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## Evolution in Early Crochet *From Flat-Hook Knitting to Slip-Stitch Crochet*

CARY KARP



A pair of child's bootees (H.TWG 4.1, 4.2) in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland. Collections records indicate that the bootees were made in 1780. © *National Museums of Scotland*

Descriptions of crochet began to appear in English-language craft literature in 1840. It was introduced as having rapidly gained great popularity toward the end of the preceding decade. The authors typically note that its precursor had been “long known ... as a species of knitting originally practised by the peasants in Scotland, with a small hooked needle called a shepherd's hook.”

Late-eighteenth-century descriptions of the same craft in France and Germany also refer to it as a form of knitting (and crochet in the present-day sense is attested in Germany beginning in 1809). The first British mention of “shepherd's knitting” I've located to date is found in a journal entry from 1812 by Elizabeth Grant about its practice in the Scottish Highlands using “a little hook [homemade] out of the tooth of an old tortoise-shell comb.”

A book from 1835, *Simple Directions in Needle-Work and Cutting Out intended for the use of the National Female Schools of Ireland*, includes instructions for “Scotch knitting.” The technique as described is now widely termed slip-stitch crochet, and the volume states that it is “very generally used for infants' woollen or cotton shoes.” The 1853 edition of

the same text extends the heading to “Scotch or Shepherd’s Knitting” with an added note about it also being known as the “elementary ... ‘Crochet Stitch’.” Other mid-century texts alternately call it “shepherd crochet,” “plain crochet,” or “single crochet.”

A pair of child’s bootees in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland (seen in this article’s banner image) are the oldest objects directly associated with a date that are made with this technique, which in local parlance was likely to have been referred to as shepherd’s rather than Scottish knitting. Labels attached to the bootees in 1886 say that they are “supposed to be made in the year 1780.” Whatever the precise date and initial craft appellation may have been, they can safely be seen as proper Scottish shepherd’s knitting.

In a descriptive catalog of *Early Textiles Found in Scotland*, from 1952, Audrey Henshall identifies the technique used to create the bootees as “*naalebinding*” but notes that, “the general effect of the Scottish example, for which no exact parallel has been found, is of a fine, firm crochet.” The basic fabric structure she illustrates is a textbook example of slip-stitch crochet, notwithstanding additional illustrations of how that structure can be produced with an eyed needle (and ignoring a slight mismatch between the illustrated slip-stitch variant and the one in the actual fabric).

The ambiguity is effectively resolved by secondary details in the bootees that are organic indications of hook-based production. Even if possible, they would require unwarranted tedium to nålbind (looping with an eyed needle, first evidenced nearly 10,000 years ago). Henshall, like many contemporary researchers, was probably unaware of the Scottish national tradition of shepherd’s knitting supported by other evidence. This extends to the craft more generally and there are other potentially significant examples of objects that were slip-stitch crocheted having been misidentified as nålbound.

### **Searching for flat hooks**

No illustration of the eponymous hook has been found in early English-language publication. However, descriptions of the same craft in French and German texts illustrate strongly tapered flat hooks. The first of them is from 1785 and has the further distinction of being the oldest known instructions for any form of yarncraft depicting hands in working position. This appears in an industrial *Encyclopédie Méthodique* (see Resources) and follows an article about mechanized knitting in a briefer section describing an expedient method for making gloves using a bent nail. It is titled *Tricot au clou*, or “Nail Knitting,” and describes the alternative use of a “crochet,” shown in different sizes.

