

# Building a 1480 English Lady's Outfit

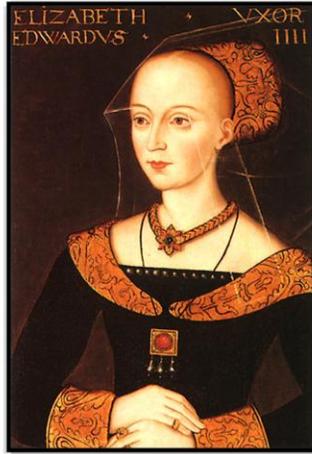


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This class is a mix between a research lecture and a dress diary, in which I first provide some source analysis on a feminine style of clothing and headdress seen in figural art around 1480, followed by my use of this information in the making of my own version of the outfit in the fall of 2009.

## The inspiration

- Elizabeth Woodville, Queen Consort of England, wife to Edward IV; 1480



Elizabeth was the mother of the Princes in the Tower, who mysteriously disappeared under their uncle Richard's care. Elizabeth went on to become a great political enemy to Richard III, who benefited from the death or disappearance of three of Elizabeth's sons.

This portrait by an unknown artist of the English school is a beautiful rendering of a specifically English fashion that appeared by the late 1470s and lasted into the late 1480s and possibly into the 1490s. The V-necked collars of the previous few decades evolved into a shallower boat-necked collar. The truncated cones worn at a jaunty angle on women's heads became a full cylinder which jutted directly off the back of the head, defying gravity and confounding clothing historians attempting to explain their method of attachment to the head.

The redrawing on the right was made between 1839-42 by William Derby in pencil and pen and ink. It is intriguing because it shows more of her veiling on the right. I am unaware if the image of the original portrait seen on the left is cropped. I'm guessing it is, never having seen the original.

## Distinctively English



Margaret of York, English wife of Charles the Bold of Burgundy



Mary of Burgundy, Margaret's step-daughter

The image of Margaret comes from a manuscript dated to 1468, though I suspect that might be early by at least a few years. Margaret and Charles (the man pictured next to her) did not marry until that same year, and it seems unlikely that she would appear in a manuscript that quickly. Even so, if the date is accurate or only off by a few years, it shows Margaret in the forward guard of this headdress style, since it didn't achieve widespread popularity until at least the mid 1470s and into the 1480s.

The image of Mary of Burgundy provides a solid example of what women on the Continent were wearing in comparison. Their headdresses were still truncated cones which sat at an angle on their heads. The veil came past the end of the cone and draped over the forehead.

## Dress: What was worn?

- Chemise
- A stomacher worn over a bust-supportive front-laced dress  
OR  
A side-laced bust-supportive dress, no stomacher
- Gown, shaped close to the body, closure along center front, possibly hidden

A thin, white linen or silk chemise (smock; shift) was the underwear of choice for women throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Over that, in the case of this outfit, Elizabeth probably wore a simple dress – perhaps called a kirtle at this time. This dress would have had short sleeves or long, fitted sleeves. It would have either laced up the front or up one side, which would provide a smooth, seamless front. Elizabeth's portrait shows pearls across the top of this layer, sewn close enough together to imply the impossibility of a front closure. This may well be a stomacher worn over a front-laced dress. There are references from the 1480s to partlets or stomachers, which appear to describe a piece of fabric that covers from the bust down to the stomach.

On top of the kirtle, another, fancier dress called a gown was worn, which likely had a front opening, given the small space seen at the center-front where the collar comes together. The closure detail is not clearly depicted in the art I've analyzed, so I am left to speculate.

## The case for two dresses



In this first drawing, we see a lady holding the folds of her fancy dress so that a simpler dress beneath can be seen. This is a part of one of many excellent drawings to be found in the Pageant of the Birth, Life, and Death of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, created between 1485-1490, and commonly referred to as the Warwick Pageant. (British Library Cottonian MS Julius E IV) . A fine lady would not stand around in public with her chemise on view, so we can safely assume this is another dress layer. The second picture makes this even clearer, as we can see the red of her kirtle. The red portion peaking from the top of the gown may be the same dress, but one may leave room for the possibility of a color-matched stomacher.

