

Constructing a 1570s French Hood

The crowning glory of Elizabethan dress, the French Hood became fashionable first in France, developing from a wired stiffened veil that was seen around 1520. The French Hood first appeared in England around 1528 to 1530, with some historians stating that it was brought over from France by none other than Anne Boleyn, The Great Harry's second wife. The hood evolved in shape over the years but by the time Queen Elizabeth sat the throne, the hood had shrunk into an arrangement of lace, jewelry, pearls, and fabric placed far back on the crown of the head and was termed simply a "billiment".



This portrait of Queen Elizabeth, painted in the 1570s, shows such a billiment, while the portrait on the right, thought to be painted in the 1560s, shows a similar silhouette. It is difficult to see the construction of these later hoods as the body of the hood is mostly hidden by puffs of hair and the decorative treatments used. In the portrait of Elizabeth and again on the left, there seems to be a point that comes forward on the head somewhat, almost as if the curved point of



an attifet (shown above) has been married to the billiment, perhaps to provide more opportunity for display of ornamentation or perhaps reminiscent of the point of the forehead cloth when worn with a coif. This may also help keep the billiment on as this now sits very far back on the crown of the head. This is pure speculation on my part, as no clear portraiture or period illustrations show this to be fact, but it appears "period possible" and does not look out of place when worn, as shown by the theatrical representation below:



(Helen Mirren as Elizabeth I, HBO)

This is the style I have chosen for my late period hood, although I have swept the billiment back a bit to prevent it from looking quite so “crown-like”.

Materials used:

Buckram (glue stiffened canvas)

Pliers (for bending wire)

Wool felt

Florist’s wire

Silk satin

Linen thread

Lace, trim, pearls, pearl headed straight pins

Cotton thread

Base Construction:

My basic pattern for the hood was obtained from the Elizabethan Costume web site at <http://www.elizabethancostume.net/headwear/frenchhood.html>, using the latest period pattern available, which was for the 1545 hood. This gave the basic shape of the billiment, with some slight modification. For the base, I measured from ear to ear on my own head and then drew an approximate shape and width for the base, cutting this from buckram and then fitting and re-shaping until I was satisfied with the size and shape.

Both shapes were cut in paper and then laid out and marked onto buckram, with two layers of buckram being cut for each, along with one layer of the wool felt. Using a large needle and waxed linen thread, I whip stitched the buckram layers and wool together along all edges to secure the layers together and to give more stiffness to the edges.

