

# 14<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY GARMENT CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES

BY

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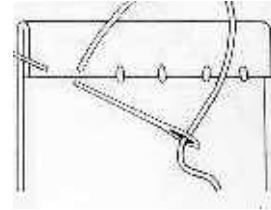
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We are so fortunate that the Museum of London published a book on their City of London Thames River archaeological digs. These digs are primarily from areas of landfill along the Thames River in London, England. Because the areas are recorded in old city records it was a fairly simple matter to date the finds. The pictures and techniques highlighted in this paper are from the Museum of London's book, *Medieval Finds From Excavations in London:4 Textiles and Clothing c.1150-1450* by Elisabeth Crowfoot, Frances Pritchard, and Kay Staniland.

I have used these stitches to create several 14<sup>th</sup> century gowns, known as kirtles. The techniques can also be used to construct hoods, hose, and cotes; basically any 14<sup>th</sup> century garment. The techniques are very basic. I will not try to write out the stitch instructions but will let the pictures and time in class do the instructing for me. These are stitches and construction techniques that I learned very early in my sewing career. They are still used today. I hope that you find them as simple and enjoyable as I do.

In no way do I wish to imply that this is the only way to make 14<sup>th</sup> century garments. Your level of authenticity is your choice. The more authenticity the better is a good rule of thumb when competing but when making clothing for wearing to tourneys knowing what they did and imitating it on your modern sewing machine is by far the fastest way to construct a garment. It's certainly more reliable until you get the hang of these techniques.

## SINGLE HEM STITCH



This stitch is used at hems tunics, gowns, mantles, and sleeve cuffs. You simply fold the fabric over once and following the diagram, stitch the hem. Folding over once works best when using felted wool so that there is no worry about fraying. If your fabric frays or ravel or you have not serged the edges, it is recommended that you make a small fold and then fold again before stitching the hems.

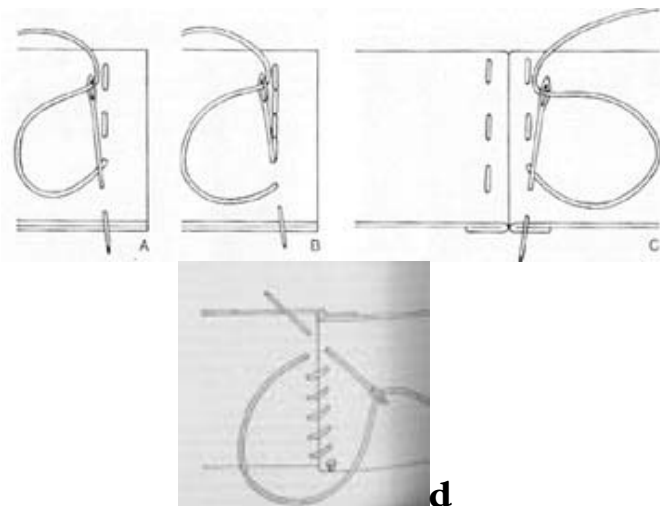
## ROLLED HEM



Rolled hems are typically used for hemming sheer or very fine fabrics, veils especially. This is a difficult stitch to manipulate but with practice it gets easier. I find it even easier if I pin one end to my

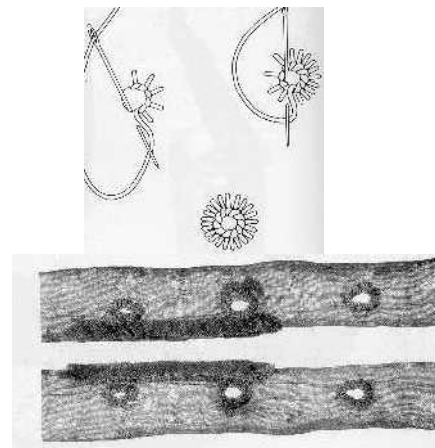
pant leg or to a cushion. This gives the fabric some tension and makes it easier to take small stitches. There is another, more modern way to do this stitch if you wish to use it.

## SEAMS



There are several ways to sew seams. The bottom picture is of an extant seam. There is even a knot on the left at the beginning of the stitching. You can do a (A) running stitch or a (B) backstitch. Sewing the raw edges down as in (C) was common practice. You can butt edges together as in (D). In the case of using fulled wool, there wasn't much worry about fraying. With linen or silk, you will want to finish your seam edges by tucking them under one more time and then stitching down as in (C). If you wish you may use the zig zag function on your sewing machine to finish the edge or you can serge them. These methods are obviously modern, but it is up to you to decide how you feel about that.

