

'... NEVER DONE' women's work in the home

This exhibition shows the creative skills and hard work of women in Australian homes during the past 100 years or so. You will see how the never-ending tasks of washing, sewing, cooking, cleaning, and caring for children have changed — and not changed.

1880s bush hut

Life for settlers in the Australian bush during the 1800s was tough, but cleaning and cooking, and caring for children still had to be done.

Stepping inside the hut you will find displays on the work involved in cooking and cleaning that would have taken place in a 19th century slab hut in rural NSW. To set the scene, an interior has been constructed from a slab hut built in NSW in 1906 using the traditional skills of 19th century bush carpentry. The timber has been pitsawn and adzed.¹

On your right are small displays on:

- food preserving and jam-making using jars made at home from beer bottles
- suet pudding made from suet, flour, salt, baking soda, sugar and flavourings such as dried fruit, spices, jam or golden syrup²
- implements used to make tea and coffee
- butter-making implements
- a Coolgardie food safe for keeping things cool
- cooking vessels and utensils, including a grain crusher, water fountain, kettle, camp oven, tinware and wirework utensils (some homemade, and others sold door to door by hawkers)
- washing-up utensils
- (underneath the bench) pest-control methods such as rat-traps, poisons and a carpet snake. The household cat is also represented on a small photograph on the labels here.

As you turn around and go back to the showcase on the left of the entrance to the 'Bush hut' look up to catch a glimpse of the friendly possum in the rafters. In the window on the side of this case you can see 19th century firefighting appliances such as flint and



A pioneer settler. Charles Kerry & Co, Tyrrell Collection, Powerhouse Museum.

tinder sets and commercially made vestas (matches). Inside the case above the wooden chopping block you will see:

- various forms of lighting used in the 19th century, from a dish of fat with a rag wick and candle lamps to the more sophisticated oil and kerosene lamps
- a selection of meats eaten at the time.

Beside this case there is a small display about bush kids, their work (eg with garden tools), homemade toys, and school textbooks and exercise books.

Wear and tear

Further along the wall, the next major section of the exhibition covers making and mending clothes, and keeping them clean. These jobs have always formed part of women's 'domestic duty'. They require skill, time, imagination and a measure of love and care. Many women also worked outside the home, making, mending or cleaning clothes for the wealthy.

Sewing machines were very precious possessions for women who did not have domestic help or who lived a long way from shops. However, they were very expensive. The Singer company actually devised hire-purchase to put machines within the reach of the less well-off. Ironically, instead of freeing women from

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the labour of sewing, many had to take in extra sewing to pay-off the machine.

You can see:

- working women's costume
- darning techniques
- a turn-of-the-century Willcox and Gibbs treadle sewing machine
- a display comparing the labour of female outworkers (those who took in sewing at home) in the 1880s with the conditions of outworkers today
- a display contrasting rich and poor men's shirts (of the late 1800s/early 1900s)
- crimping and fluting irons, used to make elaborate tucks on wealthy men's shirts³
- remedies for removing common stains such as scorch marks
- samplers and miniature garments displaying needlework education for girls of all socio-economic classes, starting from as young as five years of age.

Fashionable dress

'Fashionable dress', on the opposite wall, examines the labour involved in maintaining a lady's appearance and wardrobe in the 1850s. In the 1800s ladies wore different dresses in the morning and afternoon, for dinner and dancing. These clothes were hard to clean. Women also wore several layers of underwear so that their dresses didn't come into contact with their skin. Items displayed include:

- accessories such as ribbons and feathers, and the work of keeping them clean
- the impact on the environment of fashionable fads such as feathers. (Displayed in the top drawer, under the fashionable dress.)
- an 1850s ball gown that is unpicked at the waist and has its trimmings removed ready for cleaning and restyling, perhaps to create a new look
- tricks such as removable absorption pads, which were worn in the armpits to prevent the dress itself getting dirty. (Displayed in the bottom drawer, under the fashionable dress.)
- gloves, which everyone in fashionable society wore (from young children to old men)
- glove stretchers, used to ease women's hands into gloves so that they would look dainty.



Inside a selector's home. Charles Kerry & Co, Tyrrell Collection, Powerhouse Museum.

1920s suburban kitchen

By the 1920s dramatic changes had reshaped domestic life in the suburbs. The size of the average family had dropped from seven children to three, and advertising was transforming housework into a 'science'.

A range of expensive new products and services promised to make 'good' housewives of those women who could afford them. The advertising of packaged breakfast cereals, aimed at mothers, promoted these products as convenient and more nourishing for children, but their high cost placed additional pressure on the family budget. Advertising also set out to persuade women that new gadgets and cleaning products were essential for a sparkling, germ-free kitchen.

You can see here the influence of advertising on the 'modern' household. The display shows the work of cleaning, food preparation and storage, lighting and pest control that took place in the kitchen of a 1920s suburban home with access to electricity, gas, running water and food-delivery services. The exhibition uses original kitchen fittings and surfaces from 1900 to 1930 to set the scene for displays on:

- home deliveries by the milko, rabbit and iceman
- the 'new standards' of domestic hygiene; eg electric light, lino, flywire, enamelled gas stoves, and commercial cleaning products
- a Fowlers Vacola preserving and bottling kit

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- ways of cooling and protecting food, including an ice chest, butter cooler and meat safe
- commercially produced insecticides
- baking utensils manufactured by local firms such as Willow and Kande for dainty afternoon teas.

