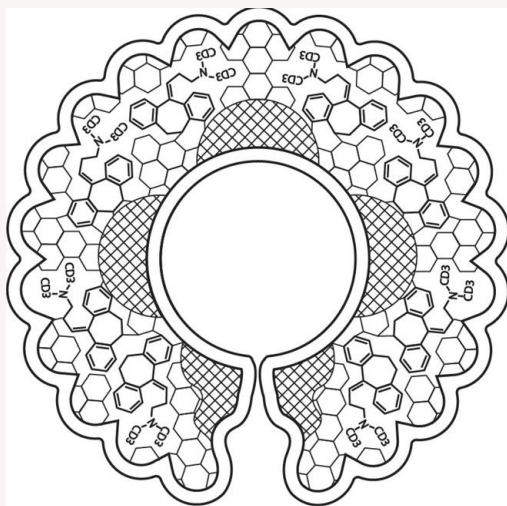


SYNTHETIC WEAVES: Reimagining the history of disability, medicine and making through lace

Professor Alana Harris (Department of History), Dr Eric Fong, Valerie Moon, Theo Leonowicz, The Grange Centre





Amitriptyline design, used for depression, chronic nerve pain, migraine prevention and insomnia.



Valerie Moon's collar

PROJECT SUMMARY

What can a piece of lace tell us about the changing history of disability, medicine and care? Synthetic Weaves brought together history, contemporary art and community collaboration to explore changing approaches to disability, mental health and care. The project reimagined traditional lace and embroidery using geometric patterns based on the molecular structures of psychiatric and disability-related medicines. Artist and former medical doctor Dr Eric Fong created the patterns, dressmaker Valerie Moon transformed two into haute couture pieces — an Amitriptyline collar and a Strontium Bromide handkerchief — and members of The Grange Centre created their own responses through workshops and ongoing creative activities. The project grew from Professor Alana Harris's wider research into Surrey's forgotten psychiatric histories and The Grange's history as the School of Stitchery and Lace, founded in 1927 to train disabled women in embroidery and seamstressing. More than 40 Grange residents engaged with this history through creative workshops, connecting archival material with their own artistic practices.

HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

Synthetic Weaves developed from Professor Alana Harris's earlier collaboration with artist Eric Fong and Freewheelers Theatre and Media on the [Us and Them](#) project. Around ten Freewheelers participants also live at The Grange Centre, revealing a connection between the project's exploration of disability history and The Grange's own heritage. Founded in 1927 as a sheltered workshop training disabled women — many injured in the First World War — in embroidery and lace work, and known from 1927 as the School of Stitchery and Lace, The Grange has a long history of teaching disabled people creative skills. Yet some contemporary residents, including wheelchair users unable to reach the building's upper floor, had never been able to see the archive documenting this history.

This provided the starting point for a project connecting historical needlework with contemporary ideas about treatment, creativity and disability. Rather than simply presenting the archive, Alana and the project partners used it as inspiration for new creative work. Eric's pharmaceutical molecular patterns provided a contemporary reinterpretation of traditional lace, while The Grange's residents responded through their own practices, working across clay, mosaics, embroidery and horticulture depending on their existing interests. The project created a dialogue between institutional history and lived experience, asking how ideas of therapy, work, skill, autonomy and disability have changed — and what might still remain unresolved. Lace itself became part of that provocation: traditionally a feminine, domestic medium, it offered a way to raise questions about agency, control and resistance, and about the unequal power relationships between patients and institutions, then and now.

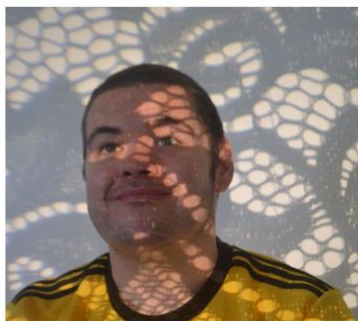


WHAT HAPPENED?

Historian Professor Alana Harris, artist Dr Eric Fong, dressmaker Valerie Moon and members of The Grange Centre came together to explore the connections between medicine, disability, care and creative practice. Drawing on research into the history of needlework in Victorian psychiatric institutions and The Grange's own heritage as the School of Stitchery and Lace, Eric developed nine new lace patterns inspired by the molecular structures of medicines associated with psychiatric and disability treatment, drawing mainly on historical rather than contemporary compounds. The pieces were worked in synthetic threads and fabrics made entirely from recycled plastic bottles, replacing the natural fibres of traditional lace with a material that echoed the project's broader interest in the shift from natural, botanical treatments to synthetic, pharmaceutical ones. Valerie transformed two of these into haute couture pieces: a collar based on the antidepressant amitriptyline and a handkerchief inspired by Strontium Bromide, a historic sedative and anticonvulsant.