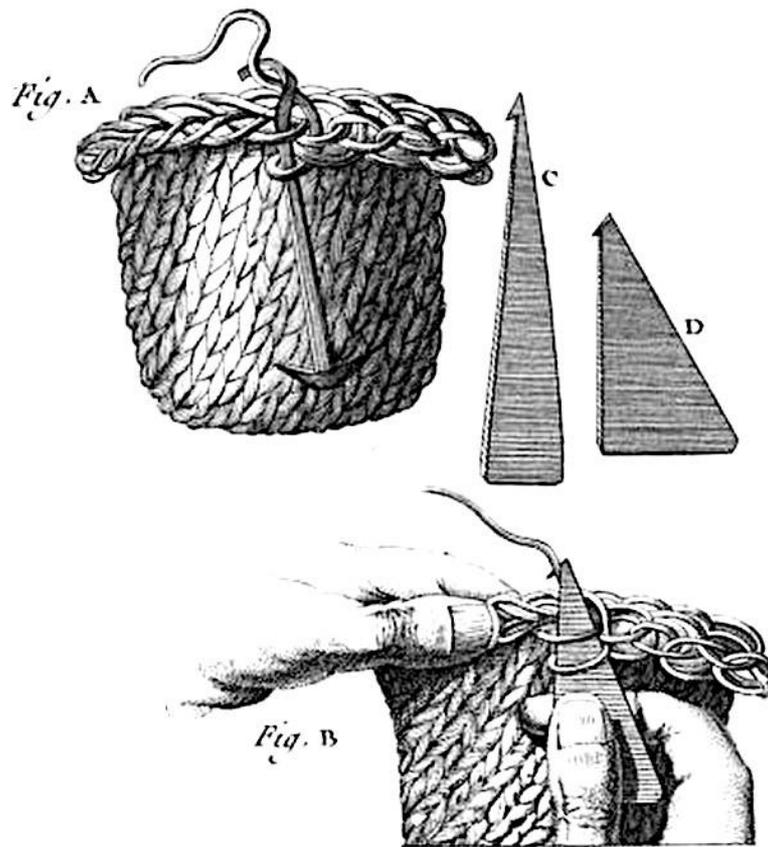
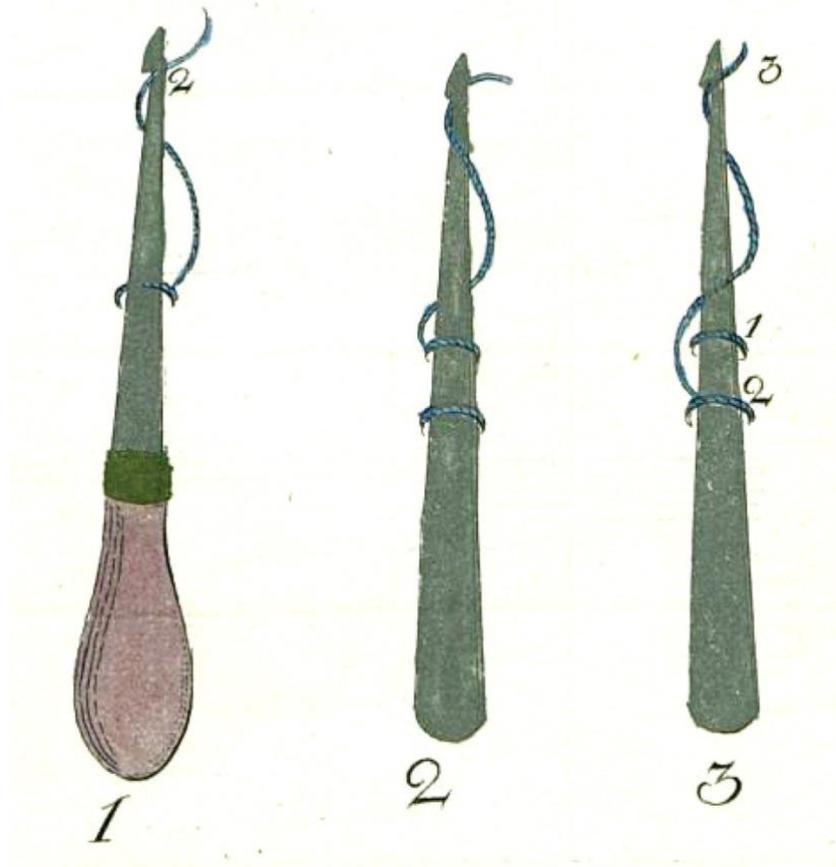


Plate described in *Encyclopédie Méthodique* (1785). Fig. A, example of knitting done on a nail, a type of finger for a glove worked in twine. Fig. B, another example of *tricot au clou* made with a flat crochet hook. Fig. C, crochet substituted for the nail, shown at scale [in the original printed edition]. Fig. D, crochet intended for use with very large objects, and which is larger to produce more open stitches.

The instructions in this French manual describe slip-stitch crochet as it is still practiced and note that “it is easy to vary the appearance of the stitches ... by working them to the left or to the right, or into the top or the bottom [edge of the loop].” The direction of the stitching is easily reversed when the hook is held vertically. The hook points to the left in the illustration but can as easily point to the right. Its up-and-down movement has no aspect of right- or left-handedness, nor does the lateral direction in which it moves as the stitching progresses. This facility was lost when the orientation of a crochet hook changed to its now familiar horizontal position but is retained in many local traditions that still use the flat hook.

