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With fast fashion in freefall due to the pandemic, the mending movement is picking up pace. Yasmin Jones-Henry meets the craftspeople, designers and retailers giving our clothes new life

Previous page: coat from Christopher Raeburn's A/W 20 collection.
This page, below left to right: Celia Pym's 'Where Holes Happen' workshop; Pym's *Hope's Sweater*, 1951 (2011); original Norwegian sweater with Celia Pym's white wool darning, originally from Annemor Sundbø's Ragpile collection



Pym: photos Michele Panzeri

learn to teach that mending is not about perfection – the damage is part of the transformation,’ says Celia Pym. ‘The mend is the acknowledgement that change is a part of the process.’ The textile artist – whose darning workshops hosted by lifestyle brand TOAST and the haberdashery Loop London, among others, regularly sell out – first became interested in mending in 2007, creating work that is driven by a desire to explore the emotional significance of preserving, cherishing and repairing garments that hold value and memories. Currently on show at the Textilmuseum in St Gallen, Switzerland (in *Material Matters*, until 21 February 2021) is a sweater worn by her mother, Hope, as a child, then by her brother and later discovered in a moth-eaten heap. She darned it with yarn from the Shetland islands, where the sweater was from, and *Hope's Sweater*, 1951 (2011) now serves as meditation on the connection between the generations.

Pym's work is an artistic intervention that is as much about the imprints of the wearer – their stories and movements – as it is about repair. In a society that places emphasis on perfection, and air-brushing away the blemishes and scars, the artist

champions the philosophy that there is a power in mending in fashion, just as in life itself.

The act of mending is now gaining mainstream momentum, as the climate crisis and mass textile waste compel the next generation of British brands to find creative solutions, and consumers to rethink their choices – or sharpen their own fixing skills. The coronavirus pandemic, and the resulting slowdown in consumerism in almost all countries, has only accelerated this. Whether through sentimentalism, thrift or concern for the environment, 2020 has created the perfect conditions for the resurgence of a repair culture – for the first time since the government launched the slogan ‘Make Do and Mend’ during the Second World War.

Long before the pandemic took hold, however, designers such as Christopher Raeburn, Priya Ahluwalia, Bethany Williams and Phoebe Williams had been upending fast fashion norms by using recycled textiles and craft skills in their collections. The vital need to reform a broken system of over-production has seen them begin to transform the linear process of ‘take-make-waste’ into a circular model that sees repair as fundamental to the lifecycle of a garment.

‘We offer free repairs for life on all our garments,’ says Raeburn, who has a team of 20 in his ‘lab’ in London’s Hackney, 70% of which are hands-on creatives and are involved in mending. His compelling mantra of ‘remade, reduced, recycled’ has seen him collaborate with the V&A and Moncler, as well as high street brands, such as The North Face and Timberland. ‘For us, the relationship with our customer starts with purchase – we use this opportunity to invite emotional attachment with our garments,’ the designer explains. This both extends each item’s lifespan and encourages people to become better curators and custodians of their wardrobes.

Christopher Raeburn is one of a number of fashion brands that have boycotted Black Friday in recent years, or ceased trading in protest, to counter the fast-fashion bargains fuelling mindless consumption. ‘Buy nothing; repair something,’ read

a sign in the window of his shop on Soho’s Newburgh Street last November, which was closed in protest. Instead, he invited people to the Raeburn lab, to learn how to repair their much loved garments, regardless of their brand.

The need for a radical rethink in the industry was laid bare earlier in 2019, when the UK parliament’s Environmental Audit Committee published its *Fixing Fashion* report assessing the state of the UK’s textiles industry, revealing that the UK buys more clothes per person than any other country in Europe, with around 20% of all textile purchases going to landfill and 80% incinerated. This report also revealed that the UK’s fashion industry recycles just 1% of its material waste – a shocking fact, coupled with the knowledge that it takes 2,700 litres of water to make a cotton T-shirt (Ellen MacArthur Foundation report, 2018). Soon after, I interviewed Mary Creagh MP, the then

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Left: coat from Christopher Raeburn's A/W 20 collection. Opposite, top: Raeburn at his lab teaching how to make a Zero Waste Bag, and below: pieces from Raeburn's S/S 20 collection

chair of the committee, who confirmed that 300,000 tonnes of material was going to landfill or incineration each year. 'That's nearly £140 million-worth [of clothing] ending up in the bin,' she said. Given that countries such as India, Indonesia and Bangladesh make a sizeable chunk of the world's wardrobe, 'we're basically wearing the fresh water supply of the Indian subcontinent'.

A rallying cry for change could be heard long before the pandemic ground the world to a halt and forced humanity to step off the consumer treadmill. But now it has a new urgency and there is a fresh set of buzzwords, such as 'Build Back Better' and 'cultural reset'. 'Mother Nature has literally locked us indoors to reflect,' says Orsola de Castro, co-founder of campaign group Fashion Revolution. I first interviewed her in January 2020 about her vision for the new decade as 'the era of the artisan', when neither of us could have conceived how rapidly people's mindsets about consumption would shift over the months to come. In February, de Castro invited me to 'Fashion Revolution: Stitch & Bitch', held at London Fashion Week, in association with the British Fashion Council. The fact that a mending workshop had found its way on to the LFW schedule confirmed that repair culture was permeating the mainstream.

