



Blackwork Journey

Techniques

TQ0004

Gadgets and Gismos



The Working Environment by Liz Almond

Gadgets and Gismos

There are a wide range of tools available to make the work of the embroiderer less complicated. Some are household tools not normally associated with sewing, whilst others are specially designed for the purpose and this month, I want to take a look at some and consider their respective merits.

Working with needles

Needles are the most essential items and working with some types can be difficult, especially fine beading needles, small ‘betweens’ or curved needles. Problems can arise when both threading and gripping them, especially if your fingers are stiff or weak and to compensate, I use the following:

Needle threaders

A number of needle threading devices are on the market for use with different weights of thread. Most are very simple to use, whilst others are more complicated, but if your eyesight is a problem these may provide a solution to your needs, especially when combined with a magnifying lens as these often have an area of additional magnification built into the lens which can be used for threading fine needles.



Fig.1 Needle threaders range from fine wire for floss to more substantial threaders

for thicker threads. The automatic threader can handle of variety of threads.

To use a needle threader, place the wire or hook through the eye of the needle. Thread the floss through the loop and pull gently. Make sure you use a threader large enough to contain the thread easily or the wire may break.

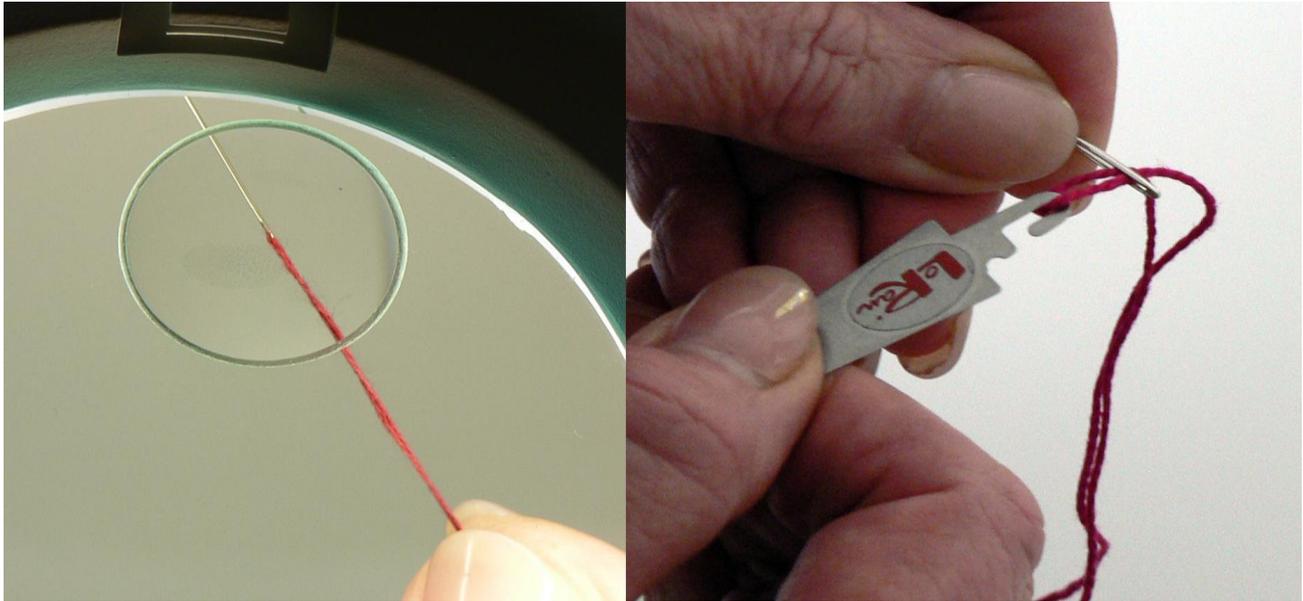


Fig.2 Thread a fine beading needle under a lens and use a needle threader for other tasks

The automatic needle threader looks complicated, but is simple to use. The needle is placed into the opening on the top of the device and the thread is placed horizontally across the groove in the threader. The white button is then moved forward which automatically pushes the thread through the eye of the needle.



Fig.3 Automatic needle threader in use

Needle grips and pliers

Needle grips are small leather pads designed to grasp a small needle firmly to enable it to be pulled through the fabric.

