





This Is Your Inheritance





She Took Up Her Mother's Sword

Two years ago, I mentioned to my Grandma that I was thinking of buying a treadle sewing machine because I wanted to make a back-pack with leather straps. My electric sewing machine didn't have a strong enough motor to sew leather, treadle sewing machines can sew anything and the charity shop down the road had one for sale for eighty quid.

When I told my Grandma that I was thinking of buying a treadle machine, she told me to hold on, Jean had my Great Grandma's Singer and she might let me have it. A few weeks later, the sewing machine materialised in my studio. I have yet to make that leather back-pack.

The arrival of my Great-Grandma Billy's sewing machine coincided with the first few weeks of my MA. In my proposal, I had promised to run a two year participatory project and I basically had no idea what I was going to do. Naturally, I was procrastinating, spending all the time I should have been working on my MA, working out how to use the treadle. It was both easier and harder than I imagined it would be.

At first I found it tricky to catch the rhythm with the pedal, and I'm still never completely confident that I have it threaded right. Once it gets going, there's nothing to go wrong, and you have so much more control than with a normal sewing machine.

As I was working, I got to thinking about how my Mum had learned to sew on this treadle machine, as did my Grandma. I thought of my Grandma Billy, making all of the clothes for her four children using it.

I come from a long line of women who can sew, women who consider an inability to take up a hem the ultimate form of incompetency. There's this picture from my brothers wedding of me, my Mum, my Grandma, Jean (my Grandma's sister) and Jeanette (Jean's daughter), everyone of us is wearing something handmade. In a way, I think that's my Grandma Billy's legacy. Here are her daughters, her Granddaughters, her great Granddaughters, and all of them can sew their way out of a problem if they need too.

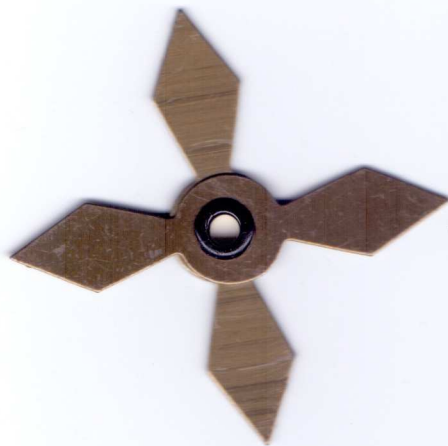
When my Grandma Billy died, she left me a little bit of money. She left me costume jewellery that I am always wearing. She left me a book of 100 embroidery stitches and all of these tins that smell like her house when you open them. Mostly she left me my textile skills and the unwavering confidence that comes with them.

LONG PINS



That's what I was thinking about as I was first using the treadle machine; the skills that I have and what it is that they mean. This voice in my head kept saying, 'This is your inheritance, this is your inheritance', over and over, in time with the rattle of the machine.

That's when I knew what to make for my MA project; something for my Grandma Billy and for all the women like her. A project for the women who have sent their daughters out into the world, armed with needles for swords.





The Accidental Revolutionary

This underwear has nothing to do with Ellen Fothergill. If this underwear had been anything to do with Ellen Fothergill, I imagine she would have sold it. I'm telling you this story in the wrong order, I should go back to the start.

Ellen Fothergill was my Great-granny, that's my Granddad's Mum. I didn't know her so long, I was only small when she died. I can remember going to see her in my communion dress. I remember her bringing me books on my birthdays. Mostly, I remember feeling like she thought everything I did was brilliant. As I've gotten older, I feel like I've come to know Granny more, through the stories I've been told. Her stories, coming to me second hand.

My Mum has told me little bits about her childhood. When she was a girl, Granny slept in one bed with four of her brothers under a pile of coats. For years, the only thing the family had in the front room of their house was a sewing machine, with a doily over it. At the window was a hand crocheted curtain.

When she was 12 years old, Granny started half-days in the mill. An unknown (to me) number of years later she started the underwear club.

I don't know all the details of the story, but the basic operation went something like this. Granny had cousins who worked in the silk mill in Addingham. They got hold of small pieces of silk and then turned them into underwear. Granny sold the underwear to women who worked with her at the woollen mill in Keighley. The subscribers to the underwear club paid a weekly fee and in return received underwear at Christmas, or for Keighley Feast, or some other time once a year.