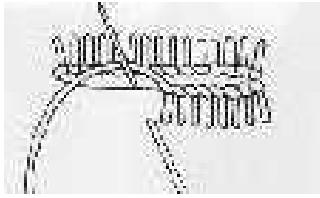
## EYELETS



Eyelets are used up the front and back on tunics and gowns. It is possible that lacing was used on pre-14<sup>th</sup> century garments but I have found no definite evidence to date. The eyelets found on the extant fabric, a tabby-woven silk, are on a fabric that is very sheer. No one knows if the fabric is the garment itself or the facing, although there is a small bit of the same silk attached which you can see at the top edge. You can use this technique on all fabrics, light or heavy wool, velvet, silk, linen. The only variation is the type of thread used to bind off the eyelets. Your choices of thread include linen and silk and should take into consideration the weight of the fabric, the use of the garment (is it for tourney or court). I have used everything from cotton embroidery floss to twisted buttonhole silks. The silk was the nicest and most period. Of course.

The eyelet hole is begun by taking an awl and slowly poking it through the fabric and pressing until you make a hole large enough for your lacings. If you are going to use the buttonhole stitch (I sometimes choose a whipstitch) make the hole larger than you would use as the buttonhole stitch has a tendency to shrink the inner measurement on an eyelet.

## BUTTONHOLE STITCH



The 14<sup>th</sup> century buttonhole is different from 16<sup>th</sup> century buttonholes and modern buttonholes because it does not have the semi circles on the ends of the hole. The 14<sup>th</sup> century buttonhole simply binds each edge.

## BUTTONS



Museum of London: Textiles and Clothing

I am not in complete agreement with the Museum of London's directions for making buttons. There were steps and instructions missing in my opinion. I recommend you follow the steps below. I spent a lot of time figuring this out. I

discovered other folks making them exact same way for the same reasons. I believe that if three different people come up with the same process independent of each other, it is probably an intuitive process and just a likely to reach in period as now.

## CLOTH BUTTON INSTRUCTIONS:

**Button #1 - Self stuffing for use with heavy fabric such as fulled wool or velvet/een**

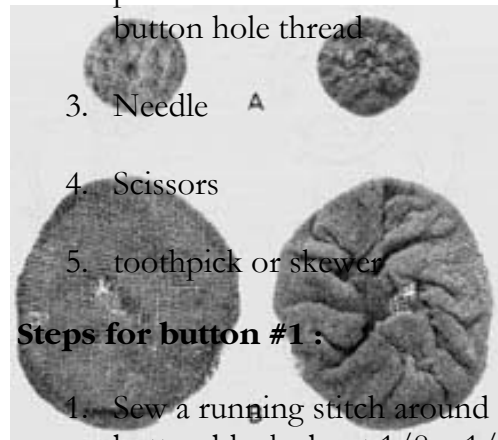
### Supplies

1. Cut circular rounds. I test the size using the following steps and continue to adjust until I have the right size circle. Once I am satisfied that the circle I have will make the buttons in the size I want, I cut out as many as I might need for the project.
2. One of the following: Heavy upholstery weight thread. Or a perl cotton in size 8. Or silk button hole thread

3. Needle
4. Scissors
5. toothpick or skewer

### Steps for button #1 :

1. Sew a running stitch around the button blank about 1/8 – 1/4" from the edge of the circle.
2. Pull the running stitch to force the raw edges in towards the center of the circle, right side of fabric facing out. Press with fingers to flatten and define fold.



3. Sew another running stitch around the button blank but this time sew it right on the fold itself.
4. Put your finger into the center of the circle over the raw edge and pull the second row of running stitches tight forming a little pouch or a raspberry shape.
5. At this point all your raw edges are inside and your button has stuffed itself. It should be a fairly hard little sphere. If it isn't hard it doesn't function well as a button. If it isn't hard you probably can't self stuff or need to try a smaller circle blank.
6. Take your needle and sew it closed. I spend a lot of time on this, holding the button closed by pressing it so with my fingers, I pull the thread very tightly (this is why you need strong thread) until the raspberry closes and is just a little button.
7. Fasten off thread
8. Optional: At this time, if you want to decorate the face of the button, you can sew little lines or designs. You will need a thick needle and possibly some pliers to pull the needle through your tight little button. I don't do this first because it is difficult, try as you may, to center the design once you start forming the button. It tends to pull to one side or the other.
9. Taking a new length of thread, this should be fancy as it will be seen, you will now sew on the shank. Take your toothpick and place it over the bottom of the button. Sew the thread through the button and over the toothpick making sure to keep the pick in place. This creates a loop of thread which you will then sew down to the garment. When you wrap the loose loop you will create the shank.

