



Society of Antiquaries
of Scotland

‘Remember Now Thy Creator’

Scottish Girls’ Samplers, 1700–1872

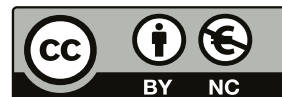
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JF

Sampler
of
Stitches

CHAPTER 3

Plain sewing samplers

THE USES OF PLAIN SEWING

Plain sewing samplers are not as decorative as the embroidered samplers and do not survive as separate items until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, plain sewing was the basis of needlework education for girls, so it is important to consider this aspect first. Children learned to use needles at very young ages. In the nineteenth century, books such as *The Workwoman's Guide*, written by 'A Lady' in 1838, gave 'needle drill', on how to hold and thread the needle, and children as young as three were taught this.¹⁰² Plain sewing samplers demonstrate the proficiency of girls in working the types of stitches required to make garments and accessories, as opposed to the fancy sewing or embroidery that the traditional sampler displayed. This type of sewing is found in making up undergarments and white-work accessories, as well as bed and table linen. Plain sewing included stitches to be learned as well as how to join fabric by seams, how to hem, make button-

holes and so on (illus 3.1). The samplers that survive for this type of work are often of an irregular shape and size, to take account of the various types of work such as gathering into a band or making a scalloped edging. There is no specific Scottish style for these samplers, which are virtually unknown before the second half of the nineteenth century. This has led some to question whether plain sewing was important in the teaching of girls before then. However, we have evidence from several sources that girls did indeed have to learn how to sew a seam before they were allowed to do any embroidery and there exists ample evidence for this in the form of structured learning guides from earlier in the nineteenth century.

It is clear from numerous memoirs, lives, accounts and the regulations from orphanages that girls even in fairly wealthy households made their own and much of the other household linen. Jane Austen, for example, records making shirts for one of her brothers before he went into the navy and Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus sewed baby linen for a new sibling.¹⁰³ In addition to baby clothes, men's and women's underwear was usually made at home and until the later nineteenth century was of plain white linen or cotton. The main undergarments were shirts for men and shifts for women, also known as smocks and later chemises, and were basic shapes developed over the centuries from the under-tunics of the Anglo-Saxon period. The shapes allowed

OPPOSITE. 3.1 This is a typical plain-sewing sampler of the latter part of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century. Made by Janet Forsyth in about 1905 when a pupil teacher in an Edinburgh school, it is linen with red silk embroidery. It shows various ways of hemming, buttonholes, scalloped edges, patches, tucks, gusset and drawn thread work. 23% in (60 cm) x 10% in (27.5 cm). NMS A.1962.421.

for the most economical use of the fabric: they were based on squares, rectangles and triangles so that cutting out the garments was not a problem.¹⁰⁴ There were ready-made sources for basic unfitted garments like shirts, but it was cheaper for a household to make all the underwear and household linen it required by buying a bolt of fabric or several yards at one time.

In Scotland, a number of accounts speak of households spinning their own flax and then sending the yarn to a local weaver to make into fabric. On its return it would be cut and sewn by the women as required; others might send it to a local seamstress. Lady Grisell Baillie, for example, expected her maids to spin whenever they had a moment free from other work. Flax spinning was seen as very important to help the linen industry, which was a major industry in Scotland, and women spun the thread for the men to weave the cloth. Spinning schools were set up and the activity vied with sewing for the girls’ instruction in some schools and institutions.

For those unable to make their own, such as men living on their own without any female relations to sew for them or sailors who might have little time in port to replace garments worn out or lost, there were ready-made underclothes available even in the seventeenth century. Charity schools appear to have made them for sale as well as for the inmates’ use, and later, when they left the orphanages, girls who could sew could find employment in clothes-making workshops. Even tailors employed women for some jobs. In the nineteenth century, when there were more people working in factories, women often had no time to make clothes, so the ready-made market developed further.¹⁰⁵ Dressmaking employed an enormous number of women in the mid and late nineteenth century; even the development of the sewing machine did not make much impact, and this aspect should be borne in mind when considering plain sewing and its importance.¹⁰⁶

Until the late seventeenth century, divisions within the garment-making trade had kept women out of making top-body items, even those for women, as these were the responsibility of the tailors, who also made corsets and there-

fore the heavily boned bodices of the period. Women, however, sewed the undergarments. Towards the end of the seventeenth century a looser style of dress for informal wear was developed as a relief from the rigid boned bodices of formal dress. These garments, known as mantuas, were easy to make and had little need of precise cutting, seen as the real skill of the tailor, so it was eventually conceded by the tailoring guilds that women could make them. Men, however continued to make corsets and women’s riding habits.

