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Bound for Australia: Anne Trotter's needlework specimen book, 1840

DOUBLE-BLIND PEER REVIEWED

Among the items Anne Trotter packed in her trunk when she sailed from Ireland to Australia in 1844 was a loose-paged book filled with needlework specimens.[1] The inscription in the front of the book, in neat handwriting, reads, *'Specimens of Needle-Work/Executed/in the Female Free School/Collon/Louth'*. Written on the reverse of the front page in a different hand is the rhyme, *'Anne Trotter is my name/and into my book I wrote my name/the grass is green the [corn is brown?]/hear is my name who [illeg.]/ Dear Collon is my Dwelling Place/but heaven is my Expectation/February/September the 20th 1840/[Mr? Mrs?] Jseph (sic) Trotter'*.[2] Donated to Museums Victoria in 2014 by a descendant, Anne's needlework book, which includes various plain sewing exercises and finely-stitched miniature shirts, provides an insight into the formal schooling offered to working-class girls in nineteenth century Ireland and the skills they brought with them when they emigrated. In particular, the book is significant for the fact that it is a well-provenanced and rare surviving item known to have been brought to Australia in the nineteenth century by a female Irish immigrant.[3] As such, it provides a means for recovering, at least in part, the story of one woman's emigration — and that of her Irish family — to the Port Phillip District in the 1840s.

1 Museums Victoria. (n.d.). HT 36147, *Needlework specimen book — Anne Trotter, Collon, County Louth, Ireland, 1840*, https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/2027802, accessed 10 March 2025. Note: Anne's name is spelled 'Ann' in various records, but 'Anne' is used in this article as it is the spelling that appears in her book and on the ship's passenger list in 1844. Public Record Office Victoria. (n.d.). *Register of assisted immigrants from the United Kingdom (1837-1871). List of immigrants for the barque* "Dale Park", p. 191, https://prov.vic.gov.au/archive/E29DD26A-F1B1-11E9-AE98-E74D94661ACA?image=98, accessed 10 March 2025.

2 It is unclear whether this inscription was written by Anne or by her mother or father. Museums Victoria has a scrapbook in its collection with a similar rhyming inscription, which suggests it was a popular saying in the nineteenth century. Museums Victoria. (n.d.). HT 23656, *Scrapbook — Margaret Knopp, Woods Point, 1884*, https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/1479453, accessed 10 March 2025.

3 A sampler made in Ireland by Dorcas McGee in 1850 and brought with her to Australia in 1852 holds similar significance. Lambkin, B. & Meegan, J. (2004). The fabric of memory, identity and diaspora: An Irish needlework sampler in Australia with United States and Canadian connections. *Folk Life, 43*(3), p. 7. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/flk.2004.43.1.7

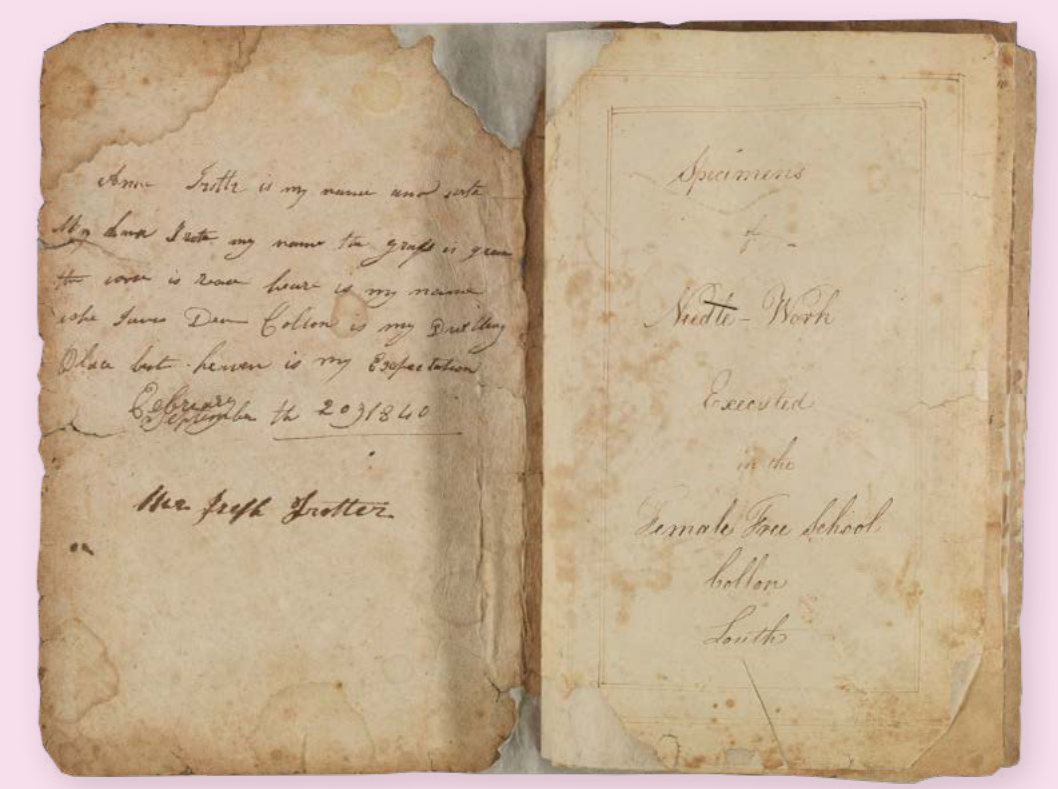

Figure 1: HT36147, Title pages in needlework specimen book — Anne Trotter, Collon, County Louth, Ireland, 1840. Museums Victoria; photographer: Rodney Start; © Museums Victoria.

The fifth surviving child (of eight children) of Joseph and Annie Trotter (née Davison), Anne was born in Collon on 7 June 1820. When her name was written in the book, Anne was 19 years old. We do not know when she attended the Female Free School or whether the date in the inscription relates to when she completed her instruction. Perhaps the latter was written around the time Anne's parents were preparing to leave for Australia ahead of their daughter and two of her siblings. Located in the border region of Ireland, County Louth is the smallest county in Ireland. The Trotters were Protestants and by the early 1840s the family had emigrated to Australia and settled near Geelong. Like many families, the Trotters left Ireland in stages. The entry written next to Anne and her younger sister Eliza's names in the ship's manifest states, '*Left with a brother & his wife to join their Father & brother living at Barrabool Hills Geelong.*'[4] In 1844 Anne and her sister Eliza travelled with their older brother Joseph and his wife Mary on the *Dale Park*, a 402 ton barque, which departed Cork on 30 March and arrived in Port Phillip on 21 July.[5] Shipping records show that an older brother, John, who was listed as a '*Labourer*', arrived in Port Phillip in December 1841.[6] While the emigration records for Anne's parents have not been located, it is evident they had already settled in Australia when Anne arrived in 1844.

4 Public Record Office Victoria. (n.d.). *Register of assisted immigrants from the United Kingdom (1837-1871). List of immigrants for the barque "Dale Park"*, p. 191, https://prov.vic.gov.au/archive/E29DD26A-F1B1-11E9-AE98-E74D94661ACA?image=98, accessed 10 March 2025.

5 Port Phillip. Arrivals — July 21. (1844, August 3). *Shipping Gazette and Sydney General Trade List*, p. 138.

6 Public Record Office Victoria. (n.d.). *Register of assisted immigrants from the United Kingdom (1837-1871). List of immigrants per the ship* Gilmore, p. 240, https://prov.vic.gov.au/archive/E289FC3D-F1B1-11E9-AE98-4F5884FEEC7B?image=250, accessed 10 March 2025.

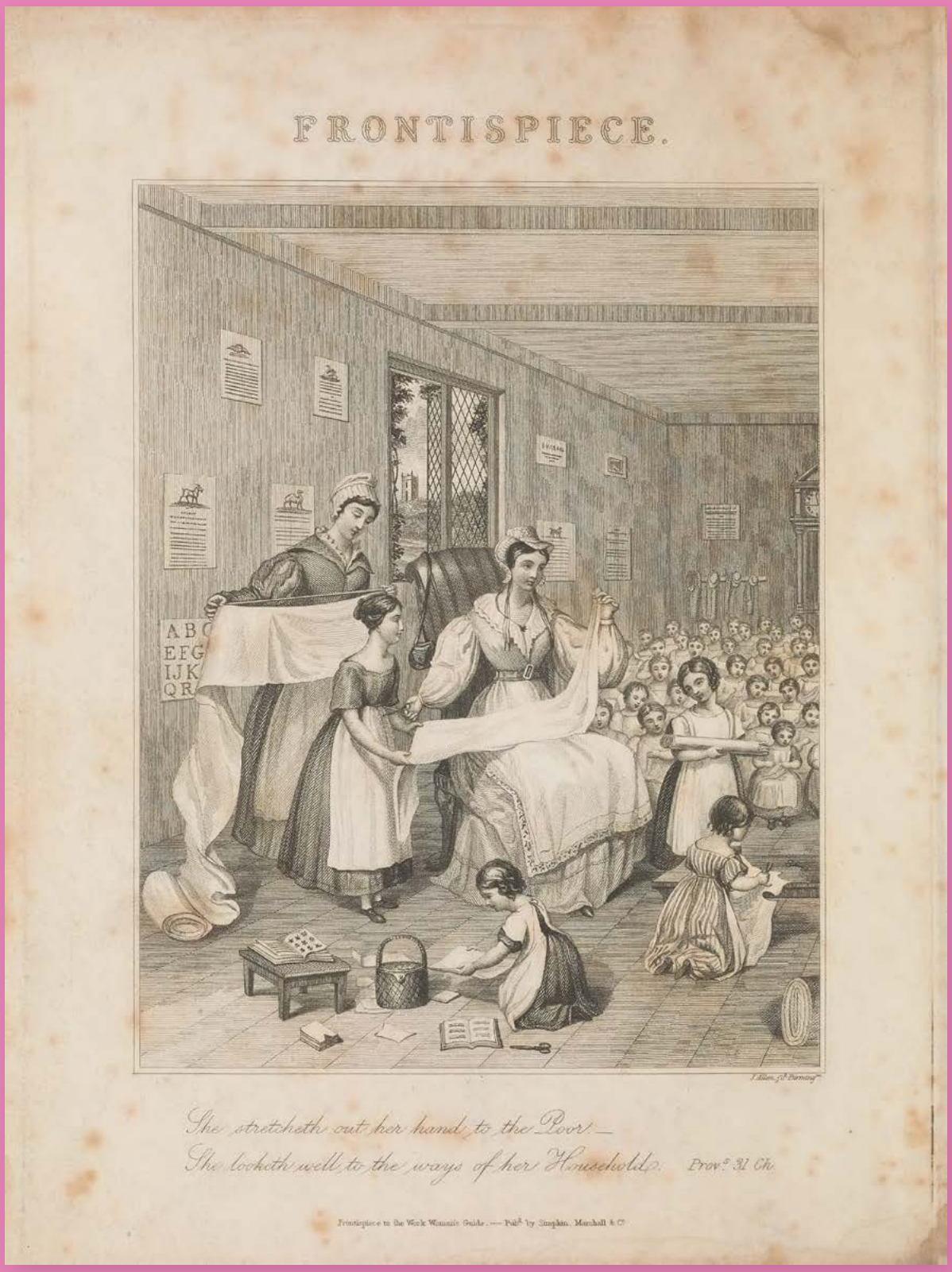

Figure 2: James Allen, Frontispiece to *The workwoman's guide*, 1838, engraving. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Library, TT705 .H16 1838; © Smithsonian Libraries.

