

The history of pockets

**'Lucy Locket lost her pocket,
Kitty Fisher found it;
Not a penny was there in it,
Only ribbon round it.'**

Traditional nursery rhyme.

Just like Lucy Locket in the nursery rhyme, women and girls in the past had tie-on pockets instead of handbags to carry the things they needed. Although life in the past was markedly different from the present, the small possessions that people carried with them in their pockets was just as important to them and just as telling about how they lived their daily lives as they are for us today.

If you made a list of all the things you have in your various pockets or hand bag, you might be surprised. Women nowadays often feel that their clothes don't have enough pockets for everything or that they need more than one size and style of handbag to suit different situations. Men generally have more pockets than women but still they can easily end up with too much stuff and lumpy pockets. The things we carry with us on a daily basis reveal a lot about the pace and complexity of our lives.

Car keys, travel cards, credit cards, purses, mobile phones and i-Pods show our desire to move, consume and communicate almost at will. House keys, office keys, personal alarms, work-place ID cards, membership cards, pens, diaries and personal organisers show how we deal with security, identity, work and leisure. And these are just the basics. Bottled water, headache tablets and paper handkerchiefs help us through the day, as do the snacks we carry and photographs or other personal mementos as we spend longer hours away from home. It's not just busy adults, youngsters also carry lots of things with them and anyone stepping out the front door with a baby and or small child knows only too well how the stuff proliferates.

All through the 18th and 19th centuries, capacious and practical tie-on pockets remained a favourite for women. These pockets were not expensive or glamorous objects but they are rich in information and meaning. The ways they were made, decorated, used and even lost and stolen, reveal a lot about life in those times.

The pockets were tied around the waist usually underneath skirts or aprons. They had a special usefulness at this time because women of all social classes had little or no private space and few if any rights to own property. But they had significant roles and varied responsibilities within households, as employers or as servants, and many were involved in their families' trades and businesses and it made sense to be prepared for all kinds of practicalities. Whether the contents of these pockets were utilitarian or precious, for daily use or private consumption, keeping them in a tie-on pocket was an efficient way of ensuring they were accessible and secure.

Although some pockets were sewn into the seams of women's garments and also added to aprons, and occasionally to muffs or stays and dainty bags called reticules were fashionable in the neo-classical period, tie-on pockets remained firm favourites for

generations. They were never the only way of carrying small possessions, for example, baskets, looped-up aprons and simple pieces of cloth made into bundles were also frequently used, and letters and small valuables were often poked down inside the front of the stays but tie-on pockets were probably the most personal and widely used over the longest period of time. It is remarkable that they were in use for well over two hundred years and retained much the same fundamental form for all that time.

We can sympathise with Lucy Locket for losing her pocket because we have pockets too. Although we can't lose ours, we know how useful they are in daily life. But if we look closer at the kind of pocket Lucy Locket lost and the role such pockets played in women's lives generally we can learn a lot about the difference between the past and the present. The world in which they were made and used has gone and we can't take the surviving pockets out of the museums and wear them, or transport ourselves back into the past, but through careful study of how these objects were made and used, we can build up a picture of their place in the everyday life of the past. The pockets themselves show us plenty of evidence about materials, construction, needle skills and even wear and tear. Written sources such as novels, diaries, letters, inventories and bills reveal more about the physical objects and also how women got them and used them; abundant court cases and newspaper stories record how women's pockets were picked or stolen and what was in them at the time. Paintings and prints show us how artists and satirists saw these pockets in use.

Putting all this together, we can also begin to understand more of the *ideas* and *values* the pockets represented. In archaeology and anthropology, or in other fields such as the histories of art, architecture or design, material culture studies provide a way to reconstruct and understand the life of societies and individuals. Textiles and clothing are amongst the most inventive and varied aspects of all material culture in human societies round the world and pockets are no exception.

In this website, you can explore the significance of this little object from different perspectives. You can a close look at the material characteristics of the pockets and how they were made and decorated. If you look at the prints and paintings and texts of various kinds, you can see how they worked in daily life and what the pockets represented and meant to people in the past.

