

News UK News The Great British Sewing Bee

Incredible 180 year history of household gadget that changed fashion forever

When the sewing machine was invented, it was revolutionary. And they're as useful now as they were 180 years ago, with a fascinating past from riots to royalty



Sewing machines were groundbreaking when invented, speeding up stitching time (Image:

Archive Photos)



Mirror + NEWS By Hannah Britt, Deputy Features Editor

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As the sewing machine celebrates its 180th anniversary this year, the world is enjoying a needlework renaissance, driven by younger generations pushing back against fast fashion and learning to make do and mend. Only last week, 27-year-old Anna, an amateur sewer from York, won the 12th series of the The Great British Sewing Bee - which often attracts more than 4 million viewers for the BBC.

But when American machinist and inventor Elias Howe patented the practical lockstitch sewing machine in 1846, it was to promote fast - or faster, at least - fashion. It revolutionised manufacturing, replacing hours of painstaking hand-stitching with precise stitches, delivered mechanically in seconds.

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It was the first truly modern sewing machine - wiping the floor with previous attempts, which could only make a single stitch. Elaine Taylor of Hobkirks Sewing Machine Museum in Blackburn, Lancs., says: "British inventor Thomas Saint designed and patented the first detailed blueprint for a sewing machine in 1790, but never built a working prototype."



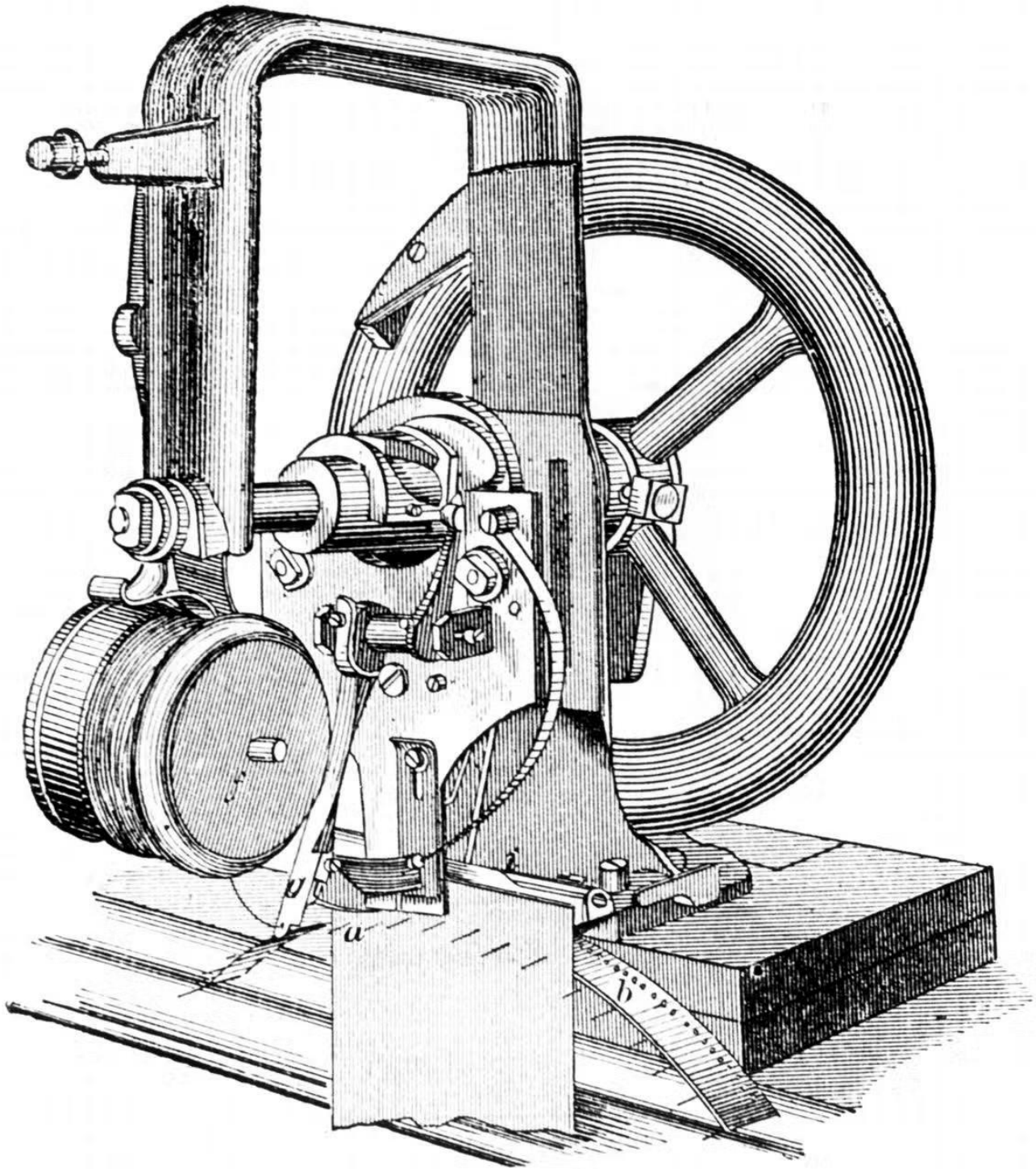
Elias Howe (1819-1867) inventor of the sewing machine (Image: Bettmann Archive)

Then, the first practical sewing machine that successfully made stitches using a single thread and a hooked needle provoked a violent backlash, when it was invented in 1829 by French tailor Barthélemy Thimonnier. Elaine says: "Fearing that the fast machines would put hand-sewing tailors out of work, an angry mob of 200 tailors ransacked the workshop and destroyed the machines in 1831."