Bound for Port Phillip, the *Dale Park* was reported as carrying five passengers and 221 emigrants. The former, who would have paid for their passage, were named in the newspaper as Mr., Mrs. and two Misses Barrow, and Mr. Shone.[7] The latter, who were emigrating under the British government's assisted migration scheme, were listed generically as comprising '*82 married couples, 77 children, 32 single females, and 30 single males*'.[8] Although the British government actively encouraged the migration of suitable single women to Australia to redress the gender imbalance, it is evident that women who were listed as single in the ship manifests did not necessarily come alone, as is the case with Anne. She emigrated with members of her family in a pattern of chain migration, where families arrived in the colonies over a number of years.[9] Anne and Eliza were travelling with their brother and sister-in-law, but the sisters, aged 23 and 17 respectively, were categorised in the ship's manifest as '*Single women*' and would have been allocated a berth in the single women's quarters, separate from the married couples and single men.[10]

Assisted migration

Beginning in New South Wales in 1831, formal processes of assisted and unassisted migration of free settlers coincided with the ongoing transportation of convicts to the colonies until the latter finally ceased in 1868. With overcrowded cities in Britain, the Australian colonies sought suitable immigrants who would provide the much-needed labour for an evolving colonial settler society. Assisted migration was seen as the key and was funded through the sale of Crown land in Australia.[11] Prior to 1831, the arrival of free settlers had increased slowly, with the long and costly voyage acting as a deterrent. As of 1830, a total of only 15,700 free migrants had arrived in Australia since first settlement.[12] However, between 1831 and 1850, when assisted migration schemes were well underway, 170,000 emigrants from Great Britain arrived in the Australian colonies — two-thirds of whom were assisted[13] — while from 1831 to 1900 approximately half of all immigrants received some form of government assistance for the voyage to Australia.[14] In providing free passage for suitable emigrants, the British government stated that it wished to ensure that '*a most valuable class of moral and industrious persons might be obtained*'.[15] In 1844, Anne and Eliza and their brother Joseph and his wife were deemed to be such people.[16] The bounty recorded beside each of

7 Port Phillip. Arrivals — July 21. (1844, August 3), p. 138.

8 Port Phillip. Arrivals — July 21. (1844, August 3), p. 138.

9 Oxley, D. (1996). *Convict maids: The forced migration of women to Australia*. Cambridge University Press, p. 173.

10 Charlwood, D. (1981). *The long farewell*: The perilous voyages of settlers under sail in the great migrations to Australia. Allen Lane, pp. 115–23.

11 Inglis, K. (1993). *Australian colonists*. Melbourne University Press, p. 21.

12 Seltzer, A. (2015). Labour, skills and migration. In S. Ville & G. Withers (Eds.), *The Cambridge economic history of Australia*. Cambridge University Press, p.181. https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781107445222.013

13 Inglis, K. (1993), p. 21.

14 Seltzer, A. (2015). In S. Ville & G. Withers (Eds.), p. 180. https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781107445222.013

15 New South Wales final report of the committee of the Legislative Council on emigration, and minutes of evidence. 18 May 1835, quoted in Oxley, D. (1996). *Convict maids: The forced migration of women to Australia*. Cambridge University Press, p. 176.

16 The report produced by authorities on the arrival of the Dale Park states of the bounty immigrants that '*...they seem like the description of people likely to become useful to the Colony*.' Public Record Office Victoria. (n.d.). Register of assisted immigrants from the United Kingdom (1837-1871). *List of immigrants for the barque* "Dale Park", p. 194, https://prov.vic.gov.au/archive/E29DD26A-F1B1-11E9-AE98-E74D94661ACA?image=98, accessed 10 March 2025.

their names was £18 14s.[17] The various assisted migration schemes either offered free passage for eligible persons or lent the passage money, which was to be repaid by the emigrant when they were settled in the colony.[18]

Life below deck on the emigrant ships was rudimentary. Assisted migrants travelled in steerage class, which was a basic, communal form of accommodation located on the lower decks. Shipboard diaries attest to the difficult and cramped conditions experienced aboard the migrant ships.[19] As a barque, the *Dale Park* was typical of the migrant ships enlisted for the route to Australia. She took 113 days, or just over 16 weeks, to reach Port Phillip from Ireland. Until the faster Great Circle route was officially adopted by the Admiralty in Britain in 1854, ships could typically take 120 days — or longer, if they experienced difficulties — to reach their destination.[20] During the voyage very few items could be kept in the passenger quarters, with the remainder being stowed in the ship's hold. Clothing and possessions were constantly at risk of being ruined from dampness and the infiltration of sea water. It is therefore remarkable that Anne's needlework book survived the voyage. Such a book was more than just a sentimental item; it demonstrated Anne's abilities with a needle and would have been an important item shown to a prospective employer, particularly when seeking a position in a household as a domestic servant.

Irish migration to Australia pre-famine

The Trotter family emigrated from Ireland prior to the Great Famine, when over one million Irish starved to death between 1845 and 1849 from the successive failure of the potato crops due to blight.[21] The Trotters' choice to come to Australia rather than sail for America was unusual, as most Irish chose to make the shorter voyage across the Atlantic.[22] Perhaps the Trotters, along with many nineteenth century immigrants to the Australian colonies, had a sense that Australia could provide them with bright opportunities that were lacking in their homeland. However, such a long and arduous journey was not undertaken by emigrants without much deliberation, and their letters and journals bear witness to conflicting feelings of separation, loss and hopes for the future.[23]

The Trotter family was fortunate, as they successfully emigrated as a group over a number of years, re-establishing the core of their family unit in Australia. Very few Irish emigrants to Australia came from the Trotters' home county of Louth. In contrast, an over-representation of assisted Irish emigrants came from the rural counties of Clare and Tipperary.[24] As the Irish historian David Fitzpatrick has shown,

17 Public Record Office Victoria. (n.d.). *Register of assisted immigrants from the United Kingdom (1837–1871). List of immigrants for the Barque* "Dale Park", pp. 190–1, https://prov.vic.gov.au/archive/E29DD26A-F1B1-11E9-AE98-E74D94661ACA?image=98, accessed 10 March 2025.

18 Oxley, D. (1996), p. 172. In the case of the *Dale Park*, the bounty was paid by the government. See Public Record Office Victoria. (n.d.). *Register of assisted immigrants from the United Kingdom (1837-1871). List of immigrants for the Barque* "Dale Park", pp. 195–6, https://prov.vic.gov.au/archive/E29DD26A-F1B1-11E9-AE98-E74D94661ACA?image=98, accessed 10 March 2025.

19 See for example the diaries and excerpts from letters that are included in Charlwood, D. (1981). *The long farewell : The perilous voyages of settlers under sail in the great migrations to Australia*. Allen Lane.

20 Charlwood, D. (1981), p. 23.

21 Mokyr, J. (2025). Great famine. *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Famine-Irish-history, accessed 10 March 2025.

