

The Jack of the War of the Roses

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What is a Jack?

Jack, pourpoint, heuk, gambeson, hacketon, and tunic are terms found in 15th century inventories and accounts describing defensive garments that were worn as a form of armor. The term jack is used by modern reenactors and scholars to describe the textile armor from the War of the Roses that was either a multi-layered linen garment or a layered linen stuffed with raw cotton garment that served to protect the wearer from arrows and sword cuts. This type of armor was common among the archers/foot soldiers of the time.

How Common were Jacks?

"In every shire with jakkes and salads clean misrule doth rise" wrote John Hardyng during the War of the Roses¹

Muster rolls from the era give us an idea of how common the jack was among soldier without harness. On September 4, 1457, before the King's officials at Bridport, Dorset, shows us that the standard equipment expected was a sallet, jack, sword, buckler, and dagger. In addition about two-thirds the men had longbows and sheaths of arrows.² In May 1455, the mayor of Coventry was ordered royal signet letter to supply a retinue for the king. The town council decided to supply a hundred men with bows, jacks, and salleds³. This shows that in the mustering of the militia, some towns required their soldiers to have a jack.

Dominic Mancini wrote this about the archers in Richard III army in 1483 as they arrived at London: There are hardly any without a helmet, and none without bow and arrows; their bows and arrows are thicker and longer than those used by other nations, just as their bodies are stronger than other peoples', for they seem to have hands and arms of iron. The range of their bows is no less than that of out arbalests (crossbows); there hangs by the side of each a sword no less long than ours, but heavy and thick as well. The sword is always accompanied by an iron shield. They do not wear any metal armour on their breast nor any other part of their body, except for the better sort who have breastplates and suits of armor. Indeed, the common soldiery have more comfortable tunics that reach down below the loins and are stuffed with tow or some other material. They say that the softer the tunic the better do they withstand the blows of arrows and swords, and besides that in summer they are lighter and in the winter they are more serviceable than iron⁴. Reading this text gives a picture of an army of archers all wearing a jack but not all having a helmet.

Who Made Cloth Armors?

In England there were guilds that over saw the production of linen armors from the 13th century through the 17th century when this type of armor started to disappear for the battle field all together. In the 15th King Henry VI granted the guilds the right to inspect it's members work and the confiscate sub par jacks because they were that important to the English military machine.

¹ Embleton, Gerry. *The Medieval Soldier: 15th Century Campaign Life Recreated in Colour Photographs*, Great Britain, Windrow and Green, 1994; 49

² Terence Wise. *The War of the Roses*, (Osprey Publishing, Ltd. 1983); 27

³ Terence Wise; 27

⁴ Andrew Boardman. *The Medieval Soldier in the Wars of the Roses*, (Alan Sutton Publishing, Ltd. 1998); 136

In the 13th and 14th centuries the taloir was often also a purveyor of armor. M. Buttin⁵ quotes several extracts from documents of the 14th century in which different names of craftsmen appear classed as “Brodeurs et Armuriers.”⁶

The linen armourers, as they were called, were a guild distinct from the armourers, for in 1272 they were instituted as “The Fraternity of Tailor of Linen Armourers of Linen Armor of St. John the Baptist in the City of London.”⁷ Their first patent of arms was granted by Edward IV in the year 1466, and in this document the society is called “gilda Armorarii.”⁸ Henry IV also confirmed the charter, and Henry VI granted rights of search, which allowed the gild to inspect shops and workshops and confiscate any work which did not come up to their standard.⁹

Did the Jack Work?

Louis XI of France state: “for never have been seen half a dozen men killed by stabs or arrow wounds in such Jacks”¹⁰ in his ordinance requiring jacks to be 25 layers of linen with a stag skin cover or 30 layers of linen.

A mass grave containing about 50 -60 bodies was found near the site of the battle of Towton. It is assumed by scholars that the men in the grave were killed while retreating as we know that a rout happened and the bodies were so far from the main battle field. Andrew Boardman had this to say about the forensics report of the grave “Almost all of the men from the Towton grave suffered multiple cranial injuries which undoubtedly caused their deaths in most cases. The abundance of head trauma ranges from small swords and dagger cuts to massive depression fractures and punctures to the skull, sometimes in the shape of the weapon that made them. It seems that the helmets were either ripped off by the attacker or were not in place when most of the attacks occurred. Injuries to the torso including blows and cuts tot eh chest cavity, the rib cage, and the back of the body, are generally not apparent, which confirms that these areas had armored protection at the time of death. As has been described in previous chapters, brigandines and jacks were commonly worn by foot soldiers, not to mention plate armor which was worn by the more affiant men-at -arms.”¹¹

Were All Jacks Made the Same?

