

Who made quilts and why?

Today people generally make quilts for artistic, educational and social reasons like celebrating or commemorating an event. This wasn't always the case.

Quilters also made quilts and coverlets for warmth, comfort or to earn an income. For many people, especially children and the elderly, poor living conditions, diet and health care meant a quilt on their bed could make the difference between life and death.

We often assume only poor people made quilts and used recycled clothing to make them. Over the last 300 years quilting and patchwork have moved in and out of fashion but in fact, during that time many wealthy people bought or made patchwork quilts themselves.

Rich householders in the 18th Century bought quilted bedcovers and clothing from quilt workshops. By the late 19th Century, some 'itinerant' or travelling workers earned a living making quilts for wealthy homeowners.

The author Jane Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra in 1811,

'...have you remembered to collect peices (pieces) for the Patchwork? We are now at a standstill.'

At this time many people also earned money setting up 'quilt clubs' in the North East of England. Quilters took a subscription fee from club members over a number of weeks and delivered a new quilt to each member at the end of the payment period.



From top:

Cot quilt made by a member of the Dennis-Cann family c.1850-90. Courtesy of Quilters' Guild of the British Isles.

Woodcut image of Jane Austen, courtesy of Jane Austen Memorial Trust'.