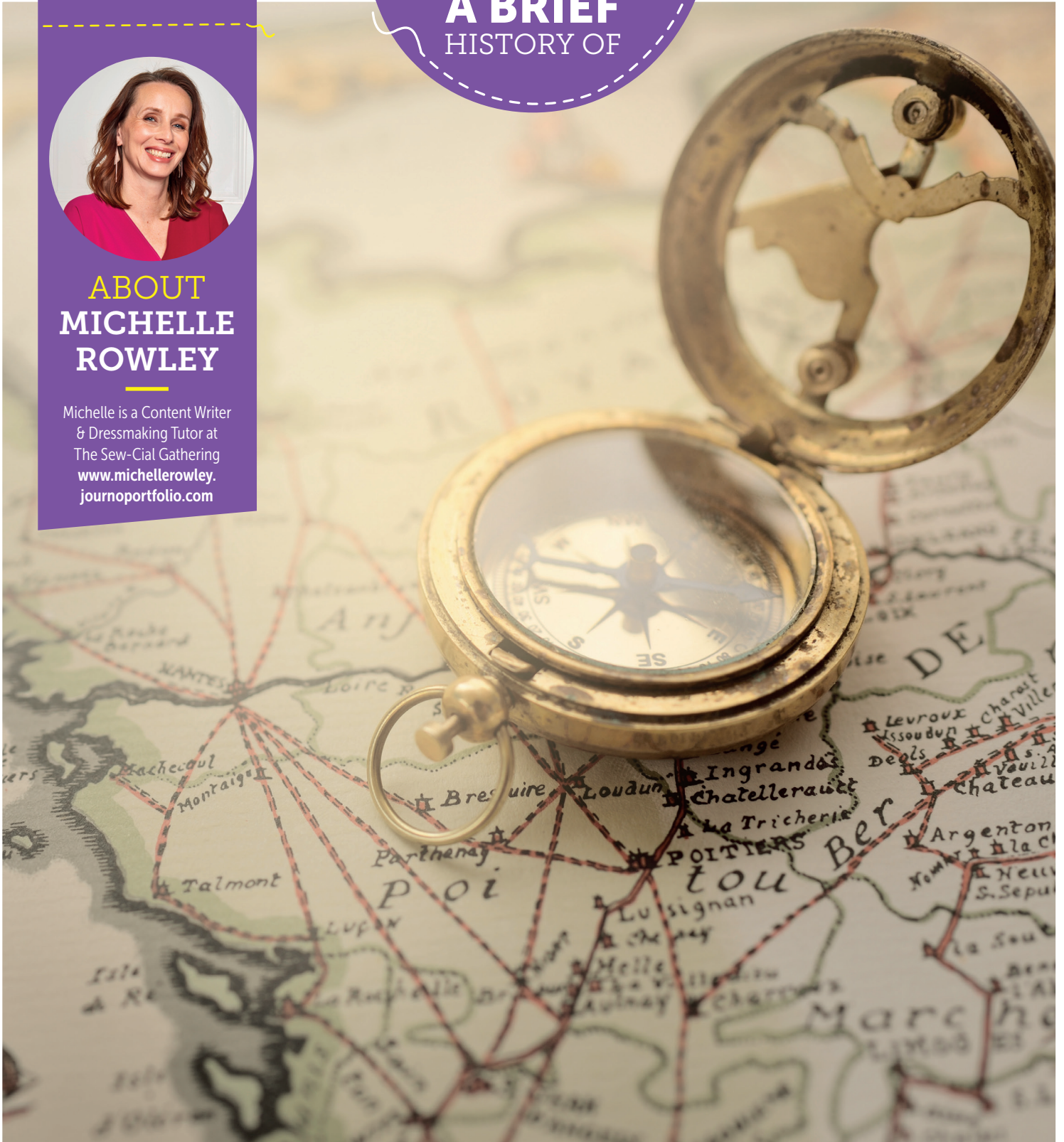


## A BRIEF HISTORY OF



### ABOUT MICHELLE ROWLEY

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# *A Brief History of* **THE BRETON TOP**

*Michelle Rowley explores the history  
of an iconic stripey staple*



**Butterick** B6848  
 85-98-10-12-14-16

B6848 is perfect for Breton stripes

Chances are there's already a Breton top or two in your collection of handmade garments. If there isn't, you're missing out on a quick and easy way to add some timeless French chic to your wardrobe. If there is, I'd guess they're some of your most worn me-made items thanks to their ease to sew, wear and style.

Popular with brands such as FatFace, Boden and Seasalt, the Breton top has become a wardrobe staple for many a mum on the school run. However, this classic top style has been seen gracing the catwalks of Celine, Louis Vuitton and Alexander McQueen in recent years, as well as the school playground. The simple sophistication of a Breton top is not lost on fashion icons such as Kate Moss, HRH The Princess of Wales and Coco Chanel, who amongst countless others have donned their stripes to add an instant 'je ne sais quoi' and French flair to a relaxed and comfortable outfit. Cult French brand Saint James is the favoured place for fashion-conscious celebrities to get their Bretons, with the famed

Normandy-based atelier's links to the early fisherman sweater.

