Chapter 4—Personal Items

Due to a paucity of reference materials, this chapter will be a little more vague and probably wander about much more than previous ones. Or maybe its just the way I write and no one will notice...

Baldricks

During the English Civil Wars, two different methods were used to carry swords: baldricks and sword belts.

A baldrick is a long wide belt worn across the shoulder and chest. The statute states that it should be 2” wide. The baldrick was usually fastened with a buckle in front, but often stitching or laces are used on those of buff leather. The buckle seems to have been mainly decorative: many paintings show buckled baldricks still fastened when put aside. Stitching or embroidery sometimes was used to decorate the leather; a baldrick in Waugh is made of brown leather and decorated with a pattern worked in brown and silver cord.

The lower end of the back of the baldrick is divided into loops with slides or buckles and is split into two or more parts. The sword or rapier scabbard is slid through the loops and held in place by a hook.

Buff leather baldrick from Littlecoat House.

Baldrick and sword belt, early 17th century (Waugh)
Sword-Belts

A decorated sword belt with twelve loops. The hooks are similar to the ones below from Flowerdew Hundred. *Royal Armouries, IX 1409* (Blackmore)

Believed to be of German origin but popular in England from the second half of the 16th century to the mid-17th century, a sword belt could be used to hold the scabbard. It was hooked to a waist belt and was held together with a number of straps and buckles. The belt held the sword at an angle, keeping it from scraping the ground. Civilian sword belts differed from those of military issue, as civilian sword belts were provided with quick-release hooks so the scabbard could be taken off without removing the belt.4

Sword belts were often highly decorated; one in Waugh is made of leather, covered in red velvet and embroidered with silver. Almost all extant sword-belts in English collections are highly decorated.

Two iron sword-belt fittings from Flowerdew Hundred. The right hand one has brass rivets

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Scabbards

“The English and French have one peculiar fashion, which I have never observed in any other part, namely to weare scabbards and sheaths of velvet upon their rapiers and daggers”5 Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary*, 1617.

Scabbards of the 17th century usually consisted of leather, or more rarely, cloth over a wooden core. A long hook was attached to the outer face of the scabbard to hold it in the baldrick or hanger.6 This was bound to the inside of the leather with stitching.

Metal fittings or lockets around the mouth of scabbards didn’t appear until the middle of the century and weren’t large enough for the scabbard hook to be mounted on them until late in the seventeenth century.7

Scabbards were generally made from a single piece of leather, usually top grain calf leather about 2mm thick. The use of calf was mandated in 1350 by the Guild of Furbishers and the rule seems to have been observed until at least the late 15th century.8 Several seventeenth century rapier scabbards in the Wallace Collection are covered with thin leather of about this thickness, but the type of leather isn’t indicated in the catalogue.9

Seams are done with linen thread with a stitch spacing of anything from 3mm to 12mm spacing. Five to seven millimetre spacing appears to be average. Holes for stitches were made with a diamond headed awl, and are often at an angle to the line of stitching to prevent tearing.10 Two different techniques could be used for stitching, these were a running stitch, going from the skin to the flesh sides to form a ridge of seam allowance on the outside; or a butt stitch, going between the skin and the cut edge of the leather, leaving a flat seam. Either single or double threads were used, the latter being more common and giving a straighter and stronger seam.

Bandoleers

In addition to the regulation baldric, Musketeers in the first half of the 17th century carried their powder and ammunition slung from a bandoleer worn over the left shoulder. The bandoleer was normally of leather and could be vegetable of buff tanned, and decorated in any of the ways used on sword belts.

Power was carried in small containers often referred to as apostles (as there are commonly twelve, although a number in the Royal Armouries have ten or fewer).11 There is no evidence that “apostles” is a contemporary term, records usually refer to them as boxes or charges.12 The boxes are suspended on strings in such a way that the lid slid up the string for loading, but couldn’t be lost. Lids could be wood or lead, boxes were almost always wooden, although leather covered wood, and fabric covered tinned iron also are found.