22 O'Farrell, P. (1987). *The Irish in Australia*. New South Wales University Press, p. 62.

23 O'Farrell, P. (1987), p. 65.

24 Fitzpatrick, D. (1994). *Oceans of consolation: Personal accounts of Irish migration to Australia*. Cork University Press, p. 15.

the prevalence of chain migration meant that the distribution of county origins in Australia changed little between the late 1840s and the end of the nineteenth century, as immigrants encouraged friends, family and neighbours from their home counties to follow.[25] About four-fifths of Irish emigrants to Australia were Catholic and it was only pre-famine bounty immigration that saw a large intake of Irish Protestants.[26] The Trotters fitted into this category. The ship's manifest listed their religion as '*Protestant*' and the sisters' profession or '*Calling*', was '*House maid*'.[27] Joseph, Mary and Anne were noted as being able to read and write, and Eliza as being able to read.[28] This points to a level of education that the family likely received from the national schools set up in Ireland in the nineteenth century. Indeed, we know from the inscription in Anne's book that she completed her work at one of these free schools. The existence of Anne's book, with its reference to classes that she has completed, leads us to ask what kind of school this was, and what curriculum Anne was working to.

Education for the poor: Women and needlework instruction

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the creation of public education programs in Britain sought to address endemic poverty, which had arisen out of the effects of the Industrial Revolution and rapid urban growth.[29] At this time, charity and parish schools scattered around the country provided a non-standardised system of education for the poor.[30] Charity schools were also established in colonial settlements. One such example was the Female School of Industry in Sydney, founded in 1826 by Eliza Darling, the Governor's wife. Its aim was to educate working-class girls, with an emphasis on needlework and religious instruction. An announcement for the school's establishment was made in the *Sydney Gazette*, outlining the number of students (ten girls aged 7 to 10 and another ten aged 10 to 14) and the curriculum: '*The Girls to be instructed, in every Branch of Household Work, Plain Needle Work, Knitting, Spinning, Reading, Writing, and the four first Rules of Arithmetic.*'[31] The inclusion of needlework reflects the centrality of sewing in women's lives and the expectation that the skills taught at school would equip them for a life focused on the home, whether as wives and mothers or as domestic servants.[32]

In Britain, a national system of free general education was seen as the answer to providing a compulsory basic education that would ensure a stable moral and political economy.[33] Free public education was linked to the notion of civil management, stimulating the creation of the free school model.[34] This model was drawn from a

25 Fitzpatrick, D. (1994), p. 14.

26 Fitzpatrick, D. (1994), p. 14.

27 Public Record Office Victoria. (n.d.). *Register of assisted immigrants from the United Kingdom (1837-1871). List of immigrants for the barque* "Dale Park", p. 191, https://prov.vic.gov.au/archive/E29DD26A-F1B1-11E9-AE98-E74D94661ACA?image=98, accessed 10 March 2025. The emigrants on the Dale Park came from the English midlands and northern counties of Ireland, and the majority are listed as being Protestant.

28 Public Record Office Victoria. (n.d.). Register of assisted immigrants from the United Kingdom (1837-1871). *List of immigrants for the barque* "Dale Park", pp. 190–1, https://prov.vic.gov.au/archive/E29DD26A-F1B1-11E9-AE98-E74D94661ACA?image=98, accessed 10 March 2025.

29 Tonks, P. (2016). Scottish political economy, education and the management of poverty in industrializing Britain: Patrick Colquhoun and the Westminster free school model. *History, 101*(347), p. 495. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.12245

30 Tonks, P. (2016), p. 498. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.12245

31 Advertisement. (1826, March 18). *Sydney Gazette*, p. 1.

32 Parker, R. (1996). *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*. The Women's Press, p. 188.

33 Tonks, P. (2016), p. 498. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.12245

34 Tonks, P. (2016), p. 495. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.12245

colonial educational system developed and implemented under the patronage of the East India Company in Madras.[35] It was based on a monitorial system of mutual instruction developed by the Reverend Andrew Bell, which was first implemented in the late eighteenth century in the Male Asylum in Madras.[36] This mode of teaching came to be known as the 'Madras System'. In this system, competent older students were involved in teaching and facilitating classes for younger students, thereby saving on teachers' salaries.[37] To earn an income, these schools also took in work, which was handed out to the competent students.[38] The monitorial system was introduced into Ireland by the education reformer Joseph Lancaster and was taken up by the Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in Ireland (also known as the Kildare Place Society) when it opened its model school in Dublin in 1815.[39] In 1831 Ireland established a government system of free national elementary education, and the monitorial system of needlework instruction was employed in the curriculum overseen by the Board of National Education.[40] To begin with, the national schools followed the Kildare Place Society's monitorial system of instruction, including that of needlework.[41] The board introduced a standardised curriculum and published a series of textbooks, including one on needlework.[42] *Simple Directions in Needle-work and Cutting out; Intended for the use in the National Female Schools of Ireland*, published in 1835, makes clear the process of instruction and the demographic of the students of the free schools. The opening pages state:

> *It will be found a useful practice to have the directions for each class read out for the children by its Monitress on one or two days of the week, and occasionally to question the pupils on substance. Classification, and instruction by Monitors, are referred to as points established in all well-regulated schools for the instruction of the poor.*[43]

The monitorial system allowed for large numbers of students to be taught in classes by selected students, under the overall guidance of a teacher. All the students were located in one large classroom with multiple classes running at the same time. At the Female School of Industry in Sydney, which followed the Madras System, there were up to four classes at a time running in the large classroom, with between eight and

35 Tonks, P. (2016), pp. 509–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.12245

36 Windschuttle, E. (1980). Discipline, domestic training and social control: The Female School of Industry, Sydney 1826–1847. *Labour History, 39*, p. 6. https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/10.3828/27508433

37 Windschuttle, E. (1980), p. 6. https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/10.3828/27508433

38 Windschuttle, E. (1980), p. 12. https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/10.3828/27508433. See also The Board of National Education. (1835). *Simple directions in needle-work and cutting out; Intended for the use of the national female schools of Ireland*. Hibernia Press, p. 8.