The third image is part of an illumination from King Rene's *Livre du coeur d'amour esprit* (Book of the Love-struck Heart), illustrated by his faithful illuminator, Barthélemy d'Eyck, probably between 1460 and 1470. The ladies are wearing veiled bonnets while dressed down to a simple, short-sleeved kirtle that laces up the front. The lady facing towards us appears to have a strip of fabric across the top of her dress—the elusive stomacher. The image on the right clearly shows a red front-laced dress beneath her open gown, with a stomacher over top. Like the lady in the boat, her laces gape wide, showing her chemise beneath. Like Elizabeth, the top of her stomacher is decorated with what appears to be pearls.

## The case for a hidden closure on a front-opening gown

- The gown appears too tight to be a pull-over
- The collar leaves a small opening in the center-front
- V-neck gowns were front-opening
- Hidden closures found in the art of the middle-late 15thc



Since one can clearly trace the evolution from the V-necked gown to this more shallow boat-necked version of the gown, it is reasonable to say that this gown also was front-opening, as the V-neck gown was. Since the shape of the collar no longer extended down the body as far as it had in previous decades, it begs the question: what mechanism was used to close the gown to the collar?

Hooks and eyes were used throughout the 15thc on clothing, and could be sewn on the inside of the opening, allowing for a less-noticeable joining of two open edges. There are many archaeological finds of hooks and eyes dated to this time period in Europe. The portrait by Jean Fouquet of a court jester named Gonella from 1445 shows hooks and eyes on the inside of his collar.

Hidden lacing could also have been an option. The famous painting of Agnes Sorel as the Virgin Mary, also by Jean Fouquet, shows a highly-stylized front-laced dress where the closure looks invisible when the lacing is drawn tight.

## Headdress: What's holding it on?



I believe this style of headwear evolved from the truncated cone style seen in the decades leading up to the later 1470s and early 1480s. The cone cap had been steadily moving further away from the crown, tilting at ever more precarious angles away from the forehead, as can be seen in multiple illuminations and paintings.

In England, the cone became cylindrical and began to jut straight out from the back of the head, which required some sort of fastening method that is not visible to the eye. The images on the left above make it clear that this hat sat towards the back of the head. There is a visible prong structure seen in the brass rubbing below Elizabeth's portrait. This alone cannot provide sufficient balance of weight to keep the piece in place over a bun of hair on the inside. Even with a very large amount of hair available to make a sizeable bun, there would still need to be some way to secure the structure to it, or risk every small movement sending it flying off the head. In addition, there are wires that extend straight back from the head, which hold the gossamer silk veil(s) out past the end of the cylinder. This further displaces the center of mass from the head.

Other researchers have pointed out evidence of a tight band that encircles the woman's head, with a loop or pointed tab angled towards the forehead. This appears in a number of artistic examples, as shown above. It is possible the bonnet was pinned to such a band. I propose that long pins may have been used to pierce the cap and attach it to the hair bun underneath.

## Headdress: What do we call it?

- **Hennin** – possibly shortened from géhennin, an old French word evoking the torments of hell
- **Atours** – means “finery” or “attire” in French; may have referred to head wear when paired with “haut”, meaning “high”
- **Toque** – Arabic origins by way of Spain into France in the 15thc; something round with an opening, i.e. a hat
- **Bonnet** – A word known in England by the 14thc; possible term for short, cylindrical hats
- Modern descriptions: pillbox cap, butterfly veil, kite veil

There is a text from the 1420s that speaks of a cleric who exhorted children to chase women wearing fancy headdresses, shouting “au hennin!”. This may have been shortened from Géhennin, which refers to hell, as described by Jesus Christ in the New Testament—Gehenna. Basically he was telling children to yell “Go to hell,” or “You’re going to hell” at women who dressed in the latest fashions. I suspect the term was not in widespread use and that the more respectful and vague “atours” was preferred. Finding an exact word to describe this English hat style, however, is still a work in progress.

If interested in chasing down the terminology of headwear in this time frame, please refer to the annotated bibliography handout where I’ve listed a number of useful sources that cite period texts discussing styles leading up to and possibly including the cylindrical style.

