

Lacing, and how not to do it.

Like many details of historical clothing, lacing is widely abused by people who fail to understand its functional origins or who have simply watched too many historical movies. This brief guide is intended to help you avoid the worst mistakes.

Twentieth-century lacing typically consists of a row of large criss-crosses, often inserted in bizarre locations such as the edges of short sleeves or the sides of leather waistcoats, or down the fronts of shirts. If anyone knows of any illustration dating from before 1800 which shows this style of lacing, in any of these places, I should like to see it.

First of all, let's dispose of two things which aren't lacing: latchets, and strings.

If there is just one doubled lace, threaded through a pair of eyelets and tied, that's a latchet - as in 'There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose' (Mark, 1,7). Latchets are found on hefty clothing as well as shoes, providing a series of single fixing points: indeed, they are known as 'points' when used to hold up men's hose to their doublets.

Strings, usually known as band-strings, are used to close the neck- and wrist-bands of gathered shirts and smocks. They *may* be sewn to the band but are more likely to be threaded through an eyelet at each end of it: one string through both ends is practical on cuffs, but one through each end of the neckband is usual. The string may simply be a loop of cord or tape, threaded as shown, but in portraits from the seventeenth century many a gentleman sports band-strings finished with incredibly elaborate little tassels, knotted and worked in fine linen thread. These were bought as separate items: the King paid 5s a dozen for band-strings in 1624 (*Costume* 31, p.18).

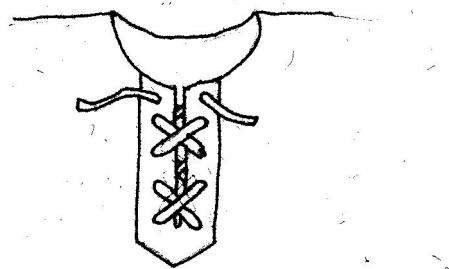
It's probably a misunderstanding of these strings which has given rise to the very widespread error of putting drawstrings in shirts and smocks, something not generally done at the time (or else it's the prevalence in early re-enactment costumes of Indian-hippie-peasant cheesecloth blouses, which often *did* have drawstrings!).

So where do we lace, and why? First, lacing is essentially a feature of clothes which fit closely, or tightly. It only works under even tension, and it has almost invariably been kept as discreet as possible: the eyelets are worked close to the garment edge, and close together – not more than 3cm apart. Most early medieval clothing was unfitted, so lacing only became commonplace with the growing use of close-fitting garments in the fourteenth century. Men's doublets and women's kirtles were laced at the centre front, and then hidden under the loose outer gown, so we only see this lacing on workers.

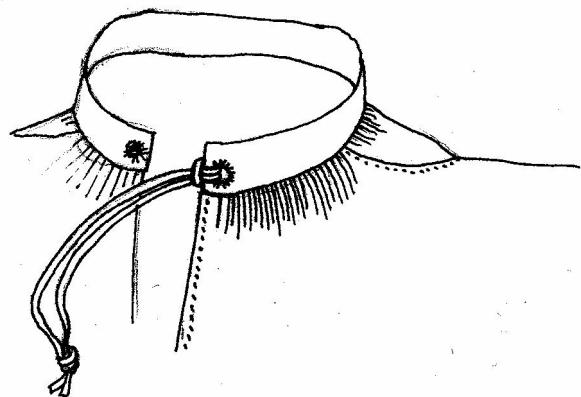
As Medieval became Tudor, the closer fit of women's gowns called for the first concealed lacing: small metal rings were sewn just inside the garment in place of eyelets. This appears to have been a short-lived method which didn't survive the sixteenth century. What appeared instead were two developments which survived to characterise women's dress for the next two centuries: laced garments which don't meet edge-to-edge, but have a gap to display a stomacher or an area of linen; and lacing through concealed eyelets. This latter was a result of the increasingly solid, corset-like lining of the bodice, which was made up first, with its eyelets, and then covered with the outer fabric. A fold of the outer fabric extended to hide the eyelets and was stitched down behind them. Alternatively a strip of linen worked with eyelets was sewn inside the finished bodice. Take a close look, and you'll see how the lacing stops at the edge of the garment.

So your eyelets are close to the edge, or entirely hidden. Now take your lace...and what will you do with it? The answer, usually, was to tie one end securely in place and use the other end to close the garment either going through each side alternately in a zig-zag or else going through two on each side in turn to make a 'ladder' effect. The single end can be threaded twice through the last eyelet and knotted round itself, to secure it. I can't say when 'two end' lacing was first used, but I know no medieval examples (well, I know of one) and I suggest that it was adopted to give more purchase on the tighter bodices of the later sixteenth century. Of course, two ends can be threaded in a ladder rather than XXX's, and indeed the ladder seems to have been much the commonest form at all times, although in the 1630's and '40's criss-cross lacing with multiple laces was fashionably used over a stomacher. To do this, start both ends of one lace in the bottom two eyelets, then start two ends of a second lace through the next two eyelets on one side, and a third lace on the other side, giving you six ends in all. Simply thread each pair of ends upwards in turn...which is easier if you have a lady's maid.

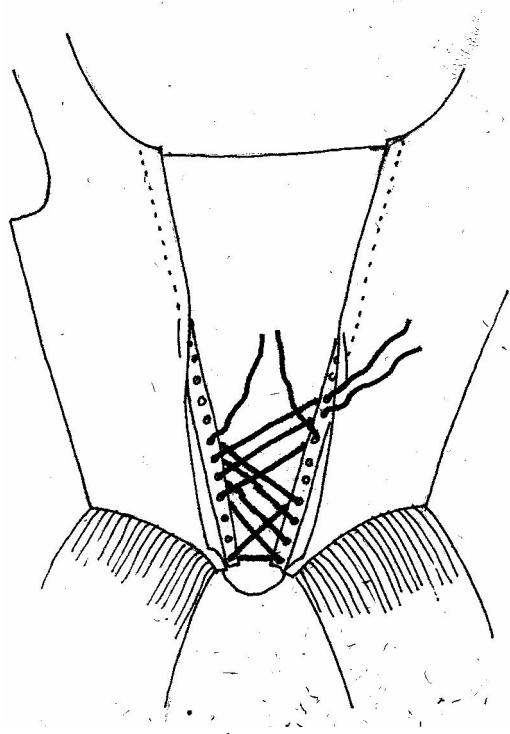
One more small point. Confusion can derive from the multiple meanings of 'lace'. A woman in a laced bodice is wearing something pulled tight, but a man in a laced coat is showing off some gold braid. And while we're on linguistic confusion, 'strait-laced' means closely fitting, as in 'strait is the gate and narrow is the way'. It has nothing to do with ladder or crossed lacing, and therefore the lacing of your bodice is not an indication of your moral habits – as has been suggested by ignorant persons.



A typical example of twentieth-century lacing



Gathered shirt with one band-string in place



1640's bodice with concealed eyelets over stomacher,
showing part-worked multiple lacing. The eyelets
must be very close together for the effect to work.