### **Button #2 - Stuffed buttons**

1. Cut circular rounds. I test the size using the following steps and continue to adjust until I have the right size circle. Once I am satisfied that the circle I have will make the buttons in the size I want, I cut out as many as I might need for the project.
2. One of the following: Heavy upholstery weight thread. Or a perl cotton in size 8. Or silk button hole thread
3. Needle
4. Scissors
5. wooden bead or wadded fabric glued to spherical shape

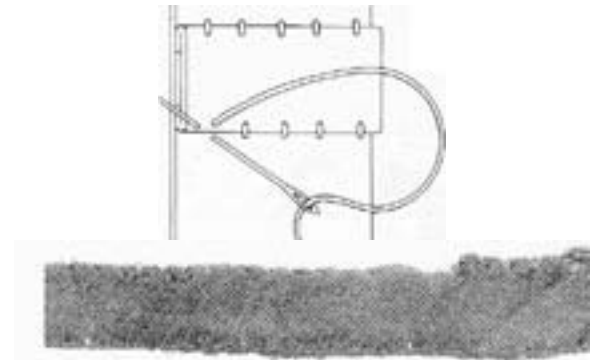
### **Steps :**

1. Optional: At this time, if you want to decorate the face of the button, you can sew little lines or designs. You won't be able to do it later because of the

stuffing.

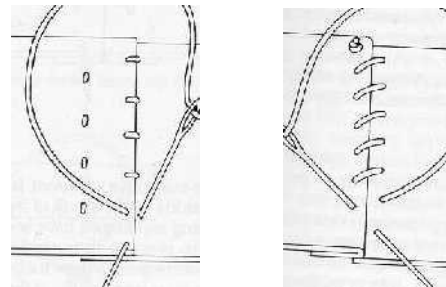
2. Sew a running stitch around the button blank about  $1/8 - 1/4$ " from the edge of the circle.
3. Pull the running stitch to force the raw edges in towards the center of the circle, right side of fabric facing out. Press with fingers to flatten and define fold.
4. Pop in the little wooden or fabric bead.
5. At this point all your raw edges are inside and your button is stuffed
6. Take your needle and sew it closed. I spend a lot of time on this, holding the button closed by pressing it so with my fingers, I pull the thread very tightly (this is why you need strong thread) until the raspberry closes and is just a little button.
7. Fasten off thread
8. Taking a new length of thread, this should be fancy as it will be seen, you will now sew on the shank. Take your toothpick and place it over the bottom of the button. Sew the thread through the button and over the toothpick making sure to keep the pick in place. This creates a loop of thread which you will then sew down to the garment. When you wrap the loose loop you will create the shank.

## TRIM



We attach trim today the same way it was attached in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Some things never change. In this case though, woven trim is not attached but strips of fabric; raw edges folded under and then attached were very common. Trim from scraps was practical use of fabric scraps; it was inexpensive, and easily obtained.

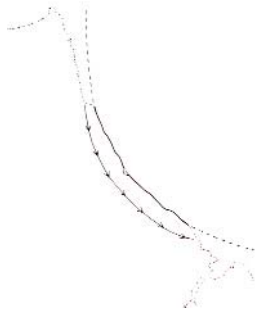
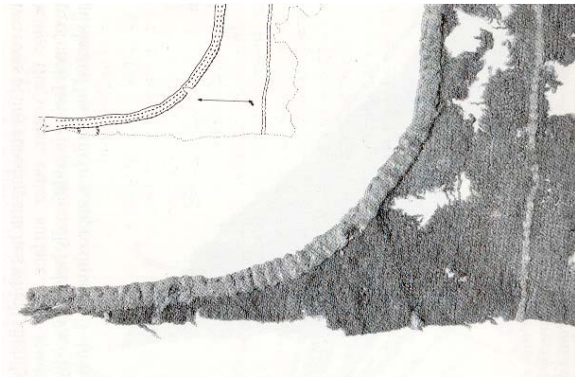
## HOSE STITCHES



This method of sewing seams was typically used with hose or areas where weight would be put on a seam and it was desirable to make the seam as flat and comfortable as possible. While many hose were cut and sewn in a way that had no seam under foot, sometimes there was a seam running along the bottom of the sole. In this case, the wearer's weight would compress and felt the seam so that it became quite comfortable. The flatter

you could sew it the more comfortable is was to wear.

## FACINGS



Edge finishings were typically of three varieties. A fully lined garment, a raw edge simply folded over and tacked down, or strips of silk, not cut on the bias, that were applied similarly to modern facings.

The best way to make facings are to cut or rip strips of fabric about the width of two fingers. You can apply them to the turned over raw edge on either the inside of the garment or on the outside of the garment. If you sew them on the outside of the

garment they can serve a duo purpose of finishing the edge and providing decoration. You can do this using the trim/appliqué method or you can use this method.

Sew the facing to the right side of the garment along the raw edge. Fold over the strip of fabric to the inside of the garment. Turn under the other raw edge of the facing and sew down using either a whip stitch or a running stitch.

## DAGGINGS

Dagging was used on the mantle of hoods, hanging sleeves and the edges of cloaks. There are two ways to produce dagging. The more time consuming but pretty way is to simply line your garment and turn all the dags. The second way isn't as pretty to the modern eye but it is practical and fast. Simply full your wool and cut. It might ravel a small bit but the fulling process will prevent harm to the integrity of the cloth.



## Bibliography

Crowfoot, Elisabeth, Frances Pritchard, Kay Staniland: *Medieval Finds From Excavations in London:4 Textiles and Clothing c.1150- 1450* Published by the Museum of London