

A Simple Shirt of the 16th Century Edged With Handmade Bobbin Lace

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I've taken up an interest in bobbin lace, and after constructing almost six yards of my first successful lace, I decided that I needed a new shirt to which to attach my new lace.

The Bobbin Lace:

I have been studying a pile of lace bobbin instruction books for a little over a year, attempting a few projects unsuccessfully while studying. Most of these books are decidedly post-period. The books I have that are of greatest interest are Gilian Dye's pamphlet series on Early Modern Lace, in which she literally puts herself into the mindset of a bobbin lace maker that would not have been likely to have used a pricking for her patterns. The significant difference between a modern lacemaker and one working her craft in the 16th century is that she would have been able to create lace from either viewing a sample of worked lace or a woodcut diagram, used lockstitch to secure the stability of her work rather than the abundance of pins a modern laceworker uses, and most significantly, would not have been likely to use a pricking.

My lace is executed on a five millimeter grid, printed onto blue cardstock. I used Bockens Lingarn 50/2, which is modernly considered a medium-thick lace thread. The original of the lace I copied, the Two Pence lace from Elizabeth Isham's lace samples contained in a letter to her father, was a delicate, tiny little bit of lace. The original should be worked on a grid half the size of mine, with 100/2 linen thread.

As it is, my lace took almost two weeks of working 4-8 hours a day. I am not a speedy lacemaker, by any stretch of the imagination. The Two Pence lace is extremely simple, to the point where I suspect it would have been taught to children, and significantly greater speed would have been expected of a lacemaker intending to sell her product with some expectation of profit. There are two styles of bobbin lace making: palm up and palm down. I have been using a cookie pillow with Midlands-style bobbins with spangles, which requires palm-down movements to work the interstices of the lace. If I were using continental rounded bobbins, a bolster or tubular pillow and working palm up, my speed would increase exponentially.

The Two Pence lace pattern is the least complex of five samples of bobbin lace enclosed in a letter dated 1627 from 19-year-old Elizabeth Isham to her father, asking advice as to which ones he liked best. Elizabeth Isham had been entrusted with fifty pounds, a HUGE sum of money at the time, to buy lovely things while she was in London, and this lace was part of the purchases she was considering.

The Two Pence edging is, of course, dated 1627. However, it is structurally similar to some of the simplest lace diagrams in the 1561 Neu Modelbuch, a collection of woodcuts intended to act as a bobbin laceworker's pattern book published only four years after Le Pompe, the first published pattern book for laceworkers. In the Neu Modelbuch, its author, a woman called only R.M., states that the craft was brought to Zurich by merchants around 1536.

The Linen Shirt

The shirt cutting diagram is a variance on the 1535-1550 Boy's Shirt in the V&A, accession item T.112-1972 and it is the very first garment in the first edition of Arnold's Patterns of Fashion 4. The original garment has extremely narrow frills edging collar and cuffs, is embroidered and edged with blue silk-- and it was indeed made for a boy.

After deciding I wanted a plain, un-embroidered shirt to frame the splendor of my lace, the changes I made to the original cutting diagram were based on the following decisions:

1. As mentioned above, I am not the same body shape as the original garment's intended wearer. While I liked the integral gussets under the sleeve and utilized them, I knew that the original shirt's neckline would be too restrictive for an older woman's comfort. This necessitated the insertion of neck gussets to widen the top of the shoulders at the collarbone area.
2. The linen the original garment was made from allowed the anonymous 16th Century sempster to utilize the fabric's selvages for the lower hem's seam finishes. Selvages were not available to me due to the way modern linen yardage is now woven by machine. I turned under all of my hems and whip-stitched them with waxed linen thread; the need to finish the seams was imperative as the filmy linen I chose is rather fragile and inclined to unravel. This was Joanns filmy white 60/40 linen/rayon blend, which no longer seems to be available. It is still my favorite undergarment fabric as it is not as desperately short staple as Fabric.com's current lightweight linen offerings; it wears better.
3. I pulled single threads from the fabric to use as a guide to make absolutely certain all my pieces were not only exact measurements, but exactly on the grain of the fabric. This makes the garment hang better on the body.
4. Instead of whip-stitching the edges of the sleeves and setting the sleeve pieces into the (whip-stitched) body of the shirt with silk or linen fancy insertion stitches, I back-stitched all seams with a doubled waxed linen thread and then felled the seam allowances on either side of the seam with a waxed single linen thread. The shape of the integral gussets under the arms threatened to be awkward, however, that was avoided when the sleeve pieces were felled as one flat piece into the armseye after felling the sleeve and the underarm seams on the body of the shirt.
5. I cannot tolerate tight-necked garments; I am subject to migraine and the light pressure on my neck from even a loosely-tied high collar guarantees a colossal headache. This is why there is no neck closure on the collar band.

I've sewn garments for almost fifty years, and this is the first time I've ever constructed a fine cloth shirt without a sewing machine. It has been an illuminating experience; I did not think I was capable at the age of 60 of hand stitching such small, finely spaced stitches. I am also of the opinion that aside from using historically-correct techniques, hand-stitching this linen is more attractive than machining the garment; while the hand stitching is not completely invisible, it is less visible on the finished garment than lines of machined lock-stitch. My one error

was placing the fancy thread lace reinforcement in the central neck slit too high; it will need to be replaced after cutting the shirt's opening further down the center front of the garment. I also do not like the texture of the ribbon ties I applied; they will be replaced with twill tape that matches the color of the linen more closely.

Bibliography

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This site has since gone down; Grace Gamble has given blanket permission for anyone with the PDF to proliferate/share the file as desired or needed. Personal communication with Grace Gamble via Facebook Messenger, dated November 2, 2024. I will be pleased to share the PDF upon request.

The four jpgs within this document are identified respectively as:

Shirt 1: the entire shirt, folded to keep the neck and arm ruffles from crushing

Shirt 2: Detail of the neck ruffle, showing the lace and the thread 'keeper' to keep the front piece from tearing down its center

Shirt 3: Detail of the inside of the shirt, underarm area, showing the seam finishes in the integral gusset, shirt body seam and sleeve seams

Shirt 4: Detail of one shoulder, showing the insertion of one of the collar gussets







