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Everyone His Own Knitting Needles

by

Colleen Formby

Companionable knitting work! When gayer friends depart
Thou hold'st thy busy station even very near my heart;
And when no social living tones to sympathy appeal,
I hear a gentle accent from thy softly clashing steel

My knitting work! My knitting work! Thou interruptest not
My reveries and pleasant thoughts, forgetting and forgot!
I take thee up, and lay thee down and use thee as I may,
And not a contradicting word thy burnish'd lips will say.

- *Southern Rose*, February 3, 1838

“Knitting has been called the friend of the blind, and is certainly the friend of the aged, as it affords the most easy and graceful employment in which they can be engaged. Then it is a really useful art both for the rich and poor....knitting can be done at times when no other work could be taken up, and during the long winter evenings what a host of useful things can be thus made by the industrious fingers! Caps, cuffs, comforters, shawls, spencers, stockings, tippetts, gloves, mittens. And then what stores of ornamental articles does it afford! What beautiful purses, bags, and beadwork will knitting produce?”

- *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book*, Feb 1847

“There is not one art practiced by ladies which is more deservedly popular than Knitting. It is so easy, requires so little eyesight, and is susceptible of so much ornament, that it merits the attention of every lady; and in giving instructions for acquiring it, we add also, such admirable diagrams of the various processes, we are sure that no difficulty will be felt in executing any pattern.”

- *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, and Fashion*, January 1858

“Though at present, Mr. Editor, a lonely and comfortless old bachelor, I still live in hopes of one of these days of getting married; and if I do, I trust it will be to a woman *who is a great knitter*. Of all the many accomplishments which adorn the gentler sex, I do assure them, from the *very bottom* of my heart, that I esteem knitting among the greatest.”

- From the Ladies' Department, *Graham's Magazine*

Knitting was one of the most popular needlework crafts of the mid-nineteenth century. Lately there seems to be a resurgence of interest in this art, not only in the living history community, but in the modern world as well. Basic classes in knitting may be found in almost any town or city, in needlework shops and community centers. This article is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to knitting in general, but rather a look at some of the different terminology that may be unfamiliar when looking at mid-nineteenth century knitting patterns. There are a great many basic books and videos to help you learn to knit, and may be found in your local libraries, or needlework shops. The problem comes when we, as living historians, want to transfer our modern knowledge over to period patterns. Then we have a few difficulties with terminology and needle sizes. With that in mind, here are some explanations and equivalents that will hopefully be of help to the period knitter.

Abbreviations:

K.	Knit
P.	Purl
M.	Make (increase)
K 2t.	Knit two as one
K 3t.	Knit three as one
D 1	Decrease one, by taking off a loop without knitting; then knit one, and pass the other over it (as if you were casting off)
D 2	Decrease two, by slipping one, knitting two together, and pass the slip-stitch over.
Sl.	Slip
R.	Raise (knit the bar of thread between the two stitches as one)
T.K.	Twisted knitted stitch
T.P.	Twisted purl stitch

Instructions: (basic terminology or stitches that might be a little different from modern terms)

- Plain knitting: This is the knit stitch
- Seam: Purl, also seen sometimes as “pearl”
- Make a stitch: This is a single increase, but a particular type of one. Pick up the strand between the last stitch knitted and the next stitch, with the right needle from the back of the work. Place it on the left needle and knit through the back (or purl through the back, depending on what stitch you are using at the time).
- (See <http://knitting.about.com/library/bllearnmake1.htm>)
- May also be a pattern stitch; bring the thread forward, as if for a yarn over.
- To take in: This is a decrease. Either knit two as one, which is marked as K2t; or slip one, knit one, pass the slip-stitch over the knitted. This is either written in full, or “decrease one”
- A turn: Two rows in the same stitch, backwards and forwards
- To turn: To change the stitch (from plain to purl, or the reverse)
- Brioche stitch: The number cast on for brioche stitch must always be divisible by three, without a remainder. Bring the thread in front, slip one, knit two together. It is worked the same way backward and forward (i.e....on every row). This makes a distinctive looking type of a rib stitch, but without quite as much elasticity.
- (See <http://www.knitting-and.com/homework/brioche.htm>)
- Double Knitting: In period literature, this does *not* refer to the DK weight thread, as it might today. This is a stitch that was frequently used, and because most knitters would have been familiar with it, usually is not described, but simply noted “this piece is nice in double knitting.”
- The stitch is fairly easy and fun to do. What you are basically doing is knitting an open tube (in the round) on two needles. That stitches look the same both front and back.
- Cast on any even number of stitches.

First row: *Bring the wool forward, slip one as if to purl; pass the wool back, knit one*; continue to the end of the row.

Every succeeding row is the same. The stitch knitted in one row, is the slipped stitch in the next.

If you knit a short swatch, and then pull the yarn off the needles without binding off, you will find you have knitted an open tube! (Here is a modern pattern for a pan handler, that demonstrates this stitch wonderfully!)

<http://frugalknit12330.goeserv.com/homepage/panhndl.htm>

The Workbasket article in the April/May 2004 *Citizen's Companion* also gives an illustration of this stitch, along with a period pattern.

