Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MIDDLE AGES: WOMAN WITH DISTAFF AND SPINDLE H122

Spinster was the name given to a woman whose job it was to spin fleece into woollen yarn, which could then be woven into cloth. There is evidence to suggest that spinning and weaving were taking place in Britain as far back as the Neolithic Period (about 4000 BC to 2200 BC). The model in the box represents a spinster from the fourteenth century, which is when the term spinster first appears in the written records.



In the Middle Ages, several processes were needed to turn dirty, tangled fleece into cloth. Firstly, the fleece had to be washed and combed, then spun to make thread or yarn. It could then be dyed using natural colours from plants and woven to make cloth. The picture on the right shows a group of people dyeing cloth in a large vat. Next came a process called fulling, where the cloth was soaked in water to shrink it and beaten so that it thickened. Finally, the cloth was stretched out to dry and the surface was brushed and tidied up.



The model spinster in the box is using two simple tools to help spin the wool.

In her right hand she holds a **spindle** - a long wooden stick with a circular weight at the bottom, called a whorl. The stronger the fibre, the heavier the whorl needed to be. Whorls are amongst the most common objects found by archaeologists. This is partly because of the materials they were made from (for example pottery, stone or bone) and also because they became a very common, everyday tool having great importance in the community. There are several examples on the right.



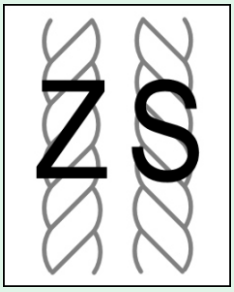
Propped underneath the huge pile of wool is the **distaff** - a long stick with a hook on the end, which stopped the fibrous fleece becoming entangled with the piece that was being spun.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MIDDLE AGES: WOMAN WITH DISTAFF AND SPINDLE H122

To spin wool, follow these steps:

First, pull out a length of fleece and twist it by hand - see how it is thinner nearer the spinster's right hand.



At the same time, spin the spindle round, making the wool twist even tighter until it wraps itself around the stick. The thread will either made an 'S' or 'Z' shape, depending on which direction the spindle is spun. (See illustration on the right).

Then pull the yarn off the stick when the spindle is full and repeat the process until some balls have been made. The yarn is now ready to be used, or, for added strength, the yarn could be plied.

To ply the yarn, take the ends of two or three balls of yarn and attach them to the spindle.

Then spin the spindle in the opposite direction to before, so that the yarn doesn't unwind. The individual strands twist together and give an extra thick thread.

Sounds easy? It takes a lot of practice before you can produce a yarn of equal thickness without any breaks or lumps!



Today the word spinster implies an unmarried woman but in the Middle Ages it simply referred to a woman who span yarn. This woman is wearing a belt called a chatelaine, which has a set of keys and a purse hanging from it. This shows us that she was in charge of a household. She looked after the money and the general running of the house and was probably married.