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**Discovering Knitting at the Regent Street Polytechnic, 1898–1948**  
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This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in  
Textile: Cloth and Culture, 12 (1), pp. 58-71.

The final definitive version is available online:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.2752/175183514x13916051793479>

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Title: Discovering knitting at the Regent Street Polytechnic, 1898-1948

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Biography: Anna McNally is currently employed as University History Project Archivist at the University of Westminster, which is celebrating its 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013. She previously worked at the Tate Archive of British Art and Lloyds Banking Group Archive. She is a keen knitter.

## Looking for Knitting in the Archives

Knitting as an activity leaves few traces in the archives. Pattern books and leaflets can tell us what could have been knitted, but give no clues as to whether they ever were; knitted garments themselves are more at home in museum collections. In the archives, the most we might hope to find is the occasional mention of knitting in diaries and letters perhaps, or details of yarn purchased in household accounts.

This makes the descriptions of knitting at the Regent Street Polytechnic held in the Archive of the University of Westminster, a particularly unique source. The University of Westminster, successor to the Regent Street Polytechnic, holds a complete set of its newsletter, the *Polytechnic Magazine*. These were published from 1879 to 1971, at various times weekly, fortnightly and monthly, and they report on everything that was happening within the Polytechnic. The University Archive digitized the *Polytechnic Magazine* in 2011<sup>1</sup>, to try to encourage greater use of this detailed but unwieldy resource. Digitization opens up the possibility of researching previously untold stories - such as knitting - within the institution's history, particularly those that have no left no other paper trace.

As well as general news about the institution, educational results and notifications of forthcoming events, the *Magazine* contains lively reports written by the secretaries of each of its many sporting and social clubs. The main audience for the *Magazine* was the members of the Polytechnic itself, who received a copy as part of their subscription. As they were primarily writing for one another, these reports have a strong self-reflective quality, with the authors creating a conscious record of their activities for posterity.

The members of the Regent Street Polytechnic's club and societies were not necessarily students in its classes, as the Poly was never just an educational establishment. In fact, it wasn't just any Polytechnic but the first, the model on which the other Polytechnics in Britain were founded.

### The first Polytechnic

#### [Fig 1]

The Polytechnic grew out of Quintin Hogg's philanthropic work with children in the Covent Garden area, at the time one of the London slums. Hogg (1845-1903) was a wealthy business man who had been educated at Eton and then gone to work in the City. His strong Christian beliefs led him to devote all his spare time and money to charitable works, to the extent of buying a shoe blacks uniform and teaching poor boys to read under the Adelphi Arches near Charing Cross station (Hogg 1904: 50). These early endeavors led him to found the York Place Ragged School in 1866, acquiring dormitories for the boys soon after, and moving to new premises in Castle Street in 1868. This was followed by the Youths' Christian Institute and Reading Rooms for older boys from 1873 (Glew 2013: 22). The YCI was a place where young men could come after work, wash, play chess, read the newspapers and (if they wished) attend bible study classes. As the majority of these young men lived in cramped lodgings, it was a way of keeping them out of pubs and helping them to improve themselves at the same time. There were trade classes so that the men could get ahead in their profession, and they organized themselves into sporting clubs, notably for athletics and cycling.

In 1882, with the Institute having yet again outgrown its premises, Hogg was on the look-out for a new building when the Royal Polytechnic Institution building on Regent

Street came up for auction. Regent Street was one of London's most fashionable addresses, having only been constructed 50 years previously. Moving his Institute from the slums of Covent Garden to Regent Street showed Hogg's ambition for these young men, and the aspirational nature of the YCI. After the move to 309 Regent Street, Hogg was able to considerably expand the educational side of the Institute, predominantly offering evening classes of a technical nature. Within a year it adopted the name of the building, The Polytechnic, and within 10 years its activities were funded by the government, with a number of other Polytechnics created in its image.

Although his chief concern had been for the young men of the area, Hogg always ensured that there was provision for women. Initially bible study classes for girls were taken by Hogg's sister, and then by his wife Alice (Glew 2013: 16, 121). From the early 1880s women were allowed into a limited number of the art, technical and scientific classes, and from 1888 classes in dressmaking and millinery were offered just for women. 1888 also saw the founding of the Young Women's Christian Institute at 15 Langham Place.