However, small fine pointed pliers are particularly useful for pulling needles through thick fabric or covered card, especially when using a small or curved needles which may be difficult to grip. However, take care not to bend or break the needle. Grasp firmly, but pull gently!



Fig.4 Needle grips and pliers are useful tools

Caring for your needles

Needles are, of course, the most essential tools in the sewing box and as such, need to be properly maintained. Needle cases, rolls and pin cushions all help to keep them safe.



Fig.5 Blackwork pin cushion and needle cases

You may choose to purchase one of these, but why not make your own special needle holder, pin wheel or pin cushion as a way of relating to the needlewomen of the past who valued their precious needles and pins. I have included a pattern for a small pinwheel. Stitch both sides or add an initial on one side for a personal touch!

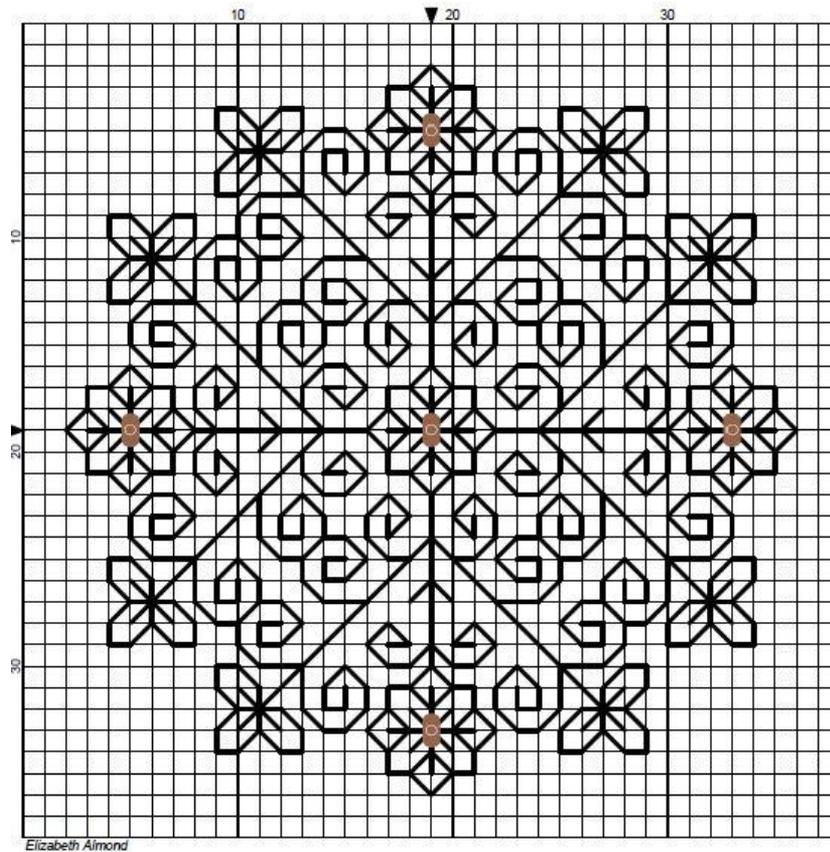


Fig.6 Blackwork pin wheel pattern

*Design area 32 x 32 stitches worked in one strand of DMC 310
2.43 x 2.43 inches worked on 14 count Aida or 28 count evenweave
2 pieces of fabric 6 x 6 inches*

Emery cushions

Whilst a variety of these are now available, Victorian sewing boxes frequently contained a small strawberry cushion filled with fine sand or emery powder. This was similar to a pin cushion, but smaller and heavier and used to remove rust and sharpen needles by pushing them into the strawberry and through the emery several times to keep them smooth and rust free. However, if the needle point is damaged, the eye bent or the shaft pitted, it should, of course, be discarded before it damages the fabric.