Extant Examples:

There are four known extent jacks left to us; three are from the continent and they are two different shapes and they are constructed differently than the ordinance I have listed suggest making them. The other which is in the Leeds Armory is also several layers of linen stuffed with raw cotton; this find does not yet have a full write up done about it so it's shape is unknown at this time but there is hope that Leeds will publish pictures in their Armor Journal in 2008.

⁵ Le Guet de Geneve, Geneva, 1910

⁶ Charles Ffoulkes. The Armorer and His Craft. Dover Publications Inc, 1988; 94

⁷ Charles Ffoulkes; 94

⁸ Charles Ffoulkes; 94

⁹ Charles Ffoulkes; 94

¹⁰ Charles Ffoulkes; 87

¹¹ Andrew Boardman; 183-184

Some 15th century jacks incorporated an internal layer of maille. Sir John Fastolfs' will of 1459 lists some jacks "stuffed" with maille and some with horn.¹²

The Extent Jacks from the Museums in Lübeck and Stendal



The Historical Text

From the ordinance of St. Maximin de Treves, published October of 1473.

In the section describing the equipment of members of a lance - specifically the mounted archer "The mounted archer must possess a horse worth not less than six francs, and should wear a visorless sallet, a gorget (This may mean a maille standard or bevor), a brigandine, or a sleeveless mail shirt under a ten layer jack"¹³

From the Ordinances of Louis XI of France (1461-1483)

¹² Clive Bartlett. English Longbowman 1330 -1515; 16

¹³ Charles Ffoulkes. The Armourer and His Craft, (Dover Publications, 1988); 87

And first they must have for the said Jacks, 30, or at least 25 folds of cloth and a stag's skin; those of 30, with the stag's skin, being the best cloth that has been worn and rendered flexible, is best for this purpose, and these Jacks should be made in four quarters. The sleeves should be as strong as the body, with the exception of the leather, and the arm-hole of the sleeve must be large, which arm-hole should be placed near the collar, not on the bone of the shoulder, that it may be broad under the armpit and full under the arm, sufficiently ample and large on the sides below. The collar should be like the rest of the Jack, but not too high behind, to allow room for the sallet. This Jack should be laced in front, and under the opening must be a hanging piece [porte piece] of the same strength as the Jack itself. Thus the Jack will be secure and easy, provided that there be a doublet [pourpoint] without sleeves or collar, of two folds of cloth, that shall be only four fingers broad on the shoulder; to which doublet shall be attached the chausses. Thus shall the wearer float, as it were, within his jack and be at his ease; for never have been seen half a dozen men killed by stabs or arrow wounds in such Jacks, particularly if they be troops accustomed to fighting."¹⁴

Stuffed Jacks and Quilting – How it was done.

Many modern reenactors recreating raw cotton/tow stuffed garments find it easier to first quilt the garment then add the stuffing but all extant historical examples are layered with the cotton/tow stuffing and then quilted. Gerry Embleton who is a historical illustrator and makes life size models and reconstructions of jacks commented on the matter in one of his books: "It must be emphasized that the jack is not made like a modern duvet or continental quilt, with two thicknesses sewn into tubular compartments which are then filled with stuffing. Obviously a blade would pass easily though the stitched but unpadding areas. When making a jack the needle must pass right through all the layers of linen and thick padding so that there are no weak pots."¹⁵

The Black Prince garment from the mid 14th century is an extent example of a garment that is layered and then quilted. Janet Arnold observed: "There was a linen foundation on this was filed the cotton wool wadding (*cotton wool is the British term for raw cotton*). Over this the layer of red or blue silk velvet, and then the row of quilting were put in."¹⁶

Other examples of quilted garments and armor include the pourpoint of Charles de Blois (1360), the pourpoint of Charles VI (1400), and the extant jacks at Lübeck and Stendal all of which are layered and quilted instead of quilted then stuffed. Each garment is linen with raw cotton and the Charles de Blois and Charles VI have silk brocade outer shells.

