A needlework sampler is a piece of embroidery or cross-stitching produced as a 'specimen of achievement', demonstration or a test of skill in needlework. It often includes the alphabet, figures, motifs, decorative borders and sometimes the name of the person who embroidered it and the date. The word sampler is derived from the Latin exemplum, which means 'example'. Our collection includes over 700 needlework samplers ranging from as early as the 1400s, to pieces stitched in the 20th century. They offer a fascinating insight into the practice and teaching of an important domestic craft. Find out how the social and educational significance of samplers has changed over time, as well as their form and function. The English word 'sampler' derives from the Latin 'exemplum', or the old French term 'essamplaire', meaning 'an example'. Before the introduction of printed designs, embroiderers and lacemakers needed a way to test their skills. A Lady, "Preface" to The Sampler; or a System of Teaching Plain Needlework in Schools (London: G. C. Caines, 1850), v. Infant Orphan Girls Learning to Sew in One of the Bristol Orphan Houses, c. 1905. Image taken from Centenary Memorial 1805-1905 (Bristol: J. Wright and Co., 1905). Copyright, and reproduced by permission, of the Bristol Central Library. Even though the books are for different schools, they are very similar in their instruction, suggesting that there were standard methods of teaching needlework to children. They are essentially prescriptive text books for school mistresses, monitors or pupil teachers. © Copyright, Terms & Conditions | University of Cambridge.