

# The tudor fashion, the Beaver hats



Baroness Cellach Dhonn inghean Mhic an Mhadaidh

April, 2018

## Tudor Fashion, The Beaver Felted Hat

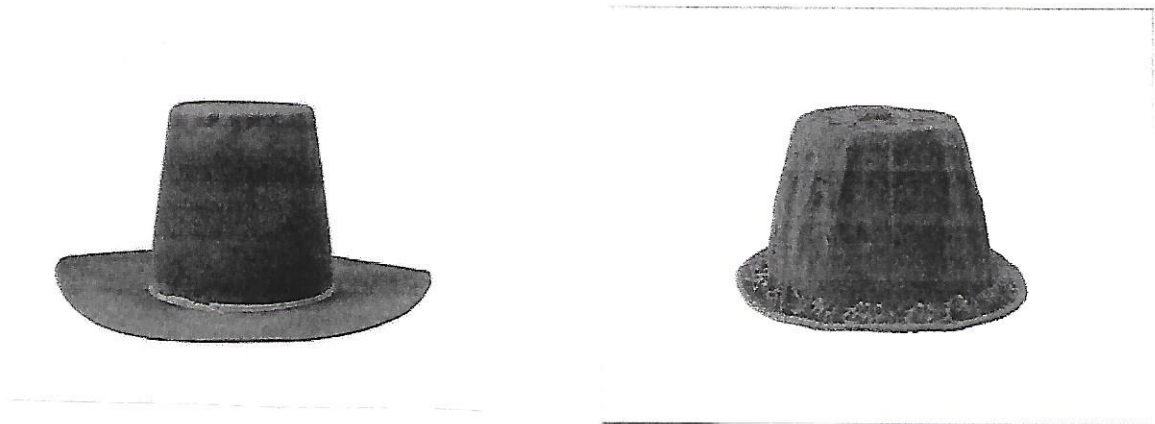
In the High and Late Middle Ages, European clothing began to involve into what we think of today as fashion. The cut, shape, style and decoration of clothing changed at a much faster pace than in the Early Middle Ages. While we think of fashion changes' occurring from year to year, the clothing designs in the Late Middle Ages changes from generation to generation. (Monet) The accessories were the mostly important part of the clothing as they were an indicator of social status. Ninya Mikhaila wrote in her book that "The proper appearance of linen, the quality of headgear and the stoutness of shoes were more than functional requirements in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These bespoke a Tudor's person station in life as eloquently as their garments. Hats served more than the purpose of keeping people's heads covered. They were an important part of social life, demonstrating status and deference".

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century there were two kinds of hats; bonnet and caps. (Mikhaila) They decline in a lot of different height and fabric. Throughout England's medieval period, there are many sources depicting simple felt caps, bonnets and hats being worn. These are likely being felted using local sheep wool, which was not known for its good felting qualities. (Frost) England's hatting industry improved dramatically when the beaver fur from America became available. With this new material, was created new styles with taller crowns and wider brims, the Top Hat. That established England's worldwide reputation.

### Hats

I decided to make two different beaver felted hat from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The first one is the 1590 common Top Hat that could be worn by both men and women. There were appropriate headgear for aristocratic women and were worn indoors and out by middle-class and gentry women. The physical description by V&A Museum indicates that the hat is made of a single piece of felt from black beaver fur, with brim and mid-height, flat-topped crown. Those worn by the masses were made of felt (sheep or rabbit) and could be covered by silk, if the budget stretched to it. Very fine ones were made of beaver hair. (Mikhaila, V&A Museum)



The second hat is an English Steeple Beaver Hat. It could have been worn by both men and women in 1590-1680. This style spread to rural areas of Britain where it remained a common form of headgear, long after new and different styles of hat came into fashion. It was still popular in late 18<sup>th</sup> century in Cornwall and Wales. The one in V&A Museum has holes at the front of the hat. This could indicate where a hat badge was repeatedly pinned. The picture below shows the English Steeple Hat.



## The period process

The two hats are beaver hats and they were made using the same process.

### Step 1: Preparing the fur

#### Pulling

To prepare the fur for felting, the guard hairs had to be removed. These hairs were unsuitable for the Hatter's purposes. The pelt would be placed on the Hatter's knee and with thumb and a large knife or tweezers; the guard hairs would be pulled leaving only the beaver wool on the skin.

#### Carrotting

A solution of nitrate of mercury would be brush on the pelt. The mercury caused the scales to raise on each individual fiber and increased at the same time the wool's matting ability. The pelt would be dried and then the wool shaved.