The sewing on mantuas and other similar garments did not need to be particularly fine, because no strain was put on the seams; in fact, it is often very rough, as surviving pieces in museum collections show. Underwear, on the other hand, had to stand up to the rigours of regular washing, so it tended to be carefully sewn. The light muslin dresses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, however, demanded greater skill in sewing neatly because the fabric was so delicate. Later, clothes began to fit the body closely and sewing became more important throughout the century. Dresses that fit the body need firm stitching to stop the seams from splitting when the garment is worn. New types of seam were brought into use that required extra skill in plain sewing. At the same time there was a growing movement for providing charitable clothing, such as baskets of baby linen that could be lent out to poor parishioners. Another charitable activity was providing cheap clothing. This might take the form of some of the wealthier people in the parish providing fabric that they cut out into parts for suitable garments, such as infants’ dresses, that the recipients were expected to sew for themselves. If they could not sew, instruction was provided.

PUBLICATIONS ON PLAIN SEWING

In order to help the women involved in this charitable endeavour, a book was published anonymously in 1789 entitled *Instructions for Cutting Out Apparel for the Poor*. It was ‘principally intended for the Assistance of the Patronesses of Sunday Schools and other Charitable Institutions,

but useful for families', so covered all bases. It was published for the benefit of the Sunday School children of Hertingbury in Hertfordshire. The book also had several plates of patterns of garments and a 'List of various Articles and Materials necessary to be purchased for making up Clothing for the Poor'. The author intended the book as an encouragement to parents to send their children to Sunday School, where they would gain a useful skill at the same time as they received religious instruction.

In the same mould is *The Lady's Economical Assistant or The Art of Cutting Out, and Making the most useful articles of Wearing Apparel without waste*, by 'a Lady', published in 1808.¹⁰⁷ This contained twenty-seven plates and directions for making everything from a baby's layette, to men's shirts, women's night gowns and dresses for small children. The Lady says in her introduction: 'It is my wish to render my book of as general service as possible, and particularly so to persons of small fortune, who, with natural and laudable pride, are desirous of making as good an appearance as prudence will admit.' In an age when an appropriate appearance was important her aims surely struck a welcome note.

Books like these started to appear at the same time as works directed more specifically to the education of children were being published. In 1835 an unknown correspondent wrote an article in *The Lady's Magazine and Museum* on the importance of infant schools for children, lauding the system perfected by Mr Wilderspin.¹⁰⁸ Samuel Wilderspin produced his book on infant education in 1824 and there were several editions until his death in 1866. He was a member of the New Church, also known as the Swedenborgians, which coloured his attitude to education, and he believed that children should be encouraged to learn through experience. He set up an infant school in Spitalfields, London, and his book detailed the regime there. According to the article, 'A little girl of five years old, ought to be capable of doing most kinds of plain work: this gentle and sedative employment is a great source of female happiness; and we are grieved to see it banished from the present system of infant

education.' It goes on: 'A female child of three years old ought to know how to hold a needle, and to hem coarse linen.' The writer is by no means uncritical of Mr Wilderspin, but Sir John Sinclair, who had visited the Infant school in the Vennel, Edinburgh, approved of his system.¹⁰⁹

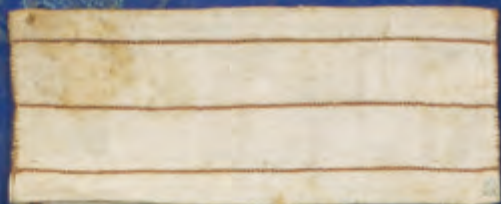
School patrons and ministers regularly examined pupils, ostensibly to make sure that the teachers were doing their job, but also to measure progress in rooting out ignorance and sloth. Those in power in all areas were keen to make sure that the children of the lower orders were growing up industrious and obedient, so that they would not be a burden on the parish by requiring poor relief. The poor were divided into the 'deserving', who lacked funds or family support and who were unable to work, and the 'undeserving', who were able-bodied and could therefore support themselves. Relief was largely organised by the parish and available to those who had been born there or had acquired right of settlement. There were changes over time, the most notable being the Poor Law Act of 1845, which set up parochial boards, but no one wanted to pay relief to people who could in theory support themselves by their own industry.

