

Sewing and braiding





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Drop spindle

Made from wood, with stone, wood, or metal weights, spindles have been used to spin yarn for millennia. Spinning involves twisting fibres together to make yarn for sewing, weaving or knitting. Most yarn was made from flax, or wool, although poor people used hemp and nettle fibres. Women held the fibres in a distaff (a long stick with a forked tip), held under their left arm, and controlled the spinning using their right hand. In pictures of distaffs, flax fibres look straight, and wool fibres look like fluffy clouds.

The weight on the spindle means it can be dropped to swing from the yarn after spinning has started, allowing long lengths of yarn to be spun before having to wind it onto the spindle.

Spinning was a social activity, done by groups of women of all classes. Spinsters took their spinning with them wherever they went.



How do we know about drop spindles?

Finds made during archaeological excavations, and illustrations in manuscripts such as *The Luttrell Psalter*, and the *MS Fr. 599, f. 40*, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Jean Bourdichon's painting, *Four Social Conditions – Work*, shows a woman spinning using a distaff and drop spindle.



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Natural dyes

Made from wool, this embroidery thread has been dyed by hand using natural dyes from seeds, leaves, flowers, roots and bark.

Tudor embroidery threads, yarns, fabrics and leathers were all hand dyed using natural dyes. You could tell how rich somebody was from the colour of their clothes, as some dyes were very expensive, and only rich people could afford to buy certain colours of cloth.

Dyeing involved different manufacturing and dyeing processes according to the dye being used, but most fabric dyes needed a mordant to 'fix' them, or make them permanent. Common mordants included alum, and urine, which families used to collect in special pots and keep for this purpose, as well as for bleaching linens.

Many other natural dyes were used in Tudor times, including dyes made from other plants, lichens, oak galls, and rust. Other elements were added to dyes to produce a variety of colours, including wine, salts, shells, mosses, sheep urine, lentils, fungus, vinegar, wild cucumber, insects, barley malt, plants, barks, roots, berries and flowers.



How do we know about natural dyeing?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, paintings, and finds made during archaeological excavations. People still use natural dyes today.



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Pins

Made by hand from wire, brass and bronze, metal pins were valuable luxuries, as making each pin took about 15 separate processes. Pins were also made from bone, fish bones, wood, thorns, ivory, and shell.

Tudor clothing was hand made, and pins were essential to hold fabric whilst it was being sewn.

Before the mid-1500s the finest pins were imported from France, but Henry VIII wanted pins to be made in Britain, and in 1543 a new law – the *Act for the True Making of Pynnes*, was made to control the quality and price of pins.

Very rich Tudor women also used longer, blunt ended 'dressing pins', with decorative heads, to hold their clothes together when they were wearing them.



How do we know about coil headed pins?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, paintings; and finds made during archaeological excavations. Catherine of Aragon's wardrobe accounts of 1531 show that she received 'ten thousand pins and two hundred needles' as well as ribbons, lace, fabric and fur. Hans Holbein the Younger's 1536 *Portrait of Jane Seymour* shows dressing pins down the side of her bodice.



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Brass needles

Made by hand from wire, medium and fine brass and bronze needles were used with linen or silk thread to sew fine linen and silk fabrics, and for embroidery. Brass and bronze were used to make needles because they are metals which don't rust, and which are hard enough to keep their shape when being used.

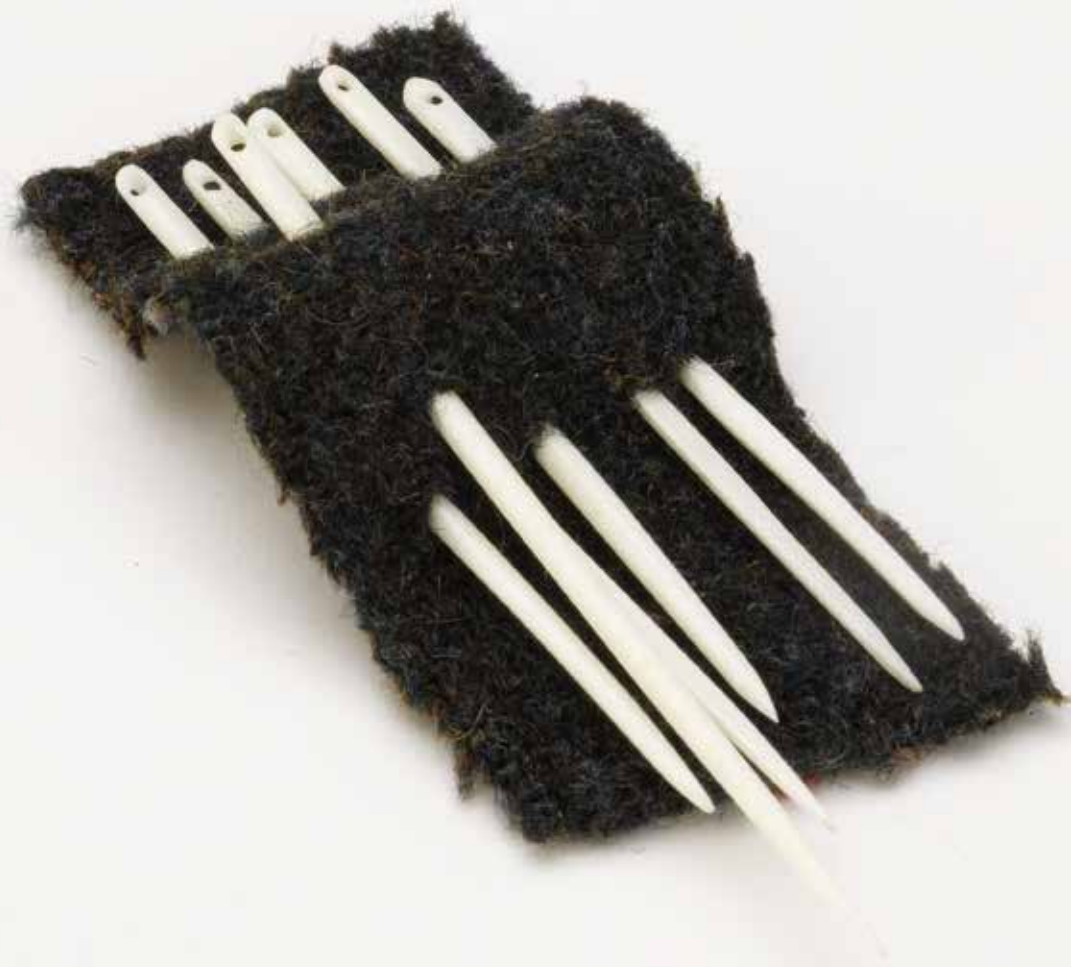
Rich Tudors loved expensive embroidered fabrics, clothes, bags, handkerchiefs, bedding, cushions, table and cupboard 'carpets', book covers, bookmarks and needlecases. Rich and middle class women embroidered as a pastime, but there were also male and female professional embroiderers, who earned their living by embroidering clothes and other items for others.



How do we know about brass needles?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, paintings, and finds made during archaeological excavations.

There are many examples of embroidered items made using brass needles in the V & A, and also the Metropolitan Museum of Art's online collections. Alonso Sánchez Coello's portraits show people wearing richly embroidered garments. Henry VIII's wardrobe accounts for 1547 show that more than half of the 224 items he owned were ornamented with embroidery.



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Bone needles

Made by hand from bone, these needles are much thicker than brass or bronze needles, and were used wool or linen thread to sew coarser woollen fabrics, and leather. Ordinary people could make needles like these at home, from the bones of animals they killed for food.



How do we know about bone needles?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological excavations.



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Needle case

This leather case with wool fabric inner, and silk hanging cord, was used by rich people or professional tailors and embroiderers for keeping expensive pins and needles safe. The needles and pins were put into the woollen circle with their heads in the middle, so that they do not fall out once the liner is pulled closed into the leather 'box'. Natural lanolin oils in the woollen liner kept the needles and pins lubricated so that they slid smoothly through fabrics in use.

The silk cord loop is added so that it could be worn hanging from a belt or girdle, or hung from an embroidery sewing frame.



How do we know about needle cases?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological excavations. This replica is based on diamond shaped needle cases made with carved diamond shaped bone or wood cases.



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Bobbin needle cases

Made from wood turned on a pole lathe, these bobbins have space for several colours of thread on the outside, and a hole for needles and pins on the inside.



How do we know about bobbin needle cases?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, paintings, and finds made during archaeological excavations. Wooden bobbin needle cases were found on the *Mary Rose*.



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Snips

These steel snips in a leather case were the Tudor equivalent of embroidery scissors, and were used to cut thread when sewing or embroidering. The case has a loop so that they could be hung from a girdle or embroidery frame.



How do we know about snips in leather cases?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological excavations. People still use snips today, and also use larger versions of this tool for topiary. A very similar, but larger, tool was used to shear sheep until the 1880s, when electric sheep shears were invented.



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Thimble

Cast in pewter, this open topped thimble was used to protect fingers when pushing brass and bronze needles through fabric. Thimbles, which were called 'thymels' in medieval and Tudor times, were also made from leather, and wood, for use with bone needles and heavier fabrics and leather.



How do we know about thimbles?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, paintings, and finds made during archaeological excavations. A 1480-90 *Portrait of Costanza Caetani*, shows a thimble, along with pins and needles, at the bottom left corner.



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Lucet

Made from wood, this simple tool was used for making woven cord or braid, and decorative edgings. Lucets were also made from bone, horn, and ivory, and could be used to make single or two coloured braid, in simple or complex patterns.

The yarn is wrapped around the prongs in a figure of eight, and then as each new wrap of yarn is added, the yarn below is pulled up over the new wrap and lucet prong to make a stitch in the centre of the lucet.

Lucet cord was useful because it didn't fray when cut, and it was used to lace clothes together.



How do we know about lucets?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, paintings, and finds made during archaeological excavations. Lucets are still used today.



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Aiglets

Made from sheet brass, these conical tips were sewn to the ends of ribbons, braids, cords, and leather laces, to make it easy to thread them through small round lacing holes in clothing.

Women's bodices were fastened by lacing, and sleeves were laced to bodices. Men's hose and breeches were laced to jerkins and doublets, and also sleeves to jerkins. Poorer people used plain aiglets, but rich people could afford to buy aiglets which were more decorative.



How do we know about aiglets?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, paintings, and finds made during archaeological excavations.

An aiglet is shown clearly on a 1580s doublet – Metropolitan Museum of Art Accession Number: *1978.128.*, and the National Portrait Gallery's 1564 *Portrait of Sir Richard Bingham* shows him wearing a laced doublet.

People still use aiglets today – they are usually made from plastic, on laces used to tie shoes and trainers, or on draw cords on bags and clothing.



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Buttons

Cast in pewter, these buttons were used by rich people, to fasten and decorate their clothes.

People have been using buttons since at least 3000BC, but early buttons were used as decorations rather than to fasten clothes together. Buttons with buttonholes for fastening clothes first appeared in the 1400s in Germany.

In Tudor times, buttons were still being sewn onto clothes as decoration – especially on rich men's clothes. Most clothes were still fastened with laces, but rich people were starting to use buttons to fasten their clothes. Pewter buttons were expensive, so were only used by rich and middle class people.



How do we know about pewter buttons?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, paintings, and finds made during archaeological excavations.

The 'woven' cone buttons are copies of original pewter buttons, on a leather jerkin c1560 in the Museum of London, and the rose shaped buttons are copies of the buttons in the 1560 Flemish School *Portrait of Robert Dudley*. The 1550s *Portrait of John, Prince of Portugal*, attributed to the workshop of Anthonis Mor van Dashorst, shows buttons being used decoratively on the jerkin sleeves, and functionally on the doublet.



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Netting shuttle

Made from brass, bronze or copper alloys, netting shuttles were used to make hair nets for noble and middle class women. The thread was wound around the shuttle between the forked ends, and the shuttles were then used to weave and knot threads to make nets. Hair nets, which had been used widely, were going out of fashion in Tudor times.



How do we know about netting shuttles?

Illustrations and descriptions in manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological excavations.

Gian Giacomo de Alladio's 1520 *Portrait of Anna D'Alencon* shows her wearing a decorative hair net. Agnolo di Cosimo's 1544 *Portrait of Eleanor of Toledo with her son Giovanni de Medici* shows Eleanor wearing a beaded hairnet.

Fishermen in some parts of the world still use much heavier wooden netting shuttles today to make and repair hand knotted fishing nets.