The row of active stitching is illustrated in correct detail and the text notes further that the glove is turned inside out when completed. The rest of the fabric is then less accurately drawn to show the reverse face. The text also states, “someone who does not know how these gloves are finished will be puzzled by how they were worked.” This foreshadows the more recent and problematic situation where objects that can reasonably only be made in this manner have, nonetheless, been erroneously associated with other techniques (such as nålbinding, noted below) and remain to be correctly identified.

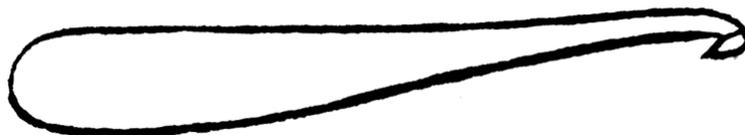
Another illustrated example of a flat hook is mentioned in a German treatise from 1800 on *The Art of Knitting in its Entirety*. This document reports “hook knitting” (*Hakenstricken*) to have been in practice before 1780 for making the uppers of “winter shoes and boots” and illustrates the tool.



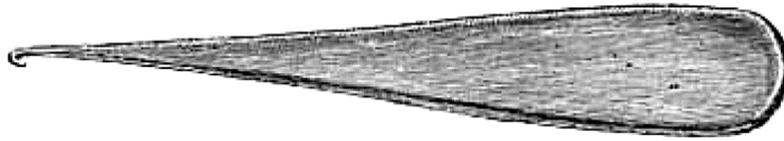
Hook illustration from Netto and Lehmann's *Die Kunst Zu Stricken in ihrem ganzen Umfange* [*The Art of Knitting in Its Entirety*] (1800).

### The evolution of Tools, Terms and Techniques

There is no evidence of the flat hook in Victorian instructions, where the term shepherd's hook soon came to designate any type of crochet hook. The flat form had no specific connection with the slip stitch in Dutch instructions from 1833, where it was recommended for work with heavier yarn.



A similar hook in German instructions from 1864 shows a much finer-gauge tip—a significant development in itself—used for its efficacy in working complex crochet stitches through tight loops.



Returning to the home territory of shepherd's knitting, the 1976 supplement to the *Scottish National Dictionary* extends the entry for *cleek*—a general designation for a hook—with the verb form “to knit with a hook, to crochet.” This is attested in a source from 1959 that describes a “pair of cleekit gloves ... made all with a small flat bone hook not much larger than a man's thumb,” additionally illustrating a specimen hook used by practitioners of that craft.



[The preceding three images are aggregated as Figs. A, B, and C in the published version.]  
Illustrations of hooks found in nineteenth- and twentieth-century instructions. From top: Figure A. *Penélopé* (Dutch, 1833); Figure B. *Der Bazar* (German, 1864); and Figure C. *Scottish Home and Country* (Scottish, 1959)



The oldest datable flat hook (NM.0136184) bears the mark of silversmith Arvid Wernström, who used the hallmark in Eksjö, Sweden, from 1778 to 1811.

*Photo by Elisabeth Eriksson, Nordiska Museet*

It would not be unduly speculative to regard this as a direct extension of the Scottish tradition described in 1812 and seen in the bootees from 1780. In the Anglophone context, the conceptual and nomenclatural transition from “shepherd's knitting” to the substantively identical “plain crochet” during the 1830s was a watershed marking the first use of the word “crochet” to name a craft (previously only having designated the tool).

This shift further signaled a growing stitch repertoire with forms that contributors to the Victorian literature deemed inappropriate to frame in terms of knitting. The defining attribute of that technique is pulling one loop of the working material through another, forming fabric by vertically intermeshing successive rows of such loops. In slip-stitch crochet, the new loop is additionally drawn through the adjacent loop in the preceding row, eliminating the need for the lateral support otherwise given by a knitting needle. The corresponding fabric consists of vertically intermeshed chains of simple loops.

Its categorization as a species of knitting is therefore reasonable—as long as the loop-through-loop attribute remains central. In current practice, a crochet stitch is normally worked under both edges of the loop to which it is anchored, rather than into that loop through only its front or back edge (abbreviated respectively as FLO and BLO, often described as two separate loops). The converse is assumed in early crochet instructions, which only prescribe working under both edges of the loop when particularly robust fabric is required, emphasizing the unsuitability of doing so in any other context.

If the conceptual shift from traditional flat-hook knitting to fancywork crochet is reflected in the cited documents and others like them beginning in the 1830s, the completion of the transition can be linked to the substantive change from working into the loop by default to working under it. This was a gradual process during the latter half of the nineteenth century and a decade or two into the twentieth.

