

The First Commercial Sewing Machine

Who invented the sewing machine? Come on. The electric light Thomas Edison. The telephone Alexander Bell. The sewing machine. Um-?

In fact this invention had such far-reaching benefits that it would be nice if it too, had just one creator, whose name fitted neatly on a Trivial Pursuit card. But it took 100 years and at least as many inventors to devise a mechanical replacement for what human hands had done for centuries.

Not that, while cloth itself was hand woven and delivered by packhorse, there was much call for seams at 4,000 stitches a minute. But when weaving became industrialised and mill owners ruled the earth, inventors became seriously interested in 'mechanical tailors'.

The earliest practical sewing machine - practical enough to be produced by the dozen and used commercially - was the brainchild of Bartholemé Thimonnier, a Frenchman born two hundred years ago in 1793. He showed academic promise and for a while his father, a textile dyer, was able to finance him at a local college - but money ran out and by twenty the young Thimonnier had instead set up a tailoring shop at Amplepuis near Lyon.

The town's main industry was weaving, and the speed at which cloth could be woven - even on the hand looms owned by almost every local household - made Thimonnier's own business of sewing look painstakingly slow by contrast. Previous would-be inventors had tried to imitate the actions of hand sewing, but their early studies in robotics had, not surprisingly, been defeated by the engineering complexities of passing the needle right through the thread for every stitch.

None of these inventors had been a tailor, though, and it was perhaps Thimonnier's inside knowledge which led him to consider instead the mechanical possibilities of a hooked needle and chain-stitch, long used for decorative

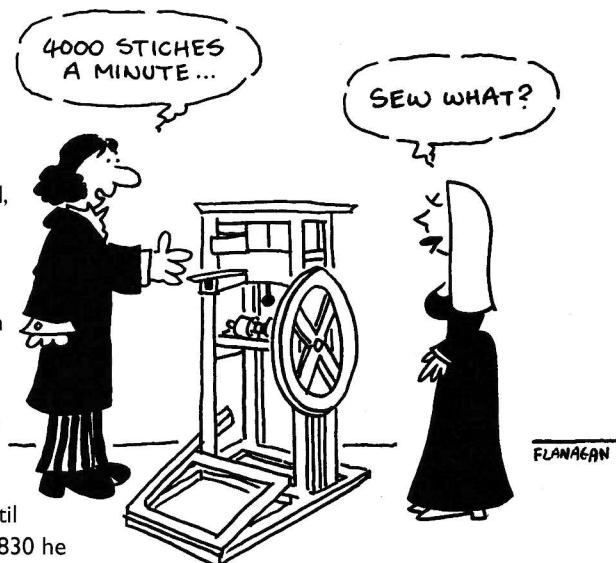
embroidery but unheard of for hand-sewn seams.

Thimonnier, on the other hand, was no mechanic, and when he moved to the more industrial St. Etienne, the challenge of inventing a sewing machine began to absorb him at the expense of his tailoring business. For the next four years he worked alone and in secret on the project, teaching himself mechanics and devising a prototype machine, until he found a financial backer. By 1830 he had gained a patent - and neighbours who feared for his sanity.

Undeterred, he took his ideas to Paris and, helped by the Napoleonic wars, went into business with eighty machines making army clothing. Though not the first chain-stitching machine (Thomas Saint had patented one for making boots and shoes in 1790) Thimonnier's was the first in recorded commercial use.

Judged on speed alone, the fastest seamstresses at 30 stitches per minute were no match for these machines, which produced 200 stitches per minute. They also looked oddly like guillotines - and on 20th January 1831, fearing for their jobs, some 200 outraged tailors and dressmakers destroyed the lot, threatened Thimonnier and eventually hounded him out of Paris.

His next few years were more hand-to-mouth. No sooner were his first three children old enough to start work than a second marriage and the arrival of four more made him risk another tailoring job in Paris, whilst furtively working on his machine. He then spent two years tramping round Amplepuis with the thing on his back, giving roadside demonstrations in return for cash.



Yet his determination paid off and by 1845 he had managed to renew the patent, found another commercial backer and set up France's first sewing machine company. But by then many other inventors had turned their attention to sewing machines, and Thimonnier's was one of several similar European and North American businesses born in the 1840's.

These however fared better: the second French revolution of 1848 forced Thimonnier's factory to close and though he obtained patents in England and the US, he also found more competition there. From then on, it seems, bad luck took over.

In Manchester he had just completed plans for Lakeman & Co to start making his machines when a cash flow crisis called him back to France. Then his partner entered one of their models in London's Great Exhibition of 1851 - the dawn of serious commercial investment in sewing machines - but it arrived late and was not even reviewed.

Thimonnier died seven years later in obscurity. Having paved the way for the ready-made clothing industry, dozens more inventors took up the threads - and reaped the rewards.