Quintin Hogg and his wife aimed for the Men's and Women's institutes to become 'home' to their members. Anyone aged 16 to 26 could apply for membership, which cost 5 shillings a year. For a woman, this entitled her to use the social and reading room at 15 Langham Place, entry to the swimming bath at the Regent Street headquarters one night a week, and reduced entry to the Polytechnic's lectures and entertainments. Many of the women who joined the Polytechnic were clerks, shop assistants or dressmakers working nearby, or who lived in cheap lodgings around Oxford Circus. At the start, with space being limited, preference was given to the sisters or wives of men in the Polytechnic; as a result the Women's Institute was

referred to as 'Our Sisters' in the *Polytechnic Magazine*, or sometimes jokingly as 'The Widows'<sup>2</sup>. The Men's and Women's Institutes of the Regent Street Polytechnic were to remain separate throughout its existence, operating parallel structures of clubs, societies and leadership.

#### Both 'home parlor' and classroom

On the 25 March 1892 the *Magazine* reports that the Reading Room at the Women's Institute was being converted into a drawing room.

"We hope members will find this room useful, not only for conversational, but for all social purposes ; that they will find in it convenient and cosy nooks into which they can bring their knitting, sewing, and other fancy work, just as they would bring light fancy work of this kind into the home parlour or drawing-room."

This comment succinctly expresses the Polytechnic's aspirational aims for its members. The Editor of the *Magazine* would have known that few of the members would have their own parlor or drawing room, but the Polytechnic gave them access to one, for a few hours each evening at least. This also the first mention I have found of knitting as a leisure activity in the *Polytechnic Magazine*.

A few years previously, the *Polytechnic Magazine* quotes from an article in *The Queen* magazine<sup>3</sup> describing the unusual methods of dressmaking tuition used at the Polytechnic, in which it mentions that smocking, embroidery, plain needlework, and knitting are also taught. Here we see the curious contrast at the heart of the Polytechnic: during the day women were learning needle skills and knitting as their

trade but then in the evening they were given the space and the opportunity to enjoy them as leisure activities.

[Fig 2]

### The Knitting Circle and charitable works

It's notable therefore that the next time we find a mention of knitting in the *Polytechnic Magazine*, and indeed the majority of the references then on, it's in the context of charitable work. Quintin Hogg always encouraged members of the Polytechnic to carry out charitable works, believing "the best safeguard against evil ... is "do good"" (UWA:HOG/1/1/12). Although they did not have the financial means to carry out philanthropic acts on his scale, there was a culture of charitable service within the Polytechnic and assisting those less fortunate than themselves, alongside an evangelical role. A very clear demonstration of this is in the Polytechnic's involvement with the Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen.

The *Polytechnic Magazine* for 30 March 1898 reports a talk by Skipper Cullington, "an old salt in the employ of the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen", describing the hardships of a life at sea and the work which was being done by temperance vessels in outnumbering the "Dutch grog ships". The Mission requested, by way of assistance, donations or subscriptions, the giving of old magazines and books of "an interesting and stimulating character" and knitting "the much-needed mufflers, mittens, &c".

The meeting was organized by the Temperance and Christian Endeavour societies of the Men's Institute. A collection was taken up at the end of the meeting but then

we hear no more about the Mission until six months later. Then we learn from the *Magazine* that after the lecture a group of women decided to “give up at least one evening a week for the purpose of making various woollen garments, such as gloves, mittens, mufflers, &c, for the fishermen out on the North Sea.”<sup>4</sup> It seems the Knitting Party had been quietly meeting every Tuesday since and was only mentioned in the *Magazine* on this occasion as they held their first general meeting, and social. The balance sheet was described as ‘satisfactory’ and the report of the work done was ‘encouraging’, but no further details are given, other than a request for other young ladies at the institute to join them.

### [Fig 3]

What makes this particularly fascinating is that it becomes clear a few months later that the women themselves were not admitted to the original lecture. We therefore must presume they resolved to carry out their good works either as a result of reading the report in the *Polytechnic Magazine*, (which, as members, they would have automatically received) or from the men who had attended. That the speaker from the Mission had directly requested knitted garments seems to have struck a chord with the women, as perhaps being something that they could provide that the men could not, unlike the collection that was taken up after the original lecture. On the occasion of a second lecture, the *Magazine* promises that the women of the Knitting Party “will now have ample opportunity of hearing and seeing, by means of lantern views and animated photographs, something of the grand work which is being done on behalf of the fishermen for whom also their own busy hands are working.”