Wool Equivalents:

- Shetland:** Any lace weight (two thread) is appropriate, although 2-thread Shetland is still made, and may be found under that name, if your desire is to duplicate the item with the specific wool named.
- Pyrenees:** lace weight (slightly tighter twist than the Shetland)
- Andalusian:** In between fingering and sport weight (try a four-ply Shetland wool, also called “jumper weight” by Jamieson and Smith, a modern firm that produces wool for retail sale.)
- Zephyr:** This is a confusing term, since it can refer to texture as well as weight, but fingering would be a safe bet for most patterns that call for this.
- Single Berlin (4 thread):** Fingering or needlepoint. Both Single and Double Berlin were traditionally made from Merino wool, which may still found in these weights.
- Crewel:** Same as today's crewel yarns.
- Worsted/Lambs Wool:** Sport weight. Period literature referring to as “worsted wool” was *not* what we know in modern terms as “worsted weight wool”. It was a reference to the way the wool was spun, and the amount of twist on the fibers in the wool.
- Double Berlin (8 thread):** DK or a three-ply worsted
- Fleecy:** DK or a soft bulky. This is a soft wool that was produced in a range of sizes, from two-ply, which was probably close to fingering or lace, to a soft bulky weight. You should probably experiment first with a small amount of DK and see if the item is knitting up to the right size. If not, adjust accordingly.

[Editor's note: DK weight wool is defined in *A History of Hand Knitting* by Richard Rutt (1987). "1911. A four-ply yarn resembling 3-ply wheeling but stronger and softer, twice the weight of fingering. *Weldon's Practical Knitter*." It is heavier than sport weight yarn and lighter than modern worsted weight yarn.]

Online sources for yarn:

There are any number of online sources for yarn, but here are just a few:

The Mannings: <http://www.the-mannings.com/>

Halcyon Yarn: http://www.halcyonyarn.com/yarn_weight.html#Anchor-Less-29709

Carodan Farms: <http://www.carodanfarm.com/>

Knitter's Underground: <http://www.knitters-underground.com/>

Yarn Barn of Lawrence, Kansas: <http://www.yarnbarn-ks.com/>

Patternworks: <http://www.patternworks.com/index.html>

Knitting Needles:

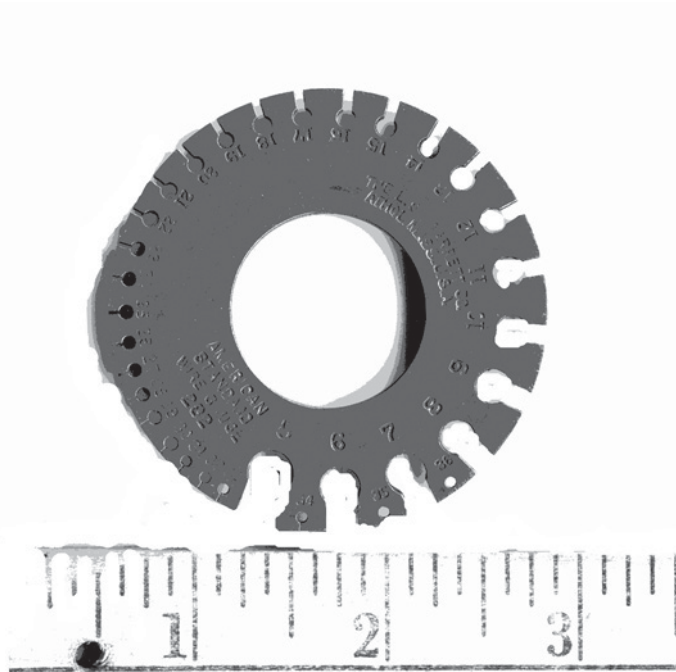
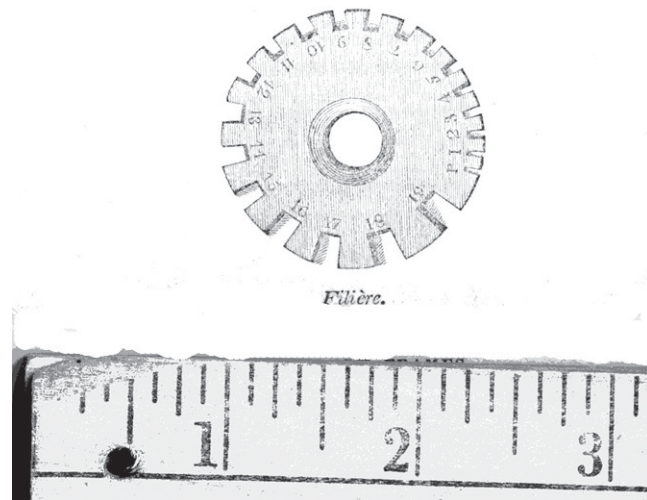
In period magazines and needlework books, needles or pins are listed as being made of various materials: bone, ivory, steel, tortoise shell, and wood. The smaller doublepoint needles were made from steel, and if you've ever tried knitting with a size 0 needle made from wood, you'll know why...the points tend to break very easily! There are plausible substitutes for all of these that may be found, although some are not currently manufactured and must be found at various auction sites, such as Ebay. There are several makers of wooden needles, including "Brittany" and "Lantern Moon". "Ivore" needles are a fairly good substitute for ivory and bone needles. If you need the small double pointed steel needles, "Skacel" is the best manufacturer for these. Most of these may be ordered from your local needlework shop, but there is an excellent online source for all of these: JKL Needles at <http://www.jklneedles.com/index.cfm> . In addition, Wooded Hamlet <http://www.woodedhamlet.com/> has also begun to manufacture small doublepoint needles. If you would like to try your hand at lace knitting with the *really* small needles, www.bugknits.com carries them all the way down to 11/0's! (And yes, you *can* knit on needles and pins that small, with not many more problems than the larger ones. In fact, when you do get used to using the smaller sizes, the larger ones will feel awkward in your hands.)