As the 1816 *Manual of the System of teaching Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and Needle-work in the Elementary Schools of The British and Foreign School Society* (discussed below) puts it: 'The cultivation of the mind bestowed in these elementary schools, opens and expands the faculties of the children, gives them clear notions of moral and social duties, prepares them for the reception of religious instruction, forms them to habits of virtue, and habituates them to subordination and control.' To be fair, it also states: 'The middle and upper rank of society are more dependent upon the poor, than without a little reflection they are apt to be aware of. It is to their labour and skill that we owe our comforts and conveniences' (illus 3.2). Teaching girls the basics of reading, plain sewing and perhaps knitting would enable them to be good wives and mothers, having a skill capable of earning money, and therefore to be reliable citizens and not a burden on parish charity.

1st. CLASS.



3rd. CLASS.



4th. CLASS.



2nd. CLASS.



2nd. DIVISION.



5th. CLASS.





3.2 Small examples of plain sewing mounted on a board. These are probably taken from the British and Foreign School Society's manual. Early nineteenth century. 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ in (28.9 cm) x 16 $\frac{5}{8}$ in (42.3 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

© Leslie B Durst
Collection

THE KILDARE NEEDLEWORK COURSE

One measure of the increased importance of plain sewing is the development of graded courses of needlework for schools to follow. The best known of these was that produced by the Female National Model School based in Kildare Place, Dublin. Their system was based on that first developed by Miss Lancaster, sister of Joseph Lancaster who pioneered the Monitorial teaching system in schools, whereby an older child taught younger children what they had already learned, becoming in effect teachers’ helpers. This system was found very useful by nineteenth-century educators, as it proved to be a cheap way of making primary education more inclusive, thus making it possible to increase the average class size. It was later adopted by the National Schools, but fell out of favour when the professional training of teachers became more widespread. It was still obviously in use in Auchtertool Female School, Fife in 1898 when Agnes Burnett worked her sampler.¹¹⁰ It is inscribed ‘Worked by Agnes Burnett the Reward of Good Conduct as a Monitress at the Auchtertool Female School, March 1898’. This is one of three samplers with similar inscriptions and designs known to have been worked at this school, the others dating from 1848 and 1860.¹¹¹ Agnes was probably the daughter of William Burnett, a farmer at Auchterderran, and his wife Janet. She was born about 1881 so was seventeen when she made her sampler, and was presumably more of a teacher’s assistant than a pupil.

Miss Lancaster’s plan was developed by Miss Ann Springman and was published in 1816 as part of the British and Foreign School Society *Manual* referred to above. Joseph Lancaster had first outlined his plan in 1798, but met few backers for a system that would educate the poor at a time when landowners and the establishment were fearful that the example of the French Revolution might spread, although King George III was enthusiastic, saying: ‘It is my wish that every poor child in my kingdom may be taught to read the Bible.’ By 1816, however, Joseph Lancaster and the Society had parted company. Dr Andrew Bell, a Scottish Anglican, developed a

similar system, known as the Madras System, taken up by the Church of England and the army. Lancaster and Bell did not get on, one reason being that the former objected to the fact that Bell’s system was used to promote the Church of England.

The Female National Model School at Kildare Place was founded under the auspices of the Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in Ireland, a non-denominational organisation founded in 1811 by a group of philanthropists in Dublin. Its aim was ‘to provide elementary education for the poor in Ireland’ and ‘to afford the same facilities for education to all classes of professing Christians without any attempt to interfere with the peculiar religious opinion of any’.¹¹² Teacher training was regarded as one of its key functions and this it achieved by giving those who were already in post a six-week course in Dublin, only for male teachers at first. The system used the Monitorial system and encouraged ‘orderliness, discipline and cleanliness’. The Society also set up a model school in 1815 with a separate schoolroom for boys and girls, adding facilities for boarding a few years later. The success of the male training scheme led the Society to consider setting up a similar one for female teachers, and in 1824 Miss Jane Edkins made a tour of English establishments to see how these were run. In late 1824 six women aged eighteen to twenty-five were admitted and a further twenty-three the following spring. Students had to know reading, writing, arithmetic and scripture and have a high standard of needlework. School management was the main study but the women’s training had a strong emphasis on domestic skills, so that half their time was spent on household duties in the residential house and in learning laundry work and cookery.

Also founded in the same year was a ‘National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church in England and Wales’, which thus differed from the Irish Society. It set up National Schools, as they were known, and it also published a needlework system book, which included space for examples, although this was much less detailed than the Kildare Place scheme.