Often nine boxes were suspended from the front of the belt; a small cloth- or leather drawstring ball bag (if you’ll excuse the expression) was attached to the lowest point of the belt and three boxes at the back. The priming flask was either attached directly to the bag or to the same point on the belt.
An alternative to a bandoleer was the cartridge box. This was most popular with cavalry and Royalist troops who had trouble getting enough bandoleers. These were worn on a belt under the soldier’s coat to keep the contents dry. A contract dated 10 January 1646 specifies: “1200 Cartridges the boxes of strong plate covered w\textsuperscript{th} black leather”\textsuperscript{13}

Carbine belts

Carbines, dragons and other long-arms were carried by cavalry suspended from a belt worn diagonally over the left shoulder so the weapon hung by the right side. On the belt was an iron fitting with a spring clip that could be fastened on to a loose ring attached to the gun.

Snapsacks

There are two known types of snapsack, one a rectangular bag worn at the hip, the other a tube shape worn at the back, both suspended by a wide strap worn across the shoulder. The rectangular style is only shown in paintings and woodcuts being worn by itinerants and beggars, the longer style shown with soldiers and people in better clothing. An undated militia regulation from Massachusetts specifies “a canvas knapsack to hold a bushel,\textsuperscript{14} with a good… [strap] fitting easy across the breast and shoulders”\textsuperscript{15}

Snapsacks were the second most frequently mentioned type of conveyance found in reimbursement petitions of the late 17\textsuperscript{th} century. They could be made from hemp or linen canvas, stout wool, leather or rawhide\textsuperscript{16}

The regiments for Ireland in 1640 were issued with a good suit of clothes, two shirts, three pairs of stockings, three pairs of shoes and a cap. In addition, further clothing was provided in 1642 once in Ireland, as well as leather “knapsacks for the field” without which “they were all lost”\textsuperscript{17}. While there is no evidence of the Trained Bands being issued with snapsacks, they were issued to the Parliamentary army in 1642 and 1643 and to the New Model Army in 1645. The New Model Army contract papers, which cover orders placed between 7th Jan 1645 and 31st April 1646 state that 20400 snapsacks were bought. Some are described as ‘leather’, and 12000 are “large and of good leather”\textsuperscript{18}. Large batches cost 8d each, small batches 9d. Clothing dispatched to the army in Ireland was wrapped in canvas suitable to make into snapsacks on arrival\textsuperscript{19}.
Other personal items commonly made of leather

**Pockets**

“Soldiers issued breeches could contain pockets. There are two particularly detailed accounts of suits. The first from 24th September 1644 (S.P.28/131) was for 7,400 suits, which the English had to provide for the Scots army in England. The materials included:

- Leather pockets 7,400 pairs at 3d per pair

On 19th December 1645 Commissary George Wood laid out two sets of costs for making up the type of coats and breeches most often seen in magazines (SP28/33/443). Both included 1 pair of leather pockets at a cost of 3d."^21

**Spectacle frames**

By the beginning of the seventeenth century there was a sizeable group spectacle makers working in London, some of them trading under the aegis of the Brewers’ Company. In 1628, they decided to petition the King to establish their own Company. The Spectacle Makers received their Royal Charter on 16th May 1629.^22
Pen cases

Pen cases have a number of different layers, mainly depending on the quality of the case – higher quality cases have more layers. It appears on inspection of some pen cases in the collections of the Museum of London and the British Museum that three layers of leather may be the most common arrangement. These are normally: an inner layer used grain in; a second layer, grain out, together making the inner case and; another outer layer, grain out. This outer layer is often decorated with stamping or incising. Some cases have two outer layers set flesh to flesh like the inner pair.

The inner layer sewing is often sloppy, irregular, and widely spaced. It has been suggested that this was done by apprentices, as the stitching doesn’t show. The outer layer is far more carefully sewn, sometime with hidden stitches, sometimes not, sometimes with the seams apparently hammered over to hide/protect the stitching.

Lasting seems to have been crucial to the shape of the finished product. The outer layer is sewn as a single piece sealing in the last and the lid is cut free when finished. This leaves a knife scar on the inner case (it being virtually impossible to cut through only the outer case). This scar can be found on all the pen and knife cases in the British Museum.

The ends of the tubes are in many cases bevelled at an angle and then edge-grain butt stitched.

The cases are kept together and closed by strings passing through “tunnels” raised from the outer layer by slitting the leather and passing a wooden rod through it while wet.

