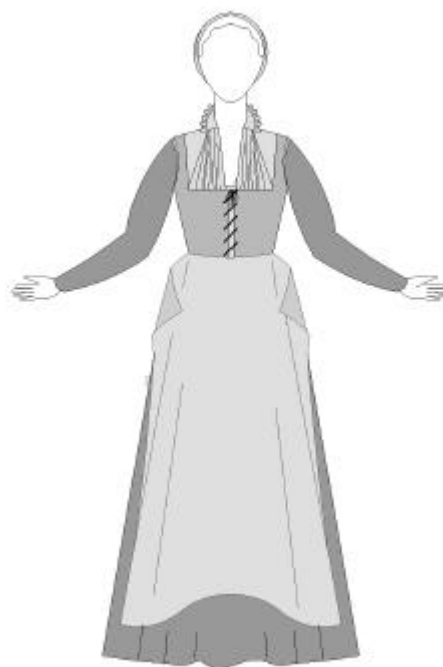


Adapting the Elizabethan Lady's Ensemble Patterns For Lower Class Wear

By Margo Anderson

A few years ago, I started doing research on the costume of lower class Elizabethan women.

One of the most useful sources was a painting known variously as “The Fete at Bermondsey” or “The Wedding at Bermondsey.” This painting is interesting for the variety of styles shown. There are ladies and little girls wearing the full-skirted farthingale styles of the upper classes. There are a number of women wearing what appear to be either one-piece, fitted coat-dresses with a waistline seam, or matching bodices and somewhat narrow skirts.



Finally, there is a group of three women dancing, who are wearing the closest thing to the usual modern concept of lower class 16th century clothing that I have found: They are wearing unmatched bodices and skirts, aprons, fitted sleeves, and partlets or neckcloths.

As many people prefer to portray the lower orders, I decided to produce a lower class woman's pattern, based on the styles of the Bermondsey dancers.

Since there are no surviving lower class garments, I had to do a certain amount of extrapolation as to what the actual shape of the pieces that made up the garments would be.

It's often been said that the clothing of the upper and lower classes was distinctly different, and would require entirely different patterns and fit. I found this not to be the case. In fact, when I experimented, I found that many of the patterns from my Elizabethan Lady's Wardrobe Ensemble worked perfectly, when made up in the proper fabrics.

Since there were many garments in those three packages that were not appropriate for the lower class character, I decided to pull various garment pieces from the Lady's Ensemble and package them as The Elizabethan Working Woman's Pattern. However, I wanted those of you who already own the Ensemble to be able to use it for as wide a range of costumes as possible, so I've written these instructions for adapting your Elizabethan Wardrobe Ensemble patterns to the Working Woman's styles.

Lower and Middle Class Women

Lower class women were often the wives and daughters of agricultural laborers. They usually lived their entire lives in one small village, working the land owned by the nobleman of the area. They had little leisure time and almost no cash. Their clothing was limited and designed for practicality.

Lower Middle class women were the wives and daughters of the artisans, craftsmen, and small merchants. They often worked alongside their husbands, and a widow could continue her husband's business after his death. Their clothing was still practical but might reflect that they had a bit more leisure time and a bit of money to spend on clothing.

The Working Woman pattern is appropriate for Lower and Lower Middle class women. For lower class, we recommend making the skirt, bodice, and sleeves in contrasting colors, to give the impression of an outfit that was assembled a bit at a time, as time and money were available. For a lower middle class woman, the skirt and bodice can match, as can the sleeves.

Servants belonging to the middle class were likely to wear livery provided by their employers. "Livery" did not necessarily mean a formal uniform as it does now. Livery was clothing (or food or other goods) paid to one by one's employer, in lieu of cash. It is likely, though, that fabric for livery was purchased in bulk, so that all the liveried members of a household could be dressed in the same fabric and color, but the styles and ornamentation may have reflected individual choices, rather than being rigorously matched "uniforms."

Fabrics for the Working Woman

As stated in your Ensemble manuals, the fabrics available to the Elizabethans were primarily linen, hemp, wool, and silk. They also used leather for men's clothing, although it is not clear whether it was used for any women's garments.

While fibers were limited, the choice of weaves and styles was not. There was a huge variety of fabric available. For working women, keep your fabrics simple, avoiding elaborately textured or patterned weaves.

Colors can be quite bright. The Bermondsey painting shows a surprising amount of bright red. Indigo blue dye was inexpensive and therefore widely used for servant's clothing and livery. Avoid making a costume in varying shades of the same color, such as pale blue bodice, medium blue sleeves, and dark blue skirt: the Elizabethans preferred a wider range of color.