Jacks from 15th Century Artwork

There is plenty of artwork of jacks out there and shapes vary greatly; full sleeves, short sleeves, no sleeves, four body panels, eight body panels, waist length, groin length, collar, no collar, quilting (patterns vary), and no quilting. Really there seems to be no standard way to construct a jack.

¹⁴ Charles Ffoulkes; 87

¹⁵ Gerry Embleton. *Medieval Military Costume Recreated in Colour Photographs* (The Crowood Press Ltd); 66

¹⁶ Janet Arnold. *The Jupon or Coat Armor of the Black Prince in Canterbury Cathedral*. (Reprint from: *Journal of the Church Monument Society Vol VIII 1993*); 17



Reconstructions Materials

We know through the extant examples and written ordinances the following materials were used to make a jack:

1. **Linen** – The ordinances call for the use of layers of linen between 10 and 30 layers while the extant examples are two layers of linen canvas with raw cotton stuffing.
2. **Leather** - The ordinance of Louis XI of France calls for the use of leather, in this case a stags skin, on the outside of a jack under 30 layers of linen.
3. **Raw cotton** – The extant examples are stuffed with raw cotton also known as “cotton wool”
4. **Linen thread** – The extant examples are quilted with heavy linen thread.

First Reconstruction

There is no commercially available pattern for making a jack on the market so the pattern for this reconstruction was created by the writer. As military fashion in the middle ages always followed the fashion of the time the pattern for this jack based off doublet patterns made by the writer. The patterns are based off historical information available, extant examples, and artwork from the time. The peplum for the jack is longer than the doublet.

In the ordinance of St. Maximin de Treves from 1473, jacks are described with no sleeves and made of 10 layers of cloth to be worn over a maille shirt. This reconstruction is sleeveless and 15 layers worn over a maille shirt. There are no images in the ordinance so the shape of this jack is based off of several jacks seen in varying artworks. There are two sleeveless jacks pictured in Memling’s painting Passion of Christ and also one in the Housebook Masters, Road to Calvary. The body of this reconstruction has eight panels with the body having a seam at the waste like the Lübeck and Stendal extant examples have. In the Ordinances of Louis XI of France from 1461 to 1483, it states a jack should lace in the front with a panel behind the gap of the same layers as the body.

Sleeveless Jacks from 15th Century Art



First step in the construction was cutting out all the layers for each piece. As the back and front are symmetrical and divided at the waist you have four pattern pieces, the front top and bottom and the back front and bottom. The inner layers are cut to final size while the outer layers are cut longer to give material to roll the edges to the inside of the jack and close the seams.

The inner eleven layers are made of ugly colored linen acquired cheap. The pieces are simple stacked and butted together and a whipstitch is used to hold the panels together. Once the main body is together the white outer layers were sewn together and pinned in place lining the seams up. The front layers were rolled over to the back and the seams are whit stitched shut with waxed linen thread.

The eyelets for lacing are done using an awl to push open the weave of the line and waxed linen thread is used in a button hole stitch to sew open the hole.¹⁷ This method is used on both, the Lübeck and the Stendal specimen, the skirt part is closed by means of regularly set eyelets, eight on each side, i.e. by eight pairs of points laced crosswise. The chest piece of the Lübeck jack is lost. The Stendal example has eyelets for three pairs of points only; one set of eyelets is placed close to the neckline, one on breast level and one at waist level (this is the natural waist around the belly button not out modern waist at the hips). The Stendal example is also strained from metal indicating a breast plate was worn over it, as seen in the St. Ursula paintings; fewer lacings would have been needed if the gaps were covered by a breastplate. It is suspected that if the Lübeck specimen was not damaged it would have a set of lacing holes going all the way up the front as this reconstruction does. The lacing for this jack is finger loop braided silk with a brass aiglette.¹⁸

The gap in the opening in the front has a reinforcement known as a “porte”¹⁹ piece

The quilting stitch used on the jack is a running stitch of waxed linen same as the extant examples in Lübeck and Stendal.

Photos of the first Jack worn with a maille shirt and sallet.



¹⁷ Elisabeth Crowfoot. *Textiles and Clothing: Medieval Finds from Excavations in London, c.1150-c.1450*; 164

¹⁸ Geoff Egan. *Dress Accessories, c.1150-c.1450: Medieval Finds from Excavations in London*; 281-283

¹⁹ Charles Ffoulkes; 87

Second Reconstruction

The second jack reconstruction belongs to small man weighing about 135 pound. We used the Ordinances of Louis XI as a guide on the layers making this a jack of twenty-seven layers of linen including the arms. The shape comes from the following artwork: Valerius Maximus, Des faits et des paroles mémorables 1475, Beauchamp Pageants c 1483, Manuscript, Siege of Thebes c. 1460, Saint Moïse l'Éthiopien et démon(s), Vincentius Bellovacensis.



The Beauchamp Pageants and Siege of Thebes are both English manuscripts which shows this style was in use in England. The thing that is interesting about these jacks is that none of them are shown as quilted and they all overlap where they close preventing the need for a “porte piece”

This jack is made of four panels for the body with one piece arms. The overlap is pointed shut like on the Vincentius Bellovacensis manuscript. Again the starting point was to cut out the inner layers from cheaper odd color linen; nineteen layers in total. While the back pattern is symmetrical the front has two different sizes pieces since the right size is overlapping the left side for the closure like in The Beauchamp Pageants; this means there are four pattern pieces with the back, two fronts, and arms.

After the nineteen inner layers were cut they were stacked up and butted next to each other and whip stitched together. Then the outer eight layers of white were sewn together. The outer layer was marked up for eyelets to lace jack chains, an arm defense made up of small plates and rings pictured right from the St. Ursula Shrine. The eyelets for lacing are done using an awl to push open the weave of the line and waxed linen thread is used in a buttonhole stitch to sew open the hole²⁰ like mentioned above in the first jack's write up.



The inner and outer layers were then pinned in place lining up the seams and the wrist, neck, body opening, and hem raw edged were turned in on each other and were then whip stitched closed like the extant jacks from the museums in Lübeck and Stendal.

Some details of this Jack are yet unfinished but it is 95% done and wearable as is.

²⁰ Elisabeth Crowfoot. Textiles and Clothing: Medieval Finds from Excavations in London, c.1150-c.1450; 164

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Image Gallery in Order Shown:

- Jan Van Eyck. Crucifixion c. 1440.
- Rogier van der Weyden. Crucifixion c. 1460.
- Manuscript: Jean Fouquet. Unknown Illumination c. 1460. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
- Manuscript: King René's Tournament Book. Varying Illustrations c. 1460s.
- Simon Marmion. Crucifixion c. 1470. John g. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia
- Hans Memling Scenes from the Passion of Christ c. 1471. Galleria Sabauda, Turin
- Hans Memling. Crucifixion c 1480. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest
- Housebook Masters. Road to Calvary c. 1480. Rijks Museum , Amsterdam
- Hans Memling St Ursula Shrine c. 1489. Memlingmuseum, Sint-Janshospitaal, Bruges
- Hans Memling . Passion (Greverade) Altarpiece c. 1491. Museum für Kunst- und Kulturgedichte, Lübeck
- Manuscript: Valerius Maximus, Des faits et des paroles mémorables 1475 came from Koninklijke Bibliotheek National Library of the Netherlands
- Manuscript: Augustine, La Cité de Dieu, Books I-X 1475 came from Koninklijke Bibliotheek National Library of the Netherlands
- Manuscript: Beauchamp Pageants c 1483. The British Library, England.
- Manuscript: Chronicle of Diebold Schilling, Bibliothèque de la Bourgeoisie de Berne.
- Manuscript: Siege of Thebes c. 1460. The British Library, England.
- Manuscript: Saint Moïse l'Éthiopien et démon(s), Vincentius Bellocensis, Speculum Historiale (trad. Jean de Vignay) 1463.

Reference for the Images for Jack Designs

Jack 1

- Housebook Masters. Road to Calvary c. 1480. Rijks Museum , Amsterdam
- Memling Scenes from the Passion of Christ c. 1471. Galleria Sabauda, Turin

Jack 2

- Manuscript: Valerius Maximus, Des faits et des paroles mémorables 1475 came from Koninklijke Bibliotheek National Library of the Netherlands
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The Companie of St. George
<http://www.companie-of-st-george.ch>
- Images from the Holstentor Museum in Lübeck. 2004
FireStryker Living History Forums
<http://www.wolfeargent.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi>
- Web Gallery of Art
<http://www.wga.hu>
- [Sankt-Annen-Museum](http://www.bildindex.de)
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