In November 1899 the *Magazine* reports that “the secretary stated that forty-three articles of clothing had been made during the past twelve months, including such useful things as stockings, mufflers, mittens, gloves, helmets, &c, and as each of these take a deal of time to complete, and entail a great amount of labour, it must be admitted that a distinctly successful year's work has been accomplished.” At this meeting the group also resolved that for the next few weeks their work would be “the making of various articles in connection with the Poly section of the Red Cross League for the comfort of our wounded soldiers in South Africa.” Richard Rutt touches on the possible superfluity of this gesture (Rutt 1987: 138), the weather in South Africa not being renowned for requiring knitwear; but including both knitted and sewn garments the Poly was able to supply 4000 items to the Red Cross for the soldiers in the space of 3 months, having collected £500 for materials<sup>5</sup>. After thanking the Knitting Party for their ‘very practical work’, the Secretary of the Christian Mission comments that “Doubtless many a soldier's heart will beat with gratitude over the thought that kindly hands ministered to his comfort when suffering in his country's cause.” It suggests that the women’s efforts were genuinely seen as having a two-fold effect, both in their usefulness and their emotional impact.

#### ‘An interesting appeal for support’: wax heads and paper bonnets

By Feb 1900 the women are back at work on behalf of the Deep Sea Fishermen, requesting additional hands to help as they have a good stock of yarn, and suggesting that those who cannot knit could be of service in winding the wool. The following year the Knitting Party exhibit some of their work at the Poly’s annual New Year Fete and Exhibition, in the hope of recruiting subscribers for the cost of the wool. The *Magazine* gives an intriguing description of the event. In a descriptive tour of the exhibits, the Editor writes that

“Before passing out of the Gymnasium one must look at the collection of work executed by the Christian Endeavour Knitting Party for the MISSION TO DEEP SEA FISHERMEN. The model of the Mission Ship, together with curios found in fishermen's nets, are placed together with these garments, and the whole make an interesting appeal for support ; but if I may be allowed to offer a word of criticism, it would be that the stands illustrating the head coverings are about as hideous as could be found. Ordinary wax heads would have been far better than the ghastly casts which give so cold and uncanny a tone to the exhibit.”<sup>6</sup>

The women's appeal for assistance was also bolstered in February of that year by a visit from Dr Livingstone's daughter, describing her work with the Mission.

Over the years the Knitting Circle seems to have alternate problems in either inspiring enough workers, or being so successful in doing so that they were running short of wool. Their money for purchasing supplies came either from subscriptions, which they heartily encouraged the men to commit to, or from charging entrance to socials, where there was singing and parlor games and competitions for their menfolk to make bonnets out of paper. In January 1911 the women report that the men have promised “unlimited supplies of wool” and the women promise not to be behind in making themselves expensive to them. Clearly either they were true to their word or the men hadn't quite realized how expensive yarn can be, as later that year the offer had been reduced to one tenth of all the wool they need. Although the committee reported each year on the state of their funds and the amount of work done, it's never very explicit what proportion of the money came from fundraising. We therefore do not know whether the women of the Knitting Party are contributing both their time and money, or whether they are reliant on donations from the Men's

Institute for their purchasing power. The majority of women attending the Polytechnic worked but they would not have had a large amount of disposable income.

#### [Fig 4]

During the first decade of the 1900s, numbers attending the Knitting Party's weekly meeting vary between 5 and 32, and the magazine mentions fears at one point that the circle would have to be wound up. However frequent talks from workers at the Mission seem to be successful at bringing in new workers. There was a regular turnover of members at the Polytechnic due to age or getting married –although the latter was no bar to membership and indeed the Poly seems to have functioned very successfully as a Marriage Bureau. Some women who could no longer attend the meetings in person continued to work on behalf of the Mission from home, with yarn being sent out to them and garments returned. In the *Magazine* the other members of the Knitting Party express their admiration for those at home “as the monotony of the work they do is unbroken by the social intercourse and chit-chat which makes the indoor life of our Polytechnic so enjoyable.”<sup>7</sup>

#### Charity begins at home: wartime knitting

With the outbreak of war in August 1914, the women of the Polytechnic Knitting Party do not hesitate to divert their energies to the soldiers, believing ‘Charity begins at home’, although they express some regret on behalf of the fishermen, whose need is still as great<sup>8</sup>. The Knitting Circle formed part of a more general War Work Party at the Poly, where women were also engaged in cutting out and sewing up clothes, putting their practical professional skills at the service of the soldiers.