39 McDermid, J. (2012). *The schooling of girls in Britain and Ireland, 1800–1900*. Routledge, p.123. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203645765; Tarrant, N. (2014). *'Remember now thy creator': Scottish girls' samplers, 1700–1872*. Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, p. 50. https://doi.org/10.9750/9781908332271

40 Walsh, T. (2016). The national system of education, 1831–2000. In B. Walsh (Ed.), *Essays in the history of Irish education*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 8–9. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51482-0_2

41 This curriculum was adapted from the Kildare Place Society's needlework publication, *A concise account of the mode of instructing in needle-work, as practised in the female model school, Kildare Place, Dublin, 1833*. Tarrant, N. (2014). *'Remember now thy creator': Scottish girls' samplers, 1700–1872*. Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, p. 51. https://doi.org/10.9750/9781908332271

42 Coolahan, J. (1983). The daring first decade of the Board of National Education, 1831–1841. *Irish Journal of Education, 7*(1), p. 47. https://www.erc.ie/documents/vol17chp2.pdf

43 The Board of National Education. (1835), pp. 5–6.

ten pupils per class. Each class had an assigned monitor.[44] The 1835 Board of National Education needlework publication goes on to state:

> *The usual arrangement for a General Monitress, and for subordinate ones, is therefore recommended. The former should cut out and adjust the work, and supply to the latter, under the direction of the Teacher, the various matters necessary for the use of the classes…The work, and other requisites for the use of each class, including a furnished needle-book, thimbles, scissors, and a good model of the work, should be placed in small baskets, or work-bags, so that the Monitresses may not lose time in applying for materials, but at once actively proceed to supply the children and put them to business.*[45]

Monitresses were given '*small rewards of either clothes or money*' for their work.[46] Particular attention was paid to the selection of monitresses with regards to their '*morals, tempers, habits, abilities, and general good conduct*', as they were to set an example to their students in all these areas. The position was regarded as '*highly honorable*' and the '*best children*' were selected as '*the highest reward to which they can aspire while at school*'.[47] While monitresses were responsible for the general teaching of the classes, the teacher inspected particular classes on certain days and was responsible for deciding when a pupil could transfer to a higher class.[48]

The national female schools of Ireland, where Anne studied, were part of a system of free public education that championed literacy and numeracy. In the early decades of its implementation, the curriculum required all students to undertake subjects in reading, arithmetic, writing, writing from dictation, grammar and geography, with girls being required to study the additional subject of needlework.[49] For working-class girls, the ability to execute a range of plain sewing skills was a door to future employment, a point which was noted in the 1835 needlework publication:

> *The practical knowledge of needlework, and its appendages of cutting out, altering, repairing, &c, &c., must always be regarded as highly useful to females generally, and particularly so to those of the poorer classes, whether applied to domestic purposes, or as a mode of procuring a decent subsistence.*[50]

While the acquisition of sewing skills was considered vital for young women who sought employment as domestic servants, or as preparation for the good management of their households as wives, the discipline of sewing was also considered to have a moral benefit for girls, inculcating the female virtues of modesty, obedience and self-discipline.[51] Being industrious with the needle discouraged idleness, and needlework

44 Windschuttle, E. (1980), p. 7.
45 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 6.
46 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 9.
47 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 9.
48 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 8.
49 Walsh, T. (2016). In B. Walsh (Ed.), p. 30. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51482-0_2
50 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 5.
51 Richmond, V. (2013). *Clothing the poor in nineteenth-century England.* Cambridge University Press, p. 102.

lessons were considered a training in the formation of good character based on diligence, restraint, self-control and duty.[52]

Plain sewing in the home

Plain sewing was an unavoidable part of domestic life in the nineteenth century. Women of all classes were faced with the repetitive and time-consuming tasks of mending, altering and making basic clothing in the home, as well as cutting out and hemming table linen, sheets, towels, curtains and various soft furnishings. Nineteenth century Australian letters and journals reveal how women were regularly at their 'work', as they described their sewing, and at times were overpowered by the constant requirements of household sewing. For those who could afford it, a needlewoman was employed to undertake such work; however, it was usually the women of the family — the mothers, wives and daughters — who dealt with these plain sewing tasks.[53]

Georgiana McCrae, who emigrated to Melbourne in 1841, was regularly at her needle, making, altering and mending clothes for her family. In September 1842 Georgiana recorded that she had '*cut out five pairs of trousers, and nearly completed one pair*' and two years later she noted she had cut up one of her old dresses to make a '*striped blue tabbinet frock*' for her daughter.[54] In the late 1850s and early 1860s, Blanche Mitchell, who was in her late teens, wrote regularly of being at her '*work*'. In January 1861 Blanche and her mother were '*busy making and putting curtains to the dairy*' and a few days later she records that she was '*working all the morning, made two pink calico table curtains, ditto valences and toilet covers*.'[55]

In December 1842, a year and a half after their arrival in Melbourne, Sarah Bunbury described how she was busy with her needle making what she had '*brought out last as long as possible*' by '*altering and contriving*', as she found the local cost of clothing very high.[56] Again, in November 1843 Sarah Bunbury wrote of repairing and altering her and her husband's clothing[57] and in October 1845 she described how she was '*overpowered with needlework, making & mending summer things for all of us…*'[58] These genteel women's descriptions of the sewing tasks they were regularly tending to give us an insight into the scope and importance of needlework undertaken in colonial households by women of all classes in the mid-nineteenth century. As can be seen, when immigrants such as Anne Trotter and her family were arriving in Australia, such skills were of vital importance to adapting to life in their new home.

52 Cramer, L. (2020). *Needlework and women's identity in colonial Australia*. Bloomsbury, p. 68.

53 Cramer, L. (2020), pp. 69–70.

54 Fletcher, M. (1984). *Costume in Australia 1788–1901*. Oxford University Press, p. 81. Tabbinet is a fabric resembling poplin that is made of silk and wool and usually given a watered finish.

55 Mitchell, B. (1980). *Blanche: An Australian diary*. John Ferguson, pp. 265, 272.

56 Bunbury, S. (1842, December 10). [Letter to Lady Bunbury]. State Library of Victoria. (Bunbury Family Papers, MS 13530, Series 6, Letter 13), Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

57 Bunbury, S. (1843, November 17). [Letter to Robert Clement Sconce]. State Library of Victoria. (Bunbury Family Papers, MS 13530, Series 6, Letter 104), Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

58 Bunbury, S. (1845, October 10). [Letter to Robert Clement Sconce]. State Library of Victoria. (Bunbury Family Papers, MS 13530, Series 6, Letter 117), Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

Figure 3: HT36147, Specimens No. 7 & 20, Shirt and Patching, in Needlework Specimen Book — Anne Trotter, Collon, County Louth, Ireland, 1840. Museums Victoria; photographer: Rodney Start. © Museums Victoria.

Anne's book

Anne Trotter's needlework specimen book is a rare surviving well-provenanced object known to have been brought to Australia by an Irish immigrant. It was kept in the family for 174 years before being donated to Museums Victoria by Anne's great-great-great-granddaughter Margaret Bagnall in 2014.[59] One can imagine generations of Anne's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren being fascinated by the old book with the 'dolls' clothes' pinned into it. However, these were not dolls' clothes, but miniature, fifth-scale garments made in the course of needlework instruction. A closer look reveals that each sample was a particular exercise that taught a specific sewing skill, such as seaming, patching, darning, tucking and buttonholes. The book, with its specimens and hand-written headings referring to numbered class exercises, indicates that Anne was working to a specified curriculum that commenced with the most basic exercises of hemming and progressed through to the more complex, including the making of miniature shirts. Research undertaken into the national female schools of Ireland uncovered the standardised curriculum, which Anne was working to when she affixed the specimens she had completed in her book. A vital reference is a first edition of the Board of National Education's *Simple Directions in Needle-work and*

59 Museums Victoria. (n.d.). HT 36147, *Needlework specimen book — Anne Trotter, Collon, County Louth, Ireland, 1840*, https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/2027802, accessed 10 March 2025.

Cutting Out; Intended for the National Free Schools of Ireland, published in 1835, which is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.[60] This book provides instructions for the teaching of the curriculum and includes examples of '*Specimens of work Executed by the Pupils of the National Model Female School*' which are similar to Anne's. It is therefore possible to trace what Anne was being taught and to obtain an insight into the rationale behind the curriculum that was equipping young women for domestic and working life. Later editions of the book show that the curriculum varied little over a 30-year span.[61] One thing to bear in mind is that in 1840, when Anne was completing these exercises, it was a good 10 years before a commercial model of the sewing machine was first made available by Isaac Singer in 1851.[62] All the specimens in Anne's book have been stitched by hand. This was the nature of women's plain sewing until well into the second half of the nineteenth century, when the sewing machine became more affordable.

The exercises

Pairing the specimens in Anne's book with those in the curriculum was not entirely straightforward, as not all of Anne's numbered classes or specimens matched exactly with those in the published books. However, Anne's progress and the skills she was taught closely corresponded with the formal needlework curriculum as set out by the Board of National Education. The curriculum progressed students through four divisions, each consisting of four classes, starting with simple hemming and finishing with various items of fancy work such as pelerines, tippets, braid chains and reticules.[63] Anne completed specimens from the first to eleventh class, the latter being the knitted items that were the penultimate class of the third division. It appears Anne did not complete the twelfth class, which taught three different types of straw plaiting suitable for hats.

The first division comprised classes covering the skills of hemming, sewing and stitching of seams. Beginning with a simple stitching exercise, the first class entailed the hemming of two small pieces of cotton with running stitches. The specimen labelled '*No. 1*' in Anne's book is a rectangular piece of yellow cotton and '*No. 2*' is a square of printed brown cotton, with the edges of both specimens finished in the same manner. According to the instructions, the pupils were to first try hemming in paper before progressing to the first sample in fabric.[64] The second class, which in the curriculum was titled '*Sewing*', is a development on the first exercise. Anne's third specimen is made up of four small squares of cotton, two white and two printed with a red geometric pattern, which have been carefully sewn together to form a larger window-pane square.

60 Victoria and Albert Museum. (n.d.). T2 to C-1942. *Instruction book, simple directions in needlework and cutting out; intended for the use of the national female schools of Ireland,* 1835, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O108338/simple-directions-in-needlework-and-instruction-book-national-model-female/, accessed 10 March 2025.

61 See for example: Powerhouse Museum. (n.d.). P3561 Text book, *Simple directions in needlework and cutting out, intended for the use of the national female schools of Ireland*, (1858), https://collection.powerhouse.com.au/object/329382, accessed 10 March 2025; The Commissioners of National Education. (1850). *Simple directions in needle-work and cutting out, intended for the use of the national female schools of Ireland*. G. & J. Grierson. State Library of Victoria H 646.2 IR2S (1850); The Commissioners of National Education. (1862). *Simple directions in needle-work and cutting out, intended for the use of the national female schools of Ireland*. Alexander Thom. State Library of Victoria H 646.2 IR2S (1862).

62 Davies, R. B. (1969). 'Peacefully working to conquer the world': The Singer Manufacturing Company in foreign markets, 1854–1889. *Business History Review, 43*(3), p. 301. https://doi.org/10.2307/3112385

63 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 2.

64 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 12.

Figure 4: HT36147, Specimens No. 1 & 2, Hemming, in Needlework Specimen Book — Anne Trotter, Collon, County Louth, Ireland, 1840. Museums Victoria ; photographer: Rodney Start. © Museums Victoria.

Figure 5: HT36147, Specimens No. 3, 4, 5 & 6, Sewing, Double Seam, Stitching and Buttonholes, in Needlework Specimen Book — Anne Trotter, Collon, County Louth, Ireland, 1840. Museums Victoria; photographer: Rodney Start. © Museums Victoria.

Below this specimen is one labelled '*No. 4 Third Class*'. At this stage students were taught '*Seaming*'. The curriculum states that this is to be a double seam or run-and-fell.[65] Specimens No. 4 and No. 5, executed in the 1835 book in white cotton, are examples of both these types of seaming.[66] However, Anne's specimen No. 4 corresponds with the double seaming of No. 5 in the curriculum. Her example is stitched in a cotton fabric printed with a wide striped geometric design and is a lesson in seaming, hemming and matching stripes on the bias. The fourth class involved '*Stitching*', which taught backstitch and half backstitch. Anne's sample labelled '*No. 5*' (which corresponds to No. 6 in the curriculum) comprises five neatly sewn horizontal rows executed in coloured thread on a white cotton ground. The contrasting stitching makes the exercise even more exacting, as any mistakes or deviations can be easily detected.

Having completed these first four exercises in basic hand-sewing, the students moved on to the second division, which comprised classes five to eight. These taught '*Overcasting – Button-holes, Buttons*', '*Gathering and Fastening-in Gathers*', '*Tucking and Trimming*' and '*Marking*'. At this level the students were expected to have gained proficiency in basic sewing and were, as such, described as '*Scholars perfect in the works of the preceding Classes, and capable of practising the nicer kinds of Plain-work.*'[67] Anne's specimen for the fifth class, labelled '*No. 6*', has five carefully stitched buttonholes executed in contrasting thread on a white cotton ground and surrounded by a border stitched in pale pink thread and dotted with rows of small running stitches. It appears that Anne did not complete the second specimen (No. 8) in the curriculum for the fifth class, which involved the making of cloth buttons, but she did complete the '*Gathering and Fastening-in Gathers*'. Although not labelled in her book, this was the ninth specimen to be completed in the curriculum.[68] This is a heavily gathered piece of white cotton that has been seamed into wide bands at either end. The exercise prepares students for the task of gathering shirtsleeves into cuffs. In this specimen Anne has incorporated a repeat of the stitching exercise in the fourth class, with five rows of contrasting stitches that create decorative stripes.

In the sixth class Anne progressed to stitching a complete shirt (labelled '*No. 7*') in miniature, executing a collar, cuffs, buttonholes and a front placket. The making of a shirt is set down in the curriculum for the tenth class. On the lower front of Anne's specimen shirt she has cross-stitched her name in fine blue thread. This task was part of the '*Marking*' exercise taught in the eighth class. Shirts, underwear and household linen were marked with initials or a name so they could be identified at the end of the laundering process and correctly sorted and returned.[69] This was particularly important if the laundering was sent out to a washerwoman. The task of marking was one that a domestic servant would have fulfilled in a household as part of her duties and therefore one of the many sewing lessons that were directly related to the employment of girls and young women.

65 The Commissioners of National Education. (1858). *Simple directions in needle-work and cutting out, intended for the use of the national female schools of Ireland*, Alex. Thom & Sons, p. 11.

66 Victoria and Albert Museum. (n.d.), https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O108338/simple-directions-in-needlework-and-instruction-book-national-model-female/, accessed 10 March 2025.

67 The Commissioners of National Education. (1858), p. 9.

68 The Commissioners of National Education. (1858), p. 13.

69 Burman, B., & Fennetaux, A. (2019). *The pocket: A hidden history of women's lives*. Yale University Press, p. 96.

Figure 6: HT36147, Ninth Class, Darning, First and Second specimens, in Needlework Specimen Book – Anne Trotter, Collon, County Louth, Ireland, 1840. Museums Victoria.

Figure 7: HT36147, Stocking and Infant's boot in Needlework Specimen Book – Anne Trotter, Collon, County Louth, Ireland, 1840. Museums Victoria.

Figure 8: HT36147, Dress in Needlework Specimen Book – Anne Trotter, Collon, County Louth, Ireland, 1840. Museums Victoria.

The seventh class taught '*Tucking and Trimming*' and Anne has worked a muslin square with three rows of small, even tucks and then applied a frill around all the edges in a fine whipstitch. This specimen is labelled '*No. 8*' and corresponds to No. 10 in the curriculum. In the eighth class Anne's specimen again diverges from the set curriculum, which was to be '*Marking*'. In surviving published books, specimen No. 11 is a small sampler with a cross-stitched alphabet. As we have seen, however, Anne had incorporated this exercise into her shirt, saving the need for a piece of open-weave linen on which to stitch the sampler.[70] Anne's eighth class consists of two meticulously sewn fifth-scale white cotton shirts that incorporate the previous exercises of tucking, gathering and fastening-in of gathers. While only one shirt specimen (No. 26) was described in the curriculum, Anne executed a total of three different types of shirt specimens. These would have provided models for the needlework that women were expected to undertake in the home, sewing shirts for their husbands, brothers and sons.

The third division comprised classes nine to twelve and covered '*Mending*', '*Making*', '*Knitting*' and '*Platting*'. Anne's four darning specimens from the ninth class are executed on carefully hemmed squares of natural-coloured open-weave linen in a combination of dark brown and pink thread. Although she has not labelled them, the first specimen is, in accordance with the curriculum, an example of '*Twill Darn*', the second is '*Wave Darn*', the third is '*Double Diamond Darn*' and the fourth is '*Single Diamond Darn*'.[71] These specimens relate to numbers 14, 15, 18 and 16 respectively in the curriculum. Anne's seventh specimen of the ninth class (labelled '*No. 16*') is a six-pointed star made from alternating red and blue flannel. This appears to be a piecing exercise called '*Fine-drawing Cloth*' (specimen No. 22 in the curriculum), which deals with the joining of thick pieces of fabric that are abutted to one another. This method avoids the bulk created from traditional modes of seaming that incorporate a seam allowance. However, the pieces in Anne's specimen are not abutted, but neatly seamed in a traditional way. Such an exercise was intended to train the students in the mending of men's suiting.[72] The distinctive red and white striped cotton square labelled '*No. 20*', which is placed on a loose page next to specimen No. 7, is the '*Patching*' exercise. Here Anne has pieced in a central square patch, carefully matching the stripes so that the insert is barely detectable. This specimen corresponds with the curriculum's numbered specimens and in the 1835 book this is made from a finely checked blue and white cotton.[73] Anne did not complete specimen No. 21 in the ninth class, which was an exercise in '*Grafting*'. In the 1835 book this is another patching exercise similar to the previous, but executed on a piece of finely knitted white fabric that required the student to graft in a square patch by picking up the knitted loops with their thread.[74]

70 See for example, Victoria and Albert Museum. (n.d.), https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O108338/simple-directions-in-needlework-and-instruction-book-national-model-female/, accessed 10 March 2025.

71 The Commissioners of National Education. (1858), pp. 16–18.

72 For a similar item, see Powerhouse Museum. (n.d.). 92/80. *Needlework sampler made by Mary Murphy*, 1837-1860, https://collection.powerhouse.com.au/object/128168, accessed 10 March 2025.