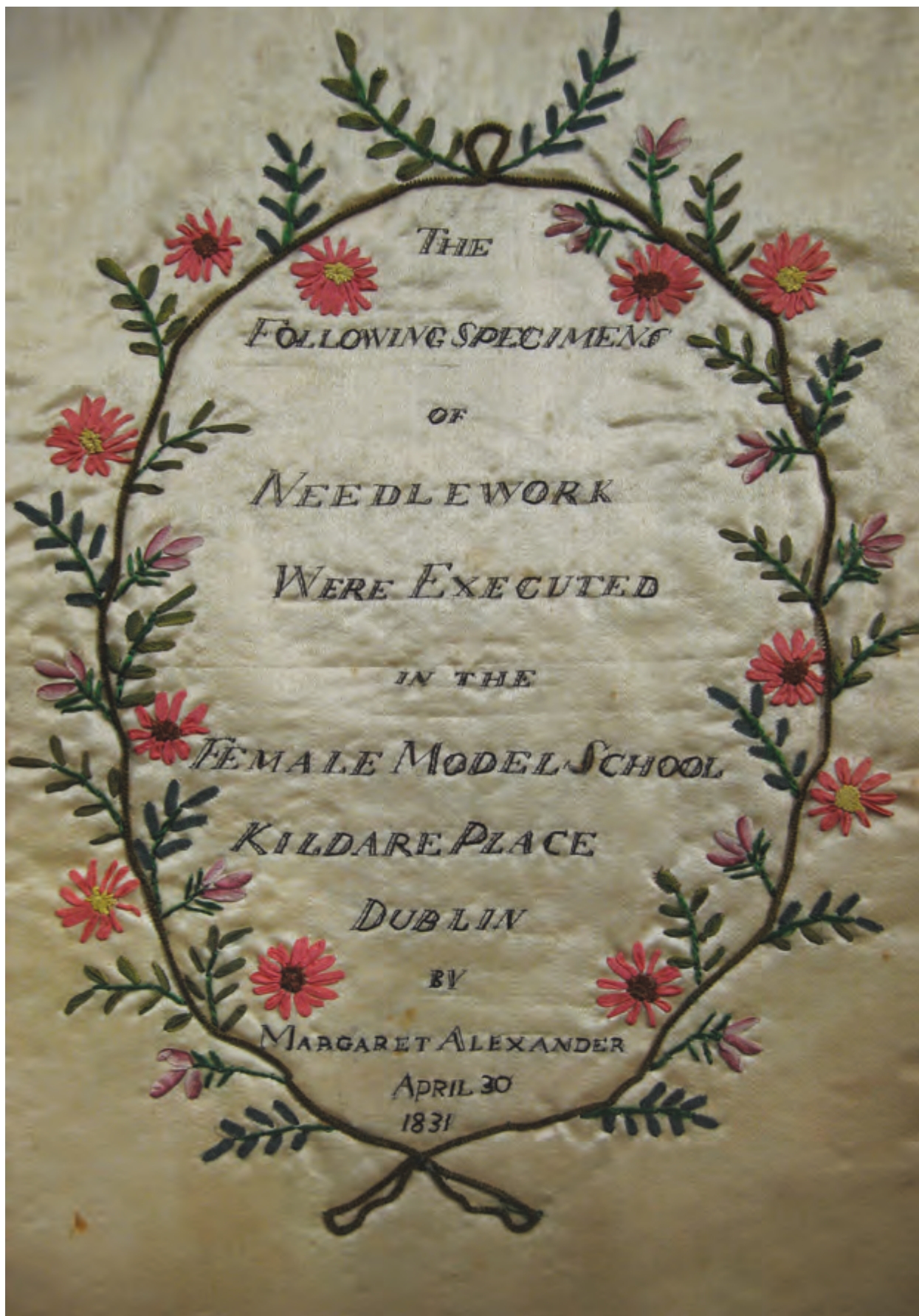
In 1816 the Kildare Place Society, as it is generally known, sent a representative over to England and Scotland to study how needlework was taught in schools there. He was disappointed and thought it of a poor standard, so the Society decided to develop its own publication on teaching needlework, based on Miss Lancaster's plan. This was a logical system with precise directions, starting with basics, such as the first stitches to be on paper, and gradually allowing the students to work their way up to making complete garments. It included instructions on knitting, a topic that was to become even more important as the century progressed, as well as plaiting straw for hats and various types of embroidery. It is probably the most influential of the various structured programmes, as the books based on this system survive in greater numbers than those of any other system. It also appears to have been produced for a longer period.