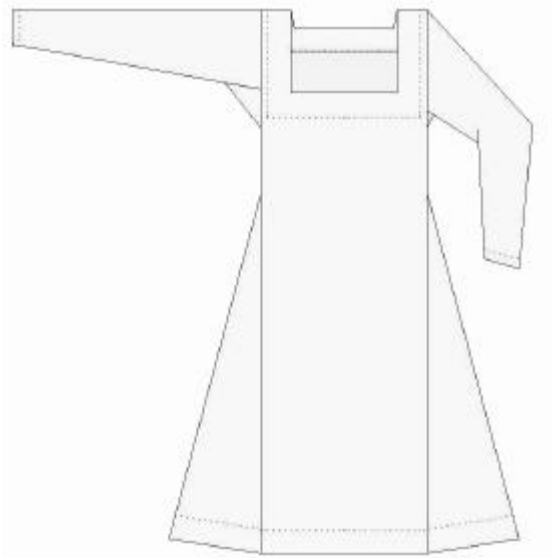
Trims

Trims should be limited to small amounts of plain trim such as bands, guards, and braid type trims that could have been homemade. A small amount of embroidery on one's "best" clothes is appropriate.

The Garments

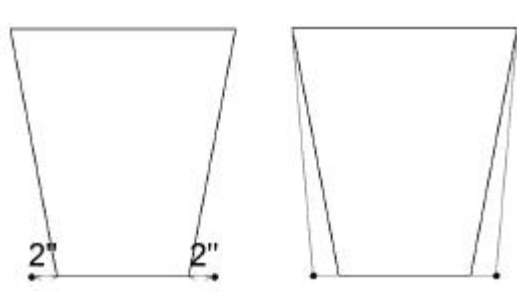
The Smock

The Working Woman's smock is identical to the low necked smock of the upper class lady. It should be made in plain linen, undecorated except, at most, for a very small amount of embroidery.



If you like, you can widen the sleeve hem by 2-3" in order to allow it to be rolled up when doing messy work.

To widen the sleeve, mark 2 points horizontally out for the sleeve hem on each side, at a distance equal to half the amount you wish to add. Draw new cutting lines from the upper corners of the sleeve to these points.



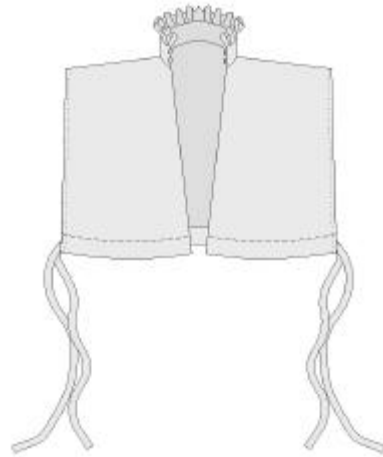
The High Necked Smock

We have not included the high necked smock in the Working Woman pattern, but if you prefer the style, it is perfectly correct to wear it. If you choose to have ruffles at the neck and sleeves, they should be made of plain fabric, not lace or lace trimmed.



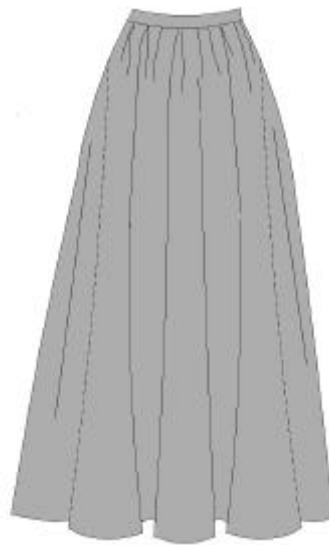
The Partlet

The Working woman pattern includes a partlet that is substantially different from the Lady's Underpinnings version, being cut with separate fronts and backs and having shoulder seams rather than the gusset of the Lady's version. Both are correct. If you prefer the Working Woman's version, go to our website to print out a pattern (www.margospatterns.com/partletprint.htm) and instructions.

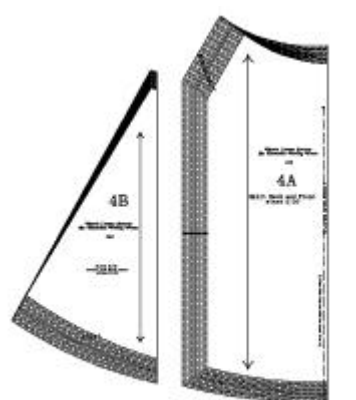


The Skirt

The skirt is the garment that differs the most from the common idea of what lower class skirts should be. It is not a very full, flouncy or drapery dirndl or flared skirt. In actuality, it is only slightly gathered at the waistline, and the fullness comes from large triangular gores at the sides of straight front and back panels. This was a common way of cutting garments in the period, as it wastes very little fabric.



