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Why I . . . sew

Recent champion of television's *The Great British Sewing Bee*, lung cancer specialist Clare Bradley tells **Richard Hurley** about her love of making clothes

Richard Hurley

"Sewing has a lot in common with other crafts that people find relaxing," says Clare Bradley, a respiratory medicine consultant in Portsmouth and lover of vintage style. "If you're not present in the moment you can easily muck it up."

Bradley makes sewing sound like mindfulness practice. "You have to concentrate," she says. "It's quite repetitive. It involves your senses—handling fabric and listening to the sewing machine. It leaves no room for challenging thoughts."

In June, Bradley was crowned the winner of the sixth series of the BBC television contest *The Great British Sewing Bee*. Lauded for her precision and technical prowess, Bradley made sure never to miss a clinic while the programme was being filmed last year.

The programme aired over 10 weeks in lockdown, with 12 sewers vying with one another across a series of challenges, including making tea dresses, palazzo pants, and '80s cocktail dresses. "That final 'red carpet' dress was the pinnacle," Bradley says. She created a scarlet satin evening gown that judges deemed "the very epitome of elegance."

Bradley clearly loves sewing. Speaking against a backdrop of art deco wallpaper, sporting circular framed glasses, she says there is a lot of joy to be gained from the craft. "There's the enjoyment of looking through patterns on the internet and in the haberdasher's," she says. "The imagination. The enjoyment in choosing the fabric, feeling the textures, the colours. Then the actual making."

"Once you start to see the garment come together there's anticipation," she adds. "And then you get to wear it."

Bradley learnt to use a sewing machine and follow a pattern as a child, but she only started making clothes in earnest eight years ago. Now about half her clothes are homemade. She defines her style as "young Miss Marple" transplanted to the late 1930s and early 1940s.

"I don't normally wear the full outfit to work," she says. "Occasionally I wear my tartan skirt and silly shoes when I do clinics. On the ward it's usually a shirt and tweed trousers rather than a frock."

Fashion can start conversations with everyone from teenagers to grannies, Bradley finds. "Patients may comment on my shoes. When I'm dressed up people mention my look. Occasionally they ask, 'Did you make that?'"

"When I see patients knitting, I'll ask, 'What are you making?' And if I'm wearing a jumper that I've made we'll have a chat about that. It's a nice way to see

each other as normal human beings—and a moment of relaxation."

The coronavirus pandemic hasn't affected her work too much, with the lung cancer clinic remaining open. But having to wear scrubs and personal protective equipment has meant no need to make new work outfits. "Being stuck at home and binge watching telly has me doing more knitting than sewing," she says.

As well as repair jobs awaiting her attention, Bradley is currently knitting a baby cardigan, has pieces for a sundress on her cutting table, and is working on a longer term creation with bloomers and three petticoats for a Victorian ball next May.

How to swap your stethoscope for a sewing machine

- Make time. Bradley is strict about keeping leisure time sacred. "When I'm at home I don't look at work emails, I don't have a work phone, and I only give out my number when I'm on call"
- Dedicate a space. Bradley says she is lucky to have a spare bedroom set up as a sewing room. "On a weekday evening I can put supper in the oven and spend 20 minutes doing a couple of seams, or cut one thing out," she says. "I don't have to unpack everything and put it all away"
- Find "how-to" tutorials online. Search YouTube for, say, "invisible zip." Bradley loves books and online tutorials from the mid-century inspired designer Gretchen Hirsch, for example, on how to add features to a skirt, zips, and linings (<https://blog.byger-tie.com>)
- Challenge yourself. Beginners should start with something basic, "but once you start to develop skills, make things that are more ambitious or you'll lose the thrill," she says. "You'll learn more, be amazed by what you've made, and want to make more"

Watch *The Great British Sewing Bee* at www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03myqj2.