

Period piece

How the 'Stitch Off' project grew from research by Dr Jennie Batchelor

WHEN THE *LADY'S Magazine*; or, *Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex* launched in August 1770, it was unlikely that its publisher predicted its success. The market for periodicals had grown substantially since the first were published in the late 17th century. By the middle of the 18th, however, the market seemed saturated, with many titles disappearing as quickly as they were being printed.

Runs of earlier women's periodicals would not have given the *Lady's Magazine's* publisher cause for optimism. Eliza Haywood's *Female Spectator* (1744–46) and Charlotte Lennox's *Lady's Museum* (1760–61) ran for only a few years. Previous *Lady's/Ladies'* magazines by Jasper Goodwill (1749–53) and Oliver Goldsmith (1759–63) fared little better.

Yet this *Lady's Magazine* defied expectations, running for 13 issues a year from 1770 to 1832 with a monthly circulation of up to 15,000 copies. This is staggering when we remember that print runs of contemporary novels such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) were routinely 750 copies. The magazine saw off countless rivals, and its readers included notable writers such as George Crabbe and Mary Russell Mitford. Jane Austen almost certainly read the *Lady's Magazine* and wore her debts to tales of Knightleys, Willoughbys and Brandons proudly in her own novels. Charlotte Brontë definitely read it, describing in a letter to Hartley Coleridge dated 10 December 1840 how she would steal away from lessons to read its serial fiction until a terrible day when her father burnt all copies in her possession.

The magazine for ladies

The magazine's diverse, multimedia content was central to its appeal and marketing strategy from the outset. Its first issue opened with an imposing fashion plate of 'a Lady in Full Dress', followed by an 'Address to the Public' in which the editor explained the magazine's aim to make its readers' 'minds not less amiable than [their] persons' through the publication of original content in genres including: essays, poetry, travel writing, moral and medical advice, recipes, as well as 'Novels, Tales, Romances, intended to confirm chastity'. This content was provided by readers themselves who were asked to send material gratis to the editors with the promise it might find a place in the magazine's pages. Women (and men) did in their hundreds. Their work sat alongside extracts from already published work, which was 'ransacked' by the editor for readers' edification.

The magazine also offered engravings, music sheets, and sartorial intelligence. It promised fashion plates and reports and included monthly 'patterns for the Tambour [and] Embroidery'. The patterns made the magazine especially good value for money. For just sixpence an issue, readers purchased 60 pages of text-based content, illustrations and a pattern for 'less than half the price they could expect to pay for the pattern alone at the Haberdashers'. The magazine kept its price to sixpence an issue for three decades, only raising it to a shilling in 1800 when colour fashion plates became a regular feature.

I have spent fifteen years,

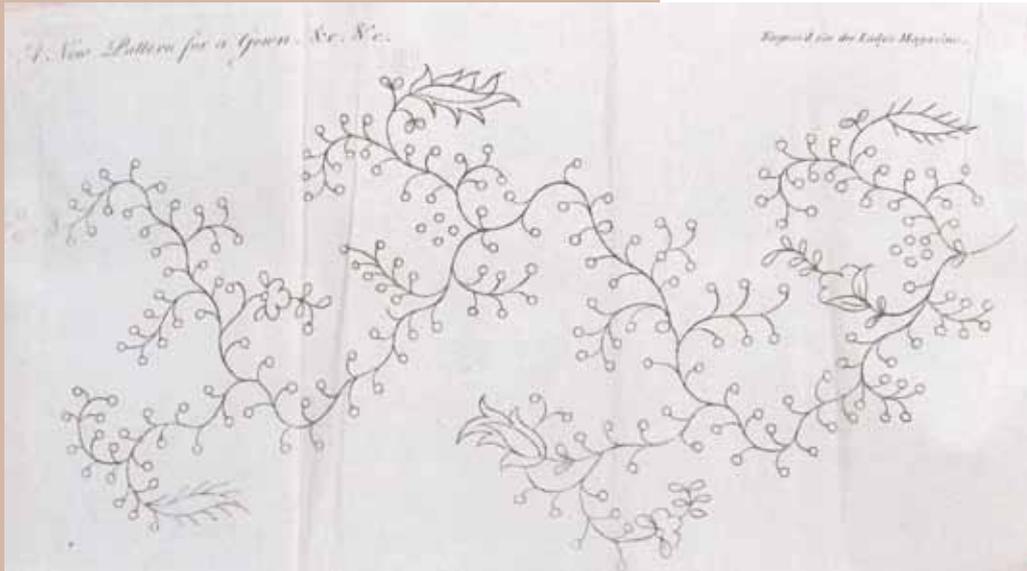


IMAGE © NICOLE RUDOLPH

"Dozens of people around the world started work on the patterns"

Top:
'Stitch Off' items on show at Chawton House Library

Above:
Shoes by Nicole Rudolph



Left:
Embroidery pattern 'A New Pattern for a Gown' which can be downloaded from the project's website (see panel on page 42)

Centre:
Pages from the *Lady's Magazine*

Bottom:
Goldwork 1775 shoe pattern by Mary Martin



on and off, reading the *Lady's Magazine*, seduced by its eclectic content on every conceivable subject from politics and education, to recipes for removing facial hair, and terrifying supernatural fiction. I have spent weeks lost in archival searches trying to work out the identities of reader-contributors, who hid behind pseudonyms like A.Z., Belinda, A Spinster, or Constantia Maria.