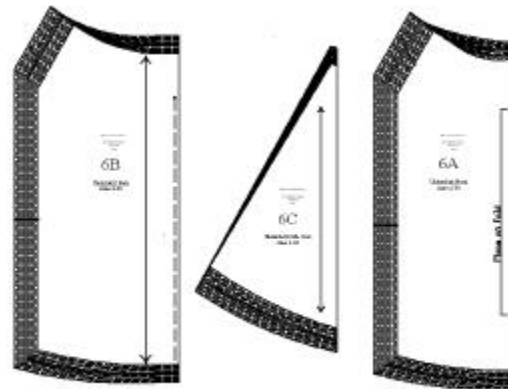
The Working Woman skirt has side gore seams that begin approximately 7" down from the upper edge of the skirt. It is also correct to have them extend all the way up to the waist, as would have been done when using a narrower fabric.



Working Woman Skirt Pattern

Alternate Patterns

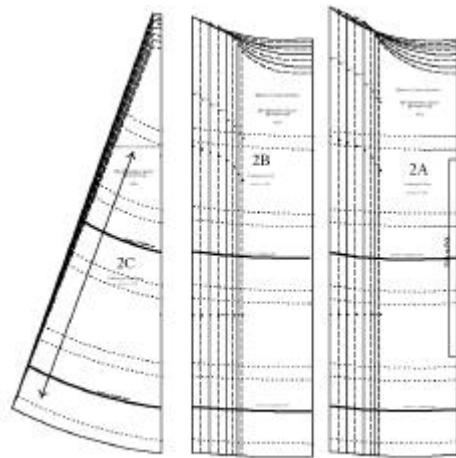
If you have the Second Edition of the Elizabethan Lady's Wardrobe pattern, (the one with the cover printed in color) you may use the Underskirt pattern, which has the same straight front and back and triangular gore construction. You will need to shorten it by approximately 4 1/2" to remove the extra length that was added to accommodate the farthingale.



Lady's Underskirt , Second Edition

Do not leave the front of the skirt waistline flat as described for the underskirt: instead, simply gather the waistline all around as for a conventional skirt.

If you have the First edition of the Lady's Wardrobe, use the Farthingale pattern for the skirt. The Farthingale has straight front and back panels with triangular side gores that extend up into the waistline, which, as discussed above, is an equally proper cut to that of the Working Woman skirt. Eliminate the hoop channels and shorten the farthingale by approximately 4 1/2".



Farthingale, 1st Edition

Trim for skirts, if used at all, should be simple horizontal bands of fabric, usually at knee level or lower. Mark the placement lines by measuring up from the hem. I prefer to use bias tape, either homemade or commercial, because it is easy to apply to the curved lines.



The Bodice

For years, costumers have been told that the cut of the upper class bodice is completely different from that of the lower class bodice. Our research and practical experimentation has proved to our satisfaction that this is untrue. The Lady's bodice works perfectly as a lower class bodice **when the desired effect is a period correct silhouette**. If the desired effect is the stereotypical overflowing Wench bodice, the Lady's bodice will not work, because that look is the direct effect of improper cutting and fitting.



The main difference between the Lady's Bodice and the Working Woman's bodice is that the latter is not worn over a corset. This result is a different shape, with a few more curves showing than if a full corset is worn. The bosom is supported and held in place by being slightly flattened against the chest wall, much in the manner of a modern sports bra. This flattening also produces a gentle swelling of the bosom above the neckline, but it is a controlled, tasteful look rather than the "oozing over" produced by improper fitting in the name of prurience. Harrumph.



The boning in the bodice should be sufficient for most bodies, but if you are full-busted you may prefer to add a few more bones to the front.

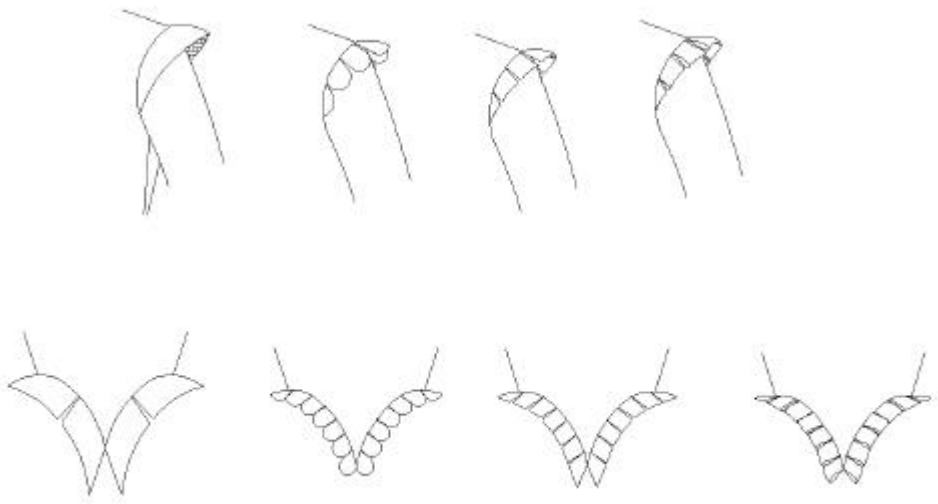
Fastenings

Either laces or hooks may be used for the front fastening bodice, although hooks should probably be reserved for more prosperous working women.