The running of the club was not, by all accounts, as straight forward as it sounds. Initially, underwear was given out monthly, but members would leave the club as soon as they received the goods. People would join the week before the delivery date and still expect underwear. People were constantly having to be talked out of leaving and taking all their money with them.

I guess it's not easy to get people to wait all year on the promise of pants, even if they are made of silk.



BLANKETS
SHEETS
BEDSPREADS.
—
HOSIERY.
DELECTENE
THREE KNOTS
DOROTHY VERNON
ETC.
—
KNITWEAR
UNDERWEAR.

TELEPHONE KEIGHLEY : 4848.

Ellen Fothergill
12. FELL LANE, KEIGHLEY.

COATS, SUITS, GOWNS.
BY
MARLBECK, EASTEX 52, RONTONY, DIANA,
LADIES PRIDE, ETC.

She worked her way up; from subscription clubs, to a market stall, to a shop in her front room, to "Ellen Fothergill Ladies Outfitters", this grand shop on Fell Lane. This shop closed before I was born but, by all accounts, it was something special. Sometimes, after a lady of a certain age figures out who I am, they'll start to tell me all about, "This lovely coat" that "did them three winters". Or this particular dress, that was "just the thing", or their wedding dress. All of them remember my granny, and all of them have good things to say.

The thing my Granny did that was so impressive is that she took some scraps of silk and she completely transformed her life. All the things stacked against her; her gender, her class, the times she was living in and she just worked around them. Ellen Fothergill held a one woman revolution. She subverted the means of mass production, and did it all without shedding any blood.

When my Granny was a little girl, the only thing her family had in the front room was a sewing machine. When my Granny came to change her life, she used what she had.



The Museum of Half Finished Things

Alice stopped knitting at around the same time as I started, so she gave me all of her things.

When Alice was knitting, she was brilliant. Every Christmas or birthday you could depend on a lumpy parcel containing a hand knit jumper (I got a jumper and a matching hat). By the time she stopped, both my brothers were over 6 feet tall, so knitting for her numerous great great nieces and nephews must have become a full time job. When I am knitting, I am rubbish. I am slow and I pick up stitches. The only thing that I've ever finished is a long, grey scarf, almost twice as wide at one end than the other. I can not follow a pattern to save my life.

I think the thing that has always bothered me the most about my knitting, and about my textile practice in general, has been my chronic inability to finish things. My drawers are stuffed full of scarves that never were, and ten year old skirts that still want hemming.

I thought this trait of leaving things half done was uniquely mine. It's a trait that spills over into other areas of my life. I abandon writing and

artistic ventures. If I were a hero in a Greek tragedy, my fatal flaw would almost undoubtedly be hubris- believing that you can do things better than the gods. This is what I have always put my inability to finish things down to- a sort of chronic over confidence. I think I can do everything, and I think I can do it better than anyone else ever.

When I was looking for things to print, I knew I wanted to include some things made by Alice, but the remaining jumpers would be far too big. I decided to include one of my hats and some of her needles. I went into her knitting bag and there was this huge ball of black wool I'd never looked underneath. At the bottom of the bag were these 3 hankies that Alice had been in the middle of embellishing with embroidered flowers and crocheted edging.

I don't know when she stopped or why, but I know it was a long time ago because the elastic bands around each one had shrivelled and hardened. After I had found them, I thought it would be a good idea to include some unfinished work. So I asked my grandma if she happened to have any. I wasn't prepared for the great bounty of half finished things she would arrive with.





Some of this unfinished work was comic, a palm sized jumper meant for my now 6 foot something brother, abandoned on account of his remarkable growth rate. The work spanned generations, including a chair cover Maud Fothergill (my granddad's, dad's, mum) was working on when she died.

I decided to base the project on hand made textile objects for two reasons; firstly because the objects are the surviving physical evidence of the skills used to create them, and secondly, because I think they embody the everyday triumphs of the women who made them. In a way, I think the unfinished objects do that even more. Here are women who kept up textile practice until they died, or until their eyesight failed them. They worked with textiles most of their lives; in mills, on market stalls, doing piece work on the side. They clothed themselves and their families and furnished their houses.

Alice learned to knit from her grandma, (who hand knit for a living after her husband died). I don't remember learning to sew, I'm pretty sure I learned through osmosis in the womb. Maybe neither of us finish everything we started, but I think in the end, we both finished everything we could.

Special thanks to my Mother and
Grandmother
and all the Mothers and
Grandmothers who came before
them.

Letty McHugh



