

## Knitting History Forum report 2025

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The Knitting History Forum Conference 2025 took place online on Saturday 1 February with 185 participants joining in. Many of the participants took the opportunity to present themselves in the Lobby and the chat was active with discussions throughout the event. The participants listened in from all over the world, and many of them knitted or crocheted during the event, as well as posing questions and discussions in the chat. The chair of the KHF, Professor Sandy Black, officially opened the conference by welcoming all participants and speakers and presenting the programme for the day.

The morning session started with the paper ***Knitting history in China: from the late 19th century to the early 20th century*** presented by Trista Yeung, PhD candidate at the University of Hong Kong and lecturer at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. She began with a brief historical background of China at this period and then shared her research into how knitting, both manual and by machine, had been introduced and disseminated in China in the late 19th century and early 20th century. We heard about the first factories with knitting machines as well as the opportunity for rural women to work from home with rented knitting machines to earn money. Yeung also shared some insights into the women who played a big part in the knitting history of China, such as Zeng Jifen, the first recorded woman to have learned hand knitting, from a missionary's wife in the 1880-1890s. We also learned about Feng Quiping who founded knitting clubs, teaching classes, and published knitting patterns. As a conclusion, Yeung talked about historical gender roles and how knitting became an essential part of the Chinese women's identity in the early 20th century.

The second paper of the day was ***The proof of the pattern is in the making: the technology of the crochet pattern in the 1840s and how I got on when I tried to use them*** presented by Eleanor Gilchrist, PhD candidate at Newcastle University. After an introduction to the history of published crochet patterns, which started in the 1840s with the first pattern published by Jane Gaugain, Gilchrist shared some of the challenges with these early patterns and their lack of information. Out of 800 patterns that Gilchrist examined, she found that 43% of these are unusable due to their poor quality of information. Gilchrist then shared some of her challenges when using these patterns. She chose eight that were good candidates for her to try out by using making as part of her research methodology for her PhD. After much trial, error and unravelling, she concluded that two of the projects had to be abandoned, another two required considerable interpretation, one project was a partial success and only three projects were a complete success. As an example of the amount of interpretation needed, Gilchrist mentioned that the patterns rarely state which type of stitch to use.

One of the participants sympathised with Gilchrist's struggles with the 1840s crochet patterns and could see some parallels to modern instruction manuals: 'I laughed along with the speaker on using 19th century crochet patterns – really, even worse than the terrible operating manuals we are inundated with nowadays for new tech gadgets.'

The final paper of the morning session was ***KnitWell: examining the use of a knitter's vocabulary in capturing emotional states*** presented by Emily Joy Rickard, PhD graduate at Nottingham Trent University. Rickard introduced us to the KnitWell project which is part of her PhD work. In the project, she examined the knitter's use of vocabulary for capturing emotional states. Twelve participants (including Rickard) recorded their emotional states by knitting daily as a sort of journal, using a set of supplied yarns of different colours and qualities and the technique 'free knitting'. Rickard was inspired by 'free writing' and the textile artist Mary Walker Philips in coining the term 'free knitting'. The participants also kept written reflections and completed weekly check-ins and interviews during parts of the project, which was divided in three phases each covering three months. Rickard then shared the process of collecting the data generated through the project and the subsequent analysis. To sum up the results, Rickard found that the knitted vocabulary differed from the written vocabulary. There was more expression in the knitted vocabulary, both direct and metaphorical. And the knitter was able to use the different elements of knitting, such as choice of yarn, colour, stitch, shape and structure to express their emotions.

After three very interesting and diverse papers it was time for a refreshment break. During the break, the participants had the option to join breakout rooms with each other to informally chat and get to know one another. This feature was appreciated, or as one participant put it in their feedback: 'Loved the small group break out!'