At The Grange, Alana led two historically informed creative workshops, on 29 April and 19 June 2026, involving more than 40 residents. The sessions used the archive as a source of inspiration, suited to the wide range of ability among participants. Residents explored historical artefacts, photographs and lace patterns connected to The Grange's past before developing their own creative responses, including geometric string art and work across ceramics, photography and embroidery — with lace patterns also used as formers in clay. Rather than prescribing a single way of working, the project let residents and their existing creative practices shape what emerged.

The project culminated in a ticketed public presentation by Alana on 25 June, attended by more than 90 people and raising over £1,600 for The Grange. Engagement at The Grange has continued beyond the formal end of the project — a deliberately slower, open-ended pace suited to residents' own priorities — giving them time to develop their work further. The resulting works, including the two haute couture pieces and artwork created by The Grange community, will be exhibited together with the *Us and Them* Freewheelers portraits at The Curiosity Cabinet in London from January 2027.



WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

The project gave Grange residents access to a history that had previously been out of reach for some — including wheelchair users who had never been able to see the archive housed above them. As Arts Lead Theo Leonowicz reflected, it gave residents the opportunity to "engage with its own history" while making art and learning together. Just as significantly, it shifted how residents were positioned in relation to that history: rather than being presented as its subjects, they became its interpreters and contributors. The workshops also reached beyond those directly involved: the Grange's embroidery group, which now works mainly by machine, compared their own practice with the hand embroidery and lace-making methods used by residents in the 1940s — connecting past and present techniques within the same building.

For Eric, the collaboration opened a new strand of practice: he learned to design lace patterns in Adobe Illustrator and gained hands-on knowledge of embroidery through working with Valerie, skills he expects to draw on in future projects. Valerie described the collaboration itself as transformative, likening the process of working with Eric's molecular patterns to a chemical reaction that changed them both.

For Alana, the project surfaced new research questions around the history of disabled labour — particularly the exploitation and under-remuneration of highly skilled disabled women by department stores in the twentieth century, and how questions of value, recognition and reward for disabled people's creative work remain relevant today. These insights are now feeding into further outputs, including a conference presentation and podcast in September, a chapter in a forthcoming edited collection, and a journal article. The project has also shaped how Alana approaches collaborative work more broadly, reinforcing the value of open-ended timelines and letting participants set the agenda rather than working to a predetermined brief.

The public presentation extended the project's reach beyond The Grange itself, drawing more than 90 attendees and raising over £1,600 for the centre. Feedback from the evening was strongly positive, with one attendee describing it as "most enjoyable and thoroughly enlightening." The event gave The Grange wider public visibility beyond its usual circle of supporters; that reach will extend further when the resulting works go on public display at The Curiosity Cabinet in January 2027, bringing the project — and The Grange's history — to new audiences. By bringing historical research together with creative work by people connected to The Grange today, Synthetic Weaves creates a dialogue between past and present, inviting audiences to consider how ideas about care, work, disability and agency have changed — and what questions remain.

ALANA'S TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT

- 1. Start with humility – and listen.** Don't arrive with a fully formed idea of what your community partner will contribute. Building trust and allowing partners to shape the agenda is essential to meaningful co-production.
- 2. Give the project time to develop.** Creative collaboration cannot always work to academic or funding timetables. The Grange's work developed at its own pace, and allowing participants time to experiment and interpret the material was crucial. Build time into the budget not just for formal workshops, but for returning, checking in, talking, observing and simply spending time together.
- 3. Value every contribution equally.** Think carefully about how different forms of creative work will be presented and celebrated. A haute couture lace collar and a piece of ceramic or string art may look very different, but both represent knowledge, creativity and labour. Celebrate the diversity of contributions rather than creating hierarchies between "high" art, craft, academic expertise and community creativity.

FURTHER READING

- Alana Harris and Laura Mitchison, 'Us and Them: Disability Ethics, Oral History and Inclusive Praxis in the Reuse of Asylum Photography', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2025), 1–31. doi: [10.1017/S0080440125100418](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100418)
- Jane Hamlett and Lesley Hoskins, 'Comfort in Small Things? Clothing, Control and Agency in County Lunatic Asylums in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 18 (2013), 93–114. doi: [10.1080/13555502.2012.744241](https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2012.744241)
- Tracey Loughran, Kate Mahoney and Daisy Payling, 'Women's Voices, Emotion and Empathy: Engaging Different Publics with "Everyday" Health Histories', *Medical Humanities* 48 (2022), 394–403. doi: [10.1136/medhum-2020-012102](https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2020-012102)



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