### **Slip-Stitch Crochet**

Attitudes toward the slip stitch also changed during this period, beginning with the appellation “plain crochet” shifting to designate the double-crochet stitch (UK). The slip stitch remained fully viable through the 1910s, with instructions being published for intricate garments using nothing else. Then, the stitch was relegated to an ancillary role, and later deprecated further. As stated in a standard text from 1980, “slip stitches have several important functions ... but they are little use in building up a solid fabric.”

This narrative is clearly gainsaid by the material record, with the frequent appearance of the slip stitch in the mid-nineteenth-century instructions, including gloves “all made in single crochet” (UK) published by Mademoiselle Eléonore Riego de la Branchardière in 1854. They provide a good introductory project for anyone curious about hooked slip-stitch fabric as it was used at that time.

In contrast, the verb “knit” still appears in instructions for Ladies’ Mittens in the same hooked slip-stitch fabric in an American publication, *The Columbia Book of Yarns*, until 1908. The increase method used in the rounds between cuff and thumb opening is described as “make 1 chain, knit 1 stitch, make 1 chain.” A 1915 pattern from *The Columbia Book of Yarns* details the same increase method as “chain 1, slip stitch in next stitch, chain 1.” The cuff of the mitten has an added border in double crochet (US). Otherwise, the instructions for the mittens include nothing more than the FLO and BLO slip stitches documented in the eighteenth-century descriptions of hooked knitting. The reference to such a stitch being “knit” nearly a century and a half later in the United States is noteworthy, even if it no longer reflected common usage.

COLUMBIA YARNS  
**Ladies' Mittens**

CROCHETED



**MATERIAL**—Columbia Spanish Knitting Yarn  
 1 hank

1 Bone Crochet Hook No. 3

Ladies' Mittens: Crocheted from *The Columbia Book of Yarns* (1915)

Slip-stitch crochet continued to develop a while longer before changing trends nudged it out of the mainstream. Instructions for a girl's sweater in the 1918 edition of *The Columbia Book of Yarns* illustrate how it was being used at that time. The back of the garment is in the same front-loop-only slip-stitch crochet seen in the 1785 *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, and the front and sleeves alternate that stitch with single crochet (US). Flat hooks by that time remained central to regional traditions but had disappeared from urban European and American worktables.



**Misses' Crocheted Middy Sweater**

**MATERIAL**

4 Fold Columbia Germantown  
 7 balls White  
 3 balls Color

1 Celluloid or Bone Crochet Hook No. 6

**INSTRUCTIONS**

For 14 or 15 years

**Note**—This sweater is worked lengthwise.

**Back**—With white yarn make a chain of 90 stitches.

**Row 1**—Work 1 slip stitch in each stitch of chain, chain 1, turn.

**Row 2**—1 slip stitch in the first stitch, \* taking up the front loop, 1 slip stitch in the next stitch, taking up the back loop, 1 slip stitch in the next stitch, repeat from \* to end of row, chain 1, turn. Repeat row 2 for all the work, work 82 rows or 41 ribs, this completes the back.

**Front**—Chain 74, work 2 ribs, then add a chain of 21 stitches at one end for the armhole, work 14 ribs on this length for shoulder, now leave 10 stitches at the top for neck and on the remaining 83 stitches work 7 ribs, now work up from the bottom 50 stitches, then chain 34, (this will form the opening in the front), work the second front to correspond. Sew up the shoulders and underarm seams.

**Border on Bottom**—With colored yarn work 1 Sg. C. in first stitch, \* 1 slip stitch in next stitch, 1 Sg. C. in next stitch, repeat from \*



every other row 7 times to shape the top of sleeve, then work 14 ribs without increasing.

This 1918 sweater is worked in what we would now call slip-stitch and single crochet (US). The original pattern is from *The Columbia Book of Yarns* (see Resources).

## Resources

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*The Columbia Book of Yarns, Nineteenth Edition*. Philadelphia: The Manufacturers of Columbia Yarns, 1918. Available at [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org).

DR. CARY KARP spent almost 50 years professionally involved in museum-based research and is now happily devoting time as a retiree to investigating details of the history and technology of looped fabric production. Crochet is his particular passion, from both the practical and academic perspectives, and he published an overview of its emergence as a named craft in an article titled "Defining Crochet" in the November 2018 issue of *Textile History*. He maintains a blog on the more arcane aspects of loopography at [www.loopholes.blog](http://www.loopholes.blog).