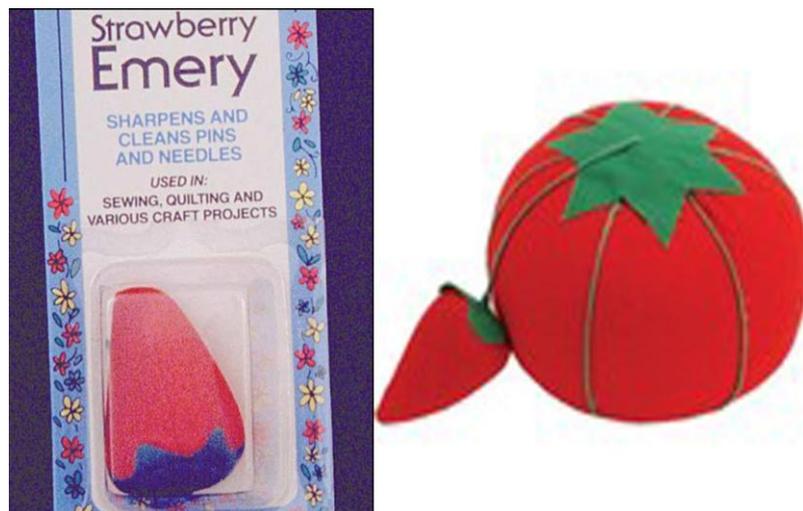


Fig.7 An emery strawberry for sharpening and cleaning needles and a modern tomato pin cushion with emery strawberry attached

Needle safety

A dropped needle is a potential safety issue. So when setting up a project, I suggest you count the needles and pins out and check that you still have the same number at the end of the session.

Beading needles are especially vulnerable to breaking, due to their fine nature and can be very difficult to find, even with a magnet. Wrist pin cushions are very useful, as is a 'biscornu' which is both small and practical. A 'biscornu' is a modern

eight sided pin cushion which is very popular at the moment and ideal to keep needles and pins in a safe place whilst you are working.



Fig.8 A biscornu makes an attractive pincushion

Bad habits can be difficult to break, so never put needles or pins between your lips as they can be accidentally swallowed. Pins with larger heads are much easier to see as are quilting pins with their extra length and visibility.

Magnets

If you lose a needle in an awkward place, an extending wand magnet can prove very useful and will usually locate the needle without having to bend down or get on your hands and knees which can prove to be dangerous, especially when sharp objects are around! Some of these magnets also have built in LED lights.



Fig.9 Extendable wand magnet

Magnets attached to your embroidery or by your workspace, can also provide an instant storage solution for spare needles whilst work is in progress. A pair of plain strong magnets placed either side of the fabric will hold small scissors, needles and pins safely. I have collected a number of these magnets, some of which are highly decorated.

I also have a magnetic pin dish, which is excellent for holding pins and needles, but remember that if the needles are left on the magnet for too long they can become magnetised and stick to your scissors! Magnetic chart holders and magnetic line keepers complete the list of magnetic tools I use when I am stitching.



Needle Safety



A word of warning – magnetic tools should not be left alongside electrical equipment, computerised sewing machines and data storage devices for long periods as they could cause damage to the internal circuitry.

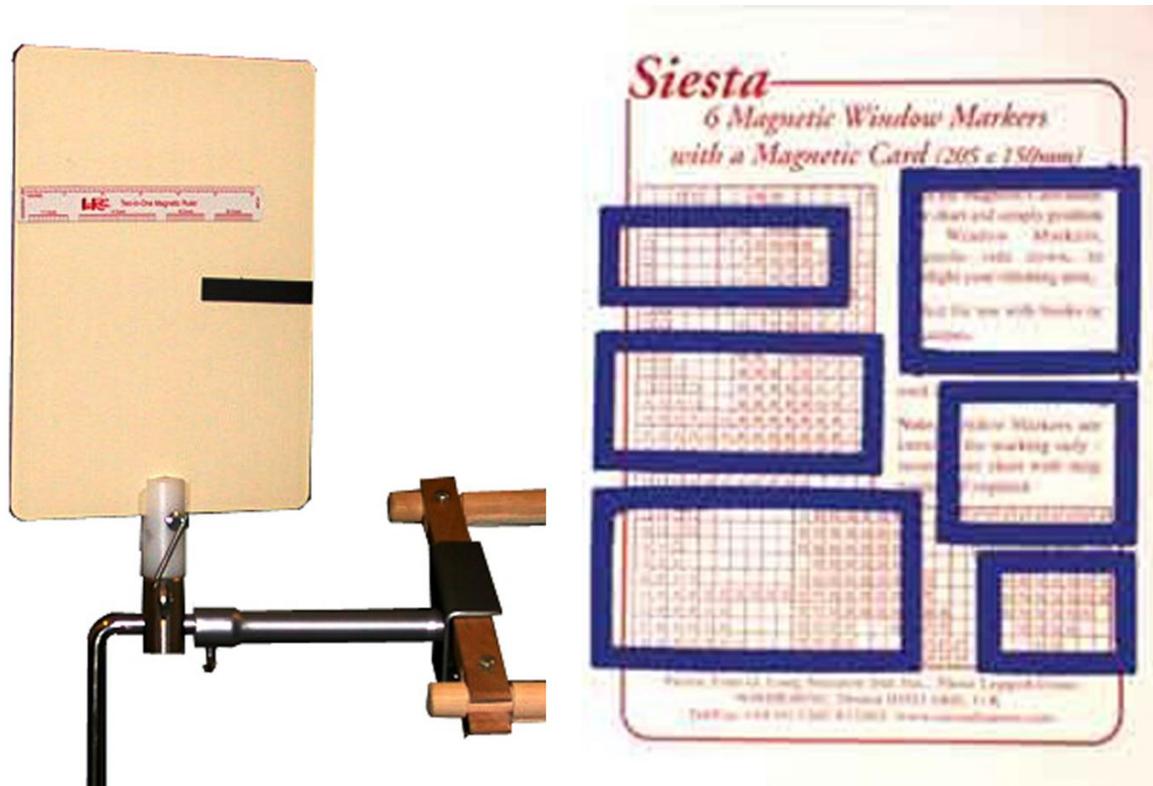


Fig.10 Magnetic chart holder and window markers hold patterns firmly in place



Fig.11 Decorative magnets can serve a very practical purpose

Stitch rippers, craft tweezers, screwdrivers, tape measures and beeswax!

These are not the tools you would normally expect to find in a workbasket, but they are practical!

Mistakes are inevitable and whilst a small pair of embroidery scissors will undo most errors, a stitch ripper is particularly useful. As *Fig.12* illustrates, the stitch ripper has two points, one sharp and one covered to prevent damage to the fabric. When not in use they should be covered by their protective caps.

Removing stitches is best done under a magnifying lens to lessen the chance of slitting the fabric and craft tweezers can be used to remove the last traces of thread from a fabric.

A small screwdriver for tightening up frame fasteners and a retractable tape measure marked in both inches and centimetres is useful for a variety of purposes and I prefer one to a standard fabric tape measure because it stays clean and safe.

For convenience, I use beeswax in a container to run my threads through. It helps smooth the thread, protects them from rubbing and helps to prevent tangling. However, I find that blocks of real beeswax are more satisfactory to work with because they are softer and coat the threads better.



Fig.12 Practical additions for your workbox, including beeswax for coating threads and a screwdriver to tighten hoops

Grippers

Whilst some people use corks or even plasters wrapped around a handle to help them hold a tool more easily, there are easy-to-use comfort grips or handles designed specifically for anyone who needs a larger handle due to weak hands or conditions such as arthritis. They slide on easily and adjust to different shapes and sizes, fitting all small tools such as crochet hooks, pencils, brushes etc enabling you to continue your hobby with ease. Investigate your local craft store or research on-line to find the most suitable one for your requirements.



Fig. 13 One example of a comfort handle

Comfort Handles” and “The Gripper” www.gripeaze.com

Thimbles

A thimble is a hard, bell-like, pitted cup placed on the third finger to protect it as it pushes the needle through the fabric. Whilst it is not essential, it can save serious damage to your quilting finger! Like needles, thimbles have a long history dating back to Roman times when they were often made of a variety of materials such as leather. Nowadays, they come in different sizes, so try the thimble on to find the right size for you. It should fit snugly to protect the vulnerable parts of your finger.

The design of thimbles varies according to the work being undertaken. For example, the quilting thimble has a ridged top to prevent the needle slipping, whilst a plastic finger shield only partially covers the finger, but still protects the finger tip when pushing the needle through the fabric. I use several different types, but it is down to personal choice!



Fig.14 Thimbles, including a plastic finger shield and a half thimble provide different choices for the needlewoman.

There is a way of coping with most difficulties and knowing which tools to use can help considerably. I hope this column has raised awareness of some of the practical gadgets and gismos currently available. Take care of your tools as the Victorian needlewomen did and they will last and serve you well. Neglect them and your needlework could suffer!

To learn more about the history of needlework tools, I suggest you go online and search under “Antique needlework tools” where you will find numerous websites that provide a fascinating insight into the subject.

Happy stitching,

Liz