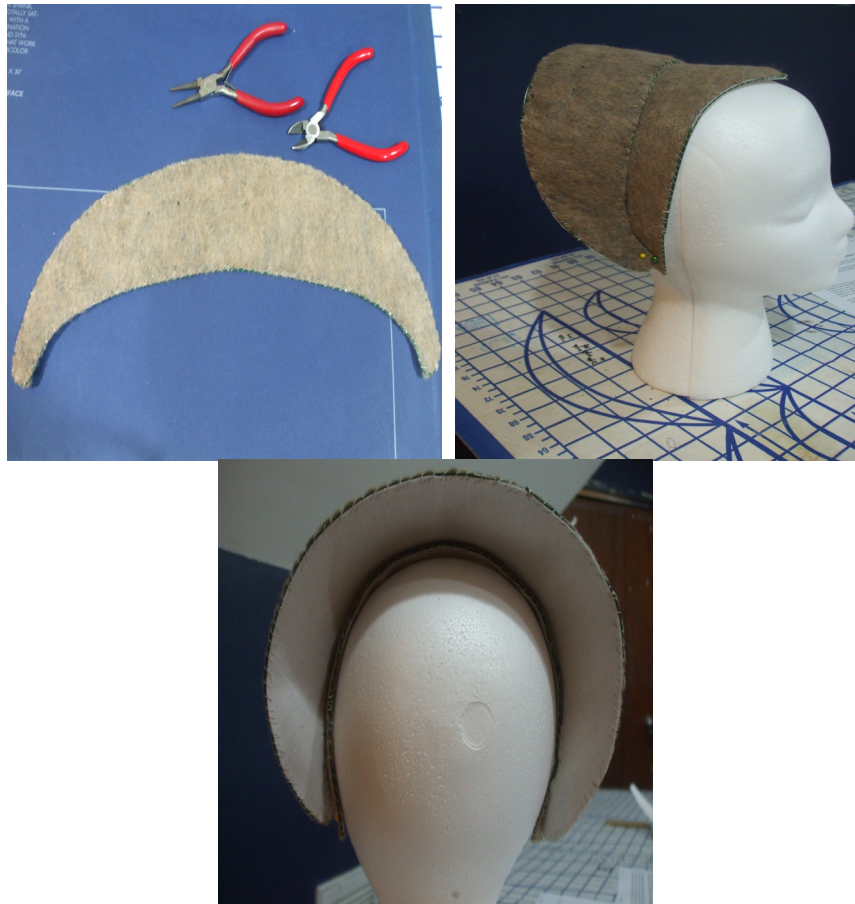


Next, the front edge of the base was wired, by placing the wire against the edge of the buckram/felt and using a whip stitch to hold this in place. Initially, I used some fabric covered bridal wire I happened to have available but once the front edge was done, I realized that this wire was not stiff enough to hold the shape that I wanted. Therefore, before proceeding, I obtained a heavier gauge florist's wire to complete the project. This worked pretty well, but still is not quite as stiff as I would like. For future projects, I will obtain a heavier gauge of wire (probably at least 18 gauge) to eliminate having to tie the hood in place.



Using the waxed linen thread, I held the florist wire against the edges of both the base and billiment, then used a whip stitch every 1/4 " to sew the wire down to all edges of the shapes, using my fingers and pliers to gently bend the wire as needed. The use of the felt turned out to have the additional benefit of allowing the wire to "sink in" just slightly, giving me a stiff but somewhat "softer" edge.

After the base and billiment were completely wired, I was able to bend them into the desired shapes and could see how they would look when put together.



Covering the Hood:

There has been much discussion among historical re-enactors about the preferred color for the French hood. From examination of available portraits, these seem to have been generally black, white or ivory and very occasionally made from the same fabric as the dress, in silk, satin and velvet. To cover the base and billiment of my hood, I chose a pale cream/yellow silk satin in a medium weight.

Using my paper patterns, I traced the shape of the base and billiment onto the satin, using light pencil marks, and adding $\frac{5}{8}$ inch all around, with a $\frac{4}{8}$ inch seam allowance. Why the difference? Because I found out the hard way that you need to add a tiny bit of “wiggle room” and also account for the bulk of the wire and buckram. I used the same silk satin for both the front and back of the hood. For the billiment, the two pieces of fabric were laid right side to right side and pinned so they lay flat. Starting at one end, on the INSIDE of the crescent, about

two inches above the “point” behind the ear, I stitched around the point and up over the top of the crescent, around to the other side, ending once again about 2 inches beyond the point, on the inside of the crescent. (Use a very small stitch for this as the seam allowance must be clipped very close to the stitching.) This gave me nicely finished points but still left enough room to insert the buckram/felt/wire base without too much trouble (after I had to remake the fashion fabric slip cover with the 5/8” allowance). The seam allowance was clipped and trimmed as close as possible, then the fabric was carefully turned to the right side and pressed flat.

A similar process was following for the base piece.

The fashion fabric casing was then slipped over the buckram/felt frames, making sure this fit snugly in the points of the fabric crescent and the point of the base. Working from the inside of the crescent and the back edge of the base, the fabric was pulled taut and the edges pinned until everything was smooth, then the edges were folded under and hand stitched, using a small hem stitch to close the openings. I tried to keep my seams reasonably straight along the edges of the hood, although I figured (correctly) that I could cover any minor dips with pearls or trim later.



Once the fashion fabric is was on, smoothed and stitched to my satisfaction, I was able to bend both pieces into their approximate curvature and then sew the billiment to the base, using a stab stitch through the very front edge of the billiment where it met the base, all the way through the base to the backside, where the stitch line would be hidden. I now know why milliners have special needles! It’s not easy to stab through ten layers of fabric (four of them buckram and two of felt) with a large needle! Once accomplished however, the billiment was firmly attached to the base.

Once the basic shape was assembled, I was able to bend the hood edges into their final shape. All that's left now is to decorate!