Then came Mr Howe's groundbreaking lockstitch machine. Dominic Macey, founder of the Gates Museum of antique sewing machines in Street, Somerset, says: "He made the first sewing machine that made repeatable stitches and that itself was reproducible from his design."

Thommonier's machine could not be reproduced and had to be adjusted for each stitch. In contrast, Dominic says: "Elias Howe made his machine have timing, like a watch. The parts worked in time to make the stitch." Set to revolutionise the garment trade, it also sparked competition, legal battles and saw sewing machines become the precursor to modern status symbols like expensive cars.

And while Singer is now the biggest sewing machine brand in the world, its American founder, Isaac Singer, became embroiled in a tangled legal battle when he copied Mr Howe's design without consent. Dominic says: "Howe sued Singer and other manufacturers for patent infringement in 1854 and won, forcing Singer and others to pay him substantial royalties on every machine sold."



First Lockstitch sewing machine, constructed by Elias Howe (Image: Getty Images)

"Singer subsequently redesigned his sewing machine. Then everyone copied his redesigned sewing machine, which is what made Singer famous."

The next leap in innovation came via bobbin technology, when US innovators Wheeler & Wilson invented a sewing machine with a round bobbin at the very beginning, rather than a shuttle that went backwards and forwards.

Dominic says: "This was groundbreaking, because it eliminated the noisy, vibrating, back-and-forth movement of traditional shuttles and replaced it with a continuous, smooth, spinning circular motion. "Fifty years later it was outselling Singer, so in 1905 Singer bought them. Fast forward to today and Singer still has the monopoly on sewing. Domestic, industrial, commercial, everywhere you look at it, it's all Singer."



A View of a woman operating a Singer patent sewing machine, USA circa 1860. 7 Images

The machine sits on a crate labelled 'Singer's patent sewing machine'. (Image: Getty Images)

But it was a German sewing machine that became probably the most famous of all time, when it was given to Queen Victoria's daughter Vicky, as a wedding present in 1865.

Dominic says: "It was a highly ornate model from German firm Pollack & Schmidt. In 1997 The Princess Vicky machine sold for £23,500 - the most expensive sewing machine ever purchased. It now resides in the London Sewing Machine Museum in Tooting."

The Royal seal of approval turned sewing machines into status symbols, also elevating the standing of certain dressmakers. Sir Norman Hartnell was knighted in 1977 for his services to the Royal household, having designed custom made clothing for the royal family, including Queen Elizabeth II's wedding dress and her 1953 coronation gown.

More recently, Vivienne Westwood became a dame in 2006 for her services to fashion - having found fame as the first punk designer, before earning renown as a master craftsperson of structural corsetry and British tartan.



 iView on The Great British Sewing Bee (Image: BBC/Love Productions/James Stack)

Elaine says: "Then there's Esme Young. A prominent contemporary British fashion designer and sewing icon, who co-founded the cult 1970s brand Swanky Modes and became widely known as a judge on The Great British Sewing Bee."

But perhaps the most famous seamstress in history was fictional. Dominic says: "No history of the sewing machine could be complete without a mention of Bertha the Sewing Girl. She appeared in an article in a New York newspaper in 1871, and her story was made into a very early black-and-white silent film."

Away from the glamour of haute couture, Bertha's story told of the gruelling 12-to-15-hour working days of thousands of real 19th-century sewing girls.

Seamstresses in New York even used her fictional story to justify getting union recognition. Dominic says: "Although sewing machines arrived, the seamstresses were being asked to work ridiculously long hours. Her story was written to be emblematic."

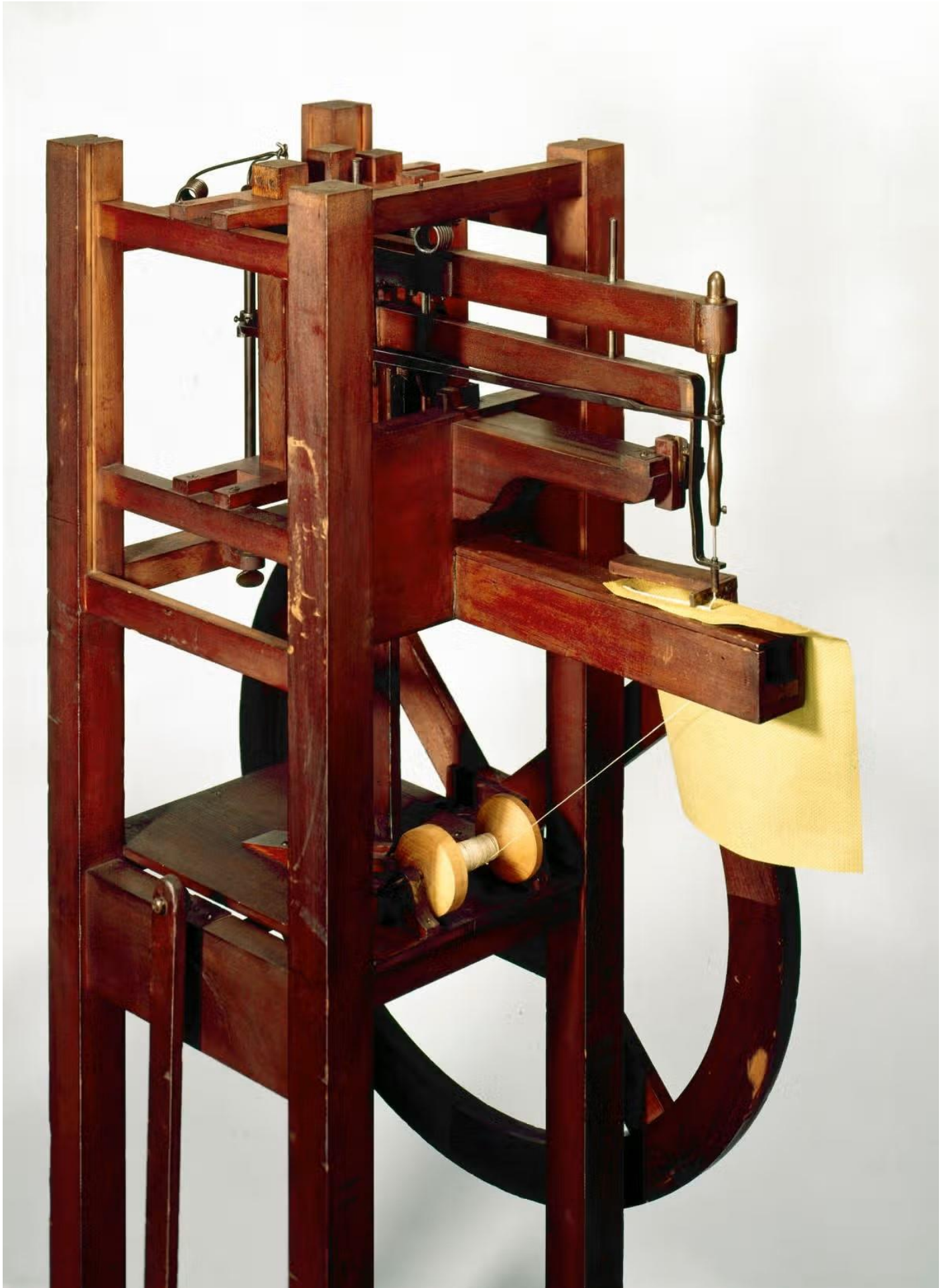


Bertha the Sewing Machine Girl became the subject of many films (Image: LMPC via Getty Images)

In the early days, sewing machines were so expensive that neighbours would club together to buy one for the whole street. In 1856, Singer machines cost around \$125 and became the first major consumer product to be sold using a hire-purchase plan - dubbed buying "on the never-never." Singer's lawyer and business partner, Edward Clark, created the hire-purchase system, so that ordinary working families could buy them.

Elaine says: "Customers paid a small deposit and made regular monthly instalments with interest, until the machine was fully paid off. This pioneering 'buy now, pay later' approach turned an elite industrial

tool into an affordable household item and tripled Singer's sales in its first year." There remains a kind of romance to sewing machines that makes people want to hold on to them, according to Elaine. She says: "We see people with sewing machines that belonged to their grandmas. They still want us to keep them going. There's a magic to them, they have stories."



View LockStitch sewing machine invented by Barthelemy Thimonnier 1875 a French tailor, was the first to achieve any practical success. (Image: SSPL via Getty Images)

The oldest machine at Hobkirk's Museum is a US Grover & Baker from 1860. Elaine says: "I have had stitches out of that machine. It's worth about £1,500."

Dominic adds: "The oldest we have at Gates Museum is from 1865 - and it still works. And our latest addition made Cilla Black's wedding dress, Emma Peel's catsuit in *The Avengers* and Sandie Shaw's dress for the Eurovision Song Contest when she won it."

Elaine also says that, after its launch in 2013, she definitely noticed a Great British Sewing Bee effect. Running her own shop in Preston at the time, she says: "The first Saturday after it aired, sold six Janome machines that were featured on the show. When I phoned on Monday to order more, they had sold out."

Modern machines cost from as little as £30 to £15,000 for the Brother Aveneer. But, despite having everything from embroidery to buttonholing machines, some : with computerised displays and automatic threading, 180 years since their invention, the underlying mechanism of the sewing machine remains unchanged. Dominic says: "First and foremost, it aims to hold two pieces of fabric together."

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