There is no truth to the oft repeated costume myth that lower class women didn't have back laced bodices because they had no maids to dress them. Very few people in the period lived alone, so there was always a mother, sister, or husband around to do it for them.

You don't need the padded rolls to prevent gapping at the front. It is correct for a Working Woman to have a small portion of the smock showing at the front gap. This is nice to know if your weight tends to vary.

Skirtings and Tabs



Due to space limitations, the Full Skirting was not included in the Working Woman pattern, but it is acceptable. The Split Skirting may also be used.

For a character of the lowest order, avoid using tabs, as they would have been very time consuming. A bodice with no shoulder or waist treatment at all would be appropriate, as would one with shoulder wings, with or without a plain or split skirt.

Shoulder Rolls and the Paned Cap Sleeve are not appropriate for Working Women.

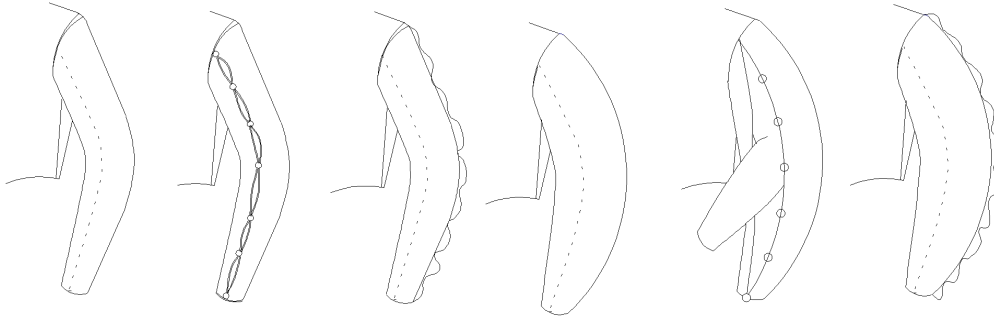
The Doublet Bodice

The Working Woman's pattern does not include a doublet bodice, but it is very appropriate for a lower class character. If you like, wear it over a low necked bodice with no shoulder treatments or tabs. You may also leave it unbuttoned to the waist for coolness and to show off the inner bodice, if you wish.

Check the fit of the upper chest, as you may need to make some small adjustments along the side front seam due to the less pronounced bosom. If your bosom is such that the degree of elevation is not spectacular, you can probably get away with wearing the doublet bodice over the lady's corset you already have.

Sleeves

Either the Narrow or Wide Curved sleeves may be used.



Hats

The Caul

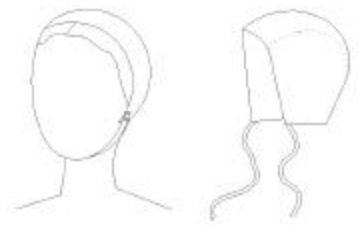
The caul pattern is identical to the Lady's caul. Make it in plain white linen. A small amount of embroidery around the band can be pretty, as can a few scattered motifs on the bag.



The Coif

It has been pointed out that the Coif pattern in Version 2.0 runs very small. We recommend using the downloadable version on our website, which has been re-graded larger.

If you wish, you can work a narrow border of embroidery around the edges of the coif, scatter small motifs over the surface, or work a motif in each of the corners where the ties attach.



The Flat Cap

The Flat Cap is the same pattern as that provided in Version 2.0, but the construction is different, giving a softer, less structured look. [You can download detailed instructions from our website at www.margospatterns.com/flatcap.htm](http://www.margospatterns.com/flatcap.htm). If you



have Version 1, use the Soft Cap brim to cut two Crown pieces, but **do not** cut the inner head opening out of one of them.

The Soft Cap

The Soft cap was not included in the Working Woman pattern, but it is correct, so use it if you prefer it to the Flat Cap. Construct the brim according to the downloadable Flat Cap Instructions.



For information on making the Apron and Neckcloth, which are unique to the Working Woman's Pattern (and therefore not included in the Lady's Ensemble), go to:
www.margospatterns.com/apron.htm and www.margospatterns.com/neckcloth.htm.