Needle Gauges and Equivalent Sizes:

There are three principle types of needle gauges shown during the mid-nineteenth century:

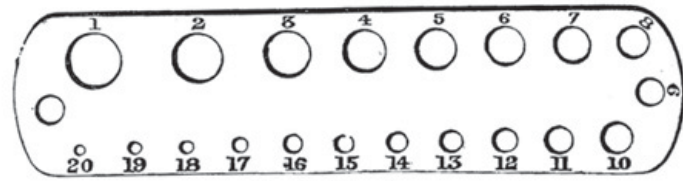
Filiere, or Wire Gauge.

Miss Lambert describes the filiere, or wire gauge “as a steel instrument with graduated notches round it’s edges, distinguished by different figures. It is used by wire-drawers for ascertaining the sizes of their wires, and is applied in a similar manner, for measuring the diameters of netting and knitting needles, thus – when speaking of the relative size of these needles, they are frequently designated by their corresponding numbers; but, as has been before observed, there appears to be no universal standard.”



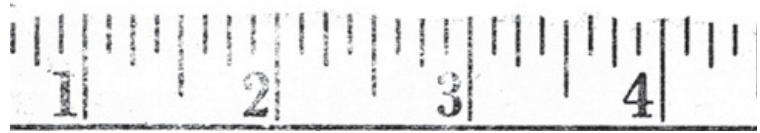
Wire Guage

Knitting gauge from *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Needlework*, by Isabella Beeton (1870)



287.—Knitting Gauge.

Even though this is from a book that is past the Civil War period, I show it here because the sizes seem to be comparable to bell gauge sizes.



Bell Gauge.

The problem is, there are no two gauges are exactly alike, and there is even some variance with the Bell gauges, which appear to be the most commonly used. It seems as if, when deciding which needle to use, we must know the specific gauge that was used by the author if we wish to duplicate things exactly. That being said, however, the pattern, thread weight, and number of stitches will give clues as to what size needle should be used. And we *can* get within a very close range by using the bell gauge.



The equivalents on the following page are based on two of the author's Bell gauges, and are good comparisons to use:

BELL GAUGE	AMERICAN MODERN	METRIC
0	11	8 mm
1 or 2	10.5	6.5 mm
3	10	6 mm
4	9	5.5 mm
5	9	5.25mm
5.5	8	5.0 mm
6	7	4.5mm
7	7	4.25mm
8	6	4mm
8.5	5	3.75mm
9	5	3.75mm
10	4	3.5mm
10.5	3	3 or 3.25mm
11	2	2.75mm
12	2	2.5mm
12.5	1.5	2mm
13	1	2.25mm
14	0	2mm
15, 16, 17	00	1.75mm
17.5	000	1.5mm
18	0000	1.25mm
19, 20, 21	00000	1.0mm
22, 23	000000	.75mm
24	00000000	.5mm

Hints for Living Historians

One of the biggest problems with trying to make your contemporary needles conform to a period look is the knob on the end which has the needle size on it. If that knob can be removed, you can replace it with a glass bead of some sort. Several period sources refer to using an ivory bead on the end of your knitting needles. In addition, you might want to try using an air-dry moldable clay to create this look of the ivory bead to cover this knob. The clay may be found in various craft stores, such as Michael's.

Stitch holders: Period sources recommend placing stitches that are to be held and worked later on a piece of silk thread. They can easily be picked up later and worked. If you choose to try this, needlepoint silk and a tapestry needle to thread the stitches work well.

Stitch place marker: natural/white rings (imitate bone or ivory)...may be found in most needlework stores.

Sources:

Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine, various years

Peterson's Magazine, various years

Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, and Fashion, various years

Decorative Needlework, by Miss Lambert (1846)

The Ladies Complete Guide to Needlework and Embroidery, by Miss Lambert (1859)

The Ladies' Manual of Fancy-Work: A Complete Instructor in Every Variety of Ornamental Needle-Work, by Mrs. Pullan (1859)

Beeton's Book of Needlework, by Isabella Beeton (1870)

Special thanks to Karin Timour, for our discussions and her input.