The afternoon session started with the paper ***(Re)Constructing the Ballybunion knitted cap: providing a glimpse into the experiences, skills, and time required in the knitting of 16th century knitted caps, utilising experimental archaeology*** presented by Ryan Daniel Koeing, an archaeologist specialising in historical textiles in Dublin, Ireland. The paper was based on his master's thesis in archaeology, in which he investigated the working lives of the 16th century cap knitters, with the aim of providing a glimpse into the experiences, skills and time which were required to knit the Ballybunion cap. Koeing began with an introduction to the cap, which is a 16th century single-brimmed hand knitted cap found in a bog in Ballybunion, Ireland, in 1847. As part of the historical background, we heard about the cappers' act of 1571, which mandated that every man in England and Wales, of lower socioeconomic status, had to wear a knitted cap on Sundays and holidays. Koenig also shared some information on the women and children who knitted caps, most likely at home, and that they earned well below what a skilled worker earned, as seen in a census of the poor in Norwich. We then learnt about the use of experimental archaeology to answer the questions of how much experience and what skills were required to knit the Ballybunion cap, and how much time it would take. The 22 volunteer participants knitted the cap from a supplied knit kit. They also knitted a speed knitting task to provide data of their speed, as well as two surveys on their skills and experiences. Koeing concluded that the average time to knit the cap was 13 hours and that one year of prior knitting experience was enough to be able to knit the cap, but that the fastest knitters had 20+ years of experience.

The next paper was ***Bohus Stickning: a network of creativity*** presented by Isa Holmgren, master in Textile Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden. The presentation was based on Holmgren's master thesis and started with some historical and economical background to the region of Bohuslän, Sweden. In the 1930s the

employment rates for women were low. Bohus Stickning was founded in 1939 by Emma Jacobsson with the purpose of increasing the local interest in knitting, to employ knitters and to sell their works. Holmgren then introduced several female designers who contributed their modernist designs for pattern knitted garments throughout the years. We also learnt that the knitters were trained in courses at the head office in Gothenburg, and, after completing these, the knitters received kits and knitted at home. The finished garments were then sent to the head office for distribution and sales. Holmgren also introduced several women who contributed to Bohus Stickning in other ways, such as by holding courses and doing quality assurance, which also included sending critiques to the knitters to help them improve. Holmgren concluded with the challenging times that the company faced in the 1960s, for example, the difficulty in recruiting knitters. Eventually, the company closed in 1969, ending the 30-year creative network of women.

The final paper of the day was ***Krystyna Chiger: the girl in the green sweater*** presented by Elizabeth Baer, Professor at Gustavus Adolphus College, Minnesota, USA. In the presentation we got to know a little about the life of Krystyna Chiger, a young Polish girl who survived the Holocaust, after hiding with her family in a sewer under the Lvov ghetto for 14 months until their liberation in 1944. During her time in the sewer, Krystyna wore a green, short-sleeved sweater that her grandmother had knitted for her. The sweater was mended and used after the liberation, and later having emigrated to the USA, Krystyna donated it to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. In a 2007 interview Krystyna stated that she did not know why the green sweater had been one of the few possessions that she took with her to the sewer, but that during her time underground, the green sweater became a representation of her grandmother's love and, by extension, an instrument for her survival. Baer then concluded by talking about Lea Stern, who examined the green sweater in the museum and took a pattern from it. She knitted several reproductions to test the pattern. In one of the images Baer shared, we saw Krystyna Chiger with one of the reproductions, which fittingly closed the circle, or loop, of the green sweater. Baer's presentation was very moving, and several participants mentioned her paper in their feedback, as in this example: 'I was particularly moved by the final programme. Garments can tell such powerful stories and it is so important that they are recorded and shared. Especially as we seem to be living in strange times.'

Before the conference ended, Professor Sandy Black summarised the day and pointed out the variety and the long timespan covered in the papers presented at this year's Knitting History Forum conference. Black concluded by thanking the KHF team, the speakers and the participants. The chat was full of thanks from the participants and many said they were looking forward to next year already!