

Attaching buttons to 18th Century clothes

Several types of buttons were used on 18th century clothes: metal shanked buttons, bone, wood, and horn buttons with holes, thread “Dorset”, “crosswheel”, buttons, thread covered “Death head” and “Basket Weave” buttons, and cloth covered buttons. Military clothing typically used metal shanked buttons to ensure longevity. Cloth covered, bone, wood, and horn buttons were common on civilian breeches, frock coats, jackets, coatees, surtouts, waistcoats, and shirts. Thread and wire buttons were common on shirt and chemise collars and cuffs, especially more intimate garments where hard buttons would be uncomfortable. Some shirts used “sleeve buttons” made from small metal buttons held together with a metal link similar to modern cuff links. As they were largely used in civilian shirts or by Officers, they are not detailed here. Images from W. Booth, Draper at the Sign of the Unicorn.



Thread buttons (left)



Dorset Buttons (right)



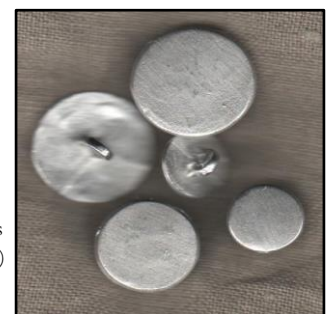
Basket weave thread covered buttons (left)



Death Head thread covered buttons (right)



Horn button (left)



Metal, shanked buttons (right)

Attaching the different types of buttons required different techniques. This tutorial describes the techniques to attach metal shanked buttons, buttons with holes, cloth covered buttons, thread and Dorset buttons.

Shanked Buttons with Tape.

Attaching shanked buttons to both military and civilian clothing with linen tape, or leather thongs was very common. It allowed the buttons to sit flat against the fabric, is quick to sew, and makes it virtually impossible for the button to pull out or fall off. This technique can be used on Regimental coats, waistcoats, breeches, gaiters – any place buttons with shanks are used. Buttons without shanks cannot be attached using this technique. This technique attaches the buttons *before* the lining is sewn into place so that the lining covers the tape and stitching for a clean appearance.



Use tailor's chalk to mark the center placement of each button. The shank on the metal button should be rounded. Use a stiletto or awl to open the weave of the fabric.



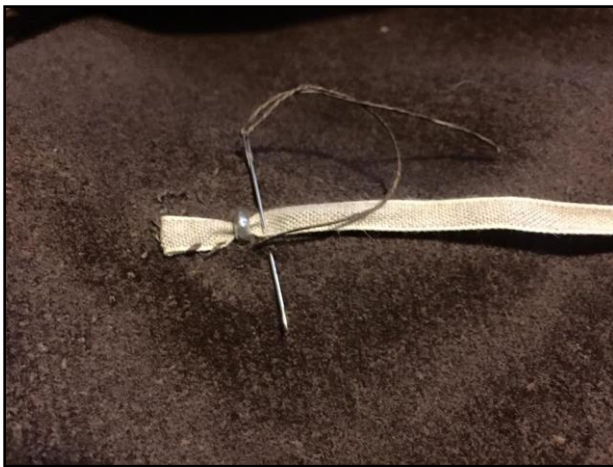
Use the tip of small embroidery scissors to help push the fabric over & securely down around the shank. Because the shank is rounded the fabric will close on the shank holding the buttons in place even without sewing. In this picture, the shanks of three buttons are protruding from the cloth. To get all the holes of the shanks lined up insert the tip of your scissors into the shank & gently rotate. If you are using patterned button faces, check carefully to ensure each button is oriented correctly from the front.



A tapestry needle is thin enough to go through the shank. Tapestry needles have a large eye so 1/4" linen tape can be inserted into the eye & easily pulled through the shank. The edge of the linen tape is only just into the eye. If you pull the tape all the way through the eye it will be too bulky to fit through the shank.



Use one length of tape whenever possible for a row of buttons. In this case I'm working on the pocket of a regimental with only three buttons.



Straighten & flatten the tape with your fingers so the tape sits flat on the fabric. Use a whip stitch to sew the tape to the garment. The buttons are not sewn down at all, just the tape.



Continue the whip stitch all the way around the tape.

Cloth Covered Buttons



Use the long thread “tail” left over from making the button to sew it to the garment. As you sew the button on, try to keep the stitches in the garment centralized. This will allow the buttonhole to sit flat once it is buttoned.



Make 5 to 7 passes through the garment fabric and button.



Once the button is securely attached, wrap the excess thread around the stitches about 5-7 times & do a back stitch over the wraps. This will form a bit of a shank.

Thread Buttons, Dorset Buttons, and Buttons with Holes

1. Wax about an arm's length of thread and thread your needle, double the thread by pulling on the loose ends until they are even.
2. At the mark for the button location, make a secure stitch on the wrong side of the fabric.
3. Push the needle from the wrong side of the fabric to exit at the mark for the button.
4. Pass the needle and thread through the holes in the button, or over the thread loop.
5. Push the needle down through the fabric a few thread widths from the up stroke.
6. Repeat steps 3-5 several times (4-5 passes through the holes or thread loop).
7. On the fourth or fifth pass, stab up front the back of the fabric again and pull the thread through. Instead of stabbing one of buttonholes, holding the threads between your fingers and firmly wrap the thread around in a circle below the button. This creates a "button stem" and allows the button to float on top of the fabric without any apparent effort. The stem should be tight enough to secure the button so it floats, but not wrapped so tight that it causes the thread to pucker. If the wrap is too tight or too loose, simply unwind and re-wrap.
8. Go back through the fabric and tie off using another secure stitch.