In 1831 the National Board of Education was set up in Ireland to provide elementary education on a secular basis, after which the Kildare Place Society lost its non-sectarian stance and became affiliated to the Church of Ireland. It also lost its government grant and had to close its Training Institute in 1840. Examples of work done by girls who attended the school, or more probably the teacher training institution, can be seen at the successor to the latter, the Church of Ireland College of Education in Dublin. There are two sets of work mounted on large folio sheets of paper, dated 1829 by I Henderson, and 1831 by Margaret Alexander (illus 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5). These start with a piece of hemming and work their way through different exercises including darning, knitting, straw plaiting, various types of white work and coloured embroidery and ending with small garments such as a shirt and a dress. The 1829 folio has several sheets of tissue-like paper with inked designs for the fashionable white-work embroidery to be worked on dresses, petticoats, caps, collars and the large shoulder capes known as pelerines. Presumably the owner became a professional embroiderer. Unfortunately the College has no knowledge of how they acquired the volumes or any information on the girls who owned them, but nonetheless

they remain a testament to the excellence of the Society's instruction. A further set, worked by Dorothy Tyrrell in 1832, survived in the hands of descendants until 2002 and another set turned up in 2012, by Christiana Norwood and dated 1831.¹¹³ These wonderful sampler books are likely to be the work of teacher trainees rather than schoolgirls and would act as both the certificate of a woman who had completed the course and as a reference for her when she commenced teaching.

In 1833, *A Concise Account of the Mode of Instructing in Needlework in the Female Model, Kildare Place, Dublin* was published. After 1831, when the National Schools were established in Ireland, they took over the methods introduced by Kildare Place and continued to publish needlework manuals until at least 1862, with 'specimens of work executed by pupils of The Female National Model School' inserted. Needlework was compulsory for girls in the National Schools. The system developed first by Kildare Place as recorded in these printed books was divided into four divisions, which contained sixteen classes. This expanded the number in the Lancastrian system. The first and second divisions, classes 1–8, covered all the things 'needed for executing any piece of plain work'. The last lesson in this group was 'Marking', that is, how to mark items with their owners' initials and date, and it is here that samplers are to be found. The third division, covering classes 9–12, was concerned with darning, mending and patching in various types of garment, as well as knitting and straw plaiting. The fourth division, classes 13–16, was devoted to muslin, lace, worsted and thread work. At the end were directions for cutting out shifts, frocks and caps for girls, and men's shirts, and for knitting stockings. It is possible that most girls would not have taken the later classes and it is not clear how many years the course was designed to take. This system was for schools that taught girls from poorer backgrounds in parish or other sponsored schools, not those privately run, so there may have been a limited number of years, or indeed days in a year, that a girl could attend school before it became compulsory.

Like the 1816 *Manual*, that of 1833 allowed



THE
FOLLOWING SPECIMENS

OF

NEEDLEWORK

WERE EXECUTED

IN THE

FEMALE MODEL SCHOOL

KILDARE PLACE

DUBLIN

BY

MARGARET ALEXANDER

APRIL 30

1831



OPPOSITE. 3.3 The front cover of Margaret Alexander's book of samplers, 1831, made of white satin embroidered with narrow coloured ribbon and chenille threads, the inscription written in black ink. The paper the items are attached to is foolscap size, 17 in (43.2 cm) x 13½ in (34.3 cm). Kildare Place Society Archives, by permission of the Church of Ireland College of Education.

ABOVE. 3.4 A small sampler from Margaret Alexander's book of samplers, 1831, showing an alphabet that is found mainly on Irish samplers. Kildare Place Society Archives, by permission of the Church of Ireland College of Education.



3.5 Miniature dress from Margaret Alexander's book of samplers, 1831, showing a fashionable dress made of fairly cheap cotton fabric but showing all the skills she had learnt in plain sewing. Kildare Place Society Archives, by permission of the Church of Ireland College of Education.

the possibility of purchasing, at extra cost, small examples of needlework showing how the various exercises should be done. Editions of these books in the copyright libraries do not have the needlework pieces and both the 1816 and 1833 volumes are relatively rare.

Later editions of the Female National Model School of Ireland book survive in larger quantities and many have some, or all, of the needlework specimens inserted on specially printed

green paper pages at the end of the text.¹¹⁴ These examples were worked by the girls at the school, as the title page makes clear, and are not the work of anyone who owned the book. The books were intended for teachers, the samples giving them an approved example by which to judge their own pupils' work. The books were not cheap and those with examples in them cost considerably more, so they probably belonged to schools rather than individual teachers. Unfortunately they have suffered because many of the samplers illustrating lesson 8 have been removed, or fallen out. There were also miniature garments and these, when found loose, are sometimes mistaken for dolls' clothes. These manuals of needlework were bought by people all over Britain, and before the Acts of the 1870s that set up local school boards in England, Scotland and Wales, they probably formed the best and easiest example of a structured system to follow.

