



PHOTOGRAPH BY CLARE KELLY ©

A living collection

It's the stuff that dreams are made of; a library devoted to knitting.

Clare Kelly discovers the stories of those who made it a reality

An Agatha Christie novel might not be the obvious starting point for this story but stick with me. If you ever visit the Knitting Reference Library at the University of Southampton, head to the first shelf you see opposite the door and pick up one of the murder mystery novels. Inhaling its attic-like smell, you'll notice

that someone has scrawled page numbers on the inside cover in pencil. And that person was Montse Stanley.

What do the page numbers correspond to? They are all references to knitting, be it a bystander busy with yarn and pins or a heroine resplendent in soft pastel knitwear. Montse Stanley, the founder of the knitting collection was, in the words of head librarian

Linda Newington "obsessed with knitting" and this much is evident when you begin to explore the vast collection housed at the University of Southampton in Winchester.

Sadly Montse died in 1999 but you may know her as the author of the informative book *The Handknitter's Handbook* (first published in 1986) but her obsession began long before that, as Linda explains: "Montse ►



LEFT: Lace Collar
RIGHT & BELOW: Knitting Bishop Richard Rutt also contributed to the library
FAR RIGHT: His 'pence jugs'



"I think the scope and range of her collection shows the many facets of knitting. It is not one thing and I think this is what she was trying to achieve."

herself was a top class knitter and I think she inherited her interest and skills from her mother whom she called a queen of knitting. I think the photographs and postcards got her started collecting and it must have developed organically then gained momentum, leading to the establishment of the Knitting Reference Library in her Cambridge home. Her book *The Handknitter's Handbook* is dedicated: 'to my mother, the knitting Fittipaldi'. It is still considered a classic on technique and has been revised and republished many times."

Born in Barcelona, Montse spent her first 34 years in Spain (qualifying as an architect, no less) before moving to England in 1974 where she married Thomas Stanley who it is believed, fuelled her passion for collecting.

Thomas ran a successful postcard business from their home, and Montse would often attend postcard fairs picking up cards and photographs which featured knitting. Over the years, her Knitting Reference Library grew with such enormity that it could no longer be contained and led to the couple purchasing the house next door to accommodate it.

While in England, Montse forged a successful career as a writer and designer contributing to a wide range of magazines and journals. She also held a particular interest in Spanish and Hispanic knitted objects and publications but her collection is

as diverse as the craft; pink knitted poodle loo-roll covers, knitted beaded handbags and Victorian patterns, all seemingly random but intrinsically woven together by knitting.

Could Linda choose her favourite items? "One of the most poignant items I have come across is the WWI postcard of men knitting and crocheting. Amongst the quirkiest would have to be the poodle loo-roll cover that Montse added to her collection. The response to the poodle is interesting; love or hate, serious or joke. I think the scope and range of her collection shows the many facets of knitting. It is not one thing and I think this is what she was trying to achieve."

If you'd like to see all the items in her collection, not only should you set aside a large amount of time, but you should note that her legacy is currently divided between Winchester School of Art (where I visited) and The Hartley Library in Southampton, both part of The University of Southampton.

In Winchester, you'll find printed materials including *Stitchcraft* magazines, an enviable collection of *Women's Weekly* plus novels such as those by Agatha Christie and others, all still bearing Montse's handwritten notes as if she has just thumbed a page and returned it to the shelf while pondering her latest knitting project.

You'll also find a small 'handling collection' which includes not only the

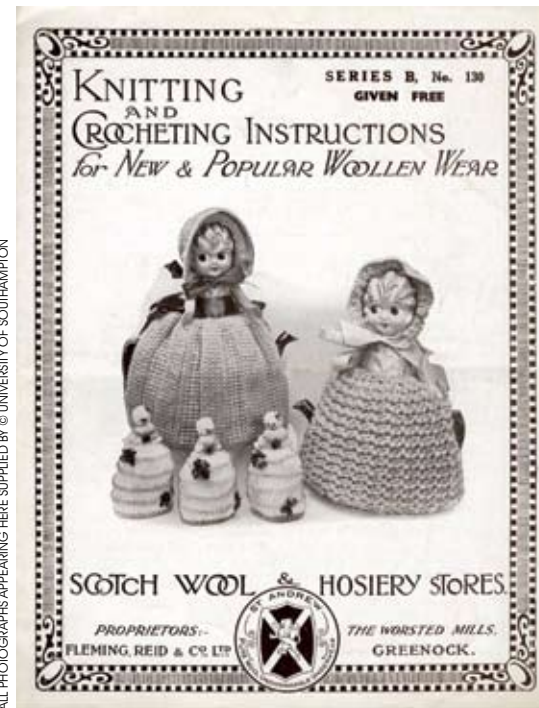
infamous poodle but also items which have been recently donated, some of which are items knitted by volunteers from old patterns. In Hartley Library, you'll be able to access even more items and several hundred photographs and postcards.