#### Mixing

Once the wool was removed from the pelt, it was called fluff. For the finest hats they would mixed two different fluff then carded them.

#### Weighing

The fluff was then weighed to the amount needed for the particular size and thickness of hat to be made. This could be about 8 to 12 ounces of fluff.

### Step 2: Matting

#### Bowing

The process of bowing was both a cleaning and fluffing operation. At this stage the bluff would begin to mat together loosely. The wool is now called a batt, would be in the shape of large oval.

#### Basoning

The next step is not well understood. It appears that each batt was manipulated into a triangular shape called a capade or gore. Basoning used heat, pressure and moisture to strengthen and condense the batt.



## Planking

The cone hat shape was placed in a large copper kettle with a very hot solution of diluted sulphuric acid, beer-grounds and wine sediments. The cone was immersed over and over again. The hatter's protected their hands from the solution by dipping their hands in cold water. This process would cause the cone to half of its initial size.

## Step 3: Shaping and finishing

It seems that there were different steps used by different Hatters at this point. The differences may have been part of trade secrets but here are some techniques they probably all used.

## Blocking

The shrunken hat body, still shape as a cone would be force on a block made of wool. The block acted as a mold, roughly creating the desired style and size of the top hat. What remained at the bottom became the brim of the hat and was then cut with a rim-jack at the desired size.

## Dyeing

The hat stayed on the mold until dried, then it could be placed on a wheel to start the dyeing process. The hat would be kept boiling in the dyeing solution for one hour. This step could be repeated ten to twelve times until the hat became the desired color.

## Stiffening and waterproofing

Those two steps were the most closely guarded secrets of the Hatters. For stiffening, gum Arabic, common gum, flounder's glue would be dissolved in water and brushed unto the hat. Waterproofing was done by rubbing a ball of rosin, bee's wax and mutton suet on the inside of the hat.

## Steaming, ironing and brushing

In order to make the brim the desirable shape they steamed, ironed and brushed the hat.

## Lining

The more valuable hats were lined with silk . At last the hat was ready for market.

## My process

Beaver's hair are no longer available because the beaver are a protected animal. We can not hunt or kill them. So, I used marino black wool in 25 microns. I used wet flat felting techniques (see annexe 1) and used a resist to felt it in a cone shape with squared top. The resist was a thick plastic sheet. I used a resist so the two sides of the hat doesn't felt together. When the shape was secured and the wool mostly felted, I cut the bottom of hat to remove the resist. Then I shaped the hat by rubbing it on a plastic container having a similar shape of the desired hat. Rubbing increases the strenght and the density of the hat. Then I steamed the brim. I don't used any glue or wax on my hats.

## The results

I'm very happy about the outcome of my hats. I just ordered plastic hat shapers, can't wait to try them.

## Bibliography

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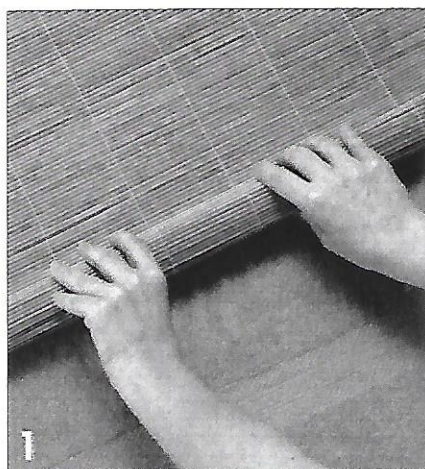
V&A Museum, Beaver Hat number 752-1893

Wikipedia, Hat (Chart for Hat size)