We spoke again a few months later as part of a panel discussion at *Fashion Revolution Week*, a programme of talks and workshops on responsible design, this year forced to go digital by COVID-19. She observed how this moment of introspection is making people rethink their choices. Instead of buying ethical fashion, 'people are beginning to look inside their wardrobes

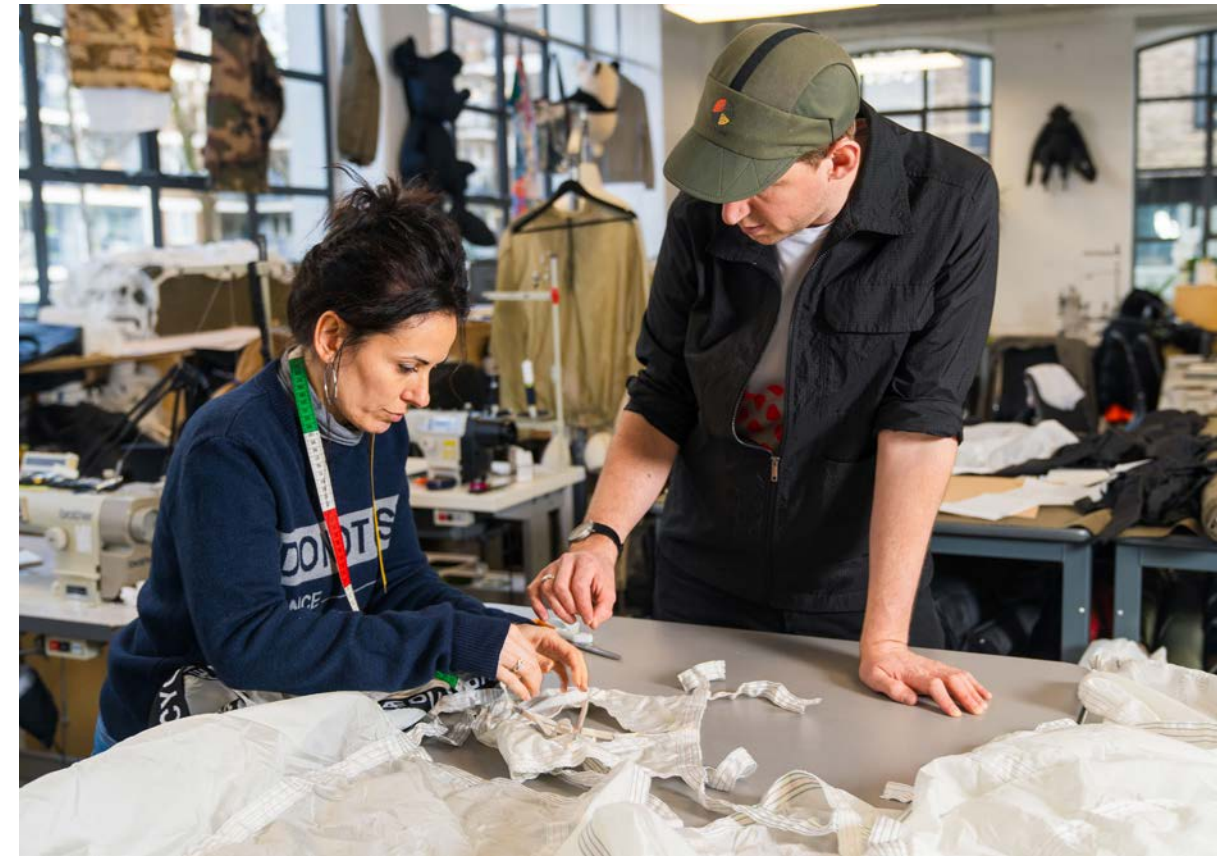
and discover that the most sustainable option is the garment they already own,' she says.

Sophie Slater, co-founder of social enterprise Birdsong in London, which champions slow fashion and provides employment for local women's organisations, shared how COVID-19 has galvanised them to add repair into their wider services. During the pandemic they also began increasing their digital engagement with their customers, establishing a customer-care WhatsApp group, which was flooded by questions about how to look after garments. Slater quickly saw an opportunity for Birdsong to produce educational content on slow fashion and repair. In August this year, it launched its new digital publication, *The Slow Shopping Guide*, in response to the shift in consumer demand.

'The biggest challenge has been sewing literacy,' Slater says. 'My generation has grown up in a culture of disposable fast fashion. Sewing wasn't on the curriculum or repair culture encouraged when I was in school.' Pointing to her own lack of ability, she added: 'I have to take my clothes to our seamstress to get things repaired, but it would be easier if I was able to do it myself.' Slater is adamant that introducing repair culture into school curriculums will be key to improving our systems and attitudes towards consumption as a society. Mary Creagh shared a similar sentiment, telling me how she taught her teenage son to mend his clothes by removing the stigma that 'sewing' was an antiquated, female pastime. 'Sewing is engineering,' she declared. 'It should be taught in schools in the same way.'

Emma Willis, who has been offering repair services since the inception of her eponymous bespoke shirt-making brand

'People are beginning to look inside their wardrobes and discover that the most sustainable option is the garment they already own' ORSOLA DE CASTRO



on London's Jermyn Street in 1999, has taken matters into her own hands. Last year she opened the Emma Willis Sewing School in Bearland House, an 18th-century townhouse in Gloucester where her shirts, socks and nightwear are made using traditional craft techniques. It forms part of her mission to preserve Gloucester's sewing trade, while sharpening the skills of a new generation and showing them a genuine career pathway in the discipline. 'Our aim in setting this up with Condé Nast International CEO, Jonathan Newhouse, is to encourage young people to go into the sewing industry, where there are many more early-career jobs than in designing and fitting, and to shine a light on the value of skilled seamstresses within the fashion industry. There would be no fashion industry without them.'

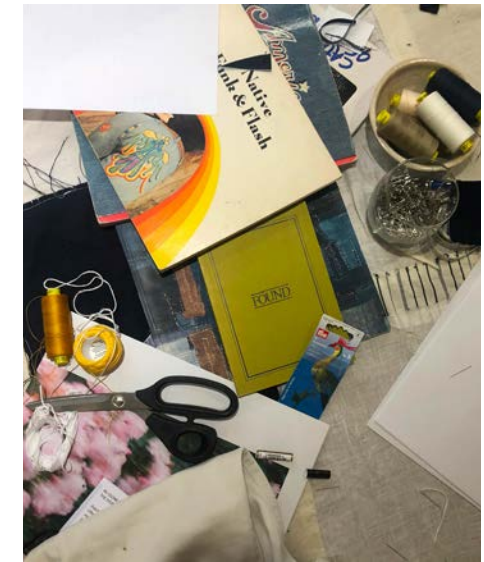
You don't have to be a professional to fix things, of course. The resurgence of amateur making – with crafts such as sewing and knitting consistently having the highest participation rates of all the arts in the UK, according to the government's *Taking Part* surveys – and the success of shows like *The Great British Sewing Bee* are fuelling people with the passion they need to take the 'make-do' out of 'make-do and mend'. The Instagram hashtag #visiblemending now has more than 80,000 posts, spurred on by time spent at home this year. One regular contributor is Japanese knitwear specialist Hikaru Noguchi, whose tutorials on IGTV get thousands of views and who recently wrote a book, *Darning: Repair Make Mend* (£19, Hawthorn Press).

Should people need further instruction, classes have been popping up across the country such as at London womenswear store Ssōne and haberdashery Ray Stitch, where workshops start from £65 and sell out fast (they are also introducing some virtual classes during the pandemic). Outdoor clothing brand Patagonia, which has championed sustainability for decades, not only repairs damaged items but also empowers customers to fix their own belongings with online tutorials for basic sewing skills and more advanced repairs. Such skills will become all the more highly prized in years to come, with the international resale market predicted to more than double in



Noguchi: photo Nerezhiko Moriya

Above: Hikaru Noguchi demonstrating how to darn.
Main image: jeans by Malin Dyer from Ssōne, which has hosted mending workshops run by the designer, glimpsed top right



Retail giants have recently begun offering 'aftercare' as part of their sustainability drives

five years to \$51 billion by 2023, according to GlobalData.

The offer of repair is also no longer restricted to the top-end, designer market – London-based label Black Horse Atelier mends its own jeans and those by other brands for a price, while the Swedish brand Nudie Jeans offers repair shops across the world. Retail giants such as Harvey Nichols and Selfridges have recently begun offering 'aftercare' too, as part of their sustainability drives. You can now book an appointment with Selfridges' Repairs Concierge to get your tired shoes, accessories, jewellery and eyewear brought back to life, and soon rental services will be added to the mix.

In response to these shifting tides, Selfridges has also launched its #ProjectEarth initiative this year, in association with, among others, the Woodland Trust and WWF – 'a series of new commitments set to radically change our business'. It's a rare acknowledgement by a major retailer of its own role as an enabler of consumer culture, and how it can therefore facilitate the circular economy. Anne Pitcher, managing director of Selfridges, admits that 'fast fashion is a very important part of our business', but says the retailer would 'explore new circular business models' of rent, re-sell, repair and recycle, 'making us synonymous with circularity'.

It's hard to imagine how 'fast fashion' and 'circularity' could ever be synonymous, and it remains to be seen how transformative such commitments will be, but this is a step in the right direction. If retail behemoths don't move fast enough, however, looming climate disaster should be enough to mobilise the new generation of menders. So let's hope our wardrobe of today will be cherished by our children tomorrow, albeit in a beautifully altered form.