Montse was keen that her collection be housed somewhere it could be appreciated and chose the University, though she's not the only collector who has contributed to the Library. A former Bishop of Leicester, Richard Rutt was known as the 'Knitting Bishop' (he even knitted his own ceremonial robes) and wrote the classic book *A History of Hand Knitting*. He was also a dear friend of Montse's.

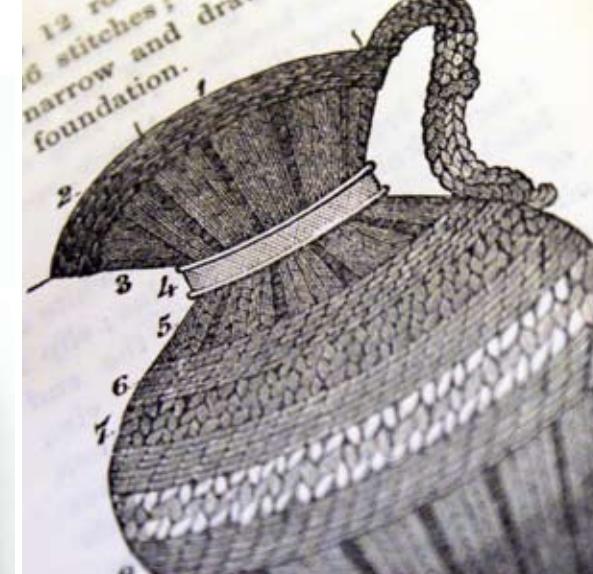
A skilled knitter, Richard learnt to knit as a child and in later years enjoyed creating items from Victorian patterns. His 'pence jugs' are a joy to behold, small enough to sit in the palm of your hand, these little vessels are believed to have been used to carry pennies. His main interest lay in Scandinavian and Korean knitting and early manuals that may have influenced many of our current 'how to knit' books. After Montse's death, he sought to donate his own library to the University of Southampton in a gesture that would further demonstrate the depth of their friendship.

The third benefactor is Jane Waller, passionate about patterns and the successful author of five knitwear design books including

"Walking in, you'll feel as if you've discovered hidden treasure"



A look inside the library



LEFT & BELOW: Montse's collection is as diverse as the craft with dolly tea cosies and knitted beaded handbags **ABOVE & FAR LEFT:** More from the Library



A Stitch in Time first published in 1972. With a focus on the war years, there's also an abundance of contemporary patterns and some dating from the late nineteenth century.

"These three library collections together comprise the Knitting Reference Library including an estimated 2,000 books, over 1,000 journal and magazine parts, and 12,000 knitting patterns. There are key texts for the history of knitting and some classic books all covering the decades of the twentieth century revealing the rich imagery and social aspects of knitting and related crafts," explains Linda.

Walking in, you'll feel as if you've discovered hidden treasure and one lady I met was so moved by the Library that she had just made and donated a fine knit shawl, the detail of which was so minute, it must have been a daunting task indeed.

Linda is keen to stress that the library is a 'living collection' and is constantly growing to accommodate donations. Acquisitions are made approximately twice a year when Linda visits auction house and private collectors.

"We'd like to be able to feel that we can continue to add new acquisitions, both current publications and older material dating back from the mid 1840s through to the present day – books, exhibition catalogues, knitting patterns, covering history to contemporary art based practice. I'm very

thankful to all those who have donated items," Linda says.

Such an integral part of the library, but something that you won't find on the shelves, is Linda's drive to educate all on the social and historical elements of knitting. Of course, she says she couldn't do it without the support of her colleagues and friends: "All the staff working with me at Winchester School of Art Library are helpful and supportive of the Knitting Reference Library. Collaboration has really been a key principle in working with library staff, academic colleagues, students or external contacts and visitors. I very much like to make connections with people and to encourage use of the KRL for all sorts of purposes."

Over the years Linda has seen many people visit. "Reactions vary a little but are all positive – excitement, tears, serious interest, fun too. I do think those who have used it are very supportive and appreciate the establishment of a resource that is focused primarily on knitting and which includes related areas, crochet and tatting, needlework and the textile industry."

To ensure that you don't feel overwhelmed, it's recommended that you make an appointment and inform the library of your area of interest. So whether that be Peruvian knitting or cashmere-wearing Christie

villians, I guarantee that you'll find exactly what you're looking for.

And when you do visit, you'll be a direct beneficiary of Montse's legacy – something she would surely be proud of.

Donations to the Knitting Reference Library welcome ●

The library by numbers

- The collection holds an estimated 2,000 books
- More than 1,000 journal and magazine extracts
- Over 12,000 knitting patterns
- Approximately 100 nineteenth century knitting manuals
- A comprehensive run of *Stitchcraft* magazine and more than 800 objects
- The earliest item is a book from 1840

Knitting Reference Library

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