## Appendices



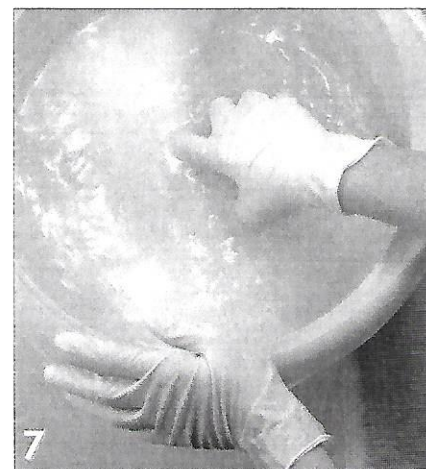
# THE SOAP TECHNIQUE Flat felting



1 Unroll the bamboo mat over the towel.



4 Arrange some pieces horizontally in the same way to form a new layer.



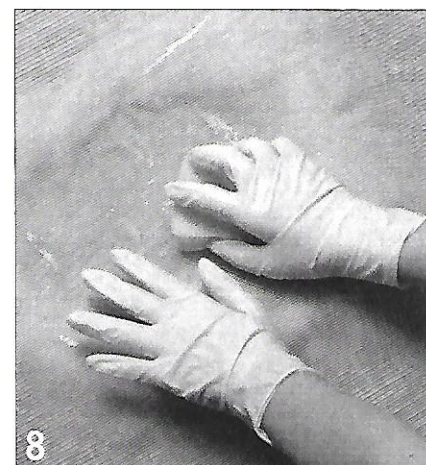
7 Put on the rubber gloves and soak the sponge in the mixture.



2 Pull out pieces of carded wool approximately 10cm (4in) long.



5 Cover with the mosquito netting.



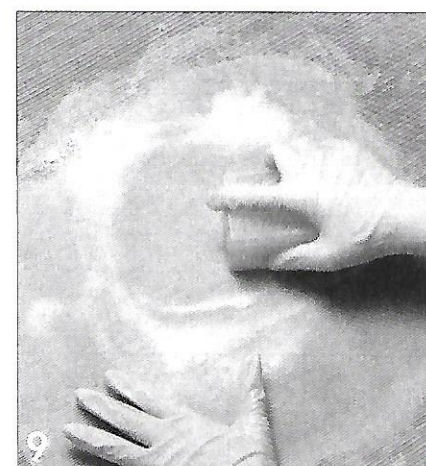
8 Thoroughly wet the entire surface of the wool with the sponge through the mosquito netting.



3 Arrange these pieces vertically, in several overlapping rows.

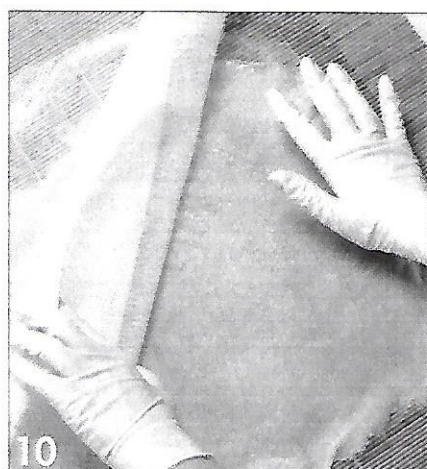


6 Add liquid soap to water at a temperature of about 50°C.



9 Rub the entire surface with household soap, using circular movements.





10 Remove the mosquito netting.



13 Repeat step 12, turning the piece of wool through 45° several times on both the front and the back.



16 Place the piece of wool on the wooden felting board and knead it.



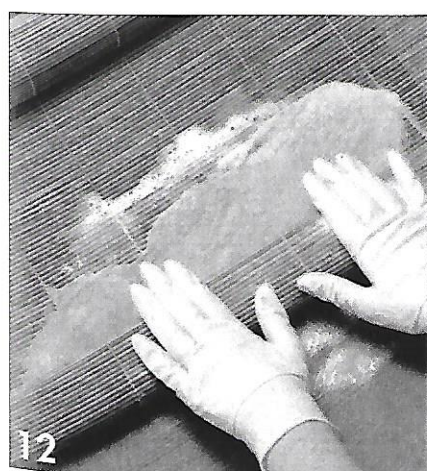
11 Carefully roll up and then unroll the bamboo mat with the wet wool inside.



14 Soak the piece of wool completely in the soapy water at a temperature of about 50°C.



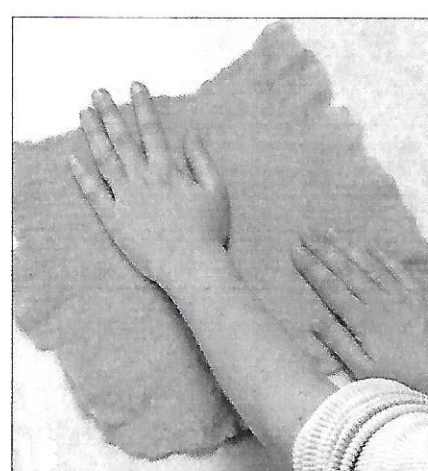
17 Rinse in cold water. This may be done under a tap.



12 Repeat this operation about thirty times, exerting an even pressure.



15 Soap the piece of wool again and massage it vigorously on both sides.



Place the piece of wool on your work surface, stretch well and leave to dry flat.



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# Hat

- **Place of origin:**

England (made)

- **Date:**

1590 - 1680 (made)

- **Artist/Maker:**

Unknown

- **Materials and Techniques:**

Felt

- **Museum number:**

752-1893

- **Gallery location:**

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In the early 1600s this was a fashionable style of beaver felt hat, worn by both men and women. Until about 1600, the beaver for hats had been trapped in Europe. By the early 17th century, most hats were made from beaver pelts imported in large quantities from North America. During felting process, the hair was removed from the skin and then fused together under heat and pressure. The resulting textile was further moulded around a wooden block to shape it into the fashionable style. Some beaver hats had short crowns and wide brims while others, like this example, had a tall, narrow crown, known as the steeple shape because it resembled a church steeple.

This style spread to rural areas of Britain where it remained a common form of headwear, long after new and different styles of hat came into fashion.

## Physical description

A man's or woman's hat of animal hair felt, with a wide brim and high crown. The felt is thin and slightly angled in shape. Holes at the front of the hat indicate where a hat badge was repeatedly pinned.

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[Museum of London](#)[www.museumoflondon.org.uk](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk)[Home](#) > [Image Details](#)**A man's hat with a high crown and narrow brim; c1590**

40cm

actual image size: 29cm x 22cm

**Full image caption**

A man's hat with a high crown and narrow brim covered with black silk velvet. Black silk velvet, very worn but repaired, on a base with trimmings.

**Image Details**

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## Technical



- [beaver fur](#)

- **Technique**

- [felting](#)
- [blocking](#)

- **Name**

- [Unknown](#)

- **Place**

- [England](#)

- **Collection**

- [Textiles and Fashion Collection](#)

## Hat

- **Place of origin:**

England (made)

- **Date:**

1590-1670 (made)

- **Artist/Maker:**

Unknown

- **Materials and Techniques:**

Beaver fur; felted, blocked

- **Credit Line:**

Given by Lady Spickernell

- **Museum number:**

T.22-1938

- **Gallery location:**

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Felt hats in a wide variety of styles were worn by both men and women in the late 16th and throughout the 17th centuries. They were appropriate riding head wear for aristocratic women, and were worn indoors and out by middle-class and gentry women.

Hat-making was a complicated procedure and by the 17th century it was often divided into the two crafts of felt-making and hatting. In the former, the fur -- either beaver or rabbit -- was removed from the pelt and shaped and felted into a cone-shaped hood. The hatter purchased these felt hoods and shaped them over a wooden block to create the desired height of crown and width of brim. The hats were then dyed, smoothed and trimmed.

## Physical description

A man's or woman's hat made of a single piece of felt from beaver fur, with a wide brim and mid-height, flat-topped crown. The pack threads used in the blocking process are visible at the base of the crown and the initials 'FM' stamped on them.

## Place of Origin

England (made)

## Date

1590-1670 (made)

## Artist/maker

Unknown

Beaver fur; felted, blocked

## Marks and inscriptions

F M

Stamped over the impression of the pack threads used to shape the felt hood, possibly the initials of the hatter who did the final blocking and finishing of the hat.

## Dimensions

Height: 17.2 cm overall, Height: 17.0 cm crown, Diameter: 36.5 cm overall, Circumference: 54.5 cm crown at base, Circumference: 44.0 cm crown at top, Thickness: 2.7 mm felt at edge of brim

## Object history note

Donated by Lady Spickernell in 1938, with a collection of 17th century hats and men's wear, which came from her mother's side of the family, the Cottons of Etwall Hall in Derbyshire.

## Historical context note

Felt hats in a wide variety of styles were worn by men and women in the late 16th and throughout the 17th centuries. They were appropriate riding head wear for aristocratic women and were worn indoors and out by middle-class and gentry women.

## Descriptive line

A man's or woman's hat, 1590-1670, English; black beaver felt, mid-height crown, wide brim

## Bibliographic References (Citation, Note/Abstract, NAL no)

Lucas, Armelle, 'Beaver Hat', in North, Susan and Jenny Tiramani, eds, Seventeenth-Century Women's Dress Patterns, vol.2, London: V&A Publishing, 2012, pp.144-145

## Materials

Beaver fur

## Techniques





Felting; Blocking

## Categories

Hats & headwear; Europeana Fashion Project; Fashion

## Collection

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