The knitting mania which hit women during the First World War is well-documented and often implied to be well-intentioned but not especially useful, despite the severities of the winter and the role of socks in avoiding Trench foot. Although many women may have learnt to knit during this period, with more or less success, for the women at the Polytechnic it was a matter of diverting their energies from one set of intended recipients to another. Many of the same garments were required by the troops as by the fishermen and were thus well-practiced. Much of the work during this period was done by women at home but the Knitting Party also continued their weekly Tuesday meetings, often now with musical accompaniment to spur them on.

The work was organized by Mrs Alice Hogg, wife of Quintin Hogg (who had died in 1903). She supplied the money for buying wool, which steadily increased in price throughout the war, and organized for the completed garments to be supplied directly to those regiments where the Poly had a personal interest, rather than sending them via any of the nationwide distribution initiatives. In 1909 the Poly had raised a Company of the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion London Regiment (The Rangers)<sup>9</sup> and by October 1914 over 900 members of the Polytechnic had enlisted, more than doubling to 2000 by the middle of 1915 (Gorst 2013: 169). The Poly maintained close links with its serving members throughout the war, recording their enlistment, promotions, injuries and passing in a series of remarkable registers that the University of Westminster Archive also holds. These details were also printed in the Polytechnic Magazine, along with letters from soldiers describing their experiences and giving reports of other 'Poly boys' who they were serving alongside or had happened to chance upon during their duties. The Magazine provided an invaluable service, enabling friends to keep track of one another, and exchanging information between the Front and Home Front.

These detailed records meant they were able to send out Poly war comforts parcels on a regular basis to each serving member. The close links with the troops also meant they could respond to their needs. Quite early in the war, it became clear that the most useful thing the women could knit was socks, and so no more time was wasted on mufflers and the like but all energy went on ensuring that at least one pair of socks could be included with every one of the comforts parcel. Paul Ward (Ward: 2001) describes wartime knitting as a mark of women's solidarity with the nation, but suggests that patriotism was "not always strong enough to win through the time-consuming nature, tedium or technical ability involved in knitting" and that the personal relationship is likely to have been more powerful. Certainly the women of the Knitting Party seem to see their knitting as providing a direct link to the Front, making the equation in the *Magazine* that, having heard that "that more men and still more are wanted, necessarily, more socks for these men will be required".

### [Fig 6]

The men express their gratitude in letters back to the Magazine and ascribing some of the Army's success to the women's efforts. As their war continued and an awareness of the conditions the men were serving in increased, the exhortations to knit in the magazine become more honest. Early letters back from soldiers thanking the women for their parcels had described "camping out on the sands, under canvas"; by 1917 the women were told that the men were spending all day standing in cold muddy water and a fresh pair of socks at the end of the day was a real luxury. As such by late 1917 the women at the Poly were producing 113 pairs of socks in a month, up from the 200 produced between the outbreak of war and Christmas 1914.

'...and at the same time be knitting a jumper'

The sock knitting continued into 1919, until all the soldiers were demobbed. As a result of their successful collaboration during the war, the Knitting Party merged into the more general working party that met on a Wednesday evening, with the local Kingsway Creche<sup>10</sup> the recipient of their hard work. The work of this group is then only mentioned irregularly throughout the inter-war period, including a request for any leftover wool from the numerous jumpers being worked on by women around the social room. Here then we see a turn at the Polytechnic from knitting as a charitable endeavor to a leisure activity. In 1920 the *Magazine* mentions special lunchtime knitting and fancywork classes being given by Mrs Graveline, the wife of the Poly French tutor, suggesting a renewed interest in acquiring these skills.

Where knitting is mentioned during the 1920s and 30s in the *Magazine*, it is generally held up as a characteristic feminine virtue, or vice. From 1904 the Poly had held a Founder's Day ceremony each January to commemorate Quintin Hogg, with reminiscences of his work and deeds both read at the service and printed in the *Polytechnic Magazine*. As the years went by, the service was extended to memorialize other senior members of the Poly, including Hogg's wife Alice (who had died in 1918) and Hilda Studd (1858–1921), the wife of Polytechnic President J.E.K. Studd. In 1931 one woman remembered the happy family atmosphere in the Langham Place building, with Mrs Hogg sat amongst them, knitting and regaling them with stories of her travels. A reminiscence from 1934 describes Mrs Studd as having the "knack of keeping her needles going rapidly and carrying on a conversation at the same time", suggesting that the speaker was perhaps not a knitter herself.

However the fashion for knitting was perhaps not so well received amongst the men of the institute. In April 1922 the *Magazine* reports on a 'most amusing' mock

Ordinary General Meeting held by the commercial students as part of their classes.

