

Built Fjord Tough: Sewing Sturdy Seams

There are three jobs you want your hand sewing to do: hold the pieces of the garment together, hold the hem of the garment in place, and finish any raw edges not taken care of during construction or hemming. A strong sturdy seam not only extends the life of your garments, but makes them hang nicely and fit better. Sewing by hand gives you the opportunity to make minute adjustments as you go, and the nature of some seams means that you won't want to take it apart later, so you'd best do it right the first time.

Construction

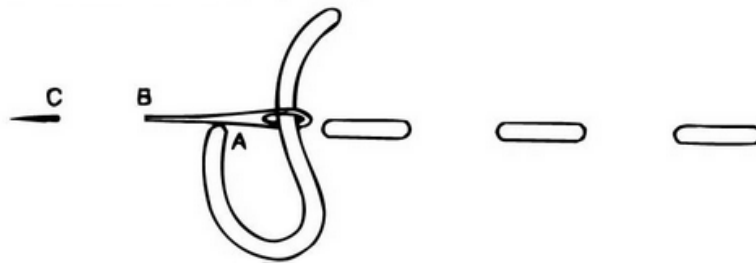
What stitch you choose for construction will depend on what you are expecting of that seam and the characteristics of that fabric. Will the seam be under strain, as in a close-fitting or supportive garment? Are you making it of delicate or easily frayed fabric? Is your fabric sturdy? Will it felt to itself?

Two common, yet very different period fabrics in common use in the SCA are linen and wool. Each of these benefits from different finishes during construction, but they tend to use very simple stitches to get there. Linen tends to fray easily, so you always want to finish your seams to prevent fraying. I have left off this step in machine sewing and lived to regret my choice. While it does add work, the beautifully finished look and the added longevity of your garment are worth the trouble. Wool will often felt to itself as you wear it, so unless the fabric is loosely woven and not fulled at all, finishing raw edges is not quite as vital.

Linen

My favorite method of finishing linen seams is flat-felling, which encloses both raw edges and creates a very tidy and workmanlike finish. Flat-felling is worked in two stages, and it's important to point out that any fit issues must be resolved before the second stage is worked -- ripping and redoing felled seams is a giant pain. The two stitches used here are the running stitch and the whip, or overcast stitch.

Joining the Seam



A running stitch is your basic in-and-out stitch. There are a couple of ways to work it quickly: stacking and stabbing. With the first method, I use a longer needle and weave it in and out of the fabric, stacking three or so stitches onto it before I pull the needle through. This has the advantage of speed, but I find that the needle goes through the fabric at an angle and it can cause the two pieces to slide against each other, which can cause issues down the road, especially with slippery fabrics. The angle also causes the stitches on the back of the fabric to be shorter than those on top, which may or may not matter to you aesthetically.

When I do the second method, I stab the needle straight down through the fabric and back up again, but don't pull the thread all the way through. I do this several times, then pull the thread all the way through, running

the stitch line between my thumbnail and forefinger to alleviate any gathering or puckering. I tend to use this method more than the other, as not only does it alleviate the skewing of the fabric, but it makes it easier to get the stitches the same length on both sides of the fabric. I make my stitches between 1/8" and 1/4" long.

Every now and again, I take a back stitch or two, where I circle the thread back on itself. You can sew the entire seam using back stitch, which makes it very strong, but given that the purpose of flat-felling is to distribute strain as well as finish the raw edges of the fabric, I generally find it unnecessary. You might feel differently, especially if you're hard on your clothes.

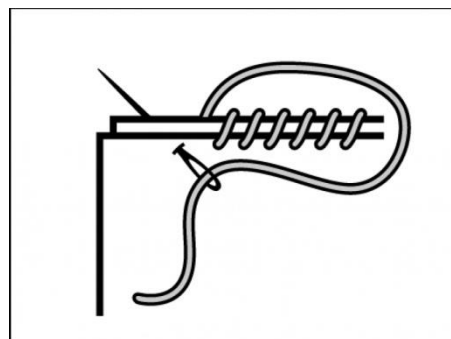
You can make your stitch line nice and line even along your seam allowance by drawing it with a pen, and on linen I swear by Pilot FriXion pens. The ink turns white when heat is applied, so you do have to be careful on colored fabric, but you can use it to your advantage on darker fabrics by drawing the line and then ironing it to expose the now-white ink. Just be careful to put those marks on the inside. If you iron over your marks by accident, put your work in the freezer for about half an hour and it will come back (this also works if you use a FriXion pen to take notes and accidentally leave your work in a hot car).

On wool, I like tailor's chalk. The line isn't as fine as with the pen, and it can rub off, but you can always draw it again.

Finishing the Edge

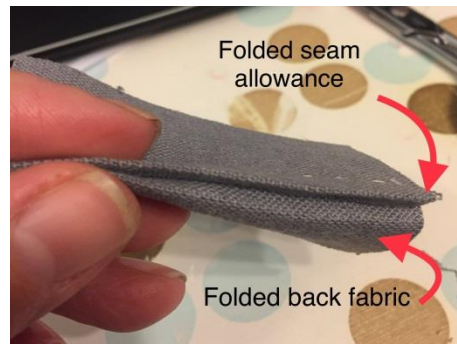
Once you get your main stitch line sewn using a running stitch, press the seam to make the fabric lie nice and flat, then press open the seam allowance. Trim one of the seam allowances to half its width, then press the other one over the top and fold the raw edge under, enclosing both raw edges and preventing fraying. (One source says to work the seam with one edge standing taller than the other, but for me this causes issues with adjusting the size of one piece or the other to accommodate this offset edge, as well as making sure the edges stay parallel so your seam doesn't curve. I'd rather just hold raw edges together and sew, then trim one side.)

This second pass over the seam is done using a different stitch: the overcast or whip stitch.



Overcast Stitch

I used to avoid flat-felling, because when you're joining the pieces together, I thought you had to gather a lot of fabric in your hand to stitch the folded edge down flat. One day I had a rush of brains to the head and realized that if you fold the fabric back on itself, you can whip the folded edge to the body of the fabric rather quickly.



Take small stitches through the body of the garment and the edge of the seam allowance, perpendicular to the seam. I like working left to right, as I'm left-handed, holding the fabric perpendicular to my body and inserting the needle towards me. It's easier to push through that way. I try to make my stitches about 1/4" apart, and as close to the edge as I can get away with.



Once the overcasting is done, press the seam open. I like to press on both sides. Try to use a press cloth on the right side of your fabric; high heat and steam can make linen shiny and you might not find this desirable.

From what I have read, the strict period method involves holding the edges of the fabric offset from one another while they are sewn together, and then doing the whole fold-and-stitch business to enclose the raw edge. I don't do this because it changes the measurement of the piece that would otherwise be trimmed, and I haven't yet played with it to see what it does to the fit of the garment, or to figure out how to adjust for it.

Seam Junctions

Seam junctions can be tricky. You don't want to sew through too many layers and you don't want odd, bulky lumps. The seam shows the direction it's laid on the right side of the fabric, and you don't want that to change if you can help it, either. This Requires Planning. It ain't easy, but it's doable. Sometimes I find that drawing arrows on the inside of my garment helps me figure out which way to turn the seam. And sometimes, when one main seam diverges, as with a gusset inserted into an underarm seam, you have to stop sewing one seam and sew another so the junction is tidy when you get there. It's a challenge, but the satisfaction of a neat and tidy seam junction is worth the hassle of planning it.



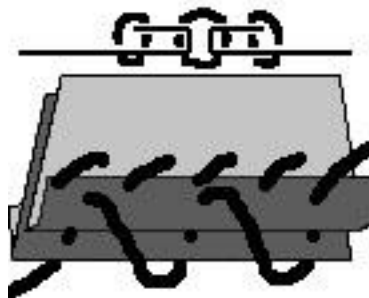
Generally speaking, I make the seams all lean in the same direction when they come together, and I try to make the edge of the seams point towards my back, which is really just an affectation on my part. If I screw it up, it doesn't affect how the garment fits or how it wears, so I sigh and tell myself I meant to do that and move on with my life.

Wool

For wool, mostly because it tends to felt to itself over time, I like to turn the seam allowances and sew them down *before* joining the seam. Admittedly this works best with straight seams; curves usually require clipping. Since I make early period garb, which has very few curved seams, I'm good to go.

Finishing the Edge

Using a hem gauge, turn the edges of your garment pieces to the appropriate depth. (Don't turn the hems; you want to work those last.) Turn only a single fold; because wool will felt, you don't need to double turn it to enclose the raw edges, as you would with more delicate fabrics. When I sew the edges, I use a hem stitch and make sure that the stitches that catch the main part of the piece are perpendicular to the edge. I think it looks tidier (and I have a wicked hard time making them parallel).

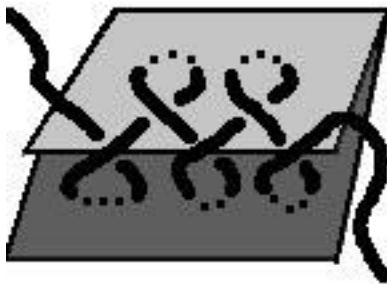


From Archaeological Sewing, Heather Rose Jones

This works best with a closely woven fabric, stitched with a wool or wool-blend thread.

For more loosely woven fabric, I use a herringbone stitch. I work this somewhat deeper on the folded edge than I normally would, so the upper stitch doesn't pull through the edge of the fabric.

For a more loosely woven fabric, like a herringbone twill, I use a herringbone stitch that covers the edge, to prevent fraying. I make these stitches deeper than I might on a smoother, more tightly woven fabric so that they don't pull out.



From Archaeological Sewing, Heather Rose Jones

Both of these techniques end up working fairly quickly once you get the hang of them. If you're concerned about keeping your stitches even and regular, you can use a ruler and pen to mark your fabric, or you can get a product like Tiger Tape (available on Amazon), which has regularly spaced markings. With practice, however, you'll find that you will make your stitches neat and even as a matter of course.

Joining the Seam

Once the seam allowances are sewn down, joining the seam is done using a very familiar technique: you hold right sides together and whip stitch the seam closed, taking small stitches through the edge of the fabric. This creates a rather elastic seam, so it might not be the best technique for seams under strain. Stitching closely does alleviate this stretchiness, however. This technique was found in Hedeby, a Norse market town in what is now Northern Germany.

Hemming

You've already seen the techniques that I use for hemming: overcast/hem stitch and herringbone stitch. For linen, I turn the hem twice to enclose the raw edge and take rather small stitches. For wool, I turn the hem once, taking slightly larger stitches since the fabric will eventually stick to itself and the hem won't drop if the stitches come out.

I have never had stitches come out.

I do sometimes couch a wool thread into the hemstitching along the edge of the fabric when I'm hemming wool, and will probably do so more often in future. This wear cord helps keep the raw edge of the wool fabric from fraying and gives it a little extra support.

Hand sewing my garb not only gives me sturdy seams that I will actively have to work at to destroy, it gives me a deep sense of peace and accomplishment. Whether you sew entire garments by hand or just hand finish your hems, I hope it brings you the same joy.

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<http://awanderingelf.weebly.com/blog-my-journey/viking-clothing-a-deeper-look-at-edges>