## Headdress: What is it made of?



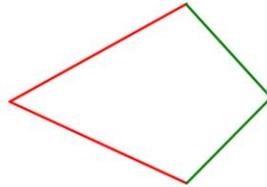
The foundation may have been a woven wooden structure, like the basket-woven truncated cones seen on earlier imagery. It could also have been shaped from glue-stiffened linen, which would have been relatively light but sturdy. It was likely covered in a rich fabric base, perhaps over another layer of thicker, more modest fabric used to smooth out the surface area. It is also possible this cap was sealed and painted. A common decorative motif seen on these caps involved laying what was likely thick metal wire—perhaps precious gold or more modest latten (a copper alloy, probably brass)—in a diamond-patterned lattice across the entire surface. Small metal bezants, pins, or rivets with decorative heads were placed at the intersections of these crossed wires. They may have pierced the cap and been bent over to hold them in place. The stiffness of the wire served to keep the form's shape, as well as provide decoration.

A prong extended from the cap so that it could curve over the wearer's head, terminating near or at the top of the forehead. This prong appeared to be integral with the cap and may have been shaped from the same decorative wire used to adorn the cap. In a variety of visual sources, it appears to have been covered with the same material that covered the cap. A number of sources imply that the top of the prong was straight, while the underside curved along with the head.

One or two wires extend straight back from the prong or the point at which the prong extends from the base of the cap (it's unclear which location is the origin for the wires). These wires serve as an understructure for super-fine silk veiling which can be of one or two layers. Each layer has a specific shape and arrangement. Some brasses portray the wires twisted in small spirals, to prevent sharp ends from poking through the veil.

## First veil: The “kite”

A diamond-shaped veil was attached at the end of the front prong and extended tautly over the end of the wire(s) at the rear of the cap.

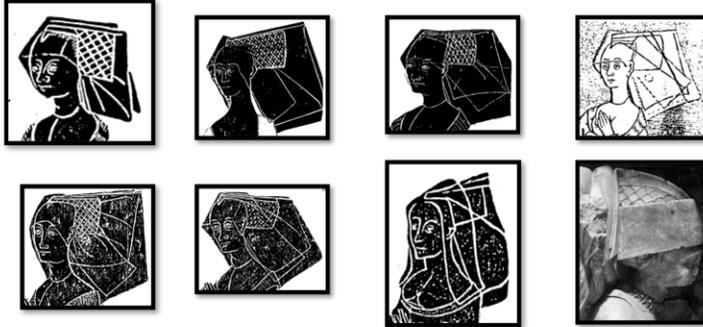


The wires extending off the end of the cap seem relatively close together, as indicated by the dip between them in these and other images depicting the kite formation of veiling. The veil was either sewn to the prong or pinned to it. To keep the veil dipped between the two support wires, it was pinned or perhaps sewn to the cap. Imagery occasionally shows veils that look sturdy and opaque, like the one on the right above and but more frequently, the veils appear transparent. The effigy on the bottom right shows one of the ways these styles were portrayed in three dimensions. Because these figures were always backed by something solid, the headdresses appear foreshortened.

While the diagram above shows the veil as a kite shape, it may have been a simple square turned so that one corner begins at the front of the prong and the rest of the square is draped over the support wires.

## Second veil: The frontal

- Worn by widows; drapes over the forehead
- Elizabeth wears this veil in the portrait; she was widowed by 1480, the date ascribed to the portrait



The proclivity towards gossamer-fine, translucent veiling in this headdress style precluded the addition of an opaque frontal, which had been the norm until then. Widows who wished to wear this style added another fine, rectangular translucent veil which fell over the forehead and folded back. Together with the “kite” veil, the frontal created the look seen in these examples from brass rubbings (and tracings/redrawings?)

## The Partlet: keeping warm

Figural art shows some women wearing a fabric structure that covers their bare shoulders, upper chest, and upper back.



The figure on the left is wearing what appears to be a tailored partlet. It lies smoothly across the shape of her upper body, no wrinkles or gathering of fabric. The neckline is shaped and there's a defined center-front closure, possibly secured with pins. Its edges are tucked under the collar of the gown, all the way around. If this lady is wearing another layer or a stomacher underneath, we cannot see it.

The figure in the middle is wearing what appears to be a simpler piece of cloth which is wrapped around her shoulders, tucked under the collar of her gown, and under her kirtle or stomacher. In many brass rubbings—like the one on the right—one can see the tell-tale sign of a partlet—the V-shape descending from her neck—but the artist also drew the curves of the top of the bust, indicating that this fabric was probably super-fine, transparent silk, much like the veils worn on these ladies' heads.