The motion was moved by a Mr Ellis that

'[in] order to facilitate discussion and for the proper conduct of the business at Meetings of the Company, the lady members of the Board of Directors shall not at any time exceed two in number.' This was discussed, and Mr. Ellis said he spoke from bitter experience, and that it was quite a common thing for a lady to start talking on the business in hand and finish up on the subject of dress, etc., and at the same time be knitting a jumper. This was protested against by Miss Ewart, who remarked that if such a thing did happen she had also heard of a much more objectionable habit practised by men at such meetings and that was snoring.

#### Wartime knitting (again) and post-war change

With the outbreak of war in 1939, a knitting circle was once again started at the Poly; it is not clear from the Magazine whether the Wednesday Work Party had fizzled out in between or whether it was a matter of diverting energies once again. Work started well, with 400 items produced in the first six months and 800 produced in 1940.

However once, what one writer described as "the coupon business" started they had difficulty obtaining enough yarn for their needs and had to merely knit up their supplies in hand. The end of war report also mentions that not so many women were available due to their being called up on war work and sent to other parts of the country although, as before, many women had yarn sent to them and continued to work at home.

After the Second World War the Regent Street Polytechnic had difficulties adjusting to the changes in society. Ostensibly life at the Poly continued much as it had done since the 1880s, with students coming in for classes during the day and members coming in for social activities in the evening. However the two groups became increasingly distinct and eyed one another with suspicion. The *Polytechnic Magazine* increasingly became the newsletter of the clubs and societies, rather than of the educational side of the Institute, with The Poly Student magazine launching in 1946.

### [Fig 7]

Mentions of knitting in the 1940s and 50s see it once again return to the status of the quintessential feminine leisure activity, with casual mentions of spectators knitting during badminton games. One member of the Polytechnic Parliament was even moved to present a paean to the relationship between knitting and politics through the ages by the sight of the many women knitting during the Parliament's debates.<sup>11</sup> By the 1950s, knitting is only mentioned in the context of craft entries to the New Year's Fete, a far cry from the evangelical display put forward by the women half a century before, on behalf of the Deep Sea Fishermen.

### Conclusion

The 50 years of knitting recorded in the *Polytechnic Magazine* gives a unique case study of how it was practiced by a specific group of women, as both a leisure activity and as a charitable endeavor. As a gendered activity – I have found no mention at all of men knitting throughout the *Magazine* - it also gives us a prism through which to look at wider issues around these women's lives, in particular the value of their craft and their time, their financial power, and the relationship between the sexes. The



Regent Street Polytechnic was a unique institution that has left behind an unrivalled record of its day-to-day existence. We are very proud to be custodians of that record in the University of Westminster Archive and hope that, by making it freely available online, other unheard histories can also be told.

## Notes

1. The digitized *Polytechnic Magazine* can be accessed free of charge via <http://www.westminster.ac.uk/archives>. The originals are available to view in the University of Westminster Archive.
2. *Polytechnic Magazine* 25 March 1892.
3. *Polytechnic Magazine* 23 October 1890. The article refers only to “the *Queen* of a recent date” and gives no exact publication date or number.
4. *Polytechnic Magazine* 2 November 1898
5. *Polytechnic Magazine* 24 January 1900
6. *Polytechnic Magazine* 2 January 1901
7. *Polytechnic Magazine* November 1913
8. In fact many of the deep sea fishermen carried out mine-sweeping work during the First World War.
9. The London Regiment was unique in containing no regular battalions, only Territorials.
10. This seems to have been run by the West London Mission of the Methodist Church at the Kingsway Hall, London.
11. *Polytechnic Magazine* April 1951. Polytechnic Parliamentary Debating Society was formed in 1883 as part of a nationwide movement for Local Parliaments, as they were known. It ran until 1965.

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Illustrations:

Fig 1: Quintin Hogg as a young man, around the time of his first philanthropic ventures in Covent Garden.

Fig 2: Women in a sewing class at the Regent Street Polytechnic, 1899.

Fig 3: Excerpt from the *Polytechnic Magazine* reporting the first of many lectures from the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen.

Fig 4: A page from the Candidate Book for the Polytechnic Young Women's Institute showing the varied occupations of those applying to join in 1904.

Fig 5: The Regent Street Polytechnic was a recruitment and training centre during the First World War.

Fig 6: A cartoon from the *Polytechnic Magazine* showing a soldier's gratitude on receiving his Poly War Comforts Parcel.

Fig 7: The student body produced a variety of magazines alongside the *Polytechnic Magazine*, which eventually closed in 1971.