sheena had a similar experience. She took a professional course to meet her parents’ expectation that she would go to university, and was unsure of whether sewing was even taught at the school.

Lyndsay also did a professional course at secondary school, but she did Sewing in her fourth-form year to satisfy the need for an art or craft.⁵³ This was differentiated from her primary school experience by the presence of sewing machines. In her intermediate school years, Lyndsay had knitted a cardigan in class — an activity apparently permitted to keep her occupied while she waited to use the single sewing machine.⁵⁴ At her secondary school, the classroom was well stocked with sewing machines.

I wonder if there was a sewing machine each. I don’t remember having to line up to sew. If we did line up, it was probably fairly pleasant and social, so I don’t remember.⁵⁵

Lyndsay saw dressmaking as part of life at home, and seemed to transfer this easy acceptance to her view of the activity at school. It was not central to her education, but formed a pleasant diversion.

Caroline did Clothing for School Certificate in the mid-1950s, although the subject was not part of the course she originally chose:

I started off on a Modern course. And we’d only been at high school about a week if that and the headmistress came in and said, “Hands up those that don’t like maths.” So I put my hand up and the next thing I was moved to another class. And it was called 3F. It included Clothing as a School Certificate subject. I

⁵³ Interviewees’ recall and the school yearbooks show that where sewing was part of a girl’s course of study for School Certificate, it was called Clothing. Where the subject was being taken in the first years of secondary school to meet the need for a craft, it tended to be called “Sewing.”

⁵⁴ Girls were not to be idle in class. The 1948 syllabus said “That where the need arises, knitting be taught.” R3850860 The Primary School Curriculum – Revised Syllabuses – Health Education, Oral/Written Expression, Spelling, Arithmetic, History/Geography, Needlework – May 1948. ANZ. The 1958 syllabus suggested all girls should be working on some decorative needlework “to carry on with when they are waiting for the help of the teacher, or for a turn at the machine.” R3850837, Primary School Syllabuses - Sewing, Standard 4, Form I, Form II. ANZ.

⁵⁵ Lyndsay, born 1940.

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finished up in there by default. My father was furious I was moved out of a class with maths because that was his forte.⁵⁶

Caroline's experience suggests the school was managing a shortage of rooms or teachers by moving pupils around. Whatever the motivation, it reinforces the idea that schools saw aptitude for maths and aptitude for sewing as exclusive — and girls who did not do maths were labelled as “dumb girls.” On one level, the change worked well for Caroline, who looked forward to being in the specialised classroom.

It had a large blackboard down one side and on there used to be beautiful illustrations of costumes from other cultures. Mainly European and medieval and obviously the history of clothing. By the time it got to our year they'd knocked that bit out of the syllabus and I was terribly disappointed about that.

Caroline had understood the subject from what was in the room, and welcomed the idea of placing what she learned about clothing in an historical context. Instead, the emphasis was on efficient production in the here and now.

And the sewing room had a little fitting room where you would go and try things on and it had windows all down one side and big benches that we all sat at.⁵⁷

While Caroline excelled at Clothing (and English) the imposed change of course had longer-term consequences for her. Success in that course was not sufficient to gain entrance to university,⁵⁸ and her options for starting a career were limited.

Cheryl did a commercial course at secondary school in the mid-1960s, and had to take sewing and cooking for the first two years. The school minimised waiting time by splitting the girls into two groups who took the lessons week about. This meant there were only about 15 girls in the class at a time. The technique worked because Cheryl remembers there were enough electric sewing machines that they did not have to wait

⁵⁶ Caroline, born 1941.

⁵⁷ Caroline, born 1941.

⁵⁸ Caroline enrolled at Canterbury University in her 50s and graduated B.A.

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around for a chance to use them. The message was that they must use their time efficiently, part of training to be good women.

The interviewees' stories show both choice and compulsion about sewing at secondary school. For some, like Geraldine and Sheena, not sewing was consequence of their choice to pursue a professional course — which was connected to their (or their parents') ambition. Lyndsay is an example of the girls who sewed at secondary school as part of the compulsion to take an art or craft. Girls like Cheryl who did commercial courses of study were compelled to sew because this was presumed to be of use to them when they left school.

In 1956, Wellington Girls' College decided that Clothing (and Cooking) were relevant for every type of girl. The school had opened a new Homecraft wing, and the principal, Miss Clark, decided the new facilities would be used by every girl in the school, regardless of her course of study.

With the approval and the cooperation of the Education Department we have reorganised the timetables of the IV Forms so that for a period of three weeks in the year each class can take seven consecutive afternoons to work in Clothing, followed by seven in Homecraft.⁵⁹

Making both subjects compulsory was a strong statement about how important these subjects were in girls' education. The inspection report from that year shows the Department was pleased with this statement. The school simultaneously appeared to be embracing change by creating facilities for a modern course, and maintaining the status quo in which girls were destined for domestic lives. Fifty years earlier, the Minister of Education had insisted every girl in her primary and secondary education should have sufficient domestic training as would “render her great future work a source of industry and pleasure.”⁶⁰ The block course was recommended to other schools as a model to

⁵⁹ Olga E. Harding. *One Hundred Years: A History of Wellington Girls' College*. (Wellington: Wellington Girls' College Centennial Committee, 1982), 110.

⁶⁰ Margaret Tennant, “Natural Directions: The New Zealand Movement for Sexual Differentiation in Education During the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Women in History: Essays on European Women in New*

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emulate, but it did not change the status of girls who included Clothing and Cookery in their chosen course of study.

The work of all classes may be carried to post-School Certificate level and it is pleasing to find that the trend towards some clothing and homecraft pupils staying for sixth form work continues to develop. These pupils are encouraged to go into homecraft teacher training.⁶¹

This shows tension around the status of domestic subjects at school. The girls who took these subjects were not generally eligible for the highest honours in the school, their activities were seldom reported in the magazine, yet they were earmarked as likely to return to school as teachers themselves. Their skills were associated with domesticity and compliance, not with achievement and independence. The girls understood this very well. In 1958, a member of the Form IV Homecraft course wrote “The Sad Ballad of Four Homecraft” for the *Reporter*.

No lipstick is permissible,
No earrings may be worn,
All uniforms must be alike,
No fashion here is born.⁶²

This poem conforms to a pattern in school yearbooks: writing and drawing about clothing generally earns its place through being humorous, or related to a change in the school uniform. At the four girls’ schools surveyed, girls made individual contributions to the school magazine, usually attributed with initials and the class name: girls from academic courses dominate. A popular contribution was poetry “in the style of,” or “with apologies to” that mimicked the style of Tennyson or Shakespeare. At both girls’ and co-educational schools, pupils in the top professional streams were proud to declare their academic and social superiority. The young people’s claim to be superior was

Zealand History, ed. Barbara L. Brookes, Charlotte Macdonald, Margaret Tennant (Wellington: Allen & Unwin/Port Nicholson Press, 1986), 99.

⁶¹ R20475451 - Inspection Reports on Schools Reports on State Post Primary Schools. ANZ.

⁶² Wellington Girls’ College *Reporter*, 1958: 44.

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reinforced by the format of magazines, which focused on the elite of the schools — with lists, photographs, and reports of prefects, prize-winners, and senior sports teams. The girls who did courses that included Clothing were barely visible; their activities and achievements did not warrant attention in the yearbooks.

The *Epsom Girls' Grammar School Magazine* demonstrates this with a strong emphasis on academic and sporting achievement. But in 1963 and 1964 the *Magazine* devoted some of its limited photo pages to the output of the Clothing classes (see fig. 40). This was a dramatic and unexplained change, that provides a rare snapshot of the collective output of these classes. In both years, there are separate photos of junior and senior Clothing classes wearing their own creations — they had made themselves look this way, and the photograph is included as evidence of achievement (see figs 40 and 41). The girls from the junior class are wearing demure cotton dresses, some accessorised with gloves and most wearing stockings and court shoes. The senior classes are distinguished by the fact they made winter clothes: fitted suits and ensembles that make them look like they are ready for work. These images illustrate comments made by one of Sue Middleton's interviewees remembering mufti day at her secondary school:

Professional A would turn up in little twin sets and pearls, and beautifully cut skirts and neat shoes with discreet heels and they'd be carbon copies of their mothers. You know, with a little bit of lipstick and maybe earrings, and terribly prissy.⁶³

Dressmaking at school appears to have helped girls achieve this imitation of their mother's style. In the 1965 *Magazine*, everything returns to normal: the only photos are again of sports teams, and the only mention of clothing is a report on drama.

⁶³ Middleton, *Women and Education*, 112.

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Figure 40. Junior Sewing class at Epsom Girls' Grammar School, 1963. A cotton dress must have been a prescribed project for this class. The resulting garments show the pupils had choice in fabric and style, and each produced something they could call their own. *Epsom Girls' Grammar School Magazine*, 1963: between pages 36 and 37.



Figure 41. Senior Sewing Class at Epsom Girls' Grammar School, 1963. The senior girls worked with woollen fabric and made outfits that would be useful for work. *Epsom Girls' Grammar School Magazine*, 1963: between pages 36 and 37.

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Pupils from the top streams also dominated contributions to the yearbooks at both co-educational schools. Other pupils got a voice in the contributions from each form class. At Wairarapa College and Papanui High School, forms were made up of pupils taking the same course, either Academic, Commercial, Technical, Agricultural, or Domestic. The forms' contributions provide insight to how the pupils positioned themselves in the school. At Wairarapa College, the courses for girls were Professional, Commercial, and Home. Reports from two forms in the 1945 magazine highlight the difference in self-image. Home 3, an all-girl class, contributed this:

H.3 is a form of cheerful damsels, 19 in all, whose skill with sewing machines and rolling pin has improved greatly during the year. [...] We are considerably relieved that the school and public have survived the cooking which we have helped in. There were 22 of us at the beginning of the year, but three were not able to stay the course. Perhaps it was the physiology. On Saturdays and Sundays we appear in the dresses made by ourselves at school.⁶⁴

The girls are self-deprecating about their cooking, they acknowledge that some of the class did not complete the year, and they attribute no qualities to the dresses they made. Physiology is mentioned as a possible reason for leaving school, the implication being that it was too difficult. Form IIIa saw itself quite differently:

In this year of grace, 1945, 40 is the number of the cream of the Third Form, [...] In this extra brainy form we have plenty of beauties (as well we know) and some gay mischievous members who only just prevent us from slipping into the depths of the Sea of Latin verbs, French grammar and physiology. [...] Most of the intelligent folk of P.III.a take art.⁶⁵

These young people see themselves as the elite: clever, beautiful, funny, and artistic. Physiology is just one of the academic challenges they will surely overcome. Art provides

⁶⁴ *Wairarapa College Magazine*, 1945: 33.

⁶⁵ *Wairarapa College Magazine*, 1945: 30.

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an outlet for their creativity, and if they have to sew they do not bother to mention it. Nor is there any suggestion that anyone left school before the end of the year.

A similar picture emerges from the Papanui High School *Review*. Girls doing domestic courses were unwilling to express confidence in their ability. Class IV Hb of 1952 started with 26 girls, but “six have since left to work in city shops.” The girls describe their day, starting with child development.

After seventy minutes for revival (lunch) we face MATHS! And then English, when we enjoy showing our dramatic talents or being told stories. But essay writing is another story. [...] Quite a lot of our time is spent in designing weird shapes in Art and floral designs for applique work. In Dressmaking we create models to wear over the week-ends. [...] Although we have no sports champions or brilliant scholars, we are a happy class and enjoy our school life.⁶⁶

The girls capitalise Maths to suggest it is somehow beyond them, as is writing essays. The emphasis on happiness and enjoyment is common to contributions from other girls' forms who took domestic or commercial courses.

The same year, Shirley Booker of Form VIb gave a recipe for continuing happiness.

What a Girl Should Know (with apologies to Mrs Malaprop)

But at sixteen years of age I would let her begin to train for a career of her own choosing. As she grew up she would put aside childish fancies (the boy next door) and acquire a little sophistication so as to be eligible for marriage. But above all she must be mistress of home planning, nursing, clothing and childcare so that when she is married she can build a happy home.⁶⁷

Shirley's writing projects ahead to life as a wife and mother, where success is firmly anchored in mastery of domestic skills including clothing. School was preparing her for that life.

⁶⁶ Papanui High School *Review*, 1952: 36.

⁶⁷ Papanui High School *Review*, 1952: 52.

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The magazine of St Cuthbert's College, a girls' school, was less predictable. It featured lots of drawings from girls, including ones about fashion. While it was not averse to acknowledging that the girls were interested in clothes, it was ambivalent about the status of the subject. This is seen in the careless way it named needle-based subjects. The 1953 prize list indicates the course that included Clothing was called Modern, because it was girls from these classes that won the Sewing prizes.⁶⁸ The Regulations had been calling the subject Clothing since 1945, so the Sewing prize is a colloquial name that implies ready understanding of the role of sewing in the girls' lives. The prize was renamed the Clothing prize in 1961, 16 years after the subject was introduced.

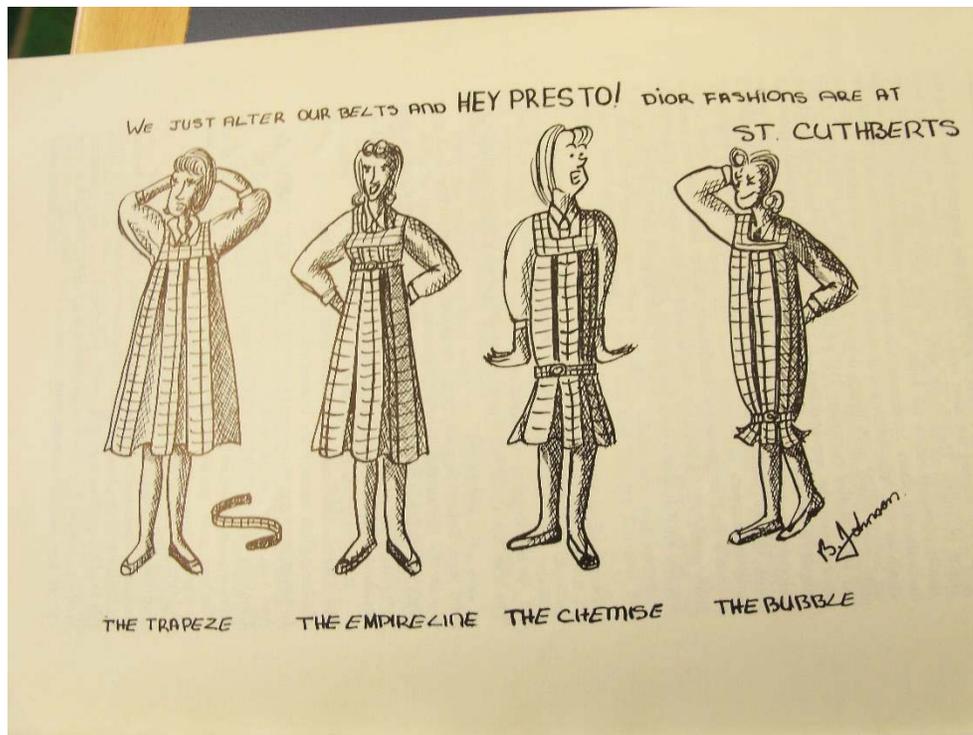


Figure 42. "Dior fashions are at St Cuthbert's." Drawing. The girls at St Cuthbert's were aware of high fashion, as this drawing shows. But the contributions to the magazine do not suggest any relationship between fashion and what was made in the Clothing classes. Fashion was something they yearned for, but not something they saw themselves cutting and stitching. *St Cuthbert's Chronicle*, 1960: 96.

⁶⁸ *St Cuthbert's Chronicle*, 1953: 8.

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Even the teachers who taught these classes are scarcely visible in the *St Cuthbert's Chronicle* relative to their colleagues. The staff list consistently named teachers for Physical Education, Art, Speech Training, and Music, but a Clothing teacher was seldom named. One teacher was named for her expertise in Domestic Science when she left the school in 1956. Mrs Perl had joined the staff in 1939 as a teacher of Domestic Science and was responsible for the girls doing the Modern course. While the farewell message acknowledges the successes of girls under Mrs Perl's care, it also makes it clear these successes were confined to the domestic and service sphere:

Whenever we hold a function where catering is called for, we are made aware of the valuable service these girls contribute so efficiently to the School. The more academically minded pupils frequently cast envious glances at garments which have been sewn by their friends in Modern forms [...] Many a mother has been grateful for the instruction in Cooking and in Dressmaking given to her daughter, and who can tell how many husbands of St Cuthbert's Old Girls have given thanks for Mrs Perl's teaching of the basics of the culinary art!⁶⁹

For these girls, school was formal training for domesticity. Mrs Perl's lessons were reinforcing the idea that these skills were mastered so they could be used in the service of others, or to make themselves more pleasing to others' sight. The piece suggests the ability to sew or cook and being "academically minded" are mutually exclusive. This supports my argument that the institutional habitus was not transformed either by interaction with domestic habitus or by the advance of modernity.

This chapter has shown that space for dressmaking in schools became increasingly specialised as girls advanced through the syllabus. Primary schools replicated domestic practice by adapting classrooms, and bringing mothers in to teach. Sewing and Clothing were taught as preparation for maternal and domestic tasks, rather than being connected to creativity and fashion. The teachers themselves might have little confidence or experience as dressmakers, because sewing skill did not help them qualify for teachers' college, although it was necessary to pass. At secondary level, teachers were more likely

⁶⁹ *St Cuthbert's Chronicle*, 1956: 21.

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to be specialists, and spaces and tools were more likely to be fit for purpose. The allocation or creation of classroom space was part of how schools confirmed that dressmaking was now the examinable subject called Clothing. But achievement in Clothing was barely recorded in school publications, the exception being Epsom Girls' Grammar School's few photographs in 1963 and 1964, and some brief reports of parades. These records suggest appearance was the only measure of success, and girls who did Clothing were not expected to talk or write about it. By contrast, the schools reported on the classrooms in which Clothing was taught, and displayed photographs of the facilities as evidence of how they met the expectation to provide spaces and tools. Separated from boys in primary school sewing lessons, girls who did Clothing at secondary school were then separated from girls deemed to be more academically able. Girls who did Clothing were being taught to become particular sorts of women, and their aptitude was understood to exclude them from the possibility of proficiency in other subjects.

Chapter 6

A necessary discipline: “Miss Smith made me mend every single one”

Velma, born in 1934, first used a paper pattern to make a garment when she was at intermediate school — about 12 years old. The experience taught her about the peculiarities of paper patterns, the importance of suitable fabric, and that her teacher liked to be in control.

I can remember going with mum to the draper to buy the material. [...] it was just an ordinary weave but it was very stiff. And it was printed with a pattern of blue roses. Anyway, we bought it and I can remember Mr Hicks measuring it off on the counter and wrapping it up and tying it up with string and breaking the string, [...] it was that tissue sort of pattern and it had, where the markings were for you to match it up, it was a triangular bit on the edge of the pattern. And the idea was that you just nicked it [...] but I cut them all. Carefully cut out, and Miss Smith [the teacher] made me mend every single one.¹

Velma had cut the dress too big, so the mended seam allowances were all trimmed after it was fitted. Miss Smith had asserted her control over the project by requiring the pointless mending. The finished garment “was so poky and awful — it had gathers [...] and I hated it and my mother thought it was dreadful and she cut it up and made it into aprons.”² Her mother’s response — to unpick the garment and re-use the fabric — satisfied the household’s practice of balancing good taste and thrift. Velma’s easy recollection of the draper’s name reinforces the idea that buying fabric was a commonplace experience for her. She had grown up seeing sewing at home as a way of using skill to create things that were aesthetically pleasing. This experience of sewing at school put more emphasis on the process than the finished product.

¹ Velma, born 1934.

² Ibid.



Figure 43. Druleigh paper pattern.

This is the style of pattern Velma would have used for her school project. Dressmakers were expected to understand how to cut and construct the garment from the code of holes, notches, and numbers on the pattern tissue. Druleigh pattern gifted by Margaret to Dinah Vincent. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

This chapter focuses on girls' experience of using tools and making garments at school to argue that sewing and dressmaking were primarily designed to teach moral and feminine habits of discipline, compliance and obedience. Like the previous chapter, it includes both primary and secondary school. It shows some girls were able to move seamlessly between home and school, while others had to reconcile established domestic practice with the different constraints imposed by school. At home, dressmaking habits formed in relation to the availability of time, space, and resources. These material elements were adapted according to taste and family values to create the desired effects. Girls accepted what they saw their mothers do as the right or normal way: Caroline's rejection of her mother's lumpy seams and Vera's dismay at her mother's trouser lengthening notwithstanding. School sewing imposed a particular version of what was right. It was right for all girls to learn to sew, and right for all girls to learn the same way. Viewed like this, sewing itself is a habit, mastery of which leads to desirable moral habits. Liora Gvion says habit can be acquired through learning and repetition, whereas habitus depends on the internalisations of cultural codes embedded in corporal practices. Whether a person internalises these habits to the point they become habitus hinges, according to Gvion, on the extent to which the resulting experience proved valuable or

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useful.³ Girls saw the value of their mothers' idiosyncratic habits of sewing and dressmaking at home — they resulted in wearable garments. School sewing, particularly at secondary level, was necessarily standardised for assessment and examination. I argue that this, combined with the emphasis on discipline, sometimes hindered the value and usefulness of the sewing habits being taught to girls.

The first stitching girls did at school was a usually a sampler of stitches, designed to practise the necessary coordination and prepare the student for more complex projects. While working on a sampler, a girl will begin to form habits in how she cuts thread, threads a needle, knots a thread, and holds the needle and fabric to stitch. Taught this way, stitching is like learning handwriting or writing lines for punishment, with the pupil repeating the form until it is perfected or the transgression overcome. Ciara McDonald uses a similar analogy when she describes the sewing syllabus in Ireland as aiming to “constitute a sort of grammar to be applied in later years, not only as a refining influence but also as a practical skill to aid women in their domesticated futures.”⁴ Samplers have been part of girls' education for several hundred years, and the act of making such a thing as an exercise can be seen as frozen in time. Rozsika Parker says they “instructed a girl in docility and accustomed her to long hours sitting still with downcast cast gaze.”⁵ Girls in New Zealand schools did not spend too many hours this way, given the maximum time allocated to the subject was two and half hours per week. But the time may have passed slowly when it was accompanied by criticism from teachers.