It may come as no surprise that the famous French striped staple should have seafaring origins since stripes and the sea are wed to each other like striped deckchairs and sticks of rock are to our UK seaside memories. The origin of the Breton stripe is the coastline of Brittany, France. When you see the French name for the region, Bretagne, the link with the name Breton becomes clear. Fishermen in the area wore tightly knit striped wool sweaters to keep warm amidst the bracing wind and icy waters they faced over months away at sea.

Sailors wore a similar design and,

*Coco dress* →



“  
The Breton  
style has been  
adapted to many  
clothing types  
”



## GET SET TO SEW A CLASSIC STRIPED TOP WITH OUR FAVOURITE PATTERN PICKS

✂ The Gable Top sewing pattern from Jennifer Lauren Handmade has a classic 50s-inspired slash neckline, a long-line body for extra comfort and three different sleeve options. It's a super quick and easy make as the neckline has no facing or binding.

✂ Kanerva Button-Back Tee from Named patterns has the classic boat neckline of a traditional Breton but also has some interesting extra details such as a cropped hem and button closure back. This pattern has darts at the bust and waist if you're after a more contoured look.

✂ Butterick 6848 has several neckline and sleeve length options enabling an advanced beginner to make a wide range of comfortable jersey tops.

✂ Give yourself the option of sewing a top or dress with the popular Tilly & The Buttons Coco Top and Dress pattern. In addition to the traditional boat neckline, the pattern also includes a funnel roll neck so you can make an array of cosy knit tops and dresses.

in 1858, the French Navy introduced the 'marinière' as an undergarment to its uniform. Fashion historian Amber Butchart explains in her book *Nautical Chic* that the marinière was defined precisely as requiring "21 white stripes at 20mm width and 20 or 21 blue stripes at 10mm for the body, and 15 white stripes and 14 or 15 blue stripes on the sleeves." The specification for 21 stripes was believed to be linked to the 21 victories of Napoleon Bonaparte over the British. Another popular, but perhaps misplaced, myth regarding the choice of stripes is that they enabled sailors who had fallen overboard to be spotted more easily.

The length of the sleeves was regulated at three-quarter length, as the sleeves were not to be longer than those of the jacket. The three-quarter length sleeve is still a popular sleeve length on a Breton top, as well as the boat neckline which made the original marinières easy to remove.

When Coco Chanel took a trip to

the seaside in 1917, she found inspiration in the Breton stripe tops of the maritime uniform, leading her to launch her first marinière. Whilst such a top would not appear ground-breaking in design today, the introduction of a garment into the fashion world that prioritised comfort and practicality over the uncomfortable designs of the Belle Époque was something of a fashion revolution.

Further endorsement of the Breton as a stylish choice for comfortable elegance came when Chanel herself was photographed wearing the top with trousers in 1930. The Breton was to become a wardrobe staple amongst bohemian men in the 1930s, with Pablo Picasso becoming perhaps the most well-known figure associated with the style.

The Breton's cool status was elevated by the 1950s when the teen Hollywood heartthrobs of the day graced the silver screen in the bold stripey top. Worn by Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* in 1953 and James Dean in *Rebel Without*

## Styling your STRIPES

☞ The Breton is the perfect weekend basic to pair with jeans for relaxing at home or walking the dog. Throw on a blazer for instant outfit elevation!

☞ Wear your Breton for work with high-waisted trousers and ballet flats for a simple but stylish put-together outfit. If it's good enough for Coco Chanel...

☞ Team your Breton with a high-waisted skirt to bring out the inner Audrey Hepburn in you.

☞ Layer up for chilly days wearing your Breton under a pinafore dress teamed with tights and a cardigan.

*a Cause* in 1955, the link between the stripes and the edgy defiance of youth was firmly cemented. When Audrey Hepburn starred in *Funny Face* wearing a Breton top with black cigarette trousers in 1957, it showed a move away from the ultra-femininity of 1950s women's fashion. What is today a ubiquitous outfit offering comfortable style and easy dressing, was then a bold outfit marking you out as a radical.

With its bohemian links, it's no wonder the Breton was adopted by French teenagers in which to smoke and discuss philosophy before French haute couture and prêt-à-porter fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier made the stripes his signature look. The sailor striped top became synonymous with the designer, thanks to his rare appearance wearing anything else. His association with the style was firmly cemented with the iconic bottle he created for his first men's fragrance, *Le Male*, shaped as a man's chest emboldened with Breton stripes. That the sailor striped top remained the inspiration for his collaborative collection "Les Marins" in 2021 reflects the continued allure of a garment created for the seafaring over 150 years ago.



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