

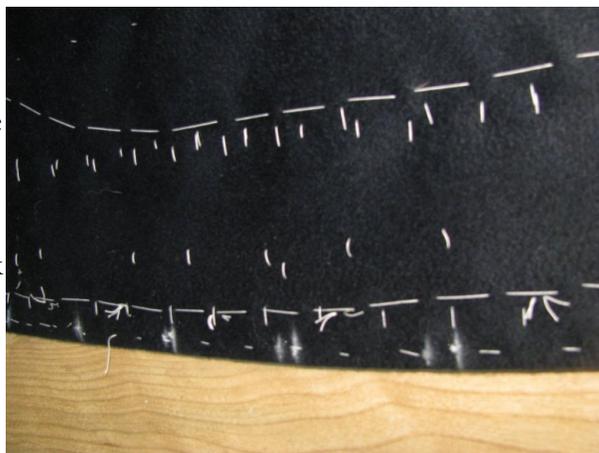
Buttonholes

Hand-tailored buttonholes are a thing of beauty, and in the hands of a skilled tailor, can make a coat stand out amongst others. Properly sewn, they will add a level of detail that you can be proud of, yet at the same time will sit unassumingly against the background of the coat. On the other hand, a badly-done buttonhole will absolutely ruin the look of a coat, so practice on scraps of fabric is a must.

Most people will at first find buttonholes very difficult to make. With practice, however, you will gain proficiency and it will become almost second nature. The best way to learn is by having somebody teach you. However, finding a skilled tailor willing to teach you is not always the easiest thing to do. I have created several videos and documented each step in order to try to take the place of a personal tutor. At the very least, you will not have to go searching through old books to pick up hints here and there.

Layout

To begin with, the buttonholes must be marked out on the jacket. The bottom buttonhole location should be marked first, and in the case of a frock coat, should be in the waist seam. Just make a chalk mark along the edge of the coat to determine the vertical position,



first. The top buttonhole should then be marked, at a height of 1/2” below the roll line. If it is any higher, it will interfere with the roll of the lapel, which will gradually lose its shape. Again, just mark the edge of the coat.

Using a ruler, measure the distance from the top buttonhole to the bottom. Determine the number of buttonholes you want, and subtract one from that number, equivalent to the number of spaces between buttonholes. In my case, there are three buttonholes, and two spaces.

Starting at the top, place your tailor's square with the divisional side up, so that the top buttonhole to bottom buttonhole measurement corresponds with the number of spaces between. In my example, the top to bottom measurement was 8 inches, and I want it divided into 3 spaces between. This happens to be the nice round number of 4 inches between buttonholes, but with other measurements, it can easily be more complicated, hence using the tailor's square.

Mark off on the edge of the coat each buttonhole mark according to the ruler. Be sure to take the width of the chalk marks into account. If you forget, go back and adjust, as I had to do in this case. You will discover this problem when you get to the second from bottom buttonhole, and discover there is a smaller interval between them. This is why we are only marking the edge of the coat for now, until we get the intervals perfected.

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Above the roll line, in the period of the 1860s, it was also very common to have buttonholes above the roll line. The top buttonhole should be $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch below the top of the lapel. The others, one in my case, should be spaced as equally as possible down the edge of the lapel.



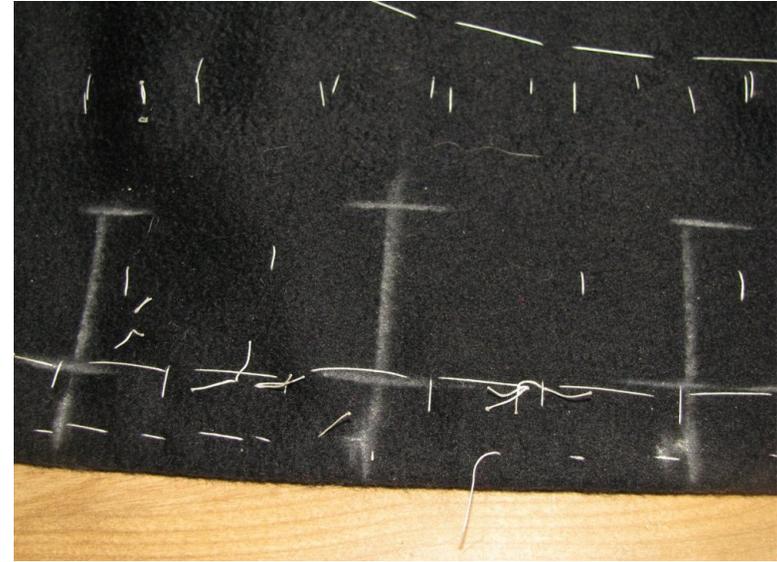
Next, draw lines square from the edge of the cloth corresponding with each buttonhole mark. These need to be at right angles with the cloth, and not parallel with each other, as the front of the coat has a curve to it.