73 Victoria and Albert Museum. (n.d.), https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O108338/simple-directions-in-needlework-and-instruction-book-national-model-female/, accessed 10 March 2025.

74 Victoria and Albert Museum. (n.d.), https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O108338/simple-directions-in-needlework-and-instruction-book-national-model-female/, accessed 10 March 2025.

The tenth class taught '*Making*' and comprised exercises in '*Herringbone stitch on Flannel and Muslin*' and a '*Heart Piece*', which is a set-in breast gusset for a shirt. Anne's specimens for these exercises are labelled 17 to 19 (numbers 23 to 25 in the curriculum) and again she has been required to execute them in contrasting coloured thread. Anne's four unlabelled items of knitting are specimens from the eleventh class. One is a miniature stocking, which is shaped to the contours of the foot and leg, another is a blue infant's boot and the third is a cap described in the curriculum as '*Scotch Knitting*'.[75] The fourth is a strip of multicoloured diagonally striped scarf length, fringed at either end, which would fit the description of '*Fancy Knitting*'.[76]

The final specimen in Anne's book is a dress, or underdress, made in white cotton with a square neckline and short puffed sleeves. Anne has not identified a class or specimen number, and while it bears no direct correlation with the specimens in the curriculum, it may be one of the items she chose to make up from the '*Cutting Out*' section in the later part of the book (which included '*Plain Chemises*', '*Frocks and Pelerines*' and '*Boys' Dresses*').[77] Having learnt how to make shirts, this exercise provides the template for a dress, underdress or child's dress, which could easily be made in the home. The bodice of the dress has been cut on the bias, which is a standard feature of dresses from the early decades of the nineteenth century, as is the raised waist with the seamline under the bust. The hem of the dress has a vandyke or saw tooth feature created by bagging out the points — an exacting thing to accomplish neatly, especially on such a small scale.

It appears Anne did not undertake the more advanced needlework of the fourth division, as these specimens are absent from her book. These classes included '*Muslin-work*', '*Lace-work*', '*Worsted-work*' and '*Thread-work*', with instruction on '*Netted Pelerines*', '*Boa Tippets*' and '*Reticules*' being among the fancy items to be made.[78] These classes may not have been offered at the school in Collon because they were considered '*works of taste*' and '*therefore not considered essential to all*'.[79] Or perhaps Anne was not amongst those who, in order to complete the final division, had '*been most diligent and successful in their progress through the Plain-work Classes*'.[80] Or maybe she was not one of the young women who, '*from particular circumstances, seem likely to find such knowledge beneficial or profitable*'.[81] Anne certainly seems to have been successful in her progress; however, we do not know how long it took her to complete the first three divisions. In 1840 Anne turned 20 and would have been working, perhaps as a housemaid, as she states her profession in the ships' manifest. What we do know is Anne treasured her needlework specimen book, packing it in her luggage when she emigrated to Australia as an assisted migrant. Establishing herself in her new home, the book would have been a useful and valued item that assisted her in the needlework duties that she would have undertaken throughout her life.

75 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 1.
76 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 1.
77 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 2.
78 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 2.
79 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 12.
80 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 12.
81 The Board of National Education. (1835), p. 12.

Conclusion

Very little has been written about these specimen books, let alone a focused study on one book and its contents. While the published books provide the written instructions for the curriculum Anne was being taught, not all of them contain specimens. Aside from a few exceptions, those that do can no longer be traced to an identifiable maker. This further singles out Anne's book for its ability to open a window onto aspects of a young working-class woman's life where few, if any, other informal records survive.[82] The existence of Anne's book, with its specimens and numbered exercises, prompted questions which led to the identification of the newly formulated national curriculum for working-class girls that Anne was following when she created her needlework specimen book at the Female Free School in Collon. The exercises that Anne completed are, in the first place, evidence of her progression through the free school national curriculum, but pinned into the book they became a future guide to which the maker could refer to and use to pass on her knowledge. The curriculum served to standardise the tasks. In doing so, it also enabled the students who had learnt the tasks to then supervise others. Travelling to a new home, Anne Trotter not only brought her precious book of needlework specimens with her, but also the skills she had been taught within those pages.

In addition, as a rare surviving item of material culture that was brought by an Irish emigrant to Australia, Anne's book provides a thread back to the shores of Ireland in 1840, prior to the Great Famine. This family chose Australia at a time when the overwhelming choice for British and Irish emigrants was to emigrate to America or Canada. We can surmise that Anne's book was a reminder of the home she had left in 1844 when she made the one-way voyage to Australia. While little is known of Anne's life in Australia, records show that she married George Thomas Windsor at the Presbyterian Church, Geelong, on 8 November 1850 and the couple had two children, Elizabeth and John, born 1854 and 1856 respectively.[83] Anne and the Trotter family remained in the region west of Geelong, living around Mount Duneed, Colac and Camperdown.[84] Anne died on 22 January 1910 at the age of 89 and is buried in Mount Moriac Cemetery, not far from Barrabool Hills where she first settled with her family in 1844.[85] It is not known whether Anne was ever formally employed in Australia in a position where she may have applied the needlework skills she was taught in Ireland. However, sewing would have been a vital part of her home life as she raised her children and attended to domestic needlework — stitching household linen and furnishings and making, altering and mending clothes for the family.

82 This point is made in relation to similar articles — needlework specimens and a pair of drawers — stitched by two working-class girls in England in the late nineteenth century. Richmond, V. (2019). Stitching women: Unpicking histories of Victorian clothes. In H. Greig, J. Hamlett, & L. Hannan. (Eds.), *Gender and material culture in Britain since 1600*. Bloomsbury, p. 90–1. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350495678.ch-005

83 Births Deaths and Marriages Victoria. *Search Your Family History*. https://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/search-your-family-history, accessed 12 April 2025; Married. (1850, November 13). *Geelong Advertiser*, p. 2.

84 Museums Victoria. (n.d.). HT 36147, Needlework specimen book — Anne Trotter, Collon, County Louth, Ireland, 1840, https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/2027802, accessed 10 March 2025.

85 Find a Grave. (2016). *Ann Windsor*. https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/158946808/ann-windsor#source, accessed 12 April 2025.