Making pockets

Although they share a strong family likeness to each other throughout the 1700 and 1800s, individually all the pockets that have survived are unique because of variations in their construction, materials, decoration or markings. Some are pretty or have a quirky charm. Others are unpretentious, probably drab and workaday from the start. Some show hardly any signs of wear but others have been patched and darned, battered and stained from hard use. By paying close attention to the physical characteristics of pockets that survive, it is possible to see how they were part of major changes to the world of production and consumption over this period.

A distinctive feature of tie-on pockets is that they were made to be independent of the wearer's other garments. The majority of the surviving single pockets or pairs have robust tapes sewn across the top to be tied round the waist. Some have button holes, probably to attach them to the bottom edge of the stays or loops for suspending from a separate tape. Pockets vary in size and young girls would wear small ones. Part of the

popularity of this type of pocket was due to its efficiency and its simple and economical construction.

Typically, the pocket consists of whole or pieced front and back sections sewn together round the outer edge. A folded-back or French seam was a favourite way to do this because of its strength and neatness, or a binding was used. The pocket was usually shaped to increase in width from top to bottom, in an oval, tear-shaped or triangular fashion. Some have a straight side worn to the front, a style described in *The Workwoman's Guide* of 1840 as 'preferred by some persons, as it sets better to the figure than the others.' If it was to tie round the waist, the same author recommended using a 'broad' tape. The tape was folded over where the top edge of the pocket was set into it and also ran across to form the ties and if necessary the attachment to the other pocket in a pair. Some pockets were fully or partially lined, including those with embroidered fronts and some had an inner pocket compartment or two sewn inside onto the back piece. Equally distinctive is the way the pocket opening was constructed, normally as a vertical slit that started at or near the top of the front part and ended midway down it. Sometimes variations occurred, such as straight or curved single or double horizontal openings. In most cases, the whole edge of the opening was reinforced with extra stitching or binding. On surviving pockets it is common to see repairs that indicate the most stressed parts of the structure were the lower point of the opening and where the tape joined the pocket top. Not surprisingly *The Workwoman's Guide* emphasised the need to sew pockets 'firmly'.

Decorating pockets

Of the surviving pockets, the embroidered ones are in the minority but their story is important in how we understand tie-on pockets in general. Embroidered pockets showing a high degree of skill in design and execution are perhaps but not necessarily from the hand of a professional. Many embroidered pockets have a charm that comes from the idiosyncrasy and imagination of amateurs sewing for their own enjoyment and use. Whilst these pockets tell us about the variations in skill or patience amongst needle workers, they also reveal that there was a shared heritage of style and pattern. Embroiderers often positioned a curving basket or urn of flowers centrally below the pocket opening and usually outlined the opening and edges. Flowers and leaves seem to predominate, with occasional birds and animals. A popular treatment was to stitch meandering or vermicular lines either alone or as background to more elaborate motifs. It was customary to apply the same decoration to both pockets of a pair and free-flowing shapes were favoured. The few pockets that survive with sampler-like patterns in cross-stitch are probably later in date. Some pockets are made of embroidered pieces remodelled to fit, perhaps cut from older furnishings or larger outmoded garments. This kind of re-cycling was common in an age when good cloth was prized and self-sufficiency was more habitual than it is today.

It might seem contradictory to embellish pockets if they were only worn underneath other clothing and not seen in public but women with little privacy and few rights of ownership may have taken special satisfaction in investing care and skill in the personalisation of such intimate things. In practice pockets may also have been visible to others quite often.

Using and losing pockets

It seems likely that the tie-on pocket first emerged sometime in the 17th century to replace the use of girdles worn outside the skirt and hung with small tools and

accessories. The pocket was a simple solution that could continue to be accommodated even when various shapes of hoops came into fashion in the 18th century to support wide skirts. Openings for putting a hand through into a pocket were easily provided in any under and outer garments. There are dolls dating from the 1690s through to the 1850s still with their miniature tie-on pockets that show how they were incorporated within the different fashionable styles over time. It seems likely that in the 18th century the growing availability of small possessions for more women of the 'middling sort' and their new social habits that took them outside the home such as paying calls and visiting shops and theatres helped establish the widespread use of the tie-on pocket.