An example of sampler stitching that predates the period of this study is in the archive of St Cuthbert's College; the teacher's comments illustrate the punitive potential of the activity. Geraldine Grubb would have been 10 years old in 1935, and her exercise book from sewing class contains her samplers of decorative embroidery stitches, including running, cross, blanket, and chain stitches. We cannot know how Geraldine Grubb felt about sewing class; all that remains is her work and the teacher's astringent comments.

³ Gvion, “If You Ever Saw an Opera Singer Naked,” 5.

⁴ Ciara McDonald, “Needlework – a Stitch in Time,” *Thoughtlines* 6 (2002): 73.

⁵ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984), 11.

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The samplers are worked on un-hemmed rectangles of cloth, some of which have been cut with pinking shears — presumably to minimise fraying. They are attached to the pages with strips of gummed paper. The teacher comments on each one, critically in most cases: “would be more effective in thinner cotton B+ head your work Running Stitch”; “Repeat this. B Chain is worked from wrong end”; “your sewing is good but your sample is very untidy B”; “weak B-.” The comments show Geraldine was being held to account both on the execution of the work and its aesthetic appeal. Good stitching was not enough; the choice of thread and the presentation also had to be good. Without other samples to compare this to, we cannot know if the choice of black and yellow thread on yellow fabric was Geraldine’s own, or one made for her by the availability of materials in the classroom. The small samples are definitely exercises, with no practical function other than to be stuck in a book for marking. Geraldine Grubb did not end up with a wearable garment, but she did know her stitching failed to meet her teacher’s expectations.



Figure 44. Stitch samplers from a school exercise book. These samplers of blanket stitch variations show how girls built up a vocabulary of stitches. Geraldine Grubb’s 1935 exercise book, from the St Cuthbert’s archive. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

Geraldine McDonald did sewing at primary school in Wellington in the 1930s, although she has little recollection of being taught. At home, her mother made clothing using both hand and machine stitching, and was a role model for the practice. When Geraldine was

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in Standard 5, about 11 years old, her hand-stitched night-gown earned the needlework prize at the school fete; her achievement was recorded in the newspaper.⁶ This recognition of her skill did not inspire Geraldine to continue with sewing at secondary school. The combination of aptitude, maternal modelling, and perhaps good teaching, made it easy for her to comply with the school's requirement that she sew neatly. At that stage of her life, Geraldine saw sewing as something girls and women did without any fuss — she did what was expected of her.

With sewing machines becoming more common, girls may have felt frustrated at the insistence of hand-stitching. Fiona Hackney's essay on dressmaking in British magazines in the inter-war period includes a recollection from a woman forced to sew by hand at school.

I thought longingly of my Mother running up dresses on her little old sewing machine, but nobody mentioned sewing machines here; you were expected to learn to sew by hand. It was part of your education.⁷

Pupils were still sewing by hand at St Cuthbert's College after World War II, and some found it hard to see the point of the exercise. Liz was at the school from 1950 to 1960.

In Standard 6 we had to make a skirt and blouse by hand! I cut mine out [...] all fine but when I had sewn by hand the side seams on the skirt and went to school I got told in no uncertain terms that it will all come apart [...] I went home [and] unpicked it all [...] I over did the eeny weeny stitches second time round and that appeared to be what was expected.⁸

For Liz, the frustration of the need to hand-stitch was balanced by the sense of success at completing garments: "After that I got all enthusiastic and had sewing lessons at Singer in Newmarket in the school holidays and seemed to do well from then on, and I still sew." Hand-stitching did not prove itself useful enough to become a habit, but

⁶ Papers Past, *Evening Post*, Volume CXXIV, Issue 139, 9 December 1937: 24.

⁷ Fiona Hackney, "Making Modern Women, Stitch by Stitch: Dressmaking and Women's Magazines in Britain 1919-39," in Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 73.

⁸ Liz, a St Cuthbert's College old girl, Email 15 November 2013.

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making garments was sufficient spur to learn to use a machine. In turn, learning to use a machine began a habit of sewing that has persisted for 50 years.

Jocelyn remembers being in Standard 4, about 8 years old, and also learning blanket stitch. For her, the skill was not taught as a discipline for its own sake through samplers. Instead, Jocelyn's class:

made little animals [...] and stuffed them and put a safety pin on the back so it made brooches. [...] we did it with blanket stitch, you know, little dogs and things like that. And it was easily accomplished.⁹

Jocelyn's primary schooling would have been shaped by the 1929 syllabus, which gave teachers flexibility to rearrange work to suit the class (see Appendix 5). The teacher was relying on pupils being more motivated by making something, a product, than by the repetitive process of stitching for its own sake. Casey Stannard and Eulanda Sanders discuss this distinction between process and product as motivations for knitters.¹⁰ The concept of motivation is explored further in the following chapter about the interviewees' adult practice, but is useful here as a way of thinking about sewing and discipline. The 1948 revision to the Needlework syllabus was more prescriptive and emphasised process, stating "practice pieces are to be regarded not as perfect specimens to be kept, but as exercises to make certain that the child understands the processes."¹¹

Val and Lynne both worked to the 1948 syllabus at primary school, and remember stitching samplers. Val, born in 1948, dismissed it as "boring" because the tasks were things she had already mastered: "I learnt to sew on bits of sacking and we did it with wool and cross stitching. And I remember being absolutely disgusted because I could do that already."¹² She had already observed and practised sewing habits at home and craved challenges, which came as she progressed through school. Val has a piece of school

⁹ Jocelyn, born 1932.

¹⁰ Casey R. Stannard and Eulanda A. Sanders, "Motivations for Participation in Knitting among Young Women," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2015): 106.

¹¹ R3850860, The Primary School Curriculum: Revised Syllabuses: Health Education, Oral Expression, Written Expression, Spelling, Arithmetic, History and Geography, Needlework, 1948. ANZ.

¹² Val, born 1948.

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embroidery she thinks she did when she was about nine, “and I look back at it and think, how did I do that?” Her memories align perfectly with the primary syllabus, which suggested hessian and wool as materials for Standard 2 classes, moving to the introduction of “finer materials, needles, thread and stitches” by Form I.

Lynne says there were no boys in the sewing class at her school, and that everything was done by hand because the school had no sewing machines. She remembers doing different types of stitches and assumes this was a sampler. The main message Lynne got from sewing lessons at primary school was that, “We had to learn to be ladies because ladies were able to do those sorts of things. And we were reminded of that.”¹³ Lynne was receiving a message like that delivered by the London School Board in the previous century, when:

the board's first salaried needlework inspector found the image of the silent, motionless female, bent busily over her sewing a persuasive ideal of mature womanhood, and organized needlework instruction accordingly, believing that such a paragon could be moulded from infancy via the needlework curriculum.¹⁴

Lynne can also remember having to buy white fabric to make an apron and cap for cookery class, and that she had to embroider her name on the cap in red, “I was just glad I had a short name.” Like many of the interviewees, her early school sewing lessons produced items to use in that universal female workplace: the kitchen.

Jocelyn remembers the transition from the enjoyable hand-sewing of primary school to far less happy sewing in Standard 5 and 6, sometimes called Form I and II or intermediate school. Her large primary school in Masterton, a provincial town (in the North Island), had a special sewing room in a dedicated manual training block, and she was excited to be going there to do “proper” sewing, that is, sewing with a machine and making garments. Jocelyn had grown up seeing her mother completely in control of

¹³ Lynne, born 1946.

¹⁴ Annmarie Turnbull, “Learning Her Womanly Work: The Elementary School Curriculum, 1870-1914,” in Hunt, *Lessons for Life*, 88.

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scissors, needles and sewing machines in their home — the school machines came as a shock.

Most of them would break down or they'd have something wrong with them. It was war-time so they couldn't be fixed. And if you ended up with a bad machine, you spent the whole of the next time undoing what you'd done the week before. We went once a week.¹⁵

The class was taught by a specialist teacher, who failed to impress Jocelyn.

She was very old and perhaps they had to take anybody [...] As a kid you think a lot of your teachers are odd [...] She didn't have much idea. You know, she was a screamer and not very well organised.¹⁶

Jocelyn also remembers standing around a big table while the teacher demonstrated how to cut out, but she cannot remember patterns and surmises the cutting was done by measurement. Sadly, the first garment was rompers, for which the school provided “horrible navy cloth.” Jocelyn failed to complete rompers in Form I, and was supposed to make a skirt in the same fabric in Form II. “And I can remember, oh it must have been over about six weeks trying to gather it. And the thread would snap.” The skirt was never finished. The dedicated classroom did not compensate for the unreliable machines, unappealing fabric, and the volatile teacher. Jocelyn did not learn any new habits from the class, and did not have the satisfaction of creating a garment: the experience was useless.

For some girls, the final years of primary school sewing meant they created sample books. These were simple school exercise books in which pupils affixed samples of specific seams, fastenings, and facings — techniques they would use on their rompers, skirts and other garments. Margaret produced a sample book as part of her training to deliver the 1958 primary syllabus. For pupils, the book served as a reference and proof of their growing expertise. Cheryl, born in 1951, has kept her one from her final year of

¹⁵ Jocelyn, born 1932.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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primary school, 1963. It includes an embroidery stitch sampler, garment techniques, and instructions for the skirts she made. Kept together in a book, the samples are a rewarding record of the techniques a girl mastered.

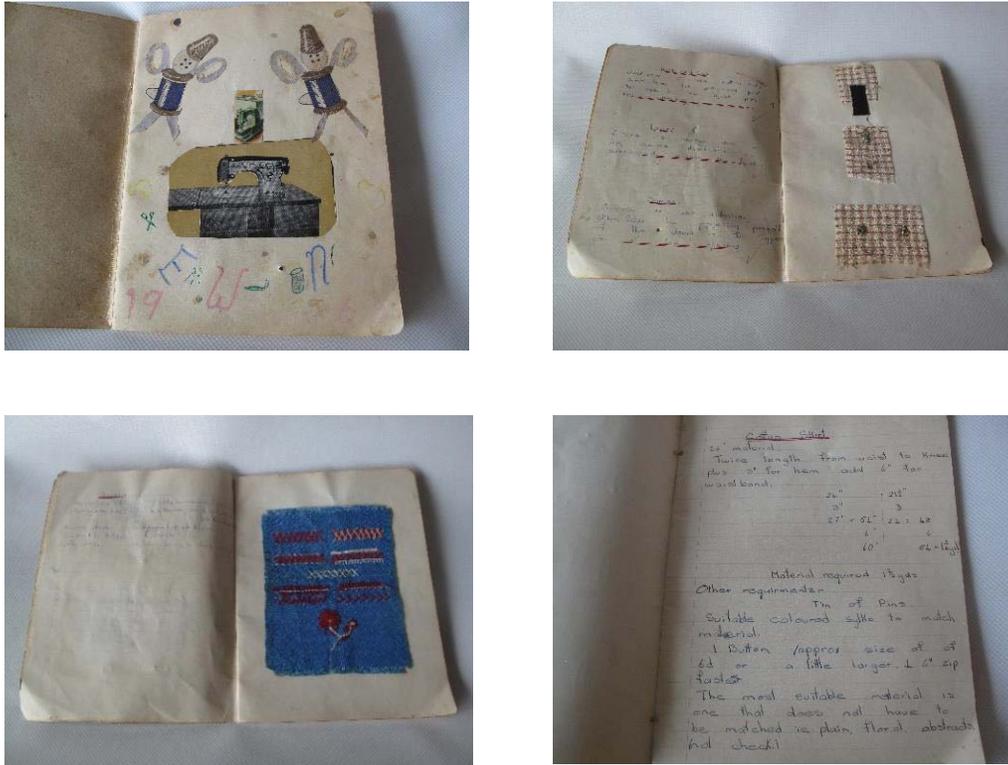


Figure 45. Cheryl's sample book.

These four images from Cheryl's Standard 6 sample book show the title page, embroidery sampler, techniques for attaching fastenings, and instructions for a skirt. The instructions include measurements and calculations for the amount of fabric Cheryl would need for the project. Photographs: Dinah Vincent.

Sample books inevitably contain a pupil's best efforts, and show the techniques worked as near as possible to perfection. When talking about sewing at home, interviewees confessed to short cuts and adaptations, but these garments did not survive as evidence. The garments that did survive are more likely to be those made with great care for special occasions, and infrequently worn. This perpetrates the idea that previous generations of women were universally competent and maintained the highest standards of stitching. The archive of St Cuthbert's College contains a school tunic that

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demonstrates a lack of care and technique in mending and attaching eyes as part of hook and eye closures (see fig. 45).



Figure 46. St Cuthbert's school tunic with visible mends.

The person who mended the waist seam and attached the eyes on this tunic did not take the trouble to match the thread or make the stitching invisible. If they had learned to affix eyes with buttonhole stitch, as seen in sample books, they did not use the technique here. School tunic in the St Cuthbert's archive. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

Sheena did not do a sample book at intermediate but she did have to do a sampler of embroidery stitches on huckaback cloth and make an apron and a skirt. Her rural primary school had only one treadle machine, and that was in the library. Like Jocelyn, she struggled with the treadle, "I was so hopeless at this treadle thing, I couldn't get it to go forwards or backwards. I can use one now, but I'd rather not."¹⁷ Sheena has her school reports from these years, and they show there were 42 girls in the class. They practised the feminine virtue of patience as they endured the discipline of waiting so they could learn treadling, a technique that would have no use beyond school if there was an

¹⁷ Sheena, born 1951.

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electric machine at home. Fortunately, mothers came into the school with portable electric machines, and Sheena used one of these to make her skirt. She finished the garment and wore it to school.



Figure 47. Sheena wearing a self-made skirt.

The girls in Sheena's Form II class made skirts. This is the first garment Sheena remembers making for herself; her mother made almost all her clothes until then. Photograph provided by Sheena.

Along with skirts, samplers, sample books, and aprons, making a sewing bag was a common experience at primary school sewing. All these items were integrated in the primary syllabi. The sewing bag can be seen from several perspectives: it was a project; it was useful; it acted as a sewing place; and it moved between home and school. The 1948 primary syllabus included bags at Standard 2 and again at Form I, and suggestion 17 was, “pupils be required to provide themselves with sewing boxes or bags containing scissors, thimble, assorted needles, a box of pins, material, and thread.”¹⁸ Implicit in suggestion 17 was the assumption that all mothers sewed and could easily provide the required tools. The 1958 syllabus advised teachers to instruct girls to make “sewing bags to hold

¹⁸ R3850860 The Primary School Curriculum: Revised Syllabuses: Health Education, Oral Expression, Written Expression, Spelling, Arithmetic, History and Geography, Needlework, 1948.

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equipment” in Standard 4. In Forms I and II, girls were expected to decorate their bags using creative needlework techniques that were part of the syllabus at that level.¹⁹

Sewing bags were made to a simple design, usually a drawstring style with a casing for the cord. While the syllabus said the bag was primarily for transporting tools to and from school, the interviewees had scant recollection of the tools. Cathie and Cheryl both recall anxiety about remembering to take their sewing bag to school on the right day. Cheryl’s sewing lessons were once a fortnight, so forgetting the bag and the enclosed project meant a great delay in progress. The bag was something else a girl was responsible for, and having it when needed was a way of demonstrating obedience and compliance.²⁰

Sheena, Cheryl, Velma, and Lyndsay all recall making a bag; most had to embroider their names or at least their initials on the bag. The quality of this work was a statement of their skills, and showed the care they had taken with the task. Cheryl still has the bag she made when she was about 11: the yellow Britway fabric is faded now, but the mauve and blue embroidery is still legible and the French seams are intact. Cheryl has a friend who uses her drawstring bag, made about the same time, as a peg bag.²¹ The other thing girls had to embroider their names on was a cap, made at the same time as an apron which they wore for cooking class. This project linked sewing and cooking as necessary skills for girls. Red appears to have been universally prescribed for names on cooking caps; casual conversations with women about this research often yielded the memory of this activity. Girls got more choice with the embroidery on their sewing bags, a labelling activity that designated ownership, responsibility and private space.

¹⁹ R3850837 Primary School Syllabuses - Sewing, Standard 4, Form I, Form II.

²⁰ Railene went to Iona College, a private boarding school. The girls were expected to have “sewing boxes and they had scissors, thread, and tape measure and in the bottom, there was room to have your material or sewing all folded up and we had lockers in the sewing room that everybody put their sewing boxes in.” Railene, born 1934.

²¹ Cheryl, born 1951.



Figure 48. Cheryl's sewing bag.

Cheryl's mother kept the sewing bag Cheryl made at primary school. It features machined French seams and stemstitch embroidery. Photographs: Dinah Vincent.

The sewing bag mimicked a domestic custom, and strengthened the idea that sewing lessons were an intersection between home and school. Most interviewees talked about their mothers having sewing bags or boxes. Even Railene and Cathie, whose mothers were not dressmakers, remember their mothers having sewing bags. A girls' own sewing bag could be seen as an accessory for role-playing as a mother, like a handbag or apron. Like mothers did at home, girls had to be tidy and keep their work clean.²² The bag ensured that sewing did not spill over to the space occupied by classmates, just as girls saw their mothers try to contain sewing at home (with varying degrees of enthusiasm and success).

Lyndsay does not remember much detail about her sewing bag, other than it being a required item. When asked if she had to provide her own equipment for school sewing, she said:

I would have thought we had to have our own tin of pins or pin cushion. Can't remember what, although I remember in later life this pin cushion with a name on it. So we probably had to have our own pin cushion. And a cloth bag we took

²² Many authors gave advice on keeping work clean. In her *Concise Manual of Sewing*, Alice White says, "Needlework can be kept clean and fresh by placing it in a white cloth, such as a clean cloth, an old pillow slip or piece of sheeting." White, 9.

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our gear to and from school. That gear, what we were sewing on, plus our tape measure and so-on went home with us that night. It didn't stay at school.²³

These blurred memories of which tools were used at school and which at home are typical of the interviewees, particularly when remembering primary school sewing. This supports the idea that sewing space in primary schools was created by the activity — and sometimes by the appearance of a mother and her sewing machine. Even when schools had a dedicated room, as most secondary schools did, it was inevitably used by several classes over the course of a day or a week. Making and using a sewing bag at primary school created the habit of remembering to bring it, and packing it up again at the end of a lesson.



Figure 49. Girls in a sewing class, undated.

This image suggests work was stored in boxes between classes, rather than carried to and from school in bags. We see girls practising both hand and machine stitching in a classroom that was specially set up for sewing. R21010781 Christchurch South Intermediate School – Girls' dressmaking class, 1900–1947. ANZ.

²³ Lyndsay, born 1940.

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While sewing at primary school was a given for all girls in public schools in New Zealand, as discussed in chapter 5, there was less certainty they would hold a needle at secondary school. All pupils enrolled for full-time instruction at a post-primary school were required to follow the common core curriculum, which included “a craft or one of the fine arts,”²⁴ regardless of whether they did an academic, commercial, or domestic course. For girls, “Home Crafts are regarded as satisfying the requirements of ‘a craft.’”²⁵ Some schools railed against the requirement for a craft, and sought dispensation from the Department so academically able girls could devote more class time to subjects perceived as important.²⁶ Individual schools must have responded differently to the guidance because some of the interviewees had no recall of sewing at secondary school. This was true for Sheena and Val, both of whom did academic courses and did not touch a needle at secondary school. Sheena was not even sure if her secondary school offered Clothing as a subject. In Sheena’s family, there was a firm expectation that all four girls would go to university, and a course that included Clothing was not seen as helping with this goal. For Val, the pressure seems to have come from the school, which had identified her as an academically able pupil. Val knew Clothing was available, but it was not an option in the academic stream. This exclusion demonstrates another way that girls were under pressure to comply. Both Sheena and Val enjoyed sewing and had successfully made garments before starting secondary school, but they had to comply with a convention that put dressmaking outside the realm of what was acceptable for them to study at school. They had the potential to achieve good marks in Clothing for their School Certificate examination, but did not have the option to use that ability.

²⁴ R19237274, School Certificate Examination Regulations, 1934–1954.

²⁵ Roger Openshaw, Gregory Douglas Lee, and Howard F. Lee, *Challenging the Myths: Rethinking New Zealand's Educational History* (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1993), 171.

²⁶ In March 1940, the Headmistress of Waikato Diocesan School for Girls wrote to the Director of Education seeking permission for a girl to drop Home Science for Geography so she could sit School Certificate and UE in six subjects: English, French, Latin, Maths, History and Geography. The reply on behalf of the Director stated, “The Department requires all girls in registered private secondary schools to learn some form of applied domestic work (cooking or needlework) for the first two years of their secondary course, for at least one hour per week. They should also learn some elementary science in the first and second years, but there is no necessity to continue with science after the second year.” R7208918 Secondary education. Courses of instruction. Domestic Science, 1931–1977.

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Jocelyn and Lyndsay are examples of girls who did sewing in the first years of secondary school despite having no intention of being examined in the subject. Jocelyn's experience just predates the introduction of the common core curriculum, but Jocelyn describes a marked improvement in the quality of the sewing teaching at secondary school. Her recollection of "properly trained teachers" is confirmed by the staff list in the school magazine.²⁷ Nevertheless, having to sew at school felt like a pointless discipline, because she still had to make unattractive garments on treadle machines that she found near impossible to manage. Jocelyn's habit of failing to complete garments was consolidated at secondary school.