On the opposite side of this room you can watch some advertisements screening on a 1950s black and white TV set. This is part of a display called 'Selling new technology'. The following advertisements screen continuously:

- an advertisement for Osram lamps, which was made about 1930 and screened in picture theatres
- an advertisement for Mr Ice Man ('ice refrigerator'), made about 1930 and screened in picture theatres
- an advertisement for Pye products with Bob and Dolly Dyer, made in 1956 and screened in picture theatres
- an advertisement for Rheem hot water, made for television in 1963
- an advertisement for Dishlex dishwashers, made for television in 1987.

Party work, Servants for a new age, Mechanical 'magic' and Mother's work ... child's play

These are small displays that include:

- the elaborate preparations entailed in Victorian parties, particularly focusing on moulds for ice-creams, jellies and gingerbreads
- the contrast of 19th and early 20th century kitchen gadgets with domestic electrical appliances from the 1920s and the 1950s
- television advertisements for these new appliances
- key domestic objects from different periods, such as irons, tea-cosies and breadboards
- children's toys based on domestic work.



Mrs Potts' irons with detachable handle. Anthony Horderns catalogue, about 1990.

Footnotes

1. A pitsaw is a long saw with a handle at each end. It is operated by two people, one on top of the log being sawn and the other below it, in a pit.

An adze is a heavy, bevel-edged steel tool fastened at right angles to a handle; used to shape timber or give it a smoother finish (ie 'dress' it).

2. Suet is the solid fatty tissue from around the loins and kidneys of animals such as sheep and cattle. It was used to make suet pudding, candles and soap.

Golden syrup is a syrup derived from sugar processing. It is used in cooking and as a sauce for desserts and porridge. The name is often used to describe treacle (also a product of refining sugar). Both treacle and golden syrup are often referred to as cocky's joy (or cocky's delight), 'cocky' being a term originally used to describe a small landholder.

3. A crimping iron is used to crimp material; that is, to press regular folds and frills.

A fluting iron is shaped to press ruffles.

Focus questions

Look for examples in the exhibition of creative skills and hard work.

In the sections entitled '1880s bush hut' and '1920s suburban kitchen'.

- What differences can you find in:
 - lighting appliances
 - cooking vessels
 - ways of keeping things cool
 - pest control.

Look at the displays in 'Wear and tear' and 'Fashionable dress'.

- What differences can you find in the shirts of rich and poor men of the 1800s?
- How were the fancy tucks made on the rich man's shirt?
- How were scorch marks removed?
- How were girls taught to sew?
- How were fashionable dresses looked after?

Look at the display 'Mother's work ... child's play'.

- What different kinds of domestic work are these toys associated with?
- What do you think children would have learned by playing with these toys?

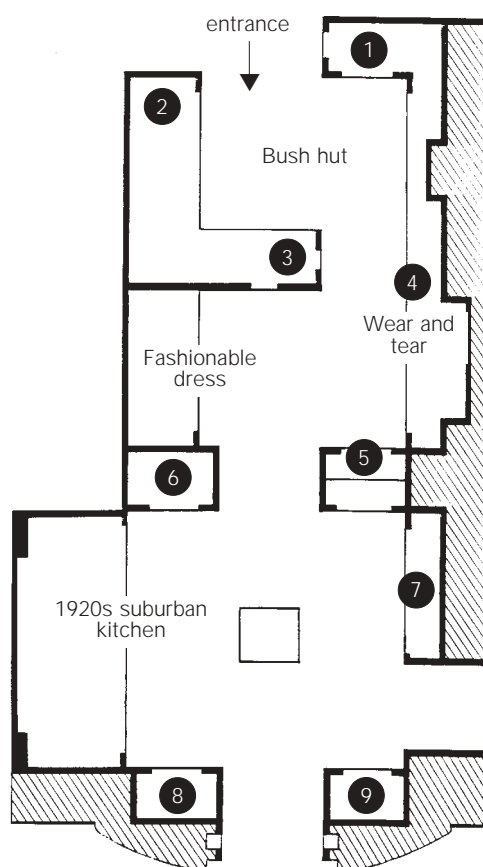


The 1920s kitchen in the '... never done' exhibition.



Advertisement for 'Onandoff' absorption pads. Grace Bros catalogue, 1911.

Exhibition floorplan



1. Lighting
2. Jam-making
3. Washing-up
4. Busy fingers — sewing
5. Five hours a day — sewing lessons
6. Feeding the family
7. Mechanical magic
8. Afternoon tea
9. Mother's work ... child's play

Available from the Powerhouse Shop

'... never done': women's work in the home, a full-colour booklet about the exhibition.

ISBN 1 86317 012 X, 8 pp, \$3.30

For more information on the exhibition
'... never done': women's work in the home,
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