



Protecting the shoemaker

Shoemaking in the medieval period was a pure hand craft where everything was sewn together by individual craftsmen selling either direct to individual customers or to wholesalers who fulfilled larger orders. Shoes that have been recovered from the 10th to 15th centuries show that they all used the turn shoe construction. Simple and easy to produce, it was very much in the shoemakers' interests to retain it as this speed of manufacture enabled them to maintain a reasonable standard of living.

The drawback as far as customers were concerned lay in the fact that it needed thin, flexible soles so that the shoe could be 'turned' on completion. These wore out quickly and 15th century domestic records indicate five pairs per year were required for a man—which was good for the shoemaker but not so good for the customer. Around 1500 AD, there was a sudden shift to the much stronger welted construction for men's shoes. For ladies and children, however, the turn shoe remained in vogue for many years.

The techniques employed were in fact

dictated by a Guild system that effectively controlled all trades and where knowledge was handed down from person to person within each particular occupation. In a time of minimal government, the individual had to look out for himself and his family. There were no social services or unemployment benefits and you either worked or you starved, so it was of paramount importance to protect your livelihood. A key function of a guild, therefore, was to guard the techniques and skills of its members from outsiders.

PATTERNS

Leather was expensive, so creating the upper pattern was considered the most important shoemaking skill as it had to combine fit, foot access, fastening and styling, together with efficient material usage. The shoemaker had to be able to create such patterns without complex formulas, instruction books or measuring devices. This knowledge needed to be kept secret as it was the shoemaker's greatest asset, one that he protected by belonging to a guild.

Medieval child's turn shoe.

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At this time, only a few basic patterns were used. Style was defined by the fastening: buckle, lace, rolled leather button, tailed leather knot, etc., which could all be applied to a single basic pattern. These are known as 'primary cutting patterns' as they all share the same basic principles and organisation of components. The most common was the so called J pattern named after the letter from the alphabet that its shape most resembles (Figure 1). It is cut in one piece so that it runs round the heel and is joined on the inside of the foot by a 'closing seam'.

Animal skin has two directions of stretch: tight or strong along the direction of the backbone and loose or weak across the belly. Upper patterns must therefore seek to accommodate both these physical constraints and the proportions of the human foot in order to produce a pair of shoes that fit correctly. The J pattern does that and also interlocks particularly well to maximise yield. It also involves a minimal number of pieces and no complex shapes and so is quick and easy to cut.

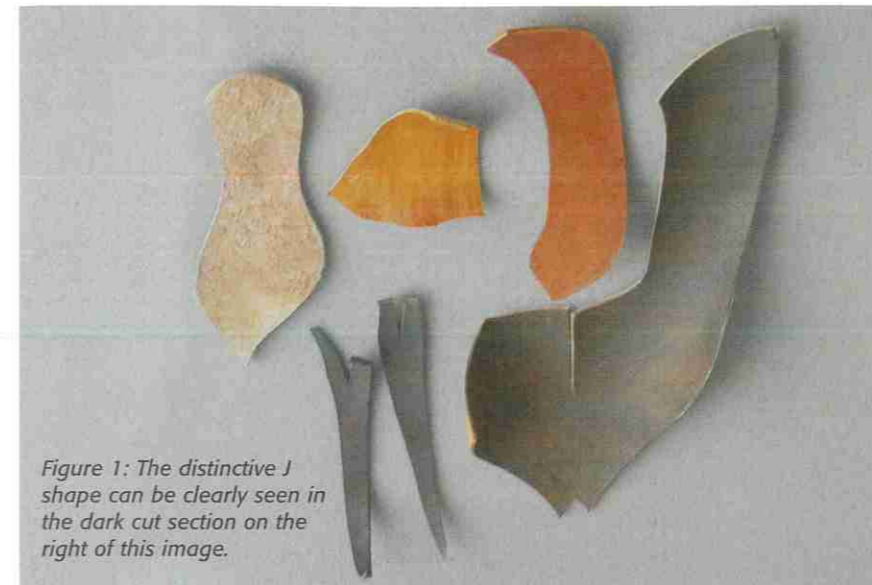


Figure 1: The distinctive J shape can be clearly seen in the dark cut section on the right of this image.

MAKING THE SHOE

The leathers used in a child's shoe, for instance, would most likely have been calf for the main upper, with goatskin for the collar and a cow hide sole. Whatever the type of skin or hide involved, it would have been vegetable tanned as was all leather up to the late 19th century when chrome salts were developed as a tanning agent. Vegetable tanned leather had the important advantage for the hand shoemaker that, when thoroughly wetted, it was easy to stretch and shape, and would then hold that shape once dried out.

Once the sections were cut out, the seams were sewn together in a specific order. First, the main upper section was joined on the inside of the foot using edge to edge stitching. This method avoids any edge skiving and produces a completely flat seam. The collar and tongue were then joined to it edge to edge using a whip stitch and the buckle strap whip stitched on to complete the upper. Both upper and sole were then wetted to soften them ready for sewing together.

It is important to remember at this point that the upper and sole were sewn together inside out, with the right foot on the left foot last and vice versa. To do this, the sole was pegged to the last bottom with one peg at mid-forefoot and another at the heel. The upper was then placed on the last and lasted as the two parts were sewn together with a raised seam starting and finishing at the pointed toe to ensure accurate location.

The two shoes were then taken off their lasts, turned and the right foot last forced into the right foot shoe and the

left into the left. The seam was then rubbed flat, the buckle attached and the shoes left to dry out and set to shape. One can see just how easy it was to make footwear with the very simplest of tools and resources using the turn shoe method. It is also easy to see why medieval shoemakers would want to use this method for as long as possible.

GUILDS

In medieval times and, indeed, right up to the late 18th century, trade guilds were a fact of life. You could not practise a trade unless a member of the appropriate guild but, once a member, the guild protected you in several ways. For instance, it controlled quality and

price so inhibiting competition between members. As all the shoemakers in a town belonged to a single trade guild, this benefited them in terms of income while customer choice was dictated by how well you got on with an individual shoemaker rather than his quality and price, as in theory all were the same.

The system was in fact very logical. You began as an apprentice and learnt the necessary skills before becoming a qualified journeyman who either worked on his own account or for an older shoemaker who was approaching what we now term retirement. There were no pensions so this covered a shoemaker's income for his old age. You entered the guild as an apprentice and stayed in it for the rest of your life. You also learnt how to make shoes to the quality standard the guild set for its members.

The economic consequences of trade guilds have been much debated. Some say that, since they lasted so long, they must have been efficient institutions since inefficient ones soon die out. Others maintain they persisted not because they benefited the economy, but because they benefited members who used political power to protect their guild and themselves. From a modern shoemaker's perspective, wouldn't it be nice to be able to produce a pair of basically the same simple shoe everyday and be able to sell it at a good price without fear of being undercut by a competitor?



Sewing upper and sole together