Lyndsay's experience showed her school complied with Department of Education expectations of how the common core curriculum should be implemented. Lyndsay took a "professional" course with French, and did Art in Form III and Sewing in Form IV. Like Sheena and Val, she had already developed some sewing skills and completed garments at primary school. She made three garments in Form IV: a wind breaker, a dress, and a blouse. She remembers the classes as "a pleasant diversion from the academic stuff."²⁸ The three garments she made all taught specific skills: inserting an open-ended zipper, binding buttonholes, and managing a reverse collar. Lyndsay says:

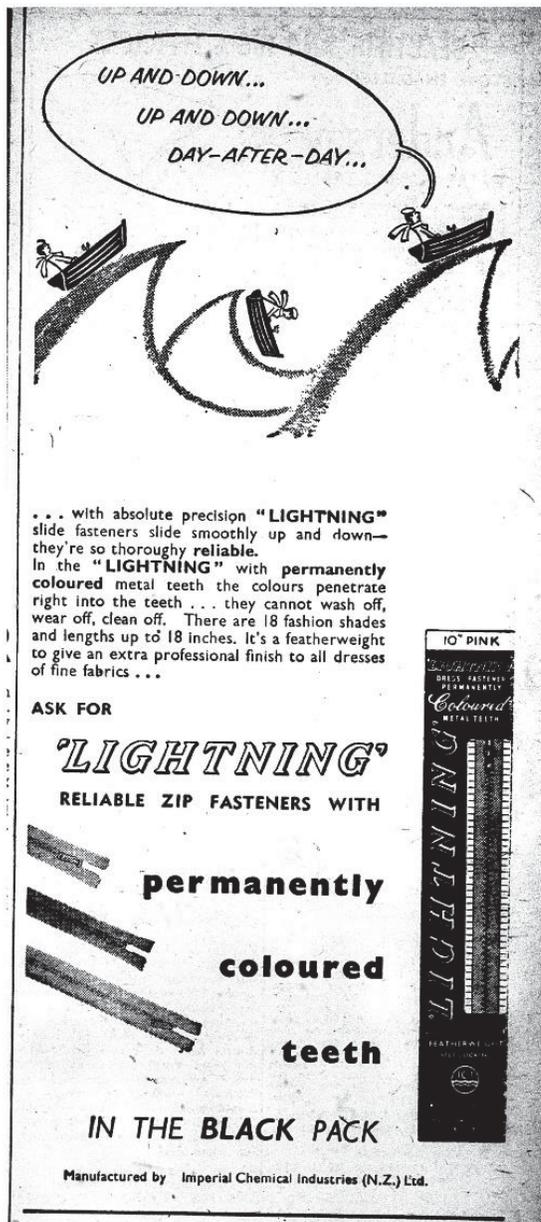
The gabardine wind breaker was brown and much used. [...] The dress had bound buttonholes and it was a cotton dress, and I had chosen buttons that were probably an inch across and they were too heavy. I remember that. There should have been more stiffening I think in the facing. Anyhow I learned to do bound buttonholes through that.²⁹

Fifty years later, Lyndsay can remember both the success of the wind breaker, and the dissatisfaction with the buttons on the dress. In keeping with her easy approach, she focuses on what she learned from the experience.

²⁷ The staff lists in the *Wairarapa College Magazine* include women with Dip H.Sc. and B.H.Sc.

²⁸ Lyndsay, born 1940.

²⁹ Ibid.



UP AND DOWN...
UP AND DOWN...
DAY-AFTER-DAY...

... with absolute precision "LIGHTNING" slide fasteners slide smoothly up and down—they're so thoroughly reliable. In the "LIGHTNING" with permanently coloured metal teeth the colours penetrate right into the teeth... they cannot wash off, wear off, clean off. There are 18 fashion shades and lengths up to 18 inches. It's a featherweight to give an extra professional finish to all dresses of fine fabrics...

ASK FOR

'LIGHTNING'
RELIABLE ZIP FASTENERS WITH

**permanently
coloured
teeth**

IN THE BLACK PACK

Manufactured by Imperial Chemical Industries (N.Z.) Ltd.

10" PINK
DRESS FASTENERS
PERMANENTLY
Coloured
METAL TEETH
LIGHTNING
FEATHERWEIGHT
EASY LOCKING

Figure 50. Lightning zippers advertisement.

Zippers were part of the modernisation of dressmaking, an advance from the hook and eye and button closures commonly used in the early twentieth century. Girls who learned sewing at school post-war were taught how to use modern fabrics and trims, including zippers. NZWW, 12 April 1956: 51.

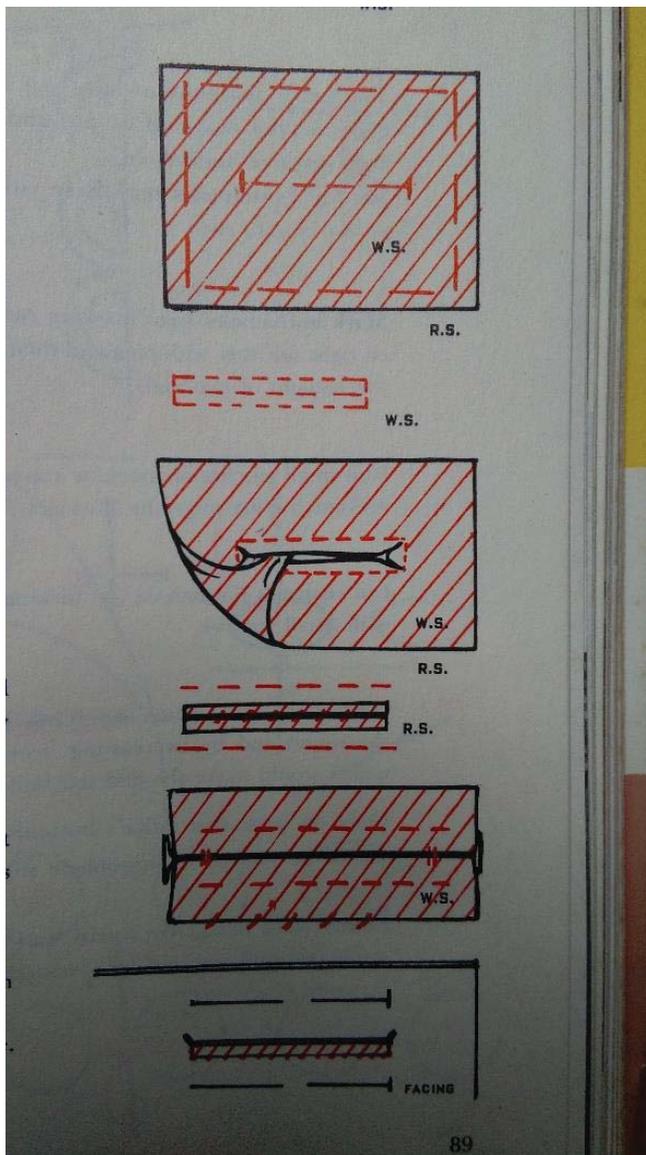


Figure 51. Instructions for a bound buttonhole. Illustration.

At primary school, girls learned to hand-stitch buttonholes that can be worked on finished garment. By secondary school, they learned bound buttonholes that must be created as the garment is being constructed. Resek and Resek, *Successful Dressmaking*, 89.

The interviewees who did not do academic courses did not stay for the fifth year of secondary school, and sometimes left as soon as possible. This was true for Velma, Joy, and Vera, all of whom left school as soon as they turned 15, before sitting the School Certificate examination. Velma, born in 1934, did a course described as “Art” at Auckland Girls Grammar, although it included Domestic Science subjects. Velma

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learned washing and ironing skills, and cooking. Her time at secondary school got off to a bad start because of the polio epidemic. Schools were closed for the first term of 1947, so Velma started secondary school by correspondence. Once classes did start, a couple of things became clear to Velma. The Art course was “designed for the no hopes” and “we had a pretty brummy lot of teachers because it was the end of the war.”³⁰ Velma also realised that between home and the teaching she had had at intermediate school, there was not much more for her to learn about domestic subjects. She does not think this made her unique.

It’s notable that anybody who had a mother or came from a family where it was routine to make your own clothes and whatever — they did extremely well at school but not really because of what you were being taught, because you knew it already.³¹

Velma’s comment connects what you knew with what you wore. Girls like her and her classmates had a lifetime of evidence that showed the relationship between dressmaking skill and appearance. In Velma’s case, this included seeing her mother work with limited resources, often renovating garments. Miss Smith’s class had introduced her to using commercial patterns, and the Clothing course gave her a chance to develop her patternmaking skill. The Regulations for the Clothing course included “Study of Patterns” as one of nine topics. The topic is described as:

How to choose and use commercial patterns. The making of simple foundation patterns and designing from these. Practice in taking measurements; estimate of quantity of material; rules for cutting; economy in placing patterns on materials.³²

Velma welcomed the idea of a learning system that would help her achieve the effect she wanted from a piece of fabric. Neither she, nor her mother, were inclined to take the risk of “freehand dressmaking” advocated by Carol Tulloch’s interviewee Anella, who released what was inside her by drawing or cutting directly into fabric.³³ Instead, Velma

³⁰ Velma, born 1934.

³¹ Ibid.

³² R19237274, School Certificate Examination Regulations, 1934–1954.

³³ Tulloch, “There’s No Place Like Home,” 114.

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could see the value of extending her knowledge to increase the chance that she could create the look she wanted.

We were taught how to spread patterns and it was very instructive. We used coloured paper [...] We cut it to spread to get a pattern to the right size. You started by drawing what you wanted [...] It was basic but it was good enough that I could do something reasonably well.³⁴

If she had stayed at school to take the examination in 1950, Velma would have had to “show by diagrams how you would cut, from foundations patterns for bodice and skirt, working patterns for [a blouse and skirt].”³⁵ But Velma had learned enough in the first two year to use her knowledge at home:

We used to save the white butcher’s paper because newsprint was too off-putting for when you wanted to draw bits on it. Nothing was ever wasted in our house. I would use that, and the sitting room floor [...] And crawl around and re-cut and so-on.³⁶

Velma’s knowledge allowed her to see patternmaking as an opportunity to exercise imagination and begin to create her vision of herself. Like Tulloch’s case study subject, Velma had a clear sense of what was “inside of her.”³⁷ At the same time, imagination was curtailed by the scarcity of paper to make the patterns, let alone the fabric to cut the garment.

³⁴ Velma, born 1934.

³⁵ R17873615 School Certificate Examination, 1950.

³⁶ Velma, born 1934.

³⁷ Tulloch, “There’s No Place Like Home,” 114.

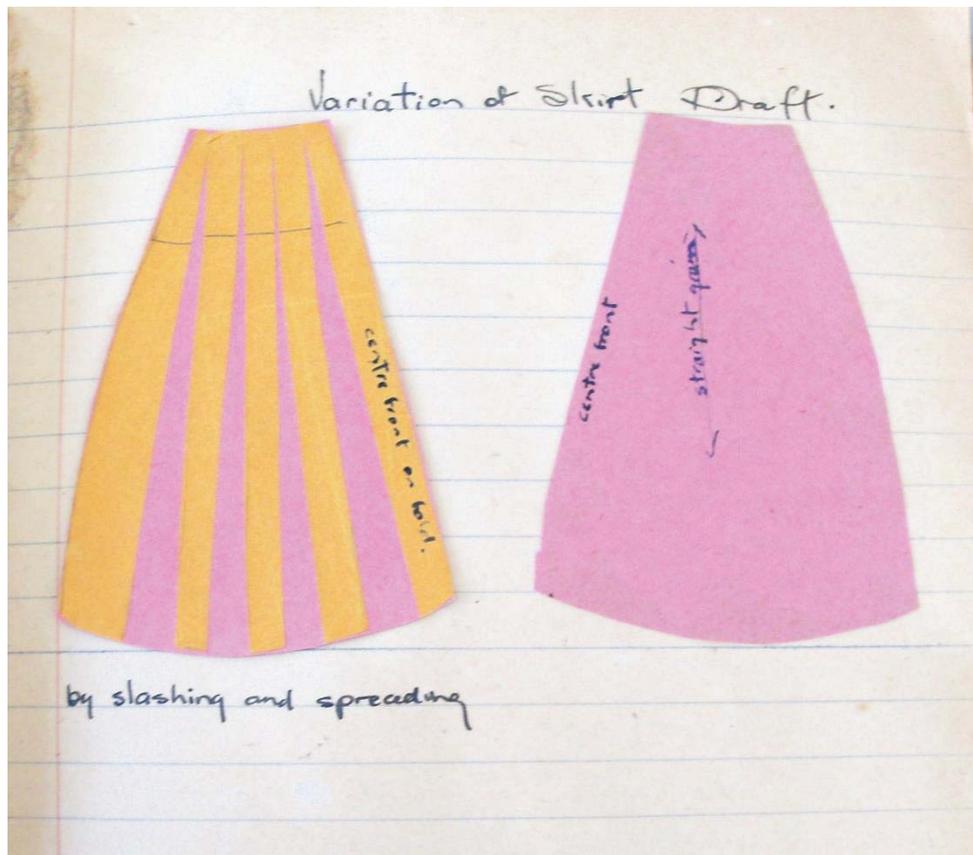


Figure 52. Patternmaking instructions in school exercise book.

Dressmakers can add fullness, flare, and pleats to styles by slashing and spreading paper patterns. Girls learned this technique at school and could use it to adapt commercial patterns and create their own unique styles. 1944 exercise book from Epsom Girls' Grammar School archive. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

Joy, born in 1936, did not have a maternal model, and arrived at secondary school with limited knowledge of sewing. She went to Grey High, a co-educational secondary school that separated boys and girls. She has no recollection of choosing a course of study, but found herself in the Domestic Science course: "the dumb people's course."³⁸ This perception lessened the chance that Joy might see anything she was taught as meeting Gvion's test habits of being valuable or useful, and therefore becoming part of habitus.³⁹ Joy's assessment of her school course is confirmed in Sue Middleton's interviews with New Zealand women educated after World War II.

³⁸ Joy, born 1936.

³⁹ Gvion, "If You Ever Saw an Opera Singer Naked," 5.

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The women in my study noted that commercial streams were perceived by academic girls and teachers as “dumb classes.” Furthermore, commercial and other “lower stream” girls were often perceived by academic girls (whether it was true or not) as more sexually active - as “tarts.”⁴⁰

Although Joy understood the course as being for dumb people, Clothing did not turn out to be easy for her. She had not had what Velma saw as the advantage of having a mother who sewed. The teacher, Miss McDonald, was old and bossy. The projects were not appealing: aprons, bloomers, and tablecloths. Joy says navy blue fabric was handed out for rompers — “dished out for every person so they’d all be the same.” She queued to use a sewing machine. And she remembers lots of unpicking when her work failed to meet the expected standard. Joy’s memories of the sewing class suggest its primary purpose was to enforce discipline on girls who were not expected to work outside the home. In the midst of this bleakness, there was one classmate who sewed beautifully. Joy concedes the girl’s positive attitude may have helped, and meant the teacher treated her differently and gave her more time on the machines. Joy herself has no sense of having learned anything from this class, and certainly did not form any useful habits. She left school as soon as she turned 15 and got a job.

Vera, born in 1945, missed the first week of secondary school because she was at a swimming competition. Vera had chosen a commercial course, but included Clothing because it was something she was interested in and capable of. When she asked her classmates what she needed to do for the class, she heard the first project was to be a plain, straight skirt. Accordingly, she and her mother went shopping.

We went into town and we bought the piece of material and it was a piece of Donegal tweed, gold, cream winter wool fabric, lining, a zip and a pattern. And I got to school. And the other thing was they had to have it cut out by the time they came back to school. [...] So I cut it out, and I pinned it together and I packed it together and I took it to the class.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Middleton, *Women and Education*, 102.

⁴¹ Vera, born 1945.

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And that is where things began to go wrong. To Vera's mind, she had complied with what was asked of her. But the teacher queried the complexity of the pattern, which included a kick pleat and welt pockets. A cycle began whereby Vera would work on the skirt at home, and the teacher would insist that work done at home be unpicked. This was the teacher's most powerful means of asserting control and imposing discipline. Ciara McDonald describes sewing as a form of discipline in Irish schools, where the syllabus was unchanged from 1831 to 1971 and was praised for "encourag[ing] habits of accuracy, neatness, order and economy."⁴² One of her interviewees recalls a teacher who demanded students unpick and re-do work as a means of enforcing authority, while purporting to teach discipline.⁴³ Vera's story is one of several that show this technique was also used in New Zealand schools.

Vera's experience shows the flipside of what Velma saw as the advantage of coming from a home where dressmaking as a common practice. As an examinable subject, Clothing could be seen as distinct from home practice. Vera's teacher may have subscribed to the views held by L. E. Eason, who warned against help from mothers and friends in *Clothing: A Practical Course for Post-Primary Schools*.⁴⁴ Vera herself subscribed to a view held by one of Sally Helvenston and Margaret Bubolz's interviewees who "felt her teacher didn't know very much."⁴⁵ Vera did not try to comply further, instead, "I used to duck around and ignore her."⁴⁶ Perhaps because of her mother's insistence on good quality fabric, Vera's project survived the unpicking. She finished the skirt, and wore it frequently, "It was a beautiful skirt. It had pockets and it had a band on the top of the pocket, [...] and a button on it. And the zip in the back and a kick pleat. And it was lined."⁴⁷ While Vera's interest and ability had the potential to make her a model pupil, her competence appears to have made her a target for negative attention. She completed

⁴² *Irish School Monthly*, 1900 3: 22 cited in McDonald, 73.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Eason, 87.

⁴⁵ Helvenston and Bubolz, "Home Economics," 314.

⁴⁶ Vera, born 1945.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

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the year, but did not take Clothing the following year and left school as soon as she turned 15.

Cheryl, born in 1951, went to a co-educational secondary school. She did a commercial course which meant she was in a girls-only class. They did sewing for the first two years as required by the curriculum. Like other interviewees, it seems likely she could have managed Clothing at School Certificate but did the subjects the school stipulated for a commercial course, “I was not the sort of girl who questioned what the school suggested.” Cheryl remembers her sewing teacher, Mrs Green, as “a nicely presented woman who wore tailored clothes, stockings and dress shoes, and was always made up and had her hair done.” While Mrs Green served as a role model in terms of personal grooming, she was not an effective teacher — not that Cheryl challenged her at the time. Looking back, Cheryl recognises that Mrs Green did not explain concepts. This meant Cheryl was unable to replicate things independently. So complete was her failure to understand how to apply a facing, she became adept at binding edges instead.

Even though Cheryl was doing sewing as a craft rather than Clothing for School Certificate, her class appears to have followed the Regulations. These stated girls should make baby clothes, along with children’s clothes and a renovation. By including these types of garments, the Regulations were reinforcing the connection between dressmaking and maternal domesticity. None of the interviewees mentioned renovating a garment at school, and Cheryl is the only one who talked about baby clothes at this level.⁴⁸ The project Mrs Green set for Cheryl’s class was a smocked baby gown. Cheryl was very keen to do this project, having seen the gowns from a previous class pinned on the sewing room wall. She was particularly struck by the deep hems on the fine lawn garments. Cheryl’s teacher was not alone in using work from previous classes to inspire pupils. Writing about home economics classes in the United States, Helvenston and Bubolz quote Peggy who had, “a vivid memory of her ninth-grade home economics teacher showing the class a beautiful pink spun rayon dress made by a senior in which

⁴⁸ Lyndsay had made a baby’s blouse at intermediate school although that was an alternative to making an apron, not a prescribed activity.

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the hem was invisible.”⁴⁹ Examples of successful work were used to inspire girls like Cheryl and Peggy to strive for the same type of disciplined femininity.

Cheryl still has the smocked gown, which was made to a pattern provided by the school. The only choice Cheryl had was the colour; she chose blue. The gown is well made and shows evidence of many techniques. The yoke is cut with the selvedge at the centre back seam, removing the need for seam neatening. Other seams are neatened with a combination of double rows of straight stitching and a zig-zag stitch. The back opening of the skirt has a bound placket, and the neck and sleeves are bound with a bias strip. The button holes are hand worked, as is the smocking. The gown features the deep hem, but that hem is not stitched with the original thread. When Cheryl’s sons were born, she considered remaking the gown into a romper, more suitable for a boy. She got as far as unpicking the hem and thinking about how to re-arrange the skirt, but did not proceed. She re-hemmed the gown before my visit. The gown remains as evidence of Cheryl’s willingness to obey instructions, and a tacit acceptance of the possibility of motherhood.



Figure 53. Smocked baby gown made by Cheryl at secondary school. Cheryl and her classmates made smocked baby gowns in class. Cheryl kept the garment but it has never been worn. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

⁴⁹ Helvenston and Bubolz, “Home Economics,” 313.

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Two of the interviewees, Cathie and Caroline, completed the Clothing course and sat and passed the School Certificate examination. For Caroline, this was sufficient to gain entry to teachers' college, while Cathie went straight to a clerical job. Both followed the pattern Helen May suggests was expected of them: that employment was an interim step before motherhood.⁵⁰

Cathie arrived at secondary school without the benefit of having seen dressmaking or even much sewing at home. What she did have was the example of her mother's pride in her appearance, and a keen interest in looking good. She has kept a sample of embroidery stitches worked in wool on an open weave embroidery cloth, and a sample book that includes facing, hem, and collar techniques as well as the seams and fastenings seen in primary school sample books. Once Cathie got the basics of dressmaking at secondary school, she was able to satisfy her desire to look nice. Part of looking nice was being on trend. In the mid-1950s that meant, "All my dresses looked the same — gathered skirts with round neck, no sleeves."⁵¹ She must have fulfilled the requirements of the course because she passed, but her marks were not important to her. Cathie took one of those full-skirted dresses she was making at school home so she could hem it on her grandmother's treadle machine and wear it on a Saturday night. Back at school, she lost marks on the garment because the teacher expected a hand-stitched hem. Her teacher did not insist that she undo and re-hem it, relying on a bad mark as sufficient discipline. When Cathie did hem dresses by hand, she worked for speed not finesse: her father coined the phrase "homeward bound" stitches to describe her technique.⁵² She alone of the interviewees appears to have both developed and sustained dressmaking habits directly from school classes.

⁵⁰ May, *Minding Children*, 3.

⁵¹ Cathie, born 1940.

⁵² Ibid.



Figure 54. Cathie's sample book, showing collars. Girls who did Clothing for School Certificate progressed from creating samples of fastenings and seam finishes to construction elements such as facings, pockets, and collars. Cathie produced these collars in chambray for her book. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

Caroline, born in 1941, also did Clothing as part of her School Certificate course. Although her mother was not a confident sewer, Caroline had already learned to sew. For her, the structured exercises of the School Certificate class were a welcome discipline. They were increasingly challenging, starting with an apron that had bands of contrasting fabric, knickers with flat-fell seams, then a petticoat with French seams:

Then we did something with buttonholes. We also had a book — we had to make samples with seams and finishes and button holes — all these bits and pieces, and samples of different fabrics, cotton, rayon, silk and how it was made and where they came from. And somebody said we had a Simplicity sewing books.⁵³ I can't remember.⁵⁴

⁵³ The *Simplicity Sewing Book* was a suggested text in the 1958 primary school syllabus, but teachers may also have used it for reference at secondary schools.

⁵⁴ Caroline, born 1941.

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Caroline had more choice about garments as she progressed through the course, “I remember making a house coat and it cost a fortune because it turned out to be a one-way pattern [...] but it was lovely, I loved it.”⁵⁵

Another successful project was denim pedal pushers, for which she also made “a red and white striped shirt and matching espadrilles. And I was just the thing.” Caroline had sufficient skill, confidence, and style to produce clothes that satisfied her desire to be in fashion. But that was not the point of Clothing as a school subject. She and her classmates were supposed to be making what Jagger describes as “the normative and subjugated image of the heterosexually desirable female.”⁵⁶ Pedal pushers did not necessarily conform to that image, and were associated with being “bodgies” and “widgies,”⁵⁷ which were threatening manifestations of non-conformist teenage culture. Redmer Yska’s analysis of teenage culture in New Zealand in the 1950s describes a policeman insisting his daughter cut up her home-made pedal pushers because “what you wear, how you are seen, you will be judged on that.”⁵⁸ Fortunately for Caroline, her teacher and her mother embraced both modernity and fashion. Caroline was not disciplined, either at school or at home, for failing to comply with a conventional full-skirted femininity. When asked whether she was proud of what she made and wore, Caroline said, “You wanted something to wear so you made it and you wore it. Perhaps mother was more proud of me.”⁵⁹

Alison, born in 1942, did a professional course at Wellington Girl’s College. This meant she had no expectation of doing sewing or cooking when she started secondary school. But she was part of the cohort that went through the “block scheme” run by the Home Science department.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Jagger, “Consumer Bodies,” in *The Body, Culture and Society: An Introduction* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 58.

⁵⁷ New Zealand nightclub manager Rainton Hastie described widgie gangs in Auckland in 1955 thus: “Widgies wore low pump shoes and skin-tight long pants, a big wide belt and a blouse, and their hair was always up. They got the idea from Betty Grable and Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.” Yska, *All Shook Up*, 183.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁹ Caroline, born 1941.

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We had seven afternoons off to do sewing, seven afternoons off to do cooking. And at the end of the period each class invited the mothers to a mannequin parade to display their dresses and to have afternoon tea which they had catered.⁶⁰

Alison's word choice is telling — time spent on sewing and cooking was time “off.” This alternative occupation created an opportunity to bring home and school together by bringing mothers in to see their daughters were capable of the tasks of motherhood. And the course marked a milestone in Alison's life: she remembers this as the first time she had been able to choose fabric for herself. Dressmaking at school was imposing on the habitus within Alison's family whereby older women made choices about what would be made and therefore worn. For these seven lessons, the school set the rules. Alison remembers it was tightly prescribed:

You were to make a dress with a square neck. It had to have a pattern, [...] sleeveless, had to have a zip, set in waist [...] And it was supposed to be floral. And I can remember I went to Thompson's silk shop. [...] And we chose this fabric that was white background and it had pink carnations [...] with green stems and leaves and there was a bit of black in the background, a sort of sprinkle of black. And we had to buy the zip and the cotton, and the pattern. [...] And there was no such thing as iron-on stiffening for the facings. [...] But there was something for stiffening which I remember having great difficulty with.⁶¹

Dresses had always seemed to materialise at Alison's home, thanks to the skills of the women in her family. The block course showed Alison the reality of making a dress, but it did not teach her to sew. That happened when she went to classes as a young mother, which is discussed in chapter 7. The culmination of the block course was the afternoon tea and mannequin parade for mothers. It was not enough that girls made themselves

⁶⁰ Alison, born 1942.

⁶¹ Ibid.

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dresses — they had to exhibit themselves in those dresses. The final discipline was to subject oneself to the gaze of an audience, hopefully one of approving mothers.

This discipline of display was part of sewing and Clothing at other secondary schools. *The Wairarapa College Magazine* includes a report on the demonstration night at the Home Science department at the end of 1947. The night was a chance for girls to exhibit their feminine accomplishments. A spectacular event of the evening was the mannequin parade in which some 50 girls participated. Amid floral decorations arranged by budding florists of the Sixth Form, the girls displayed their pinafore dresses, summer frocks and evening dresses to best advantage.⁶²

At St Cuthbert's College, the work of the Modern classes was on display at a parents' day held on 29 October 1953, described in the school magazine as follows:

Wearing the garments they had made in class, the girls from these Forms paraded from Melrose, [one of the school boarding houses] across the lawn to the dining room and back to Melrose [...] The fashion parade concluded with Year VI girls modelling evening frocks, the patterns of which were designed and drafted by each girl.⁶³

The display of work from the Lower School featured embroidered mats by Standard 2 girls, while the Standard 6 girls wore gypsy skirts and blouses — which were likely stitched by hand. These events were proof of discipline and obedience, the culmination of careful attention to the teacher and her instruction. By appearing in their self-made garments at school, girls were visible evidence of compliance with expectations of what good women would be and look like.

This chapter and the preceding one have highlighted the similarities and differences between how girls experienced dressmaking at home and at school. They show how the education system appropriated certain elements of domestic habitus to achieve cultural reproduction. The subject was taught by women for girls, and parents (mothers) were

⁶² *The Wairarapa College Magazine* 1948, 12.

⁶³ *St Cuthberts' Chronicle* 1953, 36.

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expected to be involved as providers of tools and materials, and witnesses of successes. At the same time, schools tried to isolate Clothing as a secondary school subject from domestic dressmaking by insisting on particular techniques and projects, and making connections with other subjects in the curriculum. Discipline is fundamental to schools and this chapter has shown the way sewing was used to impose particular feminine and domestic disciplines on girls. At primary school, girls were separated from boys to learn stitches, first as a means of decorating samplers, then to construct items that were associated with domestic work. The transition from stitching as an exercise, a process, to making an item, a product, was a significant milestone. As they progressed through school, girls began to use stitching to make garments for themselves, although their choices were largely prescribed. While the primary syllabus spoke of aesthetic values and the Regulations included design, girls worked within controlled environments that gave limited scope for personal expression. The ethos of dressmaking at school was conformity — in matters of style, taste, and technique. Girls who stayed at school and complied could achieve academic success in the form of School Certificate, although the possibility of this achievement was not always an incentive to stay at school. And failure to stay and comply did not preclude girls from developing habits that contributed to the formation of dressmaking habitus in life after school. The following chapter looks at the adult practice of some of the interviewees, to see how it evolved over their lifetimes.

Chapter 7

The motivation to keep dressmaking: “I shook it off and made the dress up”

When asked to recall recent sewing projects, Caroline described having the pattern for a shirt dress laid out on fabric on her living room floor the day of the Christchurch earthquake in February 2011.¹

When I came home after the earthquake, the pot plants were all over it. Luckily the potting mix was fairly dry. I shook it off and made the dress up. I wore it last year. I just bring the sewing machine out and put it on the dining table. It was not out at the time of the earthquake.²

Caroline’s home was damaged by the earthquake and, like many Cantabrians, she had years of disruption and uncertainty ahead of her. But dressmaking was something that survived the shock. Cutting out and making the dress was normal; abandoning the project would have been abnormal. When Caroline wore the dress, a friend commented that it was nice and asked where it was from. As she has done so often in her life, she was able to say, “I made it.”³ Dressmaking has been part of Caroline’s life since she taught herself to sew as a child. After doing Clothing as part of her School Certificate course at secondary school, she made all her own clothes when she was at teachers’ college.⁴ As a young wife, with two little girls, she said, “I was sewing all the time. I made most of their things.” Those words could easily have come from Railene, Joy, Margaret, Lyndsay, Cathie, Lynne, Cheryl, or Sheena — all of whom sewed for themselves and their children as young mothers and continued to sew throughout their lives. Caroline

¹ The magnitude 6.3 earthquake killed 185 people and caused extensive damage to the city.

² Caroline, born 1941.

³ Affirmations have been identified as a motivation for knitters, who wear their creations in anticipation of compliments. Caroline’s story suggests the motivation applies to dressmaking too. Stannard and Sanders, “Motivations,” 109.

⁴ Caroline’s teaching career was short: she did one year with a new-entrants class before giving up. She did not have to teach any sewing because the pupils were too young.

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bought a length of material the day before she was interviewed for this research (in October 2013), indicating she had another project in mind.

This chapter looks at sewing practice in adult life, using the interview subjects to consider what motivates women to continue the practice. I am arguing that this later practice will strongly reflect the skills and attitudes learned as girls, but will necessarily adapt as practitioners go through different life stages.⁵ Like Carla Cesare, I have looked at home dressmaking — “gathering and reviewing [...] collections of the ordinary” to “reveal the diversity of everyday lives.”⁶ The preceding chapters showed factors that affected dress strategies for Pākehā (European) girls and women in New Zealand in the early to mid-twentieth century. These were the availability (or shortage) of ready-made clothing, machines, patterns, and fabrics, and the expectation that girls and women would sew — an expectation reinforced by newspapers, magazines, and the education system. These factors combined to make dressmaking a valid and reliable dress strategy for many. While these factors were common, girls responded to them differently and attributed their own meaning to the practice. By adulthood, the women had deeply seated dispositions formed in response to their experience.⁷ I argue that their diverse individual practices are motivated by the need to: please others, please themselves, experiment with particular fabrics,⁸ achieve technical excellence, feel comfortable, and control their appearance. Life had taught them that dressmaking was a way to meet these needs, and this motivated them to continue with the practice.

I did not directly ask women what motivated them, instead I analysed the interviews to identify motivations and needs which were fulfilled by dressmaking. These motivations are broadly similar to those identified by Sherry Schofield-Tomschin in her review of

⁵ Lifetime collections of domestic dressmaking are relatively rare for reasons outlined in chapter 1. One UK example is Rachel Rosta, whose wardrobe is held at the York Museums Trust, and “capture[s] her engagement with fashion over time as a child, a young woman, a working mother and as she became older.” Buckley and Clark, *Fashion and Everyday Life*.

⁶ Cesare, “Sewing the Self,” 22.

⁷ John Scott, ed. *Fifty Key Sociologists: The Contemporary Theorists* (London: Routledge, 2007), 43.

⁸ My analysis of this motivation draws on Lilian Mutsaers’ work on the potential of unmade cloth. Mutsaers, “Unpacking Mrs Wood’s Suitcases.”

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surveys of American home sewers in the twentieth century.⁹ The dominant motivations were economy, quality, fit, creativity, and psychological well-being. Caroline's completion of her dressmaking project after the earthquake is an example of using the activity to maintain psychological well-being through engaging with a familiar activity, which might be more simply described as sewing for comfort. Dressmaking had been giving Caroline a sense of success and security for over 60 years.

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Figure 55. Gibraltar Board advertisement.

Sewing and dressmaking were activities associated with mothers and home, which are in turn associated with comfort and security. Advertisements like this one made a direct link between sewing and security. *ODT*, 16 August 1956: 16.

⁹ Schofield-Tomschin, "Home Sewing."

The motivation to keep dressmaking

Previous chapters identified themes that were common to the interviewees' early experience of dressmaking at home and school. As girls, and through to adolescence, most of the interviewees reported having very little choice about their clothing. They wore the clothes that were provided for them at home, and stitched (with varying degrees of success) the projects that were set at school. In their childhood homes, interviewees connected dressmaking to maternal duty, inherited skill, being judged (for appearance and competence), thrift, and ease. Girls' access to and affinity with the tools of sewing, particularly the sewing machine, were important in developing their interest. At school, these experiences were overlaid with expectations of learning specific techniques and demonstrating certain behaviours, notably obedience and compliance. Interviewees' experience of dressmaking in their adult lives picked up on some of these themes. A shared enjoyment of dressmaking emerged as the foundation of friendships, some of which formed in school classes and others developed from adult practice.

While many interviewees talked of sewing as mothers for their own children, none made any special effort to ensure their daughters learned to sew. Instead the interviewees seemed mildly, but pleasantly, surprised if their daughters decided to take up dressmaking. Thrift was a strong theme in the narratives of their youth, but became less important because of the increasing availability of material goods, the end of rationing, and the decreasing cost of ready-made clothing. This matches Schofield-Tomschin's conclusion about home sewing in America, that "as economic necessities diminished, home sewing became a venue for creativity and originality, and eventually a process for relaxation and alleviation of stress."¹⁰ The theme of judgement for appearance persisted, emerging as the need to please oneself and to control appearance. Judgement for competence turned into the need to prove technical expertise. Free from the constraints of family standards and school requirements, interviewees could try new skills and styles — although not all embraced this freedom.

This chapter also picks up on the idea of modernity that has traced through the thesis, and accounts for the ways the themes of childhood experience are translated into adult

¹⁰ Ibid., 107.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

practice. All the interviewees, particularly those born in the 1930s, experienced modernisation in the basic apparatus of dressmaking. This was evident in their recollections of the tools of dressmaking practice and the patterns and fabrics that were available. The older ones started to sew with treadle sewing machines and used flat irons before getting electric appliances; they remember nylon and other synthetic fabrics as novelty items; and they remember patterns becoming increasingly accurate and easy to follow. The changes to the post-primary curriculum were more evidence of modernity; they changed the definition of formal education by increasing the subject choices.

Geraldine and Margaret form an interesting pair to consider the impact of modernity on adult dressmaking practice — with distinct motivations also apparent. Both were raised by mothers who did not work outside the home, and whose dressmaking practices were visible and valued by the family. Chapter 5 analysed the role of dressmaking in their different paths to teaching. That discussion revealed Geraldine's embrace of modernity, and the way she was able to translate expertise in dressmaking into a career. For Margaret, dressmaking expertise was something she had to work to achieve and represented an obstacle she had to overcome before qualifying as a teacher. What happened when these women had children of their own? How did modernity and other motivations affect the dressmaking practice of the subsequent generation?

Geraldine cannot really recall being taught to sew by her mother or school teachers, but was taught industry-standard skills as part of her own teacher training. She went on to teach Clothing as a secondary school teacher, examined School Certificate Clothing, and indirectly supported the dressmaking practice of many girls and women through her book *You and Your Clothes*. But Geraldine did not teach her daughters to sew.

No, because my mother made things. One of the daughters made several efforts. They both loved fabrics. They really did. They love fabric and often they'd buy lengths of material, and then they'd lose interest and that would be that.¹¹

¹¹ Geraldine, born 1926.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

Geraldine's daughters understood that fabric had the potential to be something more, but did not have sufficient motivation to transform yardage to garments. They may have contented themselves with what Lilian Mutsaers describes as the "emotional experience of the garment [that] exists before it is even created and worn."¹² By the time the girls were buying fabric, sewing had ceased to be a useful habit for Geraldine, because her career in education had gone beyond classroom teaching. For her mother, sewing continued to be useful because it was a way being part of her daughter's and granddaughters' lives. Where Geraldine saw her mother make clothes quite happily, Geraldine's daughters saw that she:

wasn't desperately keen on the drudgery of actually doing the dressmaking. I was more interested in the results. [...] I liked the cutting out and getting the thing to the point where you could tell if it was going to fit or not. But as for making sure all the seams were straight and all the rest of it. Quite happy for somebody else to do that.¹³

"Somebody else" may have been her mother or dressmakers. Geraldine lived in Indonesia for a time and had domestic servants who would do "the drudgery." Geraldine was pragmatic about dressmaking. She did it to please herself, to achieve a particular aesthetic result. Where possible, she avoided doing parts of the process she found tedious. Time was a factor in her attitude to dressmaking, because she was a wife and mother who had a career. She identifies the increasing availability of ready-made clothing as having a big impact on the decision whether to make or buy.¹⁴ She said, "You would only make your clothes if there was a special pattern, or some really nice fabric." The opportunity to work with aesthetically pleasing materials seems to have been Geraldine's main motivation in adult life. In her case, this was combined with confidence that she would achieve the desired effect because of her skill. She cited the ever-lowering cost of clothing as a further disincentive to making, saying, "once upon a time if you

¹² Mutsaers, "Unpacking Mrs Wood's Suitcases," 31.

¹³ Geraldine, born 1926.

¹⁴ Mutsaers makes the same point, citing Jacqueline Atkins' claim that "the declining interest in home sewing [...] coincided with the increased availability of ready-made clothing." Mutsaers, "Unpacking Mrs Wood's Suitcases," 29.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

wanted to have clothes, you had to make them.” Geraldine relegates the practice to the past, and believes “home sewing has had its heyday.”¹⁵

Born in 1938, Margaret is 12 years younger than Geraldine, but she did not embrace the possibilities of modernity with the same enthusiasm. Margaret connects her dressmaking practice to that of her mother and grandmother, although she insists they had greater levels of skill. Margaret attributes her mother’s sewing expertise to the example of her mother, who had been in service and developed sewing skills while working for a wealthy family. The idea of service is pertinent. Margaret sees dressmaking as something done to serve or please others, and that seems to have been the primary motivation throughout her life. Margaret was the first in the three generations of women to train for a profession, which she did at her mother’s prompting. This departure from a purely domestic life did not break the connection between the sewing and dressmaking practices of previous generations, nor did it hinder transmission to a fourth.

Despite Margaret saying her young self did not listen to her mother’s advice, she retained it as the correct way to do things. Margaret repeatedly described her mother as patient and a perfectionist. Margaret’s mother was prepared to spend time on dressmaking so she could get things right. As a girl, Margaret says she struggled to pay attention to her mother’s advice because she was impatient. When asked if bought dresses were nicer than home-made ones, she said, “Well, I think when you make a dress you are sick of the sight of it by the time you’ve made it.” She describes her own sewing skills in a self-deprecating manner, implying her impatience meant she could not match the skill of her mother (or grandmother) — “I wanted to get through things.” This self-assessment is contradicted by her description of her adult approach to making garments, which suggests she has either become more like her mother, or was always similar.

I don’t think I’m very good. But I made my first daughter’s wedding dress. [...] I cut guipure lace. I spent about three times as long thinking about it before cutting it.¹⁶

¹⁵ Geraldine, born 1926.

¹⁶ Margaret, born 1938.

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Margaret's words indicate she is a careful and patient dressmaker, just as her mother was.

The same pattern of learning appears to have been repeated with Margaret and her two daughters. She said she taught them "as much as they'd listen — like me and my mother." And like her mother, Margaret must have been a successful teacher. Her eldest daughter makes clothes for herself and her family, including Margaret — which means four generations of the family have been or are dressmakers. The repetition of patterns also happens at a literal level of practice. Margaret said her daughter made them both a dress from the same pattern, while Margaret knitted them both a cardigan from the same pattern. Consequently, they met for lunch one day wearing the same outfit. This story positions dressmaking as a cultural activity as much as a design one. Mother and daughter created garments that bound them together with the same visual identity.

Cheryl identified ingenuity and creativity as hallmarks of her mother's dressmaking. She was unwilling to attribute any qualities to her own adult practice, although it is possible to discern a prolific output particularly in the early years of her marriage. Cheryl made outerwear and undergarments for her husband and two sons, as well as making clothes for herself, "I could make what I wanted, I didn't like commercial clothes." Neither of her sons is interested in sewing, so Cheryl feels she has no one to pass her skills to. That transmission of skill is important to Cheryl, because she knows her mother learned from her mother. When Cheryl married, her mother was no longer sewing. This meant she did not make a wedding dress for Cheryl as she had for her other daughters. Instead, Cheryl used the skills her mother taught her to make her own wedding dress: "I like to put myself into something. [...] I could not have worn a bought one... it would have had no meaning."¹⁷ Marriage was a transition in Cheryl's life and, in keeping with her family's practice, she marked it by making her dress. The resulting garment connected "feelings and memories with family and the activities we did."¹⁸

Alison also came from a family with a strong tradition of dressmaking. Family photographs show definite attempts to dress her and her two sisters differently, in

¹⁷ Cheryl, born 1951.

¹⁸ Buckley, "On the Margins," 168.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

colours and styles that suited them — even though they personally had no choice. The excitement Alison felt at being able to choose fabric for herself for her secondary school sewing project (described in chapter 6) appears to have been the beginning of one of her motivations to keep dressmaking throughout her life. Alison’s descriptions of fabric place her — with Geraldine’s daughters — in the group Lilian Mutsaers describes as “everyone who has a love of fabric.”¹⁹ Alison said, “I can remember the fabric of practically all my clothes.” Even before she became a confident dressmaker, she understood the potential of fabric and the importance of style. That confidence finally came when her mother paid for her to go to a sewing course as a young mother.

I went every morning for six weeks to learn to sew. At the end of the six weeks you had a shirt dress, and a dress of your choice, the pattern of your choice, and a skirt I think. [...] A shirt dress because they wanted to teach you the skills in making a collar and things.²⁰

¹⁹ Mutsaers, “Unpacking Mrs Wood's Suitcases,” 31.

²⁰ Alison, born 1942.



Figure 56. Alison in a home-made dance dress.
Alison had a say in the fabric and pattern of this bronze peau de soie dress her mother made for her in about 1959. Photograph supplied by Alison.

Alison's only classmate on the course was the woman who had been her French teacher in the fourth form. As a secondary teacher this woman had not needed to teach sewing, but once she married she was expected to be able to sew for herself and her children. The way sewing classes were advertised suggests this should have been motivation enough, suggesting dressmaking was the best way to dress the family on a budget (see fig. 56). But Alison's recollection of buying the necessary fabrics for the class suggests she was not motivated by thrift.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

I loved fabric. The one I got from Thompson's was brown and black and white print and it was eight and 11 a yard, which was quite expensive. [...] it was brown and black and bits of white in between. And the shirt dress was turquoise and white diamonds — small, very, very small.²¹

The classes also gave Alison the opportunity to master the finer techniques of sewing. Being left-handed had been an obstacle at school; in this class it was not a problem. She enjoyed learning to make button holes by hand.

It was quite nice making the buttonholes actually. You were taught the technique of making things. It wasn't just for convenience. You weren't doing it for speed. It was to learn how to make things properly.²²

That sense of making things properly has stayed with Alison. She still inserts zips by hand and uses herringbone stitch for hems. She has many patterns and uncut lengths of cloth. When she buys clothes, either new or second-hand, she often alters them to make them her own. This type of activity is an echo of the habit of a lifetime, which has made Alison accustomed to being clothed in garments with which she has a tactile, tangible relationship.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

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Singer Sewing Centre
TO THE
Ladies of Christchurch

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- Are you finding it difficult to balance the family budget ?
- Can you afford to buy new frocks for yourselves and family ?
- Can you be certain of a perfect fit, cut and style if you do ?

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'Phone 36-663.

Singer Sewing Centre
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Figure 57. Singer Sewing Centre classes advertisement.

Despite sewing being part of girls' education, there was demand for commercial sewing lessons. The selling points were budget and fit, and the promise of courteous "instructresses." *The Press*, 27 August 1953: 2.