## The belt: A demysent

- A belt of cloth with metal ends
- Reference from 1467/8 in an inventory of Sir John Howards's gifts to his wife: "... a lytel gerdyll of sylke and goolde called a demysent and the harneys of goolde".
- "Sent" is "ceint" or "ceingt", anglicized.



A defining characteristic of this style of clothing is the demysent, a belt made from cloth, with gold fittings at either end, and a chain extension terminating in a decorative pendant. Notice the chain has bulky, rectangular-shaped links, not the usual oval style seen in most modern chains.

# Making the kirtle

- Bust-supportive, straight-front (no opening)
- Laced on right side only
- Fitting done by Charlotte Johnson



I decided to forgo the stomacher option and instead made a bust-supportive, side-lacing dress with a squared-off neckline. This would serve well as a substitute, and I could wear it solo. I asked Charlotte Johnson, an experienced fitter, to fit me with a “straight front”, for bust support. She used three panels—two to shape the back, and one across the front. This dress needed to have a smooth front made of one piece of fabric to mimic a stomacher. I sewed it from some dark brown wool flannel I had lying around. I inserted a gore at center-front, to help shape the skirt, along with gores at the sides and back. The neckline is straight across the portion of the bust line that would appear when worn with a gown. I lined it in cotton canvas, like that seen in the fitting photo on the left. The canvas was very stiff and would guarantee a smooth front. In the process of sewing, I miscalculated and ended up cutting the front panels too small. Rather than recut and waste all that fabric, I inserted shaped strips of fabric on the side seams to make up the lack.

I hand-sewed the eyelet holes with brown Elegance-brand silk floss (it has a high twist; good for eyelets and buttonholes). I used the same brown floss to create an extra-long fingerloop braid done in a 4-bow variation on the “Lace Bend Rounde of Four Bowes” pattern. I had a helper beat down the bows as I worked, so that I could get the length needed. The reason for the super-long lace was so that I could leave the dress mostly-laced but loosened enough to slip over my head. This way I could pull the lace tight without having to worry about threading it through multiple holes located in a hard-to-reach area (my side). Charlotte also gave me this tip, after doing the same for herself on a dress she made. The pattern of lacing is spiral, as frequently seen in figural art of the time.

## Making the gown



There is tell-tale evidence that the princess seam made its way into tailoring of fitted dresses as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as seen in Italian paintings showing multi-colored panels depicting what was probably a six-part dress block. In the 15<sup>th</sup>c, we have the famous Agnes Sorel-as-Virgin portrait as well as the image seen in a previous slide from the Warwick Pageant, which clearly shows a princess seam curving into the armpit on the back panel. I went with a more conservative plan, however, and made the gown from a four-part block shaped from the kirtle pattern. I expanded the side of the bodice about 1/8 inch all around to give it room to fit over the kirtle. I was rushed for time (intending the outfit for a 15<sup>th</sup>c-themed SCA event taking place in a few weeks) so I did not sew gores into the skirt, instead choosing to cut the skirt with flare built into it. The fabric was wide enough to allow it.

I used a smooth-finished black melton (wool) which I decided not to pre-wash. I allowed the sizing to stay, to maintain the glossy, smooth look of the fabric—not a period choice. The cuffs and collar were made from 100% silk velvet, which has been lying around in my stash since May 2006. (Does one ever really forget one's first purchase of 100% silk velvet? I think not.) The pattern for the collar includes a tongue of fabric that hangs down the back, as seen in a variety of illuminations for this style of dress.

I sewed 32 black hooks and eyes into the center-front opening. When hooked together, there was still a slight opening seen between the panels, so I used black thread and sewed up the front in a fast overcast stitch. I was able to do this in less than five minutes while wearing the dress. The result was a reasonably smoothed-down, hardly noticeable front opening that stayed put.

## Making the bonnet



I cut out a sphere shape and a skinny, rectangular shape, from two layers of natural-colored linen. I quilted the two layers of each shape together and then soaked them in a watered-down Elmer's glue, to simulate the glue that may have been used in the period. I let them dry overnight to harden. I then sewed the rectangle into a tube, notched the edges of the sphere, and tucked the notched edges inside the tube. When I placed this on the back of my head, I realized a bit of the bottom of the cap needed to be trimmed away in order for it to lay in a horizontal plane but stay close to the shape of my head. Next, I covered it with the same brown wool I used to make the kirtle. This helped smooth out the surface, which had buckled a little after the glue solution dried. In future, I know to stretch the linen taut as it dries to minimize this effect.