Module Fourteen — The Buttonholes

At the very top buttonhole on the lapel, the buttonhole needs to be parallel to the top of the lapel, not the front edge of the lapel.

Mark $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the edge at each buttonhole, marking the outer edge of the buttonhole. For the inner edge of each buttonhole, mark a line $\frac{1}{8}$ inch larger than the width of the button.



On the waist seam buttonhole, you obviously don't need to mark the placement horizontally, just the end points.

Here's what I had, though after cutting out the buttonholes (shown later). Keep in mind you need to repeat the exact process with the other



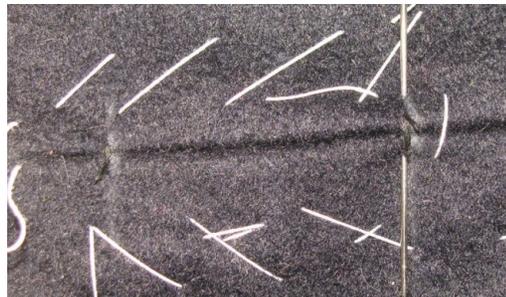
side of the coat, at least for a double breasted version. Make sure everything lines up in the chalk before continuing.

Basting

While there may be basting stitches still holding the canvas and facing in place, you need to ensure that there is absolutely no movement when cutting the holes. Using basting thread, baste around each buttonhole as shown, using a padding type stitch. The needle is inserted right to left, and you stitch in the same towards and away from you.



On the waist seam buttonhole, you want to make sure the seam does not come apart when you cut into it. On both ends of the buttonhole, just beyond the chalk marks, make a small bartack by taking five or so stitches in places, catching



both the forepart and skirt.

Cutting the Holes

There are several tools used in cutting a tear-dropped shaped buttonhole. First, you need a sturdy surface, such as a work bench, in order to have a place to hammer. On top of that, place a scrap of lumber, preferably beech as it lacks oils and resin that could stain the cloth.



To cut the buttonholes, I use a hollow punch to cut the eyelet area. These are available at most hardware stores for less than five dollars, and are hollow, so as to cut the fabric instead of just pushing it aside, like an awl. I recommend a size 1/8 or 3/16 in diameter.

Ideally, your chisel will be the same size as the desired buttonhole length. If it's smaller, it will still work, but you'll need to carefully align each cut, which is prone to error.

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Finally, a small hammer is used to hammer the hollow punch and chisel through the cloth. I happen to have a small antique hammer that works well. Much larger and it becomes difficult to control, especially with such a low tolerance for error.

Place the hollow punch directly on the intersection of the horizontal and outer construction lines. Hold it near the bottom if you can, for better leverage and preventing movement. Give it a few strokes with the hammer, cutting through to the wood underneath. You should have a clean cut. If there is any fabric that did not get cut, you need to sharpen your punch. You can also rotate it in the hole to move the dull spot out of the way.



After punching each hole, take your chisel, and line it up with the center of the hole, which should be on the chalkline. I like to do this by feel first, by dragging the tip of the chisel along the hole until you feel it get to the center. Then check with your eyes for alignment. When you are sure it is lined up, cut through the fabric with the chisel. If you need to make more cuts because of a small chisel, do not pick the chisel up.

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Instead drag it over following the cut you just made. The second cut should be made with just half to three fourths of the blade, while the rest is still over the cut you just made. In this way, you can help ensure the individual cuts line up to make a straight line.



Trimming the holes

After the buttonhole are cut, you need to trim the little triangular shaped pieces from near the eyelet, giving each hole a nice tear-dropped shape. Use some small, sharp scissors for this task. You may have to trim through one layer at a time, depending on the thickness of the cloth.

Overcasting

Now you must overcast the edge of each buttonhole with a whip stitch. The stitches should be about 1/16" in depth if you can. This however will depend on whether or not the fabric frays. Start by holding the coat

with the tear-dropped end facing away from you, and sew clockwise around the buttonhole. The purpose of these stitches is to bind the layers together. As you are sewing, try to push any canvas or linen that shows back under the wool outer layers, so that they are hidden.

The stitches should be fairly dense, about 12 to 15 per inch. Use your regular sewing thread for this stage. When finished, the stitches should be enough to strengthen the buttonhole and prevent fraying, making the actual button stitch almost decorative in nature. On one of my antique coats, the actual buttonhole twist has long worn away, but the overcast stitches remain, protecting the hole to this day.

Four cord or Gimp

In order to prevent the buttonhole from stretching out of shape, and to provide firmness to the buttonhole, a thick strand of special silk thread called gimp will need to be placed underneath the buttonhole stitches.

There are a couple of producers of this gimp out there still, but I use one in particular called Agremen gimp, which is from Gutermann. As far as I know, it is only produced in Spain. It is made with filaments of silk, which are then bound by another layer of silk thread, making it very strong and stiff. Other gimps I have seen have contained or been made with polyester thread, so I have avoided them.

If you do not wish to use this type of gimp, it is possible to make your own, using a strand of silk buttonhole twist. Cut a length about 18 inches long, and double it. Secure the ends by weighing it down, taping it, or with your teeth. Begin twisting the thread around itself, stopping just before the point when it begins to form little tension knots.



Take both ends in your hands, being careful to not let the ends untwist, and join them together.

You'll see both halves (really quarters) of the doubled thread begin to twist over each other. Help them along by smoothing the pieces together with your hands. When you are happy with the results, form a knot at the end where the cut ends are, securing the four-cord.



Now wax the four-cord by passing it over beeswax four or five times. Place it between a folded sheet of paper, and press, melting the wax into the threads. The four-cord is now complete. Repeat this process for each buttonhole.

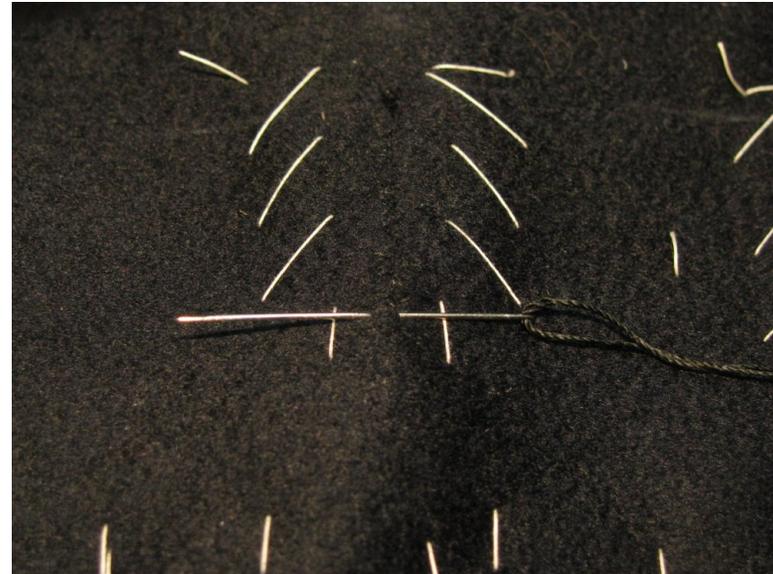


The Buttonhole Stitch

A proper buttonhole should be made with silk buttonhole twist. The twist is thicker than normal thread, and will aid in the formation of the purls. I've seen two sizes generally available. Size F is very thick, although that makes it easier to work with. Gutermann makes a thinner buttonhole twist which is closer to original buttonholes I have seen. Being thinner makes it harder to work with, however.

Cut a length about one yard long for a one inch buttonhole. Wax and press the thread, and knot one end. Holding the edge of the coat with the buttonholes away from you, insert the needle between the layers of wool, at the left bottom edge of the buttonhole. Poke the needle out

1/16 to 1/8 away from the edge, but do not take it out completely at this time. The length of the buttonhole stitch depends entirely on the fabric used. Each coat will be different, so you really need to experiment. If the thread is too close to the edge, it can pull out, especially on easily-frayed fabrics. If it is too far from the edge, you will see puckering and have a generally messy buttonhole.



With the needle still poking out of the wool, take the doubled threads that come from the eye of the needle, and pass them under the needle to the left, forming a loop. Then draw up the thread so that there is about a 1/4 inch of slack in the stitch.



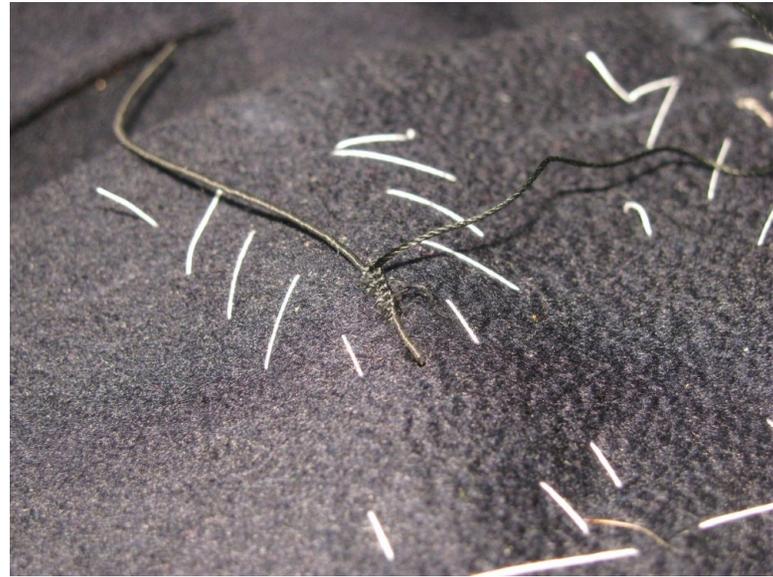
At this time, insert the buttonhole gimp between the threads, so that it lays on top of the fabric. If using four-cord, the knotted end should be placed away from you. Draw the stitch firm, moving the thread side to side to lock the stitches. The stitches need to be firm, but not tight. By forming the stitch in this manner, you create a double purl, rather than the single purl commonly done by home sewers. The benefit of this is a stronger stitch, and one that will stay in place longer, even if a stitch happens to break someday.



The purl should be placed either directly on top of the gimp, or slightly to the inner edge. The first method raised the stitches, giving a very firm buttonhole. The latter makes the buttonhole a bit softer, with a lower profile. Again, experiment and see which you like best.

Continue working each stitch in the same manner across the lower edge of the buttonhole, making sure they are spaced evenly both in depth and proximity. Each stitch needs to be taken over the gimp, holding it in place. The spacing between stitches should be close enough that the

purls touch, but not so tight that they interfere with each other.



After you've made about five stitches, carefully pull the gimp so that the end lies flush with the first stitch of the buttonhole.



When you get to the tear-dropped area, the purls need to gradually be placed directly on top of the gimp, to make room for more stitches in the tightly curved area. The stitches can also be made slightly deeper, if desired.



Continue on to the upper half of the buttonhole, turning the coat as you work. Make sure that the stitches are made similarly to the lower half, as it's easy to space them slightly differently if you aren't careful. When you get to the second to last stitch, carefully trim the gimp flush, then make one last stitch.



Bar Tack

Bring the thread up as if you were going to make another stitch, but instead, make a bar tack across the end. This is done by taking three stitches across the end of the buttonhole. These should be the same width as the buttonhole, or slightly smaller, for a neat appearance. Bring the thread out to the right side as if you were going to make a fourth stitch, but instead, insert the needle under the three stitches, wrapping the thread around. This should be done across the entire length of the bartack, and if desired, you can make a single perl for each by bringing the single end of the thread under the needle, as per a blanket stitch.



Finishing

Pass the thread to the bottom, and insert the needle underneath the buttonhole stitches three times in alternating directions. This will finish the buttonhole without unsightly knots or stitches.



Basting Closed

At this point, the buttonhole is completed and should be basted closed to prevent it from opening or stretching out of shape during the final pressing.



Practice Makes Perfect

Buttonholes must be practiced on scraps before you try them on an actual garment. If you cut two pieces of wool and a piece of canvas 18 x 6 inches, you can baste them together and practice buttonholes up and down both sides. The hardest part of making a buttonhole is learning the best practices, which is either through trial and error, or from somebody showing you how. I had to make over four hundred buttonholes to get to this level. At the same time, I was able to teach someone to get to the same quality with only a couple of tries. Hopefully this tutorial will help you reach that level as well. Here are a few other photos for inspiration.



Some Originals



Laying out the Buttons

Now we must lay out the buttons on the front of the coat. These need to be properly lined up, or the coat will close awkwardly. Begin by measuring from the center front seam, to the center of the teardrop in the buttonhole.



Mark the buttonhole location by first marking the height, which is equivalent to the buttonhole, and then the distance from the center front, which is the measurement you just took. You should have a small chalk 'x' marking the precise location of each buttonhole.



Go ahead and sew on each button, in the same manner as the back pleat buttons. Ideally, the stitches should go through the outer fabric, and canvas only, though I have seen examples where they go through all layers. Whichever method you use, be sure to not stitch through your pockets! I have an original coat in which they did that, and the pocket is unusable!