Maintaining a family tradition is a motivation for Lynne, along with the pleasure of making things properly. Unlike Alison, Lynne says she learned by observing her mother, and trying things out.

How did I learn? Just by doing I think. And having the belief I could do it. Yes, I could understand the patterns, how they worked, how you were supposed to do

The motivation to keep dressmaking

them. Read the instructions. And watched enough. I suppose I thought I got it by osmosis and it was in the genes. Just did it.²³

Just as Alison described differences in the ease with which she and her sisters began sewing, Lynne says her sister learned differently.

No, she didn't have the same umm [...] But she used to sew for her children. In fact, we were laughing because she put herself in the playpen and the kids outside to be able to do her sewing.²⁴

The suggestion that Lynne's sister was not an especially competent dressmaker was apparently not a disincentive to the practice. The sisters had grown up with their mother's dressmaking as a constant in their lives, and both continued the practice in their own adult homes. Lynne got her own sewing machine when she was about 25, soon after she married. It is the Elna she still uses. Over the years she has experimented with it, learning to sew knit fabrics and using different stitches. Lynne recreated the way her mother used space for sewing in the family home, simply setting up the machine at the dining room table and having her sons watch as she worked. Not long before the interview, the machine stopped working when Lynne was sewing heavy canvas (to make squabs for a caravan):

And my husband said, "You've got to get it fixed." And I said perhaps it can't be. He said, "You've got to have a sewing machine because that's you. You've got to have a sewing machine that goes on the end of the dining table."²⁵

Lynne's husband and children do not see her sewing as an intrusion on family space. Instead, they see it as part of her maternal and domestic identity, as she saw it part of her mother's.

Lynne's pleasure at making things properly is tempered by her high standards. She describes herself as "a neat freak," which means it is hard for her to reflect on successful

²³ Lynne, born 1946.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

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projects, “It’s hard to see yourself though in a way. I don’t know if all the clothing I made really lived up to...” With prompting, she remembered an outfit she made when she was teaching.

But there’s one that I kept for ages and ages, a high waisted skirt that had a long jacket, sleeveless over the top. That was in a wool, Donegal tweed is it? Grey and teal-y blue.²⁶

Lynne could remember the colour of the lining, and that she covered the buttons herself, and what shoes she wore with the finished outfit. She knew what she wanted to look like,²⁷ and was aware that she would be subject to scrutiny as a teacher. The awareness of this scrutiny sharpened her desire to achieve technical perfection. The bridesmaid’s dress she wore for sister’s wedding shows she was highly motivated. It is clearly the work of “a neat freak,” featuring neatly finished seams and facings, even stitching, a beautifully inserted zip, and a neat hook and eye closure.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Moseley, “Respectability Sewn Up,” 483.

The motivation to keep dressmaking



Figure 58. Lynne wearing a self-made bridesmaid dress.
Lynne made this dress for herself when she was a bridesmaid at her sister's wedding. Photograph supplied by Lynne.

The motivation to keep dressmaking



Figure 59. Construction details on Lynne's bridesmaid dress.

Lynne has kept the bridesmaid dress. It validates her description of herself as a “neat freak.” The hook and eye at the top of the zip are done with buttonhole stitch as prescribed in dressmaking books and the school curriculum. The facings around the shirred bodice panel are all machine neatened and hand-stitched in place. Photographs: Dinah Vincent.

She described herself as wanting to look reasonably smart, and not being too worried about cost. Like Geraldine and Alison, she sees the fabric as key to the success of a garment.

I wanted the feel and the look of the fabric to be right. I would spend what I wanted. If it was exorbitant I wouldn't. But it was the look and the feel of the fabric. I didn't want things that weren't nice to work with.²⁸

Lynne does not see all the decisions she makes about fabric, patterns, trims and the fit of the finished garments as design activities, instead thinking of herself as a maker. For her, the design happens in the creation of the paper patterns that are essential to all her dressmaking. She follows instructions on the paper patterns, and makes only minor adaptations, “Just whether I topstitched, or put another pocket, or missed out pockets. But no great changes.”²⁹

The idea of technical mastery is also important for Vera, but for her this evolved into seeing herself as someone who designs clothing. Her desire for technical mastery is evident from her early experiments with her mother's sewing machine, and her ready acceptance of her mother's invitation to make pyjamas if she needed them. Vera's

²⁸ Lynne, born 1946.

²⁹ Ibid.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

mastery can be seen as growing from what Bourdieu describes as a “minimal distance from necessity”;³⁰ if she had not learned to sew, she would only have had the clothes her mother made and altered for her. Vera was acutely aware of her mother’s limited budget for clothing, which also made economy an important motivation. She felt confident to ask for fabric for something that she truly needed, but knew she had to justify the request and work to a price. One request was for white sailcloth for a pair of shorts:

And people used to say to me how many pair of shorts have you got? And I said one pair. And they said, they’re always so clean. And I said, well I wear them, take them off at night, I wash them, they dry overnight, I iron them and I wear them again. [...] We had to have good quality stuff you could wash and wear immediately.³¹

This family wore clean clothes daily: washing and ironing were expected routines for maintaining clothes and for presentation of the self. As Vera became financially independent, she chose fabrics based on what was fashionable, but the habit of considering cost was firmly ingrained. She made a blue linen shift frock, “because they all came in then.” She described it as “beautiful. Fully lined, had to be because it was linen. Oh, it was expensive to maintain because you had to get it dry cleaned all the time.”³² Like the British women Rachel Moseley talked to about their longing for film star style in the 1950s and 1960s, Vera placed cleanness and respectability above ideas of fashion.³³ Vera accepted that making garments meant taking care of them — a prosaic example of what Susan Kaiser describes as “minding appearances.”³⁴

³⁰ Bourdieu, “Scattered Remarks,” 340.

³¹ Vera, born 1945.

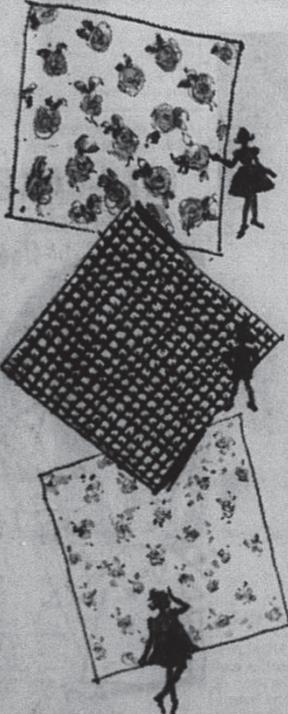
³² Ibid.

³³ Moseley, “Respectability Sewn Up,” 482.

³⁴ Kaiser, “Minding Appearances,” 90.

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So easy to wash and needs little or no ironing. In
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dresses, shorts, slacks, tops and skirts. See them in
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Green/White, Blue/White, Pink/White, Black/White.
44in - - - - - **8/3** yd.

COTTON PLISSE. So soft and dainty, ideally suited
for nightdress or shortie jamas. White grounds scat-
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Plain shades Pink, Blue, Lemon, White. Also Nursery
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Figure 60. Smith & Caughey advertisement.

This advertisement targets mothers and daughters as makers and wearers of home-made garments, both of whom must be satisfied with the fabric. Dressmakers like Vera and her mother were motivated by thrift and cleanliness, and looked for fabric of sufficient quality to withstand frequent washing and ironing. NZH, 23 August 1962, section 2: 1.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

Vera is largely self-taught; both school sewing lessons and night classes later in life were disappointing. She developed her knowledge by reading.

I used to read a lot of pattern instructions and keep them. I still do. And then I can remember buying books [...] Tailoring trousers, tailoring skirts, and I read all those, and I can do all the fancy cuffs on shirts [...] Reading. I suppose my father was always one. He was a builder mechanic and he used to always be reading manuals and that sort of thing so I suppose we had that background. If you couldn't do it, you could work it out for yourself.³⁵

The habit of working things out also started early, and success created a virtuous circle of motivation. In her teens, she saw a dress in what she thinks was *Seventeen* magazine that had a bodice with blocks of different coloured fabric. She found a similar pattern and took on the challenge of patching fabric before cutting the dress, “And I just did it. And I put it on and went out to display it to mum. She was most surprised. I said – oh it was easy.”³⁶ Although underplayed in this story, her mother's praise seems to have been a motivation for Vera to continue with such experiments.³⁷

Vera looked for details in others' clothing, rather than style, and was confident of her ability to replicate details that pleased her. After seeing piping on a dress she liked, she taught herself to make it and use the technique on a dance dress when she was about 17:

It was a white frock and it had a red rose on it with a grey stem with a grey leaf on it. [...] And it fitted all round the bust [...] and it had a beautiful skirt, white with this red and grey on it and it was piped around the centre with the grey. And I thought I was a million dollars in that frock. Funny how you remember the odd one.³⁸

³⁵ Vera, born 1945.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ For knitters, such reinforcements prompt them to try a more difficult project. Stannard and Sanders, “Motivations,” 109.

³⁸ Vera, born 1945.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

This is Vera's own Cinderella moment, without sabotage from the ugly sisters. These successes inspired her to continue.

As a mature and prolific dressmaker, Vera describes herself as a person who designs clothes. Her mastery of construction means she can adapt commercial patterns and ready-made garments to create the effect she wants. Vera explained the benefit of altering ready-made clothes was being able to work with fabrics that she might not be able to buy as yardage and creating something that was right for her. Cheryl Buckley notes the value of such clothes, perceived as exclusive to the wearer in their "unique combination of design elements, materials and colour."³⁹ Coats are the outer edge of her expertise. She made a coat once, after going to night classes, but was not satisfied with the teaching or her workmanship on the coat. Her decision to buy herself a woollen overcoat with money from her mother at the same time as she bought a sewing machine, overlocker, and press emphasises her perception of the limit of her expertise. For Vera, the reward of dressmaking comes from her satisfaction in knowing she has made herself garments that fit and flatter her using the right techniques.

Not surprisingly, several of the interviewees said they wanted the clothes they made to flatter them, although their perception of what this meant varied. Cathie, born in 1940, was most direct in stating that she wanted her clothes to flatter her so that other people would notice that she looked nice. When Caroline and Vera talked of being complimented about the garments they made, the emphasis was on their ability to make garments. For Cathie, the emphasis was on her ability to present the most flattering version of herself to others' gaze and to be complimented for her total appearance. She said, "I like to be noticed." Cathie fits into Gregory Stone's framework for appearance and self. She was establishing her identity as an attractive young woman, projecting herself to others through her self-made clothes. She sought validation from their review.⁴⁰

³⁹ Buckley, "On the Margins," 166.

⁴⁰ Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, Joanne Bubolz Eicher, and Kim Karen Johnson, eds., *Dress and Identity* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1995), 121.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

Cathie was motivated by economic factors: there was not much money for clothing in her family and she often wore hand-me-downs. Being able to make her own clothes gave her more choice and control. Once she had enough skill to make her own clothes, she had greater motivation. Dressmaking enabled her to produce garments that were both unique and flattering. Cathie said this was brought home to her when she went out in a rare shop-bought dress, only to see another girl in the identical dress. Cathie spent the evening hiding so they would not be seen together. A happier memory was of being wolf-whistled at while wearing a self-made yellow dress with black spots.

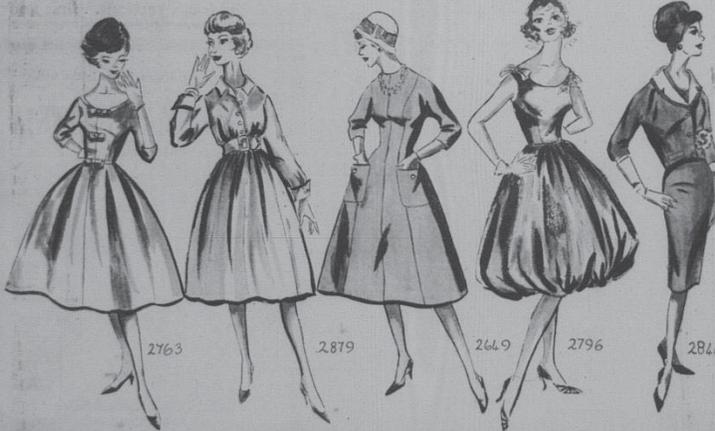
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Figure 61. Calpreta fabrics and Simplicity patterns advertisement. Fashion parades in shops showed dressmakers like Cathie the latest fabrics and patterns. Cathie's choices balanced being in fashion with having garments that were unique and flattering to her body. *EP*, 3 August 1959: 7.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

When Cathie left school she felt, “The world was my oyster, I could go and buy fabrics. I had lots of quite nice dresses.”⁴¹ Margarethe Szeless’ interviews with Austrian women who used patterns from *Burda* magazine, reveal an obsession “with the idea of creating new dresses for each new occasion”,⁴² this is something Cathie seemed to share. She talked about “taking advantage of clothes,” reinforcing her understanding that the garments were part of her total appearance, that affected the way people responded to her. She estimates she made about three-quarters of her clothing when she first started work. Unlike the interviewees mentioned earlier in this chapter, Cathie did not talk about fabrics or sewing techniques. She described stiffening petticoats with sugar and water to make her skirts as full as possible. Like Scarlett O’Hara, she was interested in the visual effect.

As a young mother, Cathie made all her children’s things until “it got too hard,” by which she meant trousers with zip flies for the boys. Lynne said the same thing about sewing for her sons, both women confirming Barbara Burman’s observation that “clothes made at home by mothers are for little boys.”⁴³ This decision is consistent with Cathie’s interest in the product of sewing, more than the process.⁴⁴ But Cathie’s motivations for sewing changed over time. Despite her lack of interest in technical mastery, she started sewing stretch fabrics in the 1980s because one of her daughters did gymnastics and needed leotards. She does not enjoy stretch sewing, but taught herself to do it so she could make things for her daughter. Cathie’s mother could not teach her to sew, and Cathie chose not to teach her daughters, but she did buy the eldest a sewing machine when she got married. As far as Cathie knows the machine is seldom used, but she does the accumulated mending on it when she visits the house. At the time of the interview, the last thing Cathie had made was a pair of “Spiderman” pants for her grandson. The much loved commercially made ones had fallen apart, so she copied the pattern and made a new pair in stretch fabric. As a mother and grandmother, she

⁴¹ Cathie, born 1940.

⁴² Szeless, “Burda Fashions,” 859.

⁴³ Burman, *The Culture of Sewing*, 13.

⁴⁴ Research on motivations for knitting identifies “process” and “product” knitters, that is they are interested in the action of making or the end result. Cathie’s responses suggest she is a “product” dressmaker. Stannard and Sanders, “Motivations,” 106.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

continues to extend and use her dressmaking skills in much the same way Geraldine described her mother doing so. These stretch items could more easily be purchased than made, but making them fulfils an emotional need for both Cathie as the maker and her daughters and grandchildren as recipients.

The possibility of emotional connection to garments made by dressmaking is demonstrated by the absence of such of connection for Joy. She saw the garments made for her by the housekeeper in her family home as a part of that woman's duty, which did not extend to sharing the skill. Joy herself came to dressmaking relatively late, at 18, when her room-mate encouraged her to sew in their shared hotel room. By 20, Joy was married and soon became a mother. One of her first purchases was a Singer electric sewing machine that she paid off over some months. The machine was a marker of her transition to motherhood, a sign that she was capable of clothing herself and her family. She had four children in five years, and sewed all their clothing and much of her own on that machine at her kitchen table. Her adoption of dressmaking was of financial necessity: "I had no choice. You couldn't afford to buy for four kids in those days." Making clothes for herself and the children demonstrated conformity with accepted norms that equated domestic industry with virtue. Her descriptions of her early married life are similar to those given by women interviewed by Helen May in her study of post-war Pākehā women, all of whom were exposed to similar representations of what a wife and mother should be.⁴⁵ Crucially for Joy, making her children's clothes made her different from her own, absent, mother.

When her children were young, she remembers sewing at night because "it was the only time you really got peace."⁴⁶ As the children got a little older, she remembers sewing while they were outside playing. To some extent, Joy was emulating what she grew up with: she never saw the housekeeper in her childhood home sew. With four young children, the chances of Joy being disturbed while she was sewing were high, so it made sense to sew when the children were asleep or outside. The activity was not deliberately

⁴⁵ May, *Minding Children*.

⁴⁶ Joy, born 1936.

The motivation to keep dressmaking

covert; it was simply more efficient to sew when she could concentrate on what she was doing. Which is perhaps how the housekeeper would have explained her practice.

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FIND OUT YOUR GRADING AS A WIFE, PARTNER AND A REAL COMPANION.

Answer the self analysis questions—Find out if you are easy to live with—If yours is a real home in a full and satisfying sense—Have you unsuspected "personality difficulties?"—How can you find the key to true companionship and happy home life.

AUGUST ISSUE "WOMAN'S CHOICE" PACKED WITH GOOD READING

"Fashions from France".
Edith Teague sends pictures of this beautiful millinery showing in London and Paris salons.

★

"N.Z.'s Designing Male".
—Barry McDonnell.
Featuring clothes by this rising young dress designer who specialises in casual wear for smart young women. Leading Auckland Model Robin Garland shows how they should be worn.

★

"It Can be Fun to Cook for One".
Carley Rish helps the girl who lives alone to eat well.

★

"Simple Secrets for Successful Stews".

★

"Is Yours a Problem Child?"

★

"Health—Your Pulse Betrays You".



2 EASY TO KNIT 'WESKITS'

Complete patterns for these easy to knit Weskits. Two, smart styles—one's his, one's hers.

BUY YOUR COPY TODAY WHILE STOCKS LAST

"Play Helps Them To Say".
They learn in a playroom with a purpose — the Grafton Speech Clinic where children with speech defects learn to correct them the play way.

★

4 Short Stories.
Short stories by Eleanor Scott, Allan Watkins, Jenny Ranald and Dorothy Braxton.

★

"Happy Ever After".
The story of a war marriage between an Indian girl and a N.Z. soldier—by Margaret Robinson.
and the long story "PICNIC"
taken from the Pulitzer prize-winning play by William Inge.

★

Other sections include:
"What The Stars Reveal".
"Camera Competition".
"Teenage Pages".
"Children's Story".
"Your Character From Handwriting".

1/6 ALL NEWS AGENTS **Woman's choice**

4.6A

Figure 62. *Woman's Choice* advertisement.

Women were under pressure to perform well as wives and mothers. Making clothes for oneself and the children, and perhaps knitting for one's husband, was part of this performance. ODT, 6 August 1956: 2.

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Once Joy realised what suited her, she made the same patterns up in different fabrics.

I made myself a lovely safari suit in linen. You know how you have the button-down pockets and tabs over the shoulder [...] And the princess line, miles of that because I actually suited it. Skirts with splits up the back.⁴⁷

As her children began to be involved in sports, Joy sewed less because her time was spent taking them to and from practices. Joy's daughter began to reject home-made garments when she got to secondary school, something Joy attributes to peer pressure. Most of her sewing as a mature woman is mending and alterations, and making drapes for friends and family. As a young woman, dressmaking helped create her identity as a good mother through her industry, skill, and practicality. Later in life, she was seen as someone who was generous with her time and skill.

Lyndsay's clothing choices have also narrowed as she has got older and she says she dresses for comfort. Lyndsay continues to sew for herself, making most of her clothing from a limited selection of patterns.

In my old age, I've stuck to a very few patterns. I make my own trousers so I've got one trouser pattern I've adjusted over the years. I've got several shirt patterns. I make the occasional skirt, but not very often.⁴⁸

Comfort as a concept is evident in many aspects of Lyndsay's relationship with dressmaking. Sewing and dressmaking were a constant and enjoyable part of her early life, both at home and at school. Her mother sewed for her and she has in turn sewed for her daughter. Lyndsay's daughter showed no interest in sewing for herself until she reached her mid-forties. Lyndsay's dressmaking has played a part in at least one friendship: Lyndsay has a friend who has done City and Guilds Dressmaking, and helps Lyndsay with fitting and advice when needed. Lyndsay has not tried to learn to sew knit fabrics and is comfortable with buying merino tops rather than trying to make them. All of this suggests that Lyndsay's dressmaking is part of a dress practice that supports

⁴⁷ Joy, born 1936.

⁴⁸ Lyndsay, born 1940.

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Andrew Hill's theory that the signifying power of clothing has been eroded through the rise of casual wear.⁴⁹ But I argue that Lyndsay's engagement in the production of those garments, however casual they may appear, sets them and her apart. Her continued use of skills observed in her home and supported at school means she has the central point of reference Hill says is crucial to meaning in clothing.⁵⁰ Like her mother, she buys up lengths of fabric and stores them for the right moment. Another point of reference is the pattern Lyndsay uses to make her underwear, made by her mother in the 1950s. Thus, Lyndsay's unremarkable clothed appearance integrates a constant connection to patternmaking skills her mother learned at the Hollywood School for Dressmaking in the 1950s and her own construction skills. When she gets dressed, she is the product of practices developed over several lifetimes.

Amanda Bill, writing about the role of fashion education in the creative economy, cites social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihayli's observation that "for many people happiness comes from creating new things and making discoveries."⁵¹ Bill's view on creativity, derived from Butler and Derrida, is that:

one becomes creative through a repetitive series of acts over time, so that it is the sedimentation of conventions that have been inserted into performances in different contexts, which constitute what we know as creativity.⁵²

This applies to home dressmaking, which simultaneously demands repetition of certain stages and processes, and allows for variety through the choice of patterns, fibres, textures, and colours. The adult practices of the interviewees summarised in this chapter show behaviours repeated over time, and variety as personal style evolved, choices increased, and fashions changed. While Vera was confident to call herself a designer, all of the women described combining their familiar or habitual skills with different fabrics and styles to produce unique items. The reluctance to label themselves as designers, to

⁴⁹ Breward and Evans, *Fashion and Modernity*, 72.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵¹ Amanda Bill, "Blood, Sweat and Shears?: Happiness, Creativity, and Fashion Education," *Fashion Theory—the Journal of Dress Body & Culture* 16, no. 1 (2012): 50.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 59.

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see themselves as creative, may come from their life-long exposure to dressmaking as a domestic practice associated by many with imitation (of shop-window styles) and thrift (as a cheaper option than bought clothing). But their dressmaking practice affected many elements of their domestic lives and created their public appearance.

This summary of findings of adult practice ends with Velma, for whom dressmaking was part of a lifetime of creativity. From early childhood she saw her mother making: using knitting, embroidery, and dressmaking techniques to clothe herself and her two daughters in beautifully made but otherwise unremarkable garments. Writing about paper patterns as a means whereby women could interact with fashion in the US and Britain in the inter-war period, Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark acknowledge women's complex motivations and high skill levels:

It wasn't just economy however, nor was it solely a working-class activity. Home-made clothing could also be the product of substantial skill in sewing, but also in knitting and crochet.⁵³

Velma learned all these skills from her mother, and picked up enough patternmaking at school to give her confidence to alter commercial patterns and make simple ones to her own style. Velma avoided the word fashion relative to her mother's activity, instead emphasising the way textile skills reinforced her domestic role as a wife and mother. Velma herself rejected the idea of fashion, but says she used her skills to forge a distinctive visual identity.

Velma left school as soon as she turned 15 and started work in a bookshop. The friendships she had made at school survived, the girls' shared interest in dressmaking part of their connection. None of them had the means to buy clothing off the rack, instead they got inspiration from:

⁵³ Buckley and Clark, *Fashion and Everyday Life*, 102.

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Just watching people. Walking down Queen Street you got a picture of the whole gamut. Unlike now where everybody looks the same, it was very easy to pick out something you thought you'd like yourself and set about copying it really.⁵⁴

Velma's description puts the ideas of copying and being different side by side; implicit in this is her belief in the significance of making your own garments. If, as Andrew Hill suggests, clothing needs a central point of reference to have meaning,⁵⁵ Velma's approach balanced her observations of 1950s streetwear with her growing sense of self; she became her own central point. She was clear, "The aim was to have something different and the only way you got that was to make it." Other interviewees expressed similar ideas — notably Vera, Val, Lyndsay, and Cathie — but Velma's is perhaps the most emphatic description of the significance that lies in the choice of fabric and finishing details, and the creation of a garment in the way that corresponds to the maker's sense of self.

Velma joined an amateur dramatic society, working on props for the productions. This gave her another source of inspiration:

That was interesting because I was looking at stuff from different periods. It didn't worry me if it was fashionable or not. But if I liked it, then I was likely to make something that included some of the things I found.⁵⁶

Velma's admission that her involvement in amateur dramatics had an impact on her dress strategies evokes the theatrical metaphor that is central to Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*.⁵⁷ Goffman, using male pronouns, describes "the individual's own belief in the impression of reality that he attempts to engender in those among whom he finds himself."⁵⁸ While Goffman's argument is about total presentation, the metaphor works for dress and dressmaking: "where the individual presents a product

⁵⁴ Velma, born 1934.

⁵⁵ Breward and Evans, *Fashion and Modernity*, 73.

⁵⁶ Velma, born 1934.

⁵⁷ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

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to others, he will tend to show them only the end product, and they will be led into judging him on the basis of something that has been finished, polished, and packaged.”⁵⁹



Figure 63. Velma and friends.

Velma, right, in the early 1950s, wearing a dress she made herself, adding design details to make it her own. The skirt features corded bands and the neckline facing is reversed out. Photograph supplied by Velma.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 44.

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Velma appears to have had a high degree of self-awareness about the fact her strategies would create an impression, and did not constrain herself when looking for inspiration.

Where she did constrain herself was in the choice of fabrics she would work with. This is the girl who was dissatisfied with garments at primary school because they were “poky,” meaning they did not hang nicely. Velma resolved this as an adult by refusing to work with synthetic fabrics, and favouring silk and wool. She showed me photographs of a silk brocade dress she made to be bridesmaid at a school-friend’s wedding. One of the group became a professional dressmaker and made gowns for her friends as her wedding gift. In designing and making her bridesmaid dress, Velma was determined to match the standard of the bride’s gown.



Figure 64. Velma as a bridesmaid in a self-made dress.

Velma designed and made this dress for herself, in a brown and silver silk. The closely fitted and draped style shows a high degree of technical skill. Photographs supplied by Velma.

Over time, Velma’s personal style evolved to create garments which would showcase her interest in historical embroidery and her fondness for wool. Her attitude showed the

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value she placed on her skill and time, and her disregard for trends, “If I’m making something, I’m making something that lasts forever. So top of the pops is wool.”⁶⁰ Her wardrobe contains self-made woollen garments from the 1970s, featuring elaborate embroidery and patchwork. Her use of these techniques means her clothes are immediately identifiable as one-off pieces, made by and for an individual with a high degree of skill who wants to create a specific look. Relative to Patrizia Calefato’s analysis of the “look” as part of the language of fashion,⁶¹ Velma seems to have reconciled looking and being looked at, and developed a visual vocabulary to represent herself.



Figure 65. Velma’s “shepherd smock” dress.

Velma’s interpretation of a shepherd’s smock, made entirely from woollen fabric and yarn. Velma first learned smocking at intermediate school and adapted the technique for this unique garment. Photograph: Dinah Vincent.

As children, the interviewees had dressmaking imposed upon them, both at home and at school. For many, it was the sole source of clothing and their primary dress strategy — although it might more properly be described as the strategy used by mothers to dress children. School dressmaking was enjoyed or endured by the interviewees, sometimes

⁶⁰ Velma, born 1934.

⁶¹ Calefato, “Fashion and Worldliness,” 76.

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emerging as an influencing factor in adult practice. The decision to continue dressmaking was shaped by economic necessity as the interviewees became mothers themselves, remembering it was unusual for married women to have paid employment and even less common for mothers to work outside the home. Dressmaking was also an expected expression of domestic femininity and some interviewees validated themselves through the practice. Those who continued the practice when it was no longer necessary for thrift or validation did so because the habits of making had begun to generate other benefits. Sometimes that benefit was in the sense of continuity with previous generations, which might be expressed in the choice of machine, the arrangement of space, or the enactment of the practice. Dressmaking maintained friendships and family relationships, and provided a tangible expression of care. The practice was a means of creative expression that allowed interviewees to realise their imagined selves. Dressmakers used it to make a statement about who they were as well as what they wanted to look like.

Conclusion:

“The skill comes only from practice”

A 1950s edition of the *Simplicity Sewing Book* urged its readers to: “Remember, the fun and ease of sewing come from being skilful, and the skill comes only from practice.”¹ Sewing was to be enjoyable, but only after a certain level of skill was acquired. The book was, of course, encouraging dressmaking to boost sales of Simplicity patterns. And this was one of many pervasive ways dressmaking was encouraged, to the point it became a formative practice in the lives of girls and women in mid-twentieth century New Zealand. This thesis has looked closely at domestic dressmaking and unpicked how it was practised, what it meant to those involved, and how it influenced girls and women over the course of their lives.

My research confirmed the extent to which dressmaking was integrated into the home and school experience of girls who grew up in the 20 years following 1945, and how it was associated with qualities deemed to be desirable in young women destined to be wives and mothers. Despite the ubiquity of the practice and the uniformity of its representation in society, little attention has been paid to its meaning for practitioners. I have shown how individuals developed diverse responses shaped by each unique set of influences and biography.

The literature review showed the necessity of creating a unique critical framework to understand dressmaking practice in a new way. The resulting framework brought together fashion and design history, feminist historical thinking, material culture theory (itself “an intervention within and between disciplines”),² and sociological thinking. The sociological thinking is dominated by theories formed by Bourdieu, particularly habitus, “durable, transposable dispositions”,³ and cultural reproduction. Cultural reproduction informed my analysis of how families perpetuated practices over generations, and the

¹ Simplicity, *Simplicity Sewing Book*.

² Buchli, *The Material Culture Reader*, 13.

³ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 53.

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role of sewing and dressmaking within schools. Fashion and design history aided my interpretation of the way girls saw and used dressmaking as a means of managing appearance. The notion of being modern emerged throughout: being modern (or fashionable) in appearance, using modern tools and material to make garments, and being modern in outlook about the role of dressmaking in girls' education and lives. A feminist historical perspective highlighted how gendered domestic dressmaking was, and the implications this had on practice. Relative to material culture, I looked at the tools and objects used for dressmaking, and the space in which the practice occurs. Taken together, these theoretical viewpoints created a framework that enabled me to understand the practice as it happened in the time period, and to understand the impact of the practice on practitioners.

My methodology brought together layers of evidence about the practice in the time period. The 15 interviews are the backbone of the research and form a unique data set: the recollections, photographs, and objects of women who grew up in homes shaped by the Depression and World War II. Their personal stories were contextualised by the public record in government documents, magazines, and newspapers. School yearbooks provided valuable insight into how girls saw themselves as pupils of dressmaking, and how they might use those skills beyond school. Together, these sources showed the variety of individual experiences as well as the commonalities. The layered methodology proved effective for qualitative research and allowed me to build a rich picture of dressmaking practice in New Zealand at a particular point in time.

Dressmaking was portrayed as a strategy that allowed the practitioner to side-step or transcend constraints of materials or money to achieve her desired effect in dress. Such constraints were a reality for many of the interviewees and their mothers. Dressmaking may have been a thrifty option, but still demanded decisions about the quantity, quality, and style of clothing that would be produced. Far from being the “between the scenes” activity suggested in movies like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Sound of Music*, dressmaking was a physical presence in homes that influenced the way families used space and time. The desired effect was assumed, by magazines and newspapers, to be “fashion,” but my

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research has shown that it might also relate to fit, perceptions of decency, or the ability to be able to use a particular fabric. Decisions about choice of fabric were sometimes based on the tactile experience of working with it. A dressmaker's motivations were different to those of someone who habitually bought their clothes ready-made. Dressmakers had greater control over their appearance; they could make more of themselves, or the most of themselves, or make themselves something other than what they were. Dressmaking allowed for conformity with contemporary expectations within the family, and of thrift, industry, and modesty. The dressmaker and those around her saw the decision making and activity that led to the garment. By allowing a greater degree of control over appearance, dressmaking allowed experimentation, social mobility, and participation in subcultures or trends.

My research confirms the arguments of feminist dress and fashion scholars who advocate for a situated and subjective perspective of female experience.⁴ I have shown the reality of girls' and women's experience through placing dressmaking at the centre of it. A degree of scholarly antipathy towards clothing and fashion has seen dressmaking side-lined as a mundane, domestic activity representative of a stereotypical feminine identity. My research has highlighted the extent to which dressmaking was a highly subjective practice that was part of daily life and contributed to each individual's unique sense of self. The stereotypical expectations of feminine identity were evident in the magazines, newspapers, and books I surveyed, but this was tempered by individual experience that showed a variety of responses. Dressmaking certainly offered a way for girls and women to make themselves "right" in the period — as good girls, good women, good wives, and good mothers.

Dressmaking was an integral part of life for the model family because it allowed women to enact the ideal: they could use the practice to manage the household budget, be occupied, and also be creative. Making garments enabled them to conform to societal expectations because making clothes for themselves and their children was visible evidence of being a wife and mother. Whatever value one may ascribe to these

⁴ Clark and Brody, eds., *Design Studies: A Reader*, 286-87.

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outcomes, my research has underscored that they were, in each case, the result of unique dressmaking practice shaped by an accumulation of influences. The performance of that practice cannot be dismissed as passive acceptance of a prescribed role. Girls and women could manage their appearance to a minute degree of detail, controlling the length of skirts, depth of necklines, and the closeness of fit. Rather than seeing dressmaking as a dress strategy imposed by lack of choice or limited budget, it can be seen as a strategy that supports creativity, experimentation and the enactment of varied identities — as a potentially empowering practice.

Dressmaking practice empowered women in other ways. They used it to maintain family ties, through making clothes and sharing garments with extended family. This created an alternate economy that allowed an initial investment of time and resource to be shared beyond the originating household. Girls and women involved in these economies saw themselves connected to a wider familial network, and understood that dressmaking could be valued in multiple ways. The skill gave status within families too; the interviewees talked about particular family members as having special skill and being respected for this. For some, dressmaking was a means of earning in the wage economy, either as makers or teachers. Once sewing became the examinable subject called Clothing in the post-primary education system, women who could teach the subject became more valued. The appropriation of a domestic skill as an academic subject created a more prestigious pathway for women within the education system.

The way sewing was taught in primary schools perhaps contributed to the way it has subsequently been overlooked by feminist scholars. Primary school education aligned sewing firmly with a limited female experience: devaluing it by the exclusion of boys, the introduction of untrained teachers, and the absence of specialist rooms or equipment. At primary schools, girls experienced a reinterpretation of the domestic ideal, with a woman in the classroom teaching them to do what most saw their mothers doing at home. I argue that this experience did not become internalised as habitus, because it was an appropriation or approximation of the domestic rather than an authentic response. Instead, sewing in primary schools is better understood as being an exercise in cultural

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reproduction. The curriculum developed after World War II was a product of thinking shaped by both the depression of the 1930s and the war. Sewing and other domestic subjects, for girls, were part of attempts to re-assert a — mythical — social order. In a similar way to magazines creating a master narrative of feminine experience in their pages, sewing lessons at school perpetuated a narrative in which girls' main educational need was to be prepared for domestic life. School sewing reinforced girls' position on the periphery of male-dominated worlds.

At secondary school, the subject called Clothing was distanced from domestic practice by being linked to other areas of the curriculum and assessed by an examination. The school curriculum imposed rules that created the potential for conflict when girls arrived at secondary school with established dressmaking habits or strong role models. The interviewees' stories suggest that domestic experience trumped whatever teachers might try to impose. Where interviewees had little domestic experience, suggestions from school were more readily absorbed. My research shows that school sewing taught habits, but dressmaking habitus was formed and re-formed in homes, as a personal dress practice.

I have also shown how dressmaking practice is both part of the progress towards modernity and at the same time is influenced by modernity. Dressmakers expressed modernity in the fabrics, tools, and machines they used for dressmaking, as well as the styles they created. The practice allowed for physical and sensory interaction with the consumer items of modern twentieth-century living. Early in the period, dressmaking meant making or remaking clothes for yourself and your children, from whatever fabric was available on whatever sewing machine you had access to. After the war, the increasing availability and variety of consumer items pushed dressmaking practice forward, because dressmakers had to learn new techniques. Dressmaking practice connected girls and women to these changes in tangible ways. Learning to sew was also modernised by being integrated into an education system that required pupils to stay at school longer and considered every pupil a potential candidate for the School Certificate

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examination. Clothing as part of secondary school education was part of a “Modern” course; girls who did that course were associated with a new approach to education.

The concept of modernity links to things, to material culture, both in the design and materials of things and in the simple availability of goods as production and trade normalised after the war. My research has underscored the importance of material culture to even the humblest dressmaking practice. In the domestic sphere, girls’ understanding of the practice was shaped by the things and spaces used by their mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters. For earlier generations, these things were often hard-won and carefully guarded. The material culture of dressmaking demanded a certain reverence or ceremony, with things used in particular spaces: scissors for cutting fabric on a flat surface, needles threaded in good light, sewing machines set up in sufficient space. Dressmaking practice in the home exposed girls to decisions about space, time, materials, style, skill, conformity, decency, and want. These everyday materialisations establish patterns of behaviour that were observed, repeated, or rejected by subsequent generations. All the interviewees, even those whose mothers did not sew, could remember sewing tools of various kinds in the family home. The sewing machine often served as the focal point for memories of the primary user, either mother or grandmother. The power of sewing tools, either machines or smaller tools, was evident in the reluctance to discard them long after they ceased being used or useful. The memories of these tools seldom focused on what was being made, rather on who was using them and where in the house this happened. My findings showed the power of emotional responses in creating memory and meaning in things and spaces. Girls observed individual patterns of behaviour in their households, and these observations became the foundation for their own behaviour. The interviewees’ sensibilities were brought to bear on what they saw in their homes, how their mothers and other relatives responded to conditions and conditioning. From that, they began to lay down their own “matchless combination of schemata,” and create their own habitus.⁵

⁵ L. Wacquant, “A Concise Genealogy and Anatomy of Habitus,” *Sociological Review* 64, no. 1 (2016): 67.

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The insights to be gained from looking at dressmaking as a practice that shapes practitioners are clear. *Habitus* is a useful way to theorise this understanding. In Joanne Entwistle's view it is:

the way we come to live in our bodies and how our body is both structured by our social situation, primarily our social class, but also produced through our own embodied activities. It is, therefore, a concept that can provide a link between the individual and the social.⁶

The accumulation of influences and habit — including society, school, family life, maternal skill, resources, and positive reinforcement — coalesce into a unique set of behaviours and responses. Because the practice does produce garments, it shapes the way the individual is seen in the world; the dressmaking *habitus* is reinforced and refined by feedback on the individual's way of being and the appearance she presents to others. Dressmakers were involved in a complex matrix of relationships and decisions, all of which were informed by previous decisions and informed future ones.

My research could be extended in a number of directions, both methodologically and theoretically. Dressmaking tools and the garments made using the practice are vital sources of information about the lives of girls and women. Even if they are only slowly being integrated into museum collections,⁷ they must be embraced by more scholars and subject to a wider range of analysis. These humble objects are tucked away in private domestic environments, ready to yield a fuller picture of experience. Oral history is a valuable technique for exploring memory and “glimpsing female subjectivities”⁸ held in such objects. Where the objects or garments are gone, scholars should heed Lou Taylor's advice to encourage their interview subjects to recollect garments⁹ while these traces remain. As my research has shown, the recollection of a garment will often be associated with the circumstances in which it was made and worn.

⁶ Entwistle, “The Dressed Body,” 148.

⁷ Buckley, “On the Margins,” 165-66.

⁸ Buckley, “Made in Patriarchy,” 287.

⁹ Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, 242.

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My research could be replicated with Māori women who went to Native Schools, in which the curriculum was biased towards domestic subjects with little thought of preparing pupils for higher education. It would be interesting to note what differences, if any, emerged in recollections of home practice by Māori women, and the interplay of home and school practice. The ability to use dressmaking to be part of a subculture was touched on briefly with the reference to “bodgie” culture of the 1950s,¹⁰ but there is scope for a more detailed study of how girls in New Zealand used, or perhaps subverted, dressmaking to signal membership of groups beyond the family and the home.¹¹ The role of sewing and dressmaking as skills in girls’ service organisations, such as Girl Guides, would be a valid starting point for tracking change in the purpose and ethos of such organisations.

My research has confirmed making, altering, and mending as economically necessary practices which sometimes became habitual. Since the end of the twentieth century, recycling has increasingly become both an environmental and political statement — and led to new conceptions of fashion both in New Zealand¹² and internationally.¹³ Relative to my research, what is the status of the dressmaker when her garments are repurposed in such designs?

The literature review established that domestic dressmaking has been largely excluded from discussion of fashion, but fashion and design has permeated this discussion.

¹⁰ Yska, *All Shook Up*.

¹¹ An example is Charlotte Macdonald’s study of female marching teams in the mid-twentieth century, whose uniforms were sometimes made by home dressmakers. Charlotte Macdonald, “Moving in Unison, Dressing in Uniform: Stepping out in Style with Marching Teams,” in Labrum, McKergow, and Gibson, *Looking Flash*. Richard Griffiths writes about punk and Goth style later in the century, focusing on assemblage and the finished look without venturing into the making. Richard Griffiths, “Wicked Wardrobes: Youth and Fashion in Aotearoa New Zealand,” in *Cultural Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Identity, Space and Place*, ed. Claudia Bell and Steve Matthewman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark consider the role of second hand clothing, assemblage and bricolage in creating visual identities that align with subcultures. The relationship between this type of making and ostensibly conventional practice warrants further exploration. Buckley and Clark, *Fashion and Everyday Life*, 203.

¹² Janet Dunn, “Refashion Redunn” (Master’s thesis, Massey University, 2008). Kim Fraser, “Redress - Refashion as a Solution for Clothing (Un) Sustainability” (Master’s thesis Auckland University of Technology, 2009).

¹³ Victoria L. Rovine, “Working the Edge: XULY.Bër’s Recycled Clothing,” in Palmer and Clark, *Old Clothes, New Looks*.

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Individual practitioners' relationships with both domestic practice and fashion could be more thoroughly examined in the New Zealand context.

The emphasis in this thesis has been on the interplay between a practice and its practitioners. Like Sandra Buckland, my real interest is in "understanding the people who [made] the clothes".¹⁴ The introduction questioned whether fragments about dressmaking from autobiographies and movies hinted at a story where dressmaking was central to female experience. My sources confirmed this was indeed possible. The multi-faceted critical framework and layered research design have shown what is missed if the practice is simply defined as a something that begins with the selection of fabric and pattern and ends with the fastening of a button. Dressmaking in post-war New Zealand had an impact on public appearance, purchasing decisions, domestic arrangements, school experience, and personal relationships; it resulted in a material product, and also shaped the practitioner. Materials, objects, skill and practice came together in unique ways to form a specific dressmaking habitus for some individuals; it was not just something they learned to do, it became part of who they were. Dressmaking was important long after its heyday at home and in school in the post-war decades, and this thesis has shown how analysis of it can add richness to fashion and cultural studies.

¹⁴ Pedersen, Buckland, and Bates, "Theory and Dress Scholarship," 75.

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Interviewees

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Caroline, born 1941.

Cathie, born 1940.

Cheryl, born 1951.

Geraldine, born 1926.

Jocelyn, born 1932.

Joy, born 1936.

Lyndsay, born 1940.

Lynne, born 1946.

Margaret, born 1938.

Railene, born 1934.

Sheena, born 1951.

Val, born 1948.

Velma, born 1934.

Vera, born 1945.

Archives New Zealand

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- R17926625, ABEP 7749 W4262, Box 1915, Record 30/2/3 Pt 1, Primary Education: Syllabus: Needlework, 1956–1957. Note: First document in file is dated 1946.
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- R21010781, AAQT 6539, Box 36 Record A2257, Christchurch South Intermediate School, Girls dressmaking class, c.1900–c.1947.
- R21010780, AAQT 6539, Box 36 Record A2256, Christchurch South Intermediate School, Boys Woodwork class, c.1900–c.1947.

Newspapers and magazines

I viewed four newspapers and one magazine on microfiche at the National Library of New Zealand.

Otago Daily Times

- 1946, 1–28 February ZN81.1 701/323, NNC 19280.
- 1946, 1–31 August ZN81.1 707/372, NNC 19286.
- 1951, 1–31 August ZN81.1 767/431.

1951, 1–28 February ZN81.1 761/367.
1956, 1–29 February ZN81.1 821/488 1.
1956, 1–31 August ZN82.1 827/547.
1961, 1–28 February ZN81.01 881/496.
1961, 1–31 August ZN81.01 887/551.

The Press

1948, 2 January–15 March NNC 19777.
1948, 11 August–20 October NNC 19780.
1953, 3rd January–28 February RAV/FM4/1092.
1953, 21 July–31 August RAV/FM4/1092.
1958, 11 February–15 March RAV/FM4/1092.
1958, 1–30 August RAV/FM4/1092.
1963, 1–25 February RAV/FM4/1092.
1963, 12–31 August RAV/FM4/1092.

New Zealand Herald

1947, January– February NNC 14921.
1947, July–August NNC 14924.
1952, January–February NNC 15720.
1952, July–August NNC 15723.
1957, February NNC 14996.
1957, August NNC 15002.
1962, 15–31 August NNC 15433.
1962, 1–23 February NNC 15424.

The Evening Post

- 1949, January–February /574.
1949, August /331.
1954, February /452.
1954, 2–31 August [no reference on box].
1959, February /544.
1959, August /614.
1964, February /697.
1964, August /779.

New Zealand Woman's Weekly

- 1945, 4 January–26 April, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3334/444.
1945, 3 May–30 August, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3335/523.
1950, 5 January–27 April, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3351/505.
1950, 4 May–31 August, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3352/636.
1955, 6 January–31 March, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3368/589.
1955, 7 July–29 September, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3370/589.
1956, 5 April–28 June, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3373/598.
1960, 4 January–28 March, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3388/709.
1960, 4 July–29 August, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3390/542.
1965, 4 January–22 February, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3417/482.
1965, 5 July–30 August, NatLib Micro 1007 ZP11 Reel 3420/635.

New Zealand secondary schools

Epsom Girls' Grammar School, Auckland

Epsom Girls' Grammar School is a state secondary school for girls that opened in 1917.

Epsom Girls Grammar School Magazine: viewed editions 1944 to 1965.

Epsom Girls Grammar School – School List: viewed editions 1944 to 1949 (final year of publication).

Epsom Girls Grammar School Annual Report: viewed editions 1950 to 1965.

Ephemera in school collection.

Otago Girls' High School, Dunedin

Otago Girls' High School is a state secondary school for girls that opened in 1870. The school's records are held at the Hocken Library.

Otago Girls' High School Magazine, 1944 to 1950, published by The Girls' High School, Tennyson Street, Dunedin. Printed by Otago Daily Times and Witness Newspapers Company. Viewed at the Hocken. Library Ref: AG-655-009/005.

Otago Girls High School Magazine, 1951 to 1957, published by The Girls' High School, Tennyson Street, Dunedin. Printed by Otago Daily Times and Witness Newspapers Company. Viewed at the Hocken Library. Ref: AG-655-009/007.

Otago Girls' High School Magazine, 1958 to 1960, published by The Girls' High School, Tennyson Street, Dunedin. Crown Print 326 Moray Place, Dunedin. Viewed at the Hocken Library. Ref: AG-655-009/007.

Otago Girls' High School Magazine, 1961 to 1965, published by The Girls' High School, Tennyson Street, Dunedin. Crown Print 326 Moray Place, Dunedin. Viewed at the Hocken Library. Ref: AG-655-009/006.

Otago Girls' high school 90th Anniversary, printed by the Otago Daily Times, Dunedin, 1961. Viewed at the Hocken Library. Ref: Ag-655-009/006.

Papanui High School, Christchurch

Papanui High School is a co-educational school that opened in 1935 as Papanui Technical College. The school had separate forms for boys and girls.

Papanui High School Review: viewed editions 1945 to 1965.

Ephemera in the school collection.

St Cuthbert's College, Auckland

St Cuthbert's College is a private school for girls that opened in 1915 as the Auckland Presbyterian Ladies College.

St Cuthbert's Chronicle, the magazine of St Cuthbert's Presbyterian College Auckland, founded February 1915: viewed editions 1945 to 1961.

Publisher (to 1949): Newmarket Printing House Ltd., 2 Teed Street, Newmarket, Auckland; (from 1950) J. E. Jenkins, 46 Victoria Street, Auckland.

Ephemera and garments in the school collection.

Wairarapa College, Masterton

Wairarapa College is a co-educational school that opened in 1938. The school had separate forms for boys and girls.

The Wairarapa College Magazine: viewed editions 1945 to 1951, 1955 to 1957, 1960 to 1965.

Wellington Girls' College, Wellington

Wellington Girls' College is a state secondary school for girls that opened in 1883.

Reporter: viewed editions 1945 to 1956, 1958 to 1965.

Ephemera in the school collection.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethics Committee approval



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA

16 November 2011

Dinah Vincent
203 Wilton Road
Wilton
WELLINGTON 6012

Dear Dinah

Re: Learning Dressmaking in New Zealand Schools, 1940-1970

Thank you for your Low Risk Notification which was received on 3 November 2011.

Your project has been recorded on the Low Risk Database which is reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committees.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please notify me if situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your initial ethical analysis that it is safe to proceed without approval by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research."

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor John O'Neill, Director (Research Ethics), telephone 06 350 5249, e-mail humanethics@massey.ac.nz".

Please note that if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish requires evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to provide a full application to one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

Yours sincerely

John G O'Neill (Professor)
**Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and
Director (Research Ethics)**

cc Dr Bronwyn Labrum
School of Visual and Material Culture
Wellington

Assoc Prof Tony Whincup, HoS
School of Visual and Material Culture
Wellington

Ms Amanda Bill
Institute of Design for Industry and Environment
Wellington

Mr Rodney Adank, HoI
Institute of Design for Industry and Environment
Wellington

Massey University Human Ethics Committee
Accredited by the Health Research Council

Research Ethics Office, Massey University, Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand
T +64 6 350 5573 +64 6 350 5575 F +64 6 350 5622
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz animalethics@massey.ac.nz gtc@massey.ac.nz
www.massey.ac.nz



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA

24 July 2015

Dinah Vincent
203 Wilton Road
Wilton
WELLINGTON 6012

Dear Dinah

Re: Learning Dressmaking Skills, 1945-1965: What Did Girls Make of It?

Thank you for your Low Risk Notification which was received on 13 July 2015.

Your project has been recorded on the Low Risk Database which is reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committees.

You are reminded that staff researchers and supervisors are fully responsible for ensuring that the information in the low risk notification has met the requirements and guidelines for submission of a low risk notification.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please notify me if situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your initial ethical analysis that it is safe to proceed without approval by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director (Research Ethics), telephone 06 356 9099, extn 86015, e-mail humanethics@massey.ac.nz".

Please note that if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish requires evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to provide a full application to one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

Yours sincerely

Brian T Finch (Dr)
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and
Director (Research Ethics)

cc Assoc Prof Bronwyn Labrum
School of Design
Wellington

Mr Rodney Adank, Co-HoS
School of Design
Wellington

Dr Caroline Campbell
School of Design
Wellington

Prof Andre Ktori, Co-HoS
School of Design
Wellington

Massey University Human Ethics Committee
Accredited by the Health Research Council

Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise

Massey University, Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand T 06 3505573; 06 3505575 F 06 350 5622
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz; animaethics@massey.ac.nz; gtc@massey.ac.nz www.massey.ac.nz

Appendix 2: Questionnaires and agreements

General questionnaire

I asked interviewees the following questions. Some interviewees asked to see the questions before the interview so they could prepare themselves.

Biographical detail: year of birth, siblings, place in family

Education: schools attended (type of school if not name, e.g. primary, intermediate, district high school), subjects at secondary school, tertiary training

Sewing and dressmaking at home:

Did your mother or other family members sew?

If there was sewing at home, where did it happen?

What were the tools and spaces involved?

What can you remember about dressmaking in your house?

What influenced the sewing in your home? Price? Magazines? Lifestyle beliefs?

As a child, did you wear home-made clothes? What can you remember about that?

Did you wear them willingly?

Thinking about when you were growing up, what words would you use to describe your mother's attitude to home dressmaking? What words would you use to describe your mother's attitude to clothing and fashion?

Sewing and dressmaking at school:

What years did you learn sewing at school?

Did you have a choice about learning? Would you have learned if you didn't have to?

Where did you go for sewing lessons?

What equipment did you have?

What did you make?

What influenced your choices of patterns and fabrics?

Did you wear or use garments or accessories that you made?

How would you describe your experience of learning to sew at school?

Did learning sewing at school stop you from learning anything else?

At the time – why did you think you were being taught to sew?

Dressmaking since school:

Have you ever made anything since finishing sewing at school?

Have you worn clothes you have made for yourself?

What motivates you to sew?

What tools and equipment do you have? Tell me about them.

Do you have a dedicated space for sewing in your home? Describe this space.

If you could have your time at school over again, would you have sewing lessons?

Do you have children?

Did you teach them to sew?

For teachers

Tell me about your training to be a sewing teacher.

Was it something you always wanted to do?

Tell me about your experience as a sewing teacher - types of school, year groups, facilities available in the school

Describe the curriculum - what was its intention?

How did sewing and dressmaking fit in with girls' other classes?

What status did sewing classes and pupils have in the school?

Vetting questionnaire

When people suggested interview subjects to me, I used the following questionnaire to assess whether they were a suitable candidate.

What year were you born?

Did you go to school in New Zealand?

Can you remember learning to sew at primary school?

Which primary school?

Can you remember learning to sew at secondary school?

Which secondary school?

Did you do Clothing for School Certificate?

Can you remember a family member teaching you to sew?

Have you ever taught sewing at a New Zealand school?

Were you trained to teach sewing?

Do you have any objects or garments associated with learning or teaching sewing at school?

Do you have any photographs of yourself or family members wearing garments you made between 1945 and 1965?

Do you own a sewing machine at the moment?

When was the last time you used it?



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF CREATIVE ARTS
 TOI RAUWHĀRANGI

Massey University
 College of Creative Arts
 PO Box 756
 Wellington 6140

***Dressmaking in New Zealand Schools 1945 - 1965:
 what did girls make of it?***

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being image recorded.

I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I wish/do not wish to have data placed in an official archive. *(use additional consent form)*

I agree/do not agree to the researcher using photographs taken or provided at the interview or in subsequent visits in presentations about the research and in the thesis.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature

Date

.....

Full name

**Address for supply of
 summary and other
 information**

.....



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF CREATIVE ARTS
TOI RAUWHĀRANGI

Massey University
College of Creative Arts
PO Box 756
Wellington 6140

Dressmaking in New Zealand 1945 - 1965:

What did girls make of it?

INFORMATION SHEET

I am Dinah Vincent and I am enrolled part-time for a PhD at Massey University. My tertiary studies to date include Clothing and Textiles (Certificate completed 1984 at Wellington Polytechnic, now Massey University); a Certificate in Journalism (1989), and Bachelors and Master's Degrees in English Literature from Victoria University (1995 and 2000). In 2010 I completed a Graduate Certificate in Museum and Heritage Studies at Victoria.

I would like to ask you about your experience of teaching, learning, or practising dressmaking, as part of my PhD research, described in more detail below.

Research description

My PhD research aims to reconstruct the practices of domestic and, more specifically, school dressmaking as undertaken by and taught to girls in New Zealand in the period 1945 to 1965. I aim to clarify the relationship between the compulsory experience of school dressmaking and what is understood to be the common practice of domestic dressmaking by women in that time period. The study concentrates on female experience, because it is popularly understood as a female activity, and because it is a subject for girls at school over this time.

In the absence of previous work on the topic in New Zealand, the research is using a grounded theory approach, that is, it does not test any existing theory

but will develop theory through analysis of existing data and information collected in interviews and other research.

I will use a combination of research methods, including: review of Department of Education records at Archives NZ; analysis of magazines and ephemera from the period; review of archives held by individual schools; and through interviews with women who taught, learned, or practised dressmaking in the period.

Who is being asked to participate?

I am asking people to share their experiences with me as the thesis progresses, using a variety of methods:

word-of-mouth introductions to women known to have taught or learned dressmaking in the period, or to be keen dressmakers
direct approaches to people involved in the development and implementation of the curriculum, identified as authors of curriculum documents or text books
requesting introductions to women identified in the archives of individual schools.

I hope to include some participants whose experience falls outside the specific time frame of the study to provide further context, and a means of assessing continuity and change in dressmaking practices.

A review of other projects and discussion with other researchers suggests around 20 participants will be the upper limit of a project undertaken by one person, as opposed to a group of researchers.

I am looking for a spread of ages, types and locations of school, whether they were teachers or pupils, and whether they have continued to use dressmaking skills in later life or not.

I cannot pay participants in this research. I expect that participation will require a commitment of time for interviews. Any other associated costs will be covered by me. These might include phone calls, postage, copying, or refreshments.

It is not anticipated that there will be any risk to you if you take part in the project. That said, discussion of the past and growing up, which is fundamental to the project, can trigger strong memories and feelings. You may stop an interview at any time and withdraw from the project if that happens or if for any other reason you feel uncomfortable.

Research procedures

Wherever possible, interviews will be carried out face-to-face and recorded. No recording will be made without your consent. Where a face-to-face interview is not possible, I will interview you by telephone.

It is expected that interviews will take between 30 and 90 minutes, depending on individual circumstances. You will get this sheet and consent forms to

review before the interview. Completing the form and other administrative tasks may take between 15 and 30 minutes. The set up and follow up to interviews will be done using e-mails and phone calls and will take extra time.

If you have objects (such as tools or equipment, workbooks, photographs, or garments) relevant to this topic I may ask your permission to take photographs for reference, presentations or possible publication in the final thesis. You can indicate the extent of such permission on the participant form. If you agree to loan items such as photographs, arrangements will be made for their safe return. I will cover any costs of such arrangements.

Data management

The information given in the interviews will be used as part of the findings of the thesis. Any recordings, notes, and transcripts, and a back-up copy of the same, will be held by me until after the thesis is submitted and examined. Electronic copies of notes and transcripts will then be deleted, and paper copies shredded.

If an interview is recorded on the understanding that it is to be lodged in an archive, you and I will complete and sign a detailed agreement form about access to and publication of such a recording.

After the thesis is submitted, you will be sent a summary of the findings of the research.

You will be identified in the thesis by your first name, year of birth and age, and the schools you attended. Given the size of New Zealand's population, this information, along with any family details, may be enough to identify some people. You may opt to be identified by an alias, and to restrict identifying information about school and family circumstances. This will be discussed at the time of the interview, and you may change your mind at a later date.

Participant's rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study (by advising the researcher before 30 June 2017);
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- limit the researcher's use of potentially identifying information about the schools you attended and your family circumstances;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded;
- if the interview is being recorded, you can ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time.

Project Contacts

Researcher

Lead supervisor

Dinah Vincent

Dr Bronwyn Labrum

203 Wilton Road

Massey University

Wellington

Ph: 04 801 5799

Ph: 04 9702 989 or 021 0273 8188

Email: b.j.labrum@massey.ac.nz

Email: Dinah.vincent@clear.net.nz

Please feel free to ask any questions about the project.

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor John O'Neill, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 350 5249, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz

Appendix 3: Biographies of interviewees

Alison was born in 1942 in Wellington. She is the second of three daughters.

Her father was a builder and her mother was a clerical worker. Her maternal grandmother and unmarried aunt lived in the family home.

Alison's mother had a treadle sewing machine that was used to make clothing for the women of the house. Her grandmother made lace, and her aunt knitted. Another aunt visited the house and would "knock up" dresses for Alison and her sisters. Alison's sisters both learned to sew, although Alison's recollection is that the older one simply "took to it like a duck to water."

Alison went to primary and secondary school in Wellington. She had sewing lessons in her intermediate years where she remembers making an apron and kerchief for cooking that she thinks were finished by her mother. She recalls being treated as a problem pupil because she was left-handed.

Alison did a professional course at Wellington Girls' College, with an emphasis on Science. In the fourth form, every pupil had to do a block course in sewing where they made a sleeveless dress with a gathered skirt and a zip. Alison recalls her mother or older sister unpicked some of her work and did it again. She remembers wearing the finished garment. Not to have done so would have been wasteful.

When Alison was newly married, her mother paid for her to go to classes run by the Singer Sewing Machine Company. Her mother also bought her a sewing machine. She has sewn her own clothing throughout her life. Alison uses the sun room of her home to store her sewing machine, patterns, and fabrics — but she sews in different rooms according to temperature and mood.

Alison has two daughters. She did not teach them to sew.

Caroline was born in 1941 in Dunedin. Caroline is the eldest of two girls.

Her mother was a homemaker and her father worked in the finance and commercial sector after serving in the air force.

Caroline's maternal grandfather was a tailor who specialised in bespoke suits. He died before Caroline was born. Caroline's mother did not sew, but was used to having high-quality clothing through her father's connections. Caroline remembers her mother had a soft chintzy bag for her mending things.

When Caroline was ten, her mother got a treadle sewing machine and went to sewing classes, but it was Caroline who really learned to sew on that machine. Caroline had already been making dolls clothes by hand, working out the patterns by herself.

Caroline ended up doing Clothing for School Certificate when the headmistress of Christchurch Girls' High asked girls to put up their hands if they did not like maths. All those with their hands up got moved to the class that did Clothing.

Caroline bought her own machine after she got married, a Husqvarna. She has had an Elna for 30 years. She made clothing for her two daughters, but did not teach them to sew. She describes herself as a throwback to her grandfather, and that her sister missed the gene.

She stills sews, and had a pattern pinned to fabric on the floor of her Christchurch home the day of the February 2011 earthquake. It was covered with fallen things, but she cleaned it off, cut it out, and wore the finished dress.

Cathie was born in Wellington in 1940, the middle child and only girl of three.

Her mother was a homemaker and her father was a tram driver, later a bus driver and inspector.

Cathie's mother mended and altered things rather than sewed, and taught Cathie to darn. Cathie's aunt who could sew and was a source of lovely hand-me-downs made for her older female cousins.

Cathie's mother's treadle sewing machine was in the house, and later had a motor added to it. Cathie used that machine, both as a treadle and an electric.

Cathie did a Homecraft course at Wellington East Girls' College and took Clothing for School Certificate. She remembers being taught specific techniques for each stage of garment construction. Those techniques were not always put into practice. Cathie remembers making dresses on Saturdays to wear out that night, and being teased by father for hemming dresses hastily with long stitches.

Cathie says she likes to be noticed, and enjoys wearing clothes that look good on her. Making her own clothes is a way of ensuring her look is unique. She has a vivid memory from her secondary school years of going out in a bought frock, and having to hide all night because another girl was in the same frock.

Cathie bought a Liberty sewing machine on hire-purchase when she first left school. For her, it was fun to go home at night and make something. She bought whatever fabrics she wanted and had "lots of quite nice dresses." If a dress doesn't feel right, Cathie will not wear it again.

Early in her married life, she bought a Brother sewing which she used until buying another Brother in 2012. Cathie has a table and chair as a dedicated sewing space in the sun room of her home.

Cheryl was born in 1951 in Waiuku, south of Auckland. She is the fifth of six children, three girls and three boys; she is the youngest girl. Her parents were sharemilkers.

Cheryl's mother sewed and knitted much of the family's clothing. Cheryl remembers her mother as being busy and competent. She described her mother as a problem solver. Her mother's machines and tools for sewing, spinning, and knitting are part of Cheryl's memories of home.

Cheryl learned to sew with her mother at home, from observation, rather than organised lessons.

She also learned to sew in lessons at primary school. Cheryl was the only senior girl in the school, so got plenty of attention from the teacher's wife who came in to teach sewing and needlework to the girls. Cheryl embroidered a gingham cloth and made a sewing bag, both of which she still has. She can remember making two skirts at primary school, both from fabric that seemed to appear from nowhere.

Cheryl did a commercial course at Fairfield College in Hamilton. She did clothing in Forms III and IV but did not ask if it was possible to take the subject through to School Certificate. In the two years of classes, she can remember making a school shirt, a lined skirt, and a smocked baby gown. Cheryl still has the baby gown, which she considered altering to a romper for one of her sons. In the end, she left the dress as it was.

Cheryl trained as a nurse and bought herself a sewing machine when she was in the nursing hostel. She can remember running up outfits for balls.

Cheryl is married with two sons and sews many garments for herself and her family. Cheryl's sewing machine and ironing board are set up in a spare bedroom in her home.

Geraldine was born in Wellington in 1926. She is an only child. Geraldine's father was a public servant. Her mother did not have employment outside the home, but was a competent sewer who made clothes for herself and Geraldine.

Geraldine remembers her mother having a treadle sewing machine, and recalls this having the benefit of continuing to work even if there were power cuts.

Geraldine won a needlework prize for a hand-stitched night-gown when she was at primary school. Despite being capable with needle and thread, Geraldine was not interested in doing sewing at school.

Geraldine did a professional course at Wellington East Girls' College. She recalls having to make some garments for school — a wrapped-coat to wear in the laboratory and rompers for Physical Education — which she was easily able to do. Geraldine never went into a sewing room at secondary school because, as a pupil in the professional stream, that was not her place.

Geraldine left school after four years, ready for tertiary study. It was 1942 and she was only 16 years old, and she was directed to Dunedin to enrol in the newly-established course for Homecraft teachers. She had little interest in this, but saw it as a stepping stone to university which was where she wanted to be.

By 19, Geraldine was a Homecraft teacher in secondary schools, and doing other university study at the same time. She worked as an examiner for secondary schools, and taught adult classes in dressmaking and fitting.

In 1959, Geraldine's book *You and Your Clothes* was published. In New Zealand, the book worked as a text book for the School Certificate Clothing syllabus. Mills & Boon published the book as a reference book in the English market.

Geraldine's mother continued to make clothes for her and her daughters, but not her son, until the children were teenagers. Geraldine herself likes choosing fabric and cutting out, but prefers to leave the construction to others.

Jocelyn was born in Masterton in 1932. She is the youngest of three, and the only girl. Jocelyn's father worked in the meat industry, and her mother earned money at home from her sewing skills. Jocelyn's mother had been apprenticed to a menswear business, and was particularly skilled at hand-stitched buttonholes. Jocelyn can remember suits being sent by train to Masterton so her mother could do the buttonholes. Jocelyn's mother also did alterations for local clothing businesses, and made womenswear to measure.

Jocelyn believes her mother's real interest was in high fashion womenswear, but Masterton did not give much scope for her creativity. Jocelyn remembers people noticing her clothes because her mother made things special with unusual techniques and details.

Sewing affected the use of the family home. In summer, the sun porch was a children's bedroom and the back bedroom became the sewing room. In winter, when the sun porch was too cold for sleeping, Jocelyn's mother used the sun porch in the daytime or the living room.

Jocelyn had sewing lessons at primary and secondary school, neither of which she enjoyed. Both schools had treadle machines which she found difficult to use. Her memory is of temperamental machines and horrible fabric; Jocelyn does not think she finished anything she started sewing at school.

Jocelyn cannot remember her mother teaching her to sew. She does remember her mother unpicking and finishing things she started, which was a disincentive to trying. When Jocelyn trained as a teacher and had to submit a sampler of hand-stitching at teachers' college, she paid someone to do hers.

Yet when she was a young mother, she realised that she must have learned something along the way because she sewed for her children and herself.

Jocelyn did not teach her son or daughter to sew. She did help her grandson with a cushion cover for a school sewing project.

Joy was born on in Runanga on the west coast of South Island in 1936. She is an only child, and her mother left her father before Joy can remember.

Joy's recollection is of growing up with her father and housekeeper. The housekeeper was a competent sewer and made clothes for herself and Joy. Joy cannot remember seeing the housekeeper sew, just that well-made garments appeared. Joy had no choice and took little pleasure from the clothes that were made for her.

Joy did Clothing at secondary school, as part of what she described as "the dumb people's course." She did not enjoy the class and has little memory of it. Indeed, her strongest memory is of the physical struggle of getting to school, when her severe asthma made it difficult to endure the cold walk and train ride.

Joy left school without qualifications. She got a live-in job at a hotel in Wellington. She roomed with another girl who had a sewing machine and was a competent sewer. Joy remembers discovering the fabric shops in the city and choosing patterns for herself. She sewed in her shared room at night and can remember garments from this time.

She bought a sewing machine on hire-purchase soon after she married and really taught herself to sew by making all the clothing for her four children.

She sewed less clothing as time went by, but enjoys making curtains and mending and hemming.

Lyndsay was born in 1940 in Christchurch, the youngest of three girls. Her mother was a Home Science teacher and her father was the principal of Christchurch West High School, which Lyndsay attended.

Lyndsay's mother taught her the basics of sewing, but Lyndsay was not especially interested as a girl. She does remember visiting a friend whose house seemed to be full of women. Lyndsay and her friend used the electric sewing machine in that house to make dolls clothes.

Lyndsay enjoyed sewing classes at primary school and made a smocked blouse for a baby and a blouse for herself.

Lyndsay did a professional course at Christchurch West High School, where dressmaking was mandatory for fourth-form girls. Lyndsay remembers the teachers as young and enthusiastic, and that the class was a pleasant experience. She made a blouse, a dress, and a jacket in that class – all of which she wore.

Despite this success, Lyndsay did not practice her skills until her mother became ill when Lyndsay was 21. She recalls her mother's amazement that Lyndsay could set to and make clothes. Lyndsay was similarly amazed when her daughter began sewing in her mid-forties.

Both her parents enjoyed making and learning as well as teaching. Her mother learned patternmaking, and her father did woodwork.

Lyndsay followed in their footsteps, achieving academic success with a PhD in Botany, and becoming a weaver.

Lyndsay continues to make most of her clothes on the Husqvarna sewing machine she has had since 1974. She makes her own underwear using a pattern drafted by her mother. She dresses for comfort, relying on proven patterns for shirts and trousers.

Lynne was born in Invercargill in 1946, the eldest of three children: two girls and a boy. Lynne's mother was a shorthand typist and her father was an accountant.

Lynne can remember the treadle sewing machine being in the living room of the family home, and that her mother was making clothes for the children. Cutting out and sewing all happened in the living room. She can remember her mother having a fitting form, but has no recollection of her making clothes for herself. Lynne says her mother encouraged her to learn the action of the treadle machine and gave her pieces of fabric to practise on.

Lynne remembers sewing lessons at primary school. Her strongest recollections are that the boys were doing something else, and that learning to sew was connected to the idea that girls were to become ladies. She stitched a sampler and made a cushion cover and an apron.

Lynne did an academic course (French, Latin, Science) at secondary school, but had to do cooking for the first two years regardless. In the second year, she and a friend negotiated to join the boys in Woodwork because they already knew how to cook. She described herself as a "neat freak," and acknowledges this attention to detail was helpful for Woodwork.

When she was getting ready to go to university, she used her mother's treadle machine to make a wardrobe suitable for student life. Lynne says her motivation was to be "smart."

Lynne has two sons. Like her mother, she was happy to have her children watch her as she sewed, and for them to learn from observation. One of her sons likes to sew and will attempt any sewing task.

Lynne still uses the Elna she bought in 1971 when she was newly married. When that machine broke down a few years ago, her husband said, "You've got to have a sewing machine because that's you. You've got to have a sewing machine that goes on the end of the dining table."

Margaret was born in rural Waikato in 1938, where her father was a sharemilker and her mother was a homemaker. She is the eldest of four, with two brothers and a sister as the youngest of the family.

At home, her mother did not have a special place for sewing, although a bit of the veranda was eventually boxed in as a sewing room. Margaret's mother progressed from a treadle to an electric Singer machine, and eventually got a Husqvarna. This was significant because the family, who had Swedish ancestors, had a running joke that something that was Swedish must be good. Margaret does not remember ever having bought things as a child, although there were sometimes cast-offs from relatives.

Margaret remembers doing basic needlework at primary school: boys and girls together learning hand-eye coordination by stitching on sugar bags. Later, girls had separate lessons where they hemmed handkerchiefs, and made soft toys before making an apron and a skirt.

Margaret's mother tried to teach her to sew, but her mother would become frustrated with Margaret's lack of attention to detail and end up taking over. Her mother paid for her to do sewing lessons, but was disappointed by the quality of the teaching.

Margaret trained to be a primary school teacher, and as part of her training she had to learn to teach the 1958 Sewing syllabus. She recalls her mother produced some of the stitch samples for her exercise book. Margaret was more motivated to draw the stitches because art was her real interest.

Margaret taught her own daughters to sew, "as much as they'd listen — like me and my mother." Margaret still has the Elna she bought over 50 years ago. She did buy an overlocker, but found she seldom used it.

Railene was born in rural Manawatu in 1934 on the family farm. She is the middle child of three girls.

Railene's description of her life was punctuated with reminders that she had enjoyed an unusually privileged life, "Mother was always beautifully dressed because they could afford it." All her mother's clothes were made by a dressmaker, who also made matching dresses for the girls.

Railene remembers learning sewing at school from when she was very young — and loving the experience as a welcome break from the tedium of lessons. She said the woman teacher took the girls while the headmaster did some other activity with the boys. Railene says there was a treadle sewing machine at the school, although most of the projects were handwork.

For secondary school, all three girls boarded at Iona College in Hawkes Bay. Railene started in her final years of primary school, so had seven years there. Sewing and mending were part of life at Iona. Railene's mother bought an electric sewing machine so the girls could sew when they were home in the holidays — something they enjoyed doing together. Railene's older sister did the Home Science course at Otago, and inspired Railene to make more of her own clothing.

Despite the family's wealth, war-time shortages meant some things were not available to buy. Railene had the novel experience, for her, of not having the right clothing when she started at Iona. The prescribed brown fabric simply was not available, and she remembers being embarrassed about her worn-out gym tunic.

Railene suffered ill health after having an ear removed to stop an infection. This interrupted her education, and she did not complete her sixth form year.

Given carte blanche to ask for anything for her twenty-first birthday, Railene asked her parents for a sewing machine. They bought her a top-of-the-line model. As a young wife and mother, she used the machine to make all her children's clothing — and uses it still.

Sheena was born in Waipawa in 1951, the third of four girls. Her mother was a teacher who worked intermittently as the girls grew up, and her father was an accountant who also served as deputy mayor of Waipawa.

Sheena remembers her mother making clothes for all four girls. Dressmaking tools and materials were part of everyday life in the house, and the girls would play or experiment with anything that was left in reach.

Sheena's mother learned to sew from her mother-in-law, whom she had known from childhood.

Sheena remembers her mother being in control of the family's clothing. She remembers her mother having bursts of activity, so the girls might get three new dresses each in a period of a few weeks. Everyone got a new "best" dress every year, which was then relegated to second best the next year.

Sheena remembers her father supporting his wife's sewing. He altered the laundry to be a sewing room. Despite this bespoke environment, the sisters preferred to sew in the kitchen or the dining room.

Once the girls got to secondary school, they were given their family allowance money to use for clothing. Their parents provided school uniform and footwear, but they had to manage everything else for themselves.

All of them sewed, and the second was a very competent after doing Home Science at Otago. She shared her new skills with Sheena in the school holidays.

Sheena said her mother stopped dressmaking when the girls left home and returned to her first loves — spinning and knitting. Sheena is an adventurous craftswoman who spins, knits, weaves, and sews.

Val was born in Whangarei in 1948, the youngest of four children — three girls and a boy. Her father worked as a clerk in the dairy industry, and her mother was a dressmaker who trained as a Homecraft teacher when Val was 12.

Sewing, dressmaking, and other kinds of handcrafts were the norm in Val's family home. Val's mother was a thrifty woman who made all sorts of garments for the entire family, including her husband.

Val's mother worked as a dressmaker in a department store when she left school and was highly competent and confident. She also saw dressmaking as a competitive activity. Val says her mother won a competition to a design school in Sydney before she was married. When she did her training to be a Homecraft teacher she was unhappy she got 98% for a garment rather than 100%. She also entered sewing and dressmaking competitions for prizes.

Val enjoyed sewing at home with her mother, but did not enjoy school sewing because the projects were too simple and unappealing.

Val was an academically able pupil who did a professional course at secondary school. She continued to sew at home, mastering the shift dresses that were highly fashionable in her teenage years. Her mother provided quality control, demanding she stitch hems neatly before leaving the house.

Val went into the fashion business, using her knowledge of construction and sense of style to great effect. Her partner, who became her husband, learned patternmaking. Their daughter does not sew.

Val now runs a fashion training course, and seldom makes her own clothes — although she enjoys other textile crafts. Her mother's treadle machine is on display at her business, still with notions in the drawers.

Velma born in 1934 in Auckland, and has an older sister. Her father was a motor mechanic, an occupation that kept him in New Zealand during the war because he provided an essential service. Velma's mother was a homemaker.

As a girl, Velma's mother worked with her three sisters selling haberdashery from their father's newsagency in Waipawa. Velma's mother was a skilled knitter, and also a competent dressmaker. Velma still has garments her mother knitted for her, and knitting and sewing books her mother used.

Velma remembers her mother teaching her French knitting before she started school. Velma learned cooking, sewing, and other domestic skills at intermediate school, and then enrolled for the Art course at Auckland Girls' Grammar, which included Clothing. New Zealand schools were closed for the first term of 1948, her first year at secondary school, because of the polio epidemic.

When school re-opened, Velma made enduring friendships with a small group of classmates, most of whom enjoyed dressmaking. Velma says their goal was to be individual; they did not want to look like everyone else.

Velma, like her sister, left school as soon as she turned 15 so she could earn a wage. She worked in shops before being offered a job as a piano teacher at a girls' school. She continued to teach Music in secondary schools for the rest of her life, becoming head of department in several schools.

Velma inherited her mother's love for wool. Instead of knitting it, Velma used it for embroidering and smocking. Velma designed her own clothes, preferring simple shapes in woollen cloth, which she embellished with fine and intricate surface decoration.

Velma did not have children of her own, but enjoyed making smocked garments for other people's children.

Vera was born in 1945 in Hawkes Bay, the youngest of six children and the only girl. Her parents were orchardists, who later developed a motor camp on their property.

Vera's mother used the sun porch at the family home as a sewing room, where she made and mended clothing and household linens for the family.

Vera's mother was a competent and efficient seamstress, who favoured practical garments in good quality fabrics. Vera remembers her mother having commercial patterns and fabrics neatly stored in the sewing room. Sewing was not only a means of making new clothes; it was also a way of extending a garment's usefulness. Vera remembers having trousers lengthened with contrast fabric sewn at the hems.

Vera was encouraged to sew for herself, starting with pyjamas when she was ten. Her mother supported her by providing advice and encouragement, giving her access to the sewing machine, and buying good quality fabrics.

Vera started Clothing at secondary school as part of her commercial course, but dropped it after one year because she was not learning anything new. Vera left school before taking the School Certificate examination. She is an avid reader of patterns and instructions, and enjoys mastering techniques. She went to sewing classes as an adult but was disappointed with the teaching.

Vera's mother had an Elna sewing machine, and Vera stayed loyal to that brand. When Vera was 20, she bought herself an Elna sewing machine. When her mother died, about 30 years later, Vera used money she inherited to buy a new Elna sewing machine, an overlocker, and a pressing machine — along with a woollen overcoat. Despite having a high level of skill, Vera does not believe she has sufficient knowledge or mastery of tailoring to make an overcoat.

Vera continues to make about half her clothes. She often buys ready-made garments for the fabric, before unpicking and altering them to her taste.

Appendix 4: Archives New Zealand permission



Level 3, St Paul's Square, 45-47 Pipitea Street
P O Box 1666, Thorndon, Wellington

REF: 346250

Dinah Vincent

203 Wilton road

Wellington 6012

10 May 2012

Dear Dinah

Please find the enclosed letter authorising access to department of Education files held at Archives New Zealand.

Access is granted only for the purpose of research for your PhD studies; the contents of the files must not be used or disseminated for any other purpose.

Under no circumstances should you publish the name of or otherwise publicly identify any student or teacher named in the files unless you have express permission to do so from that person, their legal guardian, or their closest living relative.

Should Archives New Zealand allow, you may take copies from these files and reproduce them subject to the above conditions.

Presentation of the letter and adequate identification should ensure access, but if there are any further issues please feel free to contact me on my direct phone line: (04) 463 8166.

Best of luck for your research.

Yours Sincerely

Stephen Metherell
Manager, Records Services

Archives New Zealand, Head Office

PO Box 12-050
10 Mulgrave Street
Wellington

10 may 2012

*Permission for **Dinah Vincent** to View Restricted Archives*

Please allow the above named access the Department of Education files listed below:

Acc.	Box	No.	Pt	Title	Opened	Closed	Item #
W4262	1022	20/5/19	1	Examinations - School Certificate - Clothing Revision Committee	1953	1982	R17917845
W4262	1022	20/5/20	1	Examinations - School Certificate - Homecraft Revision Committee (Home Economics from 1971)	1953	1980	R17917847
W4262	3185	40/9/19	1	Training of Teachers and Training Colleges - Refresher Courses - Teachers of Homecraft and Clothing	1957	1967	R7242368
W4262	3416	50/2/8		Departmental Special Schools - Kelston School for the Deaf - Clothing	1937	1965	R7244149

Please ensure Dinah provides adequate identification.

Should you need to confirm or clarify any aspects of this request please contact me on 04 463 8166.

Stephen Metherell
Manager, Records Services

Appendix 5: Sewing in the education system

This timeline shows the place of sewing in the free state education system in New Zealand from 1877 to 1968.

1877 The Education Act “established the free, compulsory, and secular system.”¹ It was for primary education, to Standard 6. Most children went to primary school from the ages of six to 14, moving through Primers 1 to 4, before Standards 1 to 6. “The subjects of instruction were named as reading, writing, arithmetic [...] and, in the case of girls, sewing, needlework, and the principles of domestic economy.”²

1899 The Proficiency Examination was introduced to mark successful completion of primary education. The examination was in “Reading, Spelling and Dictation, Writing, Composition, Arithmetic, Geography, and Drawing.”³

District high schools opened to cater for pupils who wanted to continue their education, but were not intending to go to university.⁴ Pupils who wanted to go to university went to secondary schools.

1901 A pass in the Proficiency Examination became a way of getting free entry to district high schools.⁵ Central government gave financial incentives to boards to provide free education at district high schools, and to establish classes in technical subjects.⁶

1903 The Competency Certificate was introduced for those in lower Standard 6 who failed to achieve Proficiency.

Pupils could choose between three distinct types of post-primary school: district high schools if they were to work in agriculture, technical high schools if they were to get

¹ H. Henderson, “The Post-Primary System,” in *The Administration of Education in New Zealand*, ed. George W. Parkyn (Wellington: New Zealand Institute of Public Administration, 1954), 45.

² Cumming and Cumming, *History of State Education*, 102.

³ Openshaw, Lee, and Lee, *Challenging the Myths*, 195.

⁴ Henderson, “The Post-Primary System,” 46-49.

⁵ Openshaw, Lee, and Lee, *Challenging the Myths*, 195.

⁶ Henderson, “The Post-Primary System,” 46-49.

a trade or work in industry, and secondary schools if they expected to go to university.⁷

1912 The Minister of Education commented “on parents’ failure to appreciate that the sound education of girls was just as important as that of boys.”⁸

1914 An addition to the Education Act confirmed the importance of needlework in girls’ primary education, “where possible, needlework had to be taken by all girls and could even be taken by boys.”⁹

1929 The primary syllabus was revised in 1928. The document was published in 1929 and became known as the “Red Book” because of the colour of the binding. The introduction said teachers should be free to, “make any alteration or rearrangement of work they think desirable, and the inspectors will approve any reasonable scheme that appears to meet the needs of children of a particular type or a particular locality.”¹⁰

1934 Needlework was one of 12 new subjects¹¹ added to the existing 19 subjects available for the University Entrance examination.¹²

“School Certificate was instituted in an attempt to provide an alternative to the University Entrance examination as a general qualification for pupils entering commercial work and other similar employment.”¹³

1935 Handicraft Teachers Certificate offered for women to train to teach the newly created post-primary subject called Needlework.

1936 The Proficiency examination was abolished.¹⁴

⁷ Openshaw, Lee, and Lee, *Challenging the Myths*, 196-7.

⁸ Tennant, “Natural Directions,” 87.

⁹ Cumming and Cumming, *History of State Education*, 192.

¹⁰ O'Rourke and Robinson, *Schools in New Zealand Society*.

¹¹ R19237274 School Certificate Examination Regulations – Regulations relating to the School Certificate Examination – 1934.

¹² Cumming and Cumming, *History of State Education*, 253.

¹³ Henderson, “The Post-Primary System,” 50-51.

¹⁴ Openshaw, Lee, and Lee, *Challenging the Myths*, 199.

1943 Bursaries established for girls wishing to train to teach homecraft subjects at teachers' college or a technical institute.

1944 The Thomas Report introduced the common core curriculum for post-primary (secondary) education. All pupils took English, Mathematics, General Science, Social Studies, Music, Art and Craft, but was emphatic that girls had to have training related to their likely occupation as a in the home.¹⁵

The school leaving age was increased from 14 to 15.¹⁶ In 1945 the average length of pupil attendance at all three types of school (district, technical, and secondary) was less than three years.¹⁷

Homecraft Teachers Certificate offered for women to train to teach the revised post-primary subject called Homecraft (previously Home Science and Housecraft).

1945 Clothing and Embroidery replaced Needlework as subjects that could be part of a School Certificate course.¹⁸ Candidates were expected to make at least three garments per year for three years. The garments had to include baby's clothes, children's clothes, and a renovation.

1948 Revised syllabus for Needlework in primary schools issued, covering six years of school from Standard 1 to Form II and aimed specifically at girls.¹⁹

1955 Clothing prescription for the School Certificate examination was revised at the request of the Post-Primary Teachers' Association.²⁰ The revised prescription became the foundation on which Geraldine McDonald's book *You and Your Clothes* was based. Girls still had to make at least nine garments over the three years, but no longer had to renovate an existing garment, and only had to make one garment for a baby or a child.

¹⁵ Middleton, *Women and Education*, 78.

¹⁶ "The New Zealand Official Year-Book, 1946," ed. Statistics (1946).

¹⁷ Gregory Douglas Lee, "From Rhetoric to Reality: A History of the Development of the Common Core Curriculum in New Zealand Post-Primary Schools: 1890-1945" (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 1991), 511.

¹⁸ R19237274 School Certificate Examination Regulations – The Education (Post-Primary Instruction) Regulations 1945.

¹⁹ R3850860 The Primary School Curriculum – Revised Syllabuses – Health Education, Oral/Written Expression, Spelling, Arithmetic, History/Geography, Needlework – May 1948.

²⁰ R17917845 Examinations – School Certificate – Clothing Revision Committee.

1958 Revised syllabus for Sewing in primary schools issued, covering three years of school from Standard 4 to Form II and aimed specifically at girls.²¹

1959 76 candidates for the Handicraft Teachers Certificate, the highest number in any year it was offered.²² (This is the qualification Val's mother gained — see chapter 5.)

1964 A remit at the NZ Education Institute conference held in May suggested sewing for girls be part of the manual training programme where a manual training centre was available. Where a manual training centre was not available, sewing not be required in primary schools.

The same month, the Chief Inspector of Primary Schools wrote “Some proposals for a change in the general timetable for primary schools involving general science and homecraft.”²³ The proposal notes the long history of sewing in the primary curriculum, and questions the time still given to it, “in which they make a garment or two.”

1967 The primary syllabus was revised in 1967, ushering in “a new era for sewing as a primary-school subject.”²⁴ Needlecraft became part of the art and craft syllabus, learned by boys and girls in Standard four.²⁵ Girls did sewing as part of the modified Homecraft syllabus, and the main objective was to help girls make “attractive garments using acceptable techniques.”²⁶

1968 Education Secondary Instruction Regulations 1968²⁷ The Regulations made it necessary for a pupil to have a minimum amount of instruction in certain subjects

²¹ R3850837 Primary School Syllabuses - Sewing, Standard 4, Form I, Form II.

²² From 1962 Year-Book. Numbers of candidates for the Homecraft Teachers' Certificate peaked in 1957 and 1958 with 74 candidates.

²³ The Revision Committee that looked at the primary school subject in 1949 said “The subject should be called Homecraft, and should cover work in Foods, Housewifery, and Laundry-Work. These should not be treated as separate subjects, but be correlated in the complete lesson plan for each day.” (R17926790 – Primary Education – Syllabus – Homecraft) Homecraft was named as a post-primary subject in the 1945 Regulations. R19237274 School Certificate Examination Regulations – The Education (Post-Primary Instruction) Regulations 1945.

²⁴ John L. Ewing, *Development of the New Zealand Primary School Curriculum 1877-1970*, Educational Research Series; No. 47. (Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 1970), 248.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁷ http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/num_reg/esir1968459/, accessed 19 March 2017.

(Geography or History or Social Studies, and Mathematics or Science) even if they were not taking it for the School Certificate examination. This limited pupils' instruction time for their chosen subjects, which had a disproportionate impact on practical subjects like Clothing.