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From rags to riches

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Abstract

This paper describes the history of female sanitary protection. The author discusses the use of rags as washable napkins, the introduction of sanitary towels made of cotton shoddy in the nineteenth century and finally the development of surgical cotton tampons. Women's personal accounts of their experiences are quoted and manufacturer's advertisements are reproduced.

Keywords: history, sanitary towels, surgical cotton tampons.

Introduction

How is that a fashion-and-dress-historian-cum-actress – a.k.a. The Knicker Lady – is going to speak at a 'serious' plenary session of the ACPWH Conference, as well as (we hope) entertaining in the more frivolous atmosphere of the evening 'do' that same night?

I admit that I don't have much professional medical expertise. The most I can offer is a 1950s Girl Guide badge in First Aid and a general 'Get Mum – quick!' experience of bringing up a big family. However, my chosen subject is intimately connected to women – and fashion – and it is the story of the worldly progress of both with regard to a small item of necessary apparel. Fashion in women's dress history isn't always a case of studying hem lengths or waist sizes. Occasionally, the curious researcher will stumble across other intriguing underlying influences that have helped to shape women's lives and the clothes that they wear. Like a keen detective – or medic – I'm often carefully examining one thing when, quite by chance, I start noticing another. That's exactly what happened in this case: I was researching something on Victorian mourning, I turned the page of a nineteenth-century ladies' magazine and a discreet advertisement caught my eye . . .

The year 1953 stands out in my memory for three things: it was the Coronation, my father bought a television set and I started my periods.

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Mine was a 'Don't talk about it' household – like so many throughout the land in the 1950s – I was an only child and the only periods I'd heard of were historical. Since my mother was at work, my practical grandmother, who lived with us, calmed me, saying she had the very thing I now needed 'put by' in the linen cupboard.

She produced a pile of hemmed 'napkins' made from an old tablecloth. These she folded, sides to middle, into a hefty pad and, with two large safety-pins, anchored the sling inside a clean pair of bloomers. Now I was sorted and 'comfy', she gave me a cup of tea, and picking up her knitting, delivered the most profound statement of my 13 years:

'This will happen to you every month for a lot of your life. Soft white cloths may be considered old-fashioned by some, but in my opinion, they're nicest for girls when they start. You don't want to get chafed down there . . . and they can be boiled. All you have to do is change the napkins twice or three times a day, and put them in the bucket of water in the back kitchen. Remember to put the lid on the bucket – and don't lose the pins.'

And that was that. The first chapter of birds and bees had been duly told.

My grandmother was a Victorian, born in 1876, and the arrangement that I have described had been one that had been adhered to by generations of women previous to her birth.

From before the time of Queen Elizabeth I to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, washable sanitary towel (STs) were used in homes across

the civilized world. For hundreds of years, *poor* women who were ‘on the rag’ – the sad slang for monthlies – used scraps of cloth that, before the invention of the modern safety-pin in 1870, were secured by tape ties around the waist. Rich women had soft, hemstitched pieces of diaper cloth: a fine, absorbent, diamond-patterned, sanitary cotton fabric that was sold in narrow, 10-yard pieces, and cut and hemmed when needed. Inventories of well-to-do women in earlier centuries often list diapers amongst their personal belongings. Indeed, the word ‘diping’ was an upper-class euphemism for menstruation in the nineteenth century.

Think about all that washing! Small wonder that, for many women, Monday became associated with having the blues.

Then the first successful commercial advance in modern sanitary protection came in 1880 when humble cotton shoddy came into its own.

Here is an extract from the July 1880 edition of the *British Medical Journal*:

‘THE LADIES’ NEW SANITARY TOWEL
(Patented)

‘UNDER the above name, Messrs. Southall Bros. and Barclay of Birmingham have introduced to the profession and public, through the medium of ladies’ outfitting establishments, what will undoubtedly prove a very great boon to all ladies, viz., a much improved substitute for the generally adopted napkin used during menstruation. The old napkin, with its many obvious defects, may now be entirely discarded, and the new “sanitary towel” adopted in its stead, with all the advantages to be derived from a more comfortable article, and one possessing all that can be desired from a sanitary point of view. This “towel” is essentially a pad, and is made entirely of absorbent and antiseptic materials. Though impregnated with boracic acid, it is not irritating. A striking illustration of the absorbent power of the materials used may be obtained by taking a portion from the centre of the pad and placing it upon water. It almost immediately becomes saturated, and sinks; and the same absorbent power is possessed by the pad or towel as a whole.