A further private initiative was published in 1850, with a second edition in 1855, which had similar aims to both the Lancastrian and Kildare systems and was intended for schools. Called *The Sampler: A System of Teaching Plain Needlework in Schools*, it was published by 'A Lady', revealed in the second edition in 1855 to be The Lady E Finch.¹¹⁵ The structure is similar to the others but the girls appear to work the stitches of each class on one piece of cloth, finishing with a gusset sampler that shows gathering, putting on a frill and buttonholes. Despite its name, the book is a mixture of the Kildare book and *The Lady's Economical Assistant or The Art of Cutting Out . . .* of 1808 (see above), with plenty of diagrams for cutting out basic garments.

These books are important for the understanding of girls' education in the nineteenth century. By the time education was organised on a nationwide basis in Britain these detailed manuals had fallen out of use. Women training to be teachers in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century made samplers as part of domestic science courses, and examples of their work can be found in museum collec-

tions. Two such colleges in Scotland, both founded in the 1870s, were the Edinburgh School of Cookery and Domestic Economy, known as Atholl Crescent after its location, and the Glasgow and West of Scotland College of Domestic Science, familiarly known as the Dough School. The greater use of the sewing machine in schools from the middle part of the twentieth century and the demise of teacher training college courses in home economics that included dressmaking probably killed off the plain sewing sampler.

An interesting example of the encouragement of plain sewing can be found in the *Girl's Own Paper*, founded in 1880, published by the Religious Tract Society, which also published the *Boy's Own Paper*.¹¹⁶ It was the most popular and widely read girls' magazine of its day. Girls and young women from all walks of life in Britain, including royalty, such as Princess Mary of Teck (later Queen Mary), read it, entered its competitions and wrote to ask for help with various problems. It was a very respectable magazine with a Christian message aiming to make girls accept their lot but always to strive to better themselves through education and hard work, to show Christian charity and to behave with dignity, and it ran regular articles on types of employment suitable for girls. It was a weekly, costing one penny, and included stories, factual articles, poems, music, fashion news once a month, and a page of answers to questions, but it could also be bought as an annual, and many bound volumes of these survive, confirming its popularity. Its competitions included plain sewing and in 1882 it announced one for a sampler.¹¹⁷ This included an engraving to show how the sampler should be made and instructions on working it. It was to be made of white linen 8 inches by 6 inches (20.3 x 15.2 cm) with a frill of white mull or lawn of 2 inches (5.0 cm). In the centre was to be an alphabet of both capital and lower case letters 'in the correct marking stitch as shown in the illustration'. This was not the cross stitch that had commonly been used before, but satin stitch. The sampler would show off the maker's ability in various plain sewing stitches such as hemming, gathering, whipping and buttonholes, and was to

include their name and address. The competition had three divisions, one for girls from twenty to twenty-five, one for girls aged sixteen to twenty, and one for girls below the age of sixteen, and it attracted over 300 entries. The samplers were returned to the girls to 'enable each girl to see for herself, after reading our list of faults, where she fell short'.¹¹⁸ Each sampler that received a prize or certificate was stamped by the Editor and one or two survive with such a stamp (illus 3.6). Encouraged by this result, the paper decided to hold another sampler competition, with even more detailed instructions and a few minor changes, but the results were disappointing as only eighty-two entries were received.¹¹⁹ Scottish girls entered these competitions and won certificates, including Mary Margaret Wishart, aged twenty, from Edinburgh, who won a second-class certificate, and Patricia Brown, aged eighteen, of Sangster Cottage, Bridge of Earn, who won a third-class certificate in the second competition. These sampler competitions fitted in with the paper's encouragement of girls to make their own clothes and not buy shoddy ready-mades.



3.6 Edith Mary Hall won a second-class certificate from *The Girl's Own Paper* for this entry in their plain-sewing sampler competition in 1882. The stitch used for the alphabets is satin stitch, not the more usual cross stitch. Edith was christened in Westbury, Wiltshire, on 4 June 1863, the daughter of Alfred and Ann Hall who were farmers. 11¼ in (29.8 cm) x 9½ in (24.1 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.