Women could choose how to wear and access their pockets according to individual preference. The safest place was probably underneath the petticoat, a substantial and important garment in the 18th century, but sometimes they were worn just under the dress or apron. They were worn indoors and outdoors, for work and for leisure. Working women who handled cash, for example on market stalls or as itinerant traders, often had their pocket immediately to hand, sometimes centre front, tied on over their other clothes for easy access, rather as today's market traders wear pouches or bum bags. Dramatic changes in fashionable dress from the 1790s onwards led to some famously skimpy neo-classical dresses, but although tie-on pockets were sometimes lampooned as old-fashioned by the early 19th century, there is plenty of evidence, including many dated pockets surviving from this time, that women continued to value them. By the mid and later 19th century, they become more associated with country women and older or less fashionable women.

There was a busy traffic of people and goods in and out of houses in the 18th and 19th centuries. Domestic servants lived with their employers, many homes served as shops or workshops, food supplies and other goods and services were frequently delivered to the kitchen door and there was much renting out of rooms in increasingly congested urban spaces. Court cases of the period testify to the suspicion and frequency of thefts in these circumstances. So for security at night, women often put the pockets they were using under their pillows.

Memory and identity

Think of all of the metaphorical phrases we have today that refer to pockets: 'out of pocket' meaning having lost out in a financial transaction, 'in pocket' for having money or funds, to 'pocket' something means to conceal or keep it private, 'put one's hand in one's pocket' for generosity and even something as simple as 'empty pockets' for being broke. In 1693, a man testifying in court used the words 'kept one Pocket and one Bed' to describe the union between himself and the woman he was living with. Tie-on pockets too had a wide range of metaphorical and symbolic meanings over the years.

Steadfastness, stolidity, thrift, and self-discipline were all ideals that pockets could embody. The fact that women retained the use of this pocket in such a stable form for so long is also an indication of how they exercised personal choices independent of passing fashions in a consumer culture that was burgeoning over this period.

Pockets could also embody privacy and even secrecy. In the twenty-first century we worry about the effect that CCTV, the internet or credit cards can have on our privacy, but it is generally agreed that privacy is a good thing. We are thought to need privacy from corporations and the government, and personal privacy is seen as necessary for emotional well-being. It was not always this way. While privacy is thought of as a right in

the twenty-first century, in the 1700 and 1800s it was akin to secrecy and could be a sign of immorality. But in a world in which a woman had very few spaces to call her own, a pocket was often the only space she had to keep her few private possessions.

The role of clothes in remembering arises from the often close association between the clothes a person wears and their identity. Clothes can identify us to others by showing gender, age, social status, cultural or religious background – a highly skilled, professionally embroidered pocket might identify its wearer as a wealthy woman, while a simply constructed plain one made from low cost material would demonstrate that the pocket and its owner were from a more workaday world. Clothes can also be a means of expressing individual choice and taste.

Pockets may be viewed as a material embodiment of memory, evoking the long ago lives and actions of the women who wore them. Used pockets are often imprinted with their original owner's presence through deliberate marking, specific effects of wear, or embroidery. Re-cycled materials show the vestiges of older domestic textiles. The marking of pockets with names and initials was the simplest way of personalizing a pocket. There were also more complex and personal ways of expressing individual choice. Many embroidered pockets seem to be simply done by amateur embroiderers. The handicraft involved in creating one's own pocket design allowed the individual to personalize clothing, producing unique items which may have held significant personal value. Embroidery involving significant investment of skills and effort was the primary way of expressing forms of creativity through pockets and some embroidered pockets may have served as a handy reminder of patterns and stitches, like a sampler. Embroidered pockets were highly individual possessions through which identity may have been embodied in the choices and creativity shown by embroiderers. While they often followed similar patterns and ideas about the appropriate subjects – floral patterns, geometric shapes – no two were alike.

An afterlife for tie-on pockets

It is impossible to know precisely when the tie-on pocket began to fall from use but it probably happened sometime around the mid-19th century with some generational and regional differences. Whilst some younger fashionable women might have rejected it because of its association with their mothers or grandmothers, these older women may have retained it precisely because they knew it was a proven asset. In particular it seems to have remained useful to working and rural women. During the 19th century women increasingly worked for wages outside the home, often enabled latterly by new affordable modes of transport such as trains, omnibuses and bicycles. These new opportunities still necessitated carrying small possessions securely and for some women the tie-on pocket continued to have a place. Sometimes known as a 'safety' pocket, it could work became an adjunct to handbags as women travelled more often for pleasure. The pocket evolved in various ways, including a ready-made type that contained a metal frame purse and which survives in some numbers in museums. One such example is associated with an intrepid Englishwoman who travelled in South America in the 1920s. The hand or shoulder bag proved to be the most important alternative to the tie-on pocket and this became popular towards the end of the 19th century, though not yet as universal as it is today. Eventually the tie-on pocket lingered in just a few situations as a curious legacy of the past. In the 20th century and into living memory, working women who continued to make and use the old form were often in the fish trade, in Wales and North Shields, for example. It also survived in use amongst women travellers in Northern Ireland. Perhaps some of the most obvious descendents of the tie-on pocket are bum

bags, money belts and the pouches worn by market traders. Some bags for clothes pegs still echo the old shape.

By the start of the 20th century a few of the oldest embroidered pockets from the 18th century were finding their way into museums and private collections as sought-after examples of domestic needlework. As interest grew in the history of everyday life, so more utilitarian examples were collected too, though only a tiny fraction of the total number that would have been made and used in the past. A few surface in salerooms where they are much appreciated by collectors and there are some old pockets still treasured as private family heirlooms. They also appear sometimes in books and exhibitions of historic dress, but for the most part they and the story they can tell have been forgotten.

The history of tie-on pockets shows how a common and appealing object can disappear from use and then be forgotten surprisingly quickly. Simple, unpretentious and personal objects can be overshadowed by more glamorous aspects of fashion history. As part of a growing interest in everyday life of the past and in our textile and dress heritage and history, the *Pockets of History* project aims to restore tie-on pockets to memory and widen public appreciation of their intriguing story.

Selected further reading and resources

Women's tie-on pockets are illustrated and discussed in the following publications:

Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America*, Williamsburg, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002.

Linda Baumgarten and John Watson, *Costume Close-Up: Clothing Construction and Pattern 1750 – 1790*, Williamsburg, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1999

Barbara Burman, 'A Linnen Pockett a prayer Book and five keys': approaches to a history of women's tie-on pockets', in (eds) Maria Hayward and Elizabeth Kramer, *Textiles and Text: Re-establishing the links between archival and object-based research*, London, Archetype Publications, forthcoming 2007.

Barbara Burman, 'Pocketing the Difference: Gender and Pockets in Nineteenth-Century Britain', in (eds) Barbara Burman and Carole Turbin *Material Strategies: Dress and Gender in Historical Perspective*, Oxford, Blackwell 2003

Barbara Burman and Jonathan White, 'Fanny's Pockets: Cotton, Consumption and Domestic Economy, 1780-1840', in (eds) Cora Kaplan and Jennie Batchelor *Women and Material Culture 1650 – 1830*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2007

Vanda Foster, *Bags and Purses*, London, Batsford, 1982

Anna Harrison and Kathryn Gill, 'An Eighteenth-Century Detachable Pocket and Baby's Cap, Found Concealed in a Wall Cavity: Conservation and Research', *Textile History*, 33:2 (2002), pp. 177-94.

Therle Hughes, *English Domestic Needlework 1660 – 1860*, London, Abbey Fine Arts, n.d.

Jane Tozer and Sarah Levitt, *Fabric of Society: A Century of People and their Clothes, 1770-1870: Essays Inspired by the Collection at Platt Hall, The Gallery of English Costume, Manchester*, Manchester, Laura Ashley, 1983

If you are interested in the textiles of this period, see also the following selected titles for a range of perspectives and approaches:

Donald King and Santina Levey, *The Victoria & Albert Museum's Textile Collection: Embroidery in Britain from 1200 – 1750*, London, V&A Publications, 1993

Florence M. Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650-1870*, New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 1984

Florence M. Montgomery, *Printed Textiles: English and American Cottons and Linens 1700 – 1850*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1970

Natalie Rothstein, *Barbara Johnson's Album of Fashions and Fabrics*, London, V&A Museum/ Thames and Hudson, 1987

Philip Sykas, *The Secret Life of Textiles: Six Pattern Book Archives in North West England*, Bolton, The North West Pattern Book Project, Bolton Museums, Art Gallery and Aquarium, 2005

You can also visit the Victoria and Albert Museum website to see more information about their collection of pockets. www.vam.ac.uk/collections/fashion/pockets

For more information about deliberately concealed garments, visit www.concealedgarments.org