

Sewing Throughout History

Sewing is an ancient practice with roots that go back to our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Early sewing was a primitive practice; needles were made from animal bone, natural fibres such as plant fibres, and animal gut were used to bond leather and other materials. The first sewing needles with eyes have been dated back to around 17,500 BCE and were used to sew skins and furs and create basic clothing and other practical goods.

Advances in Sewing Technology

This practice remained relatively unchanged for centuries, with gradual advances being made in creating sewing needles, cordage, and fabrics. The earliest examples of sewing needles used in conjunction with thimbles can be found in archaeological sites in China, which were used during the Han Dynasty from 202 BCE to 220 AD. These needles and thimbles were found in the tomb of a government official, showing that sewing was an important part of everyday life and was much more advanced than you might think for the time.

During the mediaeval period, sewing technology continued to evolve. Tailors and seamstresses began to use more specialised tools, such as shears for cutting fabric and awls for making holes. The introduction of iron needles in the 14th century marked a significant improvement in sewing efficiency and durability. These iron needles were stronger and more flexible than their bone and bronze predecessors, making working with tougher fabrics like wool and leather easier.

The Renaissance era saw further advancements in textile production and sewing techniques. The development of more complex looms allowed for the creation of intricate woven patterns, which required skilled sewing to assemble into garments. Embroidery also became more popular during this time, with artisans using silk and gold threads to decorate clothing and accessories, reflecting the growing importance of fashion and personal adornment in society.

By the 18th century, [the Industrial Revolution began to transform the textile industry](#). Innovations such as the flying shuttle, spinning jenny, and water frame revolutionised fabric production, increasing the availability and variety of textiles. This period also saw the invention of the first mechanical sewing devices, such as the chain stitch machine, which laid the groundwork for future sewing machines. These early machines were primarily used in factories to produce garments more quickly and efficiently, signalling the beginning of the mass production era in sewing.

Introduction of Buttons and Buttonholes

While buttons and buttonholes might seem commonplace and an obvious way to fasten clothing, they didn't become popular in Europe until the 1200s, following the Crusades, which increased Europeans' exposure to other cultures. This initial period of long-distance movement and the intermingling of cultures led to an ongoing exchange of ideas, many related to the sartorial arts and fashion.

Spinning Cotton and Mass Production

Spinning cotton into thread by hand was time-consuming but the only way for sewists to create fine fibres. Spinning wheels formed a core part of the cottage industries that provided the vast majority of clothing, though spinning thread was not a well-paid profession. By 1730 in England, cotton thread was being spun by machinery, which allowed manufacturers to create thread much faster and in much higher volumes relatively cheaply.

Impact of Mass Production on Sewing

This mass production of cotton thread allowed sewing to become much more widespread and affordable. As a result, clothing designs became more decorative and complex. At this point in its history, England was an empire, so technical advances such as cotton production could go international. As sewing became more integral to daily life, the demand for sewing machines surged. For those looking to invest in one, there are [several key considerations for purchasing a sewing machine](#). Understanding these factors can help buyers make informed decisions, ensuring they select a machine that meets their specific needs and skill level.

Invention of the Sewing Machine

Interestingly, a German immigrant living in London is credited with patenting the first sewing needle designed to be used with a machine in 1755. Still, no patent or evidence for the existence of a sewing machine existed until years later, in 1790, the year that Thomas Saint entered the first pattern for a mechanical sewing machine design.

This crude design lacked the parts we expect to find on modern machines, such as interchangeable *sewing machine feet* and tension levers, but the patent was accepted. However, the machine was never built, and it wasn't until the 1800s that his designs were rediscovered and adapted into something that would work.

Development of Practical Sewing Machines

The first practical and easily usable sewing machine was not created until around 1830 and was the brainchild of a man named Barthelemy Thimonnier. This machine was almost completely made from wood but was still highly practical and efficient. In addition to operating his own sewing rooms to produce garments, he also sold his machines to others within the newly-fledged industry.

Controversy and Adoption of Sewing Machines

While sewing machines transformed garment making forever, the change did not come without controversy. French tailors protested the invention of the machine and rioted in the streets. This machine threatened their livelihoods and way of life, and it is no surprise that they would be unhappy with it. The riots led to Thimonnier's factory being set ablaze, something from which he struggled to fully recover.

Modern Sewing Machines

Sewing machines, as we recognise them today, [were initially developed in America in 1844](#) by a man named Elias Howe. Surprisingly, though it had many improved features and functions, the uptake of his machine was slow, so he left America to try his luck. This was one of his biggest mistakes when marketing his sewing machine. Upon his return to America, he found that many other manufacturers had acquired his patent and were now making money from his carefully constructed design. This ultimately gave rise to the brands producing the electric machines we know and love today, such as Singer and Husqvarna.