‘After use, the “towels” are simply burned. In addition to their absorbent and antiseptic powers they are of a downy softness, elastic in a high degree, and are very light, in striking contrast to the ordinary diaper, which is cumbrous, heavy, and hot, chafing the skin

during its use. The towels are more comfortable, and it is believed that some dangers to health of a septic nature will be avoided by their use. For ladies’ travelling on long voyages they are indispensable. The towels, provided in packets of four and boxes of one dozen, are to be bought at a cheap rate; they will no doubt be largely adopted.’

At first, this new sanitary towel was advertised using only lineage. It was discreetly placed amongst the ‘Personal and For Sale’ columns on the back pages of posh women’s magazines.

The following advertisement is from *The Queen*, *The Lady’s Paper* for 23 October 1880:

‘The Ladies’ New Sanitary Towels are approved and highly recommended by many eminent members of the medical profession for their cleanliness, comfort, and antiseptic properties. They may be obtained from Mrs. Cook, Ladies’ Outfitter, New-Street, Birmingham. 3 shillings per dozen, postage 3d. extra, or in packets of three for 12 stamps.’

Southall’s, now part of Smith and Nephew, were established in 1820. Their trade included bandages, medical dressings and violet powders, and naturally, a large assortment of select, washable sanitary towels. All these could be sent directly to the customer.

At the same time as Southall’s were advertising their new disposable sanitary towel, other British manufacturers were seeking to produce similar products, but Southall’s bold marketing made them the front runner. ‘Health, Comfort and Hygiene’ was their slogan.

By hyping the ‘medically approved’ angle, and launching a product that was endorsed and proclaimed by doctors – all male at this date – they successfully directed the attention of wealthy women via the pages of society magazines, magazines that were undoubtedly then read by their servants. Almost certainly it was ladies’ maids who encouraged their mistresses to purchase these new articles, thus relieving the maids having to hem diapers or, indeed, wash the wretched things . . .

Three shillings a packet was a hefty price in the 1880s, especially for something that didn’t last. Certainly, it was an unnecessary, frivolous expense for poor working women.

Southall’s New Sanitary Towels came packaged in small brown cardboard boxes, and were dispatched under plain cover. Nevertheless, by the 1890s, Southall’s faced fierce competition

from abroad, even with their tempting 'free sample' offer.

Hartmann's, a German company that is still going strong, produced Hygienic Wood Wool Towellettes that were advertised and retailed in this country.

Wood wool wadding was cellulose, a by-product of pulped wood fibre used in paper manufacture. It was highly absorbent and the pad was contained within a tube of surgical gauze. This pad was more 'admitting', less bulky and probably much easier to dispose of discreetly. Manufacturers now competed for a far wider market and 'The Actual Cost of Washing' was Hartmann's marketing ploy – a slogan that suggested how you could save money by paying the washer woman less.

Meanwhile, in the USA, the Johnson & Johnson pharmaceutical company came up with the 'Serviette' sanitary cloth:

'Totally Absorbent, Absolutely Antiseptic, Dainty and Ready for Instant Use, Ladies! 40 cents per dozen.'

The new STs aided activity. More women were now working, travelling and enjoying sports. They were daring, energetic riders, but their saddle now sat over wheels and two pedals and didn't bite!

The bicycle was more than a means of transport: for thousands of women, it brought freedom – a trusty steed called 'Independence'.

From the early 1900s, Southall's used large display advertisements in more magazines. These were illustrated with a beaming, super-starched nurse holding aloft a packet of STs, and the copy was often taken from 'real' letters full of eager, professional appreciation; for example, 'My patient at Monte Carlo has been truly delighted . . .' Then, in 1906, although still market leaders, Southall's changed from brown paper packets to silver ones. They wanted to stand out from competition – but just in case the postman went faint with embarrassment, the 'Sample' packet was still delivered, post-free, in a plain wrapper.

World War I brought important social changes; for instance, there was better sanitation, better education for working-class girls and a plethora of new, cheap, weekly women's magazines. These publications were to serve Sanpro manufacturer's well in the years ahead.

The 1920s and 1930s were undoubtedly Sanpro saturation years.