Now, as Principal Investigator of a Leverhulme Trust funded project on the magazine at the University of Kent, I work in a team of three devoted to cataloguing its content and as many of the magazine's authors as we can identify between 1770 and 1818. The project's principal goal is to provide an open-access database that indexes contributors and all 14,000 plus of its print items over this period so that anyone interested in the history and literature of the Romantic era can locate items of particular interest.

The database launches in September 2016. Until then, you can follow our progress on our blog (see panel on page 42), Twitter feed or Facebook page. The social media community that has formed around the project is one of its biggest joys for me. I like to think our followers resemble the magazine's first readers: people of diverse interests and backgrounds who come together to share their passion for women's history and writing. The community is also responsible for taking my

research into new and unexpected directions, most notably, 'The Great *Lady's Magazine* Stitch Off'.

'Stitch Off'

The success of 'Stitch Off' has been more of a surprise than the magazine's success must have been to its editors. I would like to say I planned it, but I cannot. One day a reader of our blog contacted me to say that she had a 1796 copy of the magazine and wondered if I would like to buy it. I did and was amazed to find it contained several original embroidery patterns, which rarely survive because they were intended for use. I posted photos of the patterns on our Twitter page. The response was phenomenal. 'I would love to make one of these', several people said. I could make that happen, I thought, and set up a webpage from which the patterns could be downloaded. I could not have predicted what happened next.

Dozens of people around the world started work on the patterns. They asked if there were rules on what they could do. I said no. People could use (and many have used) historically sensitive techniques and materials. Others have machine embroidered and turned the patterns into works of art in forms and media that would be inconceivable to the magazine's original readers.

Then came the icing on the cake: an approach by Chawton House Library, a centre for early women's writing in the house once



IMAGE © MARY MARTIN



Above:
A 'Stitch Off' embroidery

belonging to Jane Austen's brother Edward Austen (later Knight). They were putting on a major exhibition about Jane Austen's *Emma* to mark its 200th anniversary and wondered if they might give a home to a 'Stitch Off' display. *Emma* is especially preoccupied with the question of female accomplishments, after all.

For the exhibition's duration a room will be full of exquisite 'Stitch Off' items produced by novice to highly experienced embroiderers. The items include many glorious hoops and mounted samples, an exquisitely delicate handkerchief, a stunning pashmina, a beautiful stitched pot plant and an extraordinary pair of shoes made in Colonial Williamsburg from scratch by the very talented Nicole Rudolph.

No amount of verbal description or two-dimensional images can convey how extraordinary the results are. You need to see them for yourself and I hope many of you will by visiting the 'Emma at 200' exhibition. Better still, you might

Above right:
'Stitch Off' items on show at Chawton House Library

consider joining in yourself. We can take new items for the 'Stitch Off' until the exhibition closes in late September. Do contact me if you would like to know more.

The magazine's legacy

The *Lady's Magazine* disappeared from public memory some time in the late 19th century, but its influence is still felt in the genre to which it gave birth. It set the agenda for a new type of publication and for a type of womanhood – creative, accomplished, yet critical and educated – that historians of gender should take note of. The 'Stitch Off' is only one, but perhaps the most elegant, way in which we are trying to bring this once incredibly important, but until recently forgotten, publication back to the prominence it deserves.

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The *Lady's Magazine* project

More details can be found at: www.kent.ac.uk/english/ladys-magazine/

The project's blog can be found at: <https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/ladys-magazine>

Patterns for 'The Great Lady's Magazine Stitch Off' can be downloaded at: www.kent.ac.uk/english/ladys-magazine/patterns/index.html

'Emma at 200: from English Village to Global Appeal'

Until 25 September 2016

Chawton House Library, Chawton, Alton, Hampshire GU34 1SJ

www.chawtonhouse.org

The exhibition commemorates a landmark in Jane Austen's publishing career and features manuscript materials, unique loan items and work from the Library's own collection. Emphasising the global world of the novel, and early 19th-century publishing practices, the exhibition sets the first edition of *Emma* alongside the first American edition (on loan from King's College Cambridge), and the first French translation (on loan from the University of Göttingen). Another section, which features the 'Stitch Off' display, concentrates on female accomplishments. The largest exhibition area focuses on Jane Austen's move to publish with John Murray and features first editions of works by several of Austen's female contemporaries and correspondence with them. An exciting highlight is Charlotte Brontë's letter on reading the novel (on loan from the Huntington Library in California).



Chawton House Library