To simulate the lattice decoration, I couched gold thread in a diamond pattern on the gold silk velvet I planned to cover the cap with. I sewed pearls to the intersections. I glued plain velvet to the sphere portion of the cap and then glued the embroidered velvet rectangle around the tube. I created a stiff wire prong with support antenna using clothes hanger wire, wrapped the prong portion in velvet, and then sewed the prong into the cap. Finally I sewed pearls along the side of the prong and in two rows around the base of the cap.

I experimented with different silk gauzes and found that none of what I had gave the right taffeta-like stiffness to achieve the look seen in the figural art. I compromised and used a synthetic material that did achieve the correct look.

## Adding the veils and wearing the bonnet



I chose a man-made gauze instead of real silk gauze for the kite portion of my veil because I could not find a silk which maintained reasonable transparency and was stiff enough to fall in the manner seen in the art. For the frontal, I used real silk gauze of a very fine weave.

I pinned the kite veil to the front of the prong first. I then pinned it between the support wires, to the cap itself. I sewed the folded-back portion of the frontal to the rest of the veil at the bottoms on both sides of the fold-back. I ironed it thoroughly to help it hold its shape. I then pinned it to the prong, to the cap (between the support wires), and to the kite veil, where both veils hung over the ends of the support wires. These pins (made of brass) kept the veils from sliding all over the place.

To put the whole thing on, I pulled my hair back into a ponytail and then attached a fake ponytail over that, which I wrapped up into a large bun. I just don't have enough hair, even when it is grown long, to achieve a bun of any significance. I placed the cap with veils attached against the back of my head, and then used two "doll" needles (about 5 inches long each) to pierce the cap and my fake bun beneath. The cap stays put all day long this way.

## Making the demysent



I ordered lovely fittings from Raymond's Quiet Press, but did not realize they were bronze until I received them (I was envisioning a more yellow brass). They did not come with a chain, so I asked Laurie Cavanaugh, a jewelry-making friend of mine, if she had any bronze chains. Luckily she had one, and mailed it off to me. I put the fittings together.

I used the same gold silk velvet that makes up the cuffs and collar and covers the headdress to make the fabric portion of the belt. I rolled a rectangle of it together until it was a sturdy thickness. I then tucked the rough end under and sewed it closed. I ironed the tube until it was a flat, belt-like structure, finished the ends, and then sewed the fittings onto each end.

Another friend was kind enough to make me a bronze chain in the rectangular link style seen in the figural art, but alas, the fittings did not fit to the chain.

## Making the partlet



I patterned and hand-sewed this partlet with the intention of draping it around my shoulders, tucking it under my dress collars, and then pinning it up the front. It's made from a light habotai silk and is surprisingly warm when worn.

## The finished ensemble



The outfit is quite comfortable when worn for a day of activity. Since these pictures were taken, I have shortened the length of the veil support wires and pulled them closer to each other. I also reduced the size of the kite veil by cutting it into a square from the kite shape it originally had in these photos.

I would love one day to add recreations of the necklaces seen in the Elizabeth Woodville portrait.

## Sources Consulted (in no particular order)

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Available as a Google eBook
- Rene d'Anjou's Book of the Love-Struck Heart (*Livre du Cœur d'Amours Espris*)**, by Rene d'Anjou, illuminated by Barthélemy d'Eyck, Routledge, 2001  
Illuminations available on flickr here: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/crimsongriffin/sets/72157616464921108/with/3421322990/> (last accessed January 16, 2012)
- Fifteenth Century English Noblewoman's Clothing, c. 1475 – 1485**  
**Northern Shores Arts & Sciences Competition, Martinmas, Barony of Ruantallan, AS XXXX**, by Mistress Isobel Mowbrey  
<http://webzoom.freewebs.com/bessdarnley/Revised%20gown%20research.pdf> (last accessed January 16, 2012)  
Excellent research from a colleague in the East Kingdom who produced her own version of a 1480 English lady's outfit. We differ on some interpretations, but I think her reasoning is sound and well-informed.
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- Medieval Dress & Fashion** by Margaret Scott, The British Library, 2007  
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