In 1921, a US paper-making company, Kimberley-Clark, marketed a fully soluble

sanitary napkin. It was made entirely from cellulose wadding. The brand was Kotex, and it was an instant success. As the fashionable skirts went up, so the sales improved! In 1927, Kotex went on sale in the UK, along with a free booklet advertised by the latest smiling 'Kotex nurse', entitled *Marjorie May's 12th Birthday*.

Wow! How come I never got to read that?

By 1926, a famous British disposable had already made its appearance: Lilia. A loop-ended towel, the Lilia was made by Sasheena Ltd of Hull, surgical suppliers previously known for commendable first-aid kits – and here was another! The Lilia company advertised in a range tuppenny and thruppenny weekly magazines, targeting 'ordinary' women with sensitive, well-written copy that educated them and answered their unasked questions about the benefits of disposable STs.

Nevertheless, the biggest boon to disposability came with more wash-down lavatories in homes, offices and shops. With one pull and a two-gallon flush, and a little luck, you could be rid of the beastly thing. By 1929, some factories and Government offices had gone further and installed incinerators in the ladies' toilets. Things were looking up.

Which brings us to 'Internally Yours'. In 1931, A US doctor in Denver, CO, created a compressed, surgical cotton tampon with a cord stitched through its length for the convenience of his wife, Myrtle. He finished it off with a cardboard applicator tube. Myrtle was very pleased!

The doctor obtained a patent for this product, but major manufacturer's were reluctant to invest because of the Wall Street Crash, and the ensuing slump and depression . . . (What do you know, here we go again.) Nevertheless, an enterprising business woman, Gertrude Tendrich, bought the doctor's patent and ordered a machine to be built that could produce over 1000 tampons a day (these now make about 40 000). From this modest start, Gertrude's company established the name Tampax. By 1937, aided by a brilliant advertising campaign (clever advertising has been the key throughout the whole story of sanitary protection), a subsidiary was launched in the UK, and in 1939, with four compressors and two adapted cigar-wrapping machines, the factory went into production.

If manufacturers had thought that disposable STs had been difficult to explain, they really faced the furnace now. The church, medics, mothers, grandmothers and maiden aunts all contributed to a wave of protest about this

product: 'Agents of defloration!' 'The work of the Devil!' Tampons tested the generation gap and were found to be a taboo subject. Most distasteful of all was the implication of having to 'fiddle with oneself'. Burning at the stake would have been preferable.

What were they going to tell little Marjorie May now?

That story took several years to come good and the rest, as they say, is history. It was not until 1986 that STs could be advertised on television, and in 1992, the last confident, smiling nurse was seen: Claire Raynor on Channel 4 advertising Johnson & Johnson's Vespri Silhouettes. I expect that everyone got those muddled with motor scooters.

Nowadays you can buy STs anywhere – corner shops, garages and supermarkets. Stroll down the Sanpro aisle of any big chemist's, and you'll count 20 or 30 different products – light days, slight days, heavy days, barely there days, night-times, daytime, slimline, ultra-slimline, deodorized, scented, unscented, mini, maxi – mooncups – and Always, the ones with little sticky-back wings.

From rags to riches: the leaky nature of women and cotton shoddy, a waste material at one time used to clean horse's tack, brass fenders and military cannons, had, curiously enough, provided manufacturers with the means of making fortunes at home and abroad.

To end with, here is a cautionary tale from the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, which was related to me by a lady in her nineties:

'I had my monthlies start when I was 12 or thereabouts. Frighten me to death it did. I didn't know nothin', see. Thought I'd die. My Mam made me a rag nappy and pinned it to me combs. Rough it was, I tell yer.

'Worse was, a few weeks later, I went on Sunday School trip to seaside and sat in charabanc with vicar an' 'is missus and didn't know I'd been visited again. It made a great patch on my new, green skirt – unlucky, see . . . Other girls sniggered and I was so embarrassed. It was turrible – I remember, all these years on, feeling shamed all over Weston-super-Mare. It be a place I've never visited again.'

As was found in the 1880s, the New Sanitary Towel was to be a great comfort to ladies when travelling.

Rosemary Hawthorne is a classically trained actress who won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). In addition to being a RADA medallist, she was also awarded the coveted Costume Prize . . . which is where it all started. She cultivated her passion for unusual historical clothing and its sociological link to the past two centuries, becoming a well-respected fashion historian. With little being documented about the history of underwear, Rosemary emerged as a leading authority. Her first book, Knickers: An Intimate Appraisal, was published in 1991, and became the gospel on everything from pantaloons and pantalettes to divided drawers and bloomers.