There are up to four tunnels on each top/bottom pair, running along the axis of the cylinder but the number may vary depending on the decoration and size of the case.23

Cutlery canteens were produced in exactly the same way. Decoration is usually stamping or incising.

Inkwell

Inkwells of this period were commonly made of lead (it helped intensify the blackness of the ink) or glass, or occasionally as a hang-over from earlier centuries, leather.

A leather inkwell, 15th or 16th century, embossed with figures of the saints. The construction technique is sort of a hybrid between the pen case above and the leather bottles in Chapter 5. (Waterer)
**Letter case**

“Brown morocco (goatskin) leather embroidered in silver wire with a design of scrolling flowers and, under the front flap ‘Saml Pepys Esq’ and on the back ‘Constantinople 1687’. This may have been a gift, as Pepys made no recorded visit to the Turkish city in that year. However, such decorative cases were obviously a known speciality of Constantinople, as several examples exist.

Such cases were used to safeguard letters, papers and bank bills and a fair number survive in museum collections. Usually envelope shaped they were made in a variety of materials.”

**Hornbook**

Leather was often used for covering the child’s primer known as a hornbook because of the window of horn protecting the document from damage. The base was normally *wainscot*, fine oak less than 6mm thick, covered with morocco or roan (sheepskin) normally red, but occasionally brown. Rare examples are made from two layers of cattle hide, stitched around the edges and with a window cut in the upper piece. The hole in the handle allowed a ribbon or string to tie it around the child’s neck.
Fake or artificial leather

The razor is dated 1612 on the blade and probably arrived in America on the Mayflower. The case itself is made of pasteboard, painted and stamped to look like leather. Note the similarity in the faked construction to the pen case on the previous page.

DIY Scabbards

Wooden core

Take a suitable piece of timber about 6mm thicker than the thickest part of the sword and about 15mm longer. Lay the blade of the sword on the timber and draw around it, then turn the sword over, lining up the point and forte of the blade with the previous markings, and draw around it again. This will result in a scabbard that you will be able to put your sword in either way around. Draw another line about 10mm outside these lines to give the final shape of the scabbard. Excavate to a depth equal to the width of the sword blade using a hammer and chisel, plane or router depending on your inclination, and then cut the final shape with a saw. Using this piece as a template, take a 3mm thick piece of timber; mark it, then cut to the same shape as the rest of the scabbard. Glue or nail these together, then using a plane, sander or router round all the edges.

Leather cover

Make a paper pattern from the wooden core. If you plan to use a running stitch, you will need to make the pattern 6-9mm wider than the circumference of the scabbard for the seam allowance, if you are butt stitching the seam, make it 4mm wider. Cut a piece of leather to the width of your pattern, but leave it about 12mm longer than the scabbard to allow for shrinkage. Dye it to the desired colour unless you plan to cover it with fabric, a dark colour is less likely to show water stains from the later step of shrinking the leather. Make all the stitch holes with an awl and start sewing with seven to ten stitches at the bottom of the scabbard. Using the wooden core as a last, stitch the rest of the scabbard
and keep making sure the seam is straight. When the stitching is finished, take the scabbard outside and gently pour boiling water over the leather, turning frequently to make sure the leather shrinks evenly. The top and bottom will curl and carry on as the boiling water scalds the exposed edges. This only works because the leather is particularly thin and does not hold enough heat to damage the leather. Waterer notes the use of this technique “For sheaths of knives, swords and daggers…”, claiming it “ever to have been in demand”.

Don’t use leather from near the edge of the hide (the belly of the animal), the changes in thickness and grain near the legs will make the leather buckle and twist as it shrinks. Best results will come from using the leather along the back of the beast. This is usually the straight edge if you buy half-hides.

You won’t encounter this problem with scabbards, but for other objects don’t bother trying the boiling water shrinking business with anything other than top grain leathers, as it is the skin that shrinks. I once watched someone pour about 30 litres of boiling water over a shield trying to get the split leather rim to shrink. It sagged instead as the leather cooked.

When the leather is dry trim the top edge to size and open up the seam for about 100mm down from the mouth of the scabbard. Stitch the hook in place with a tunnel stitch binding and re-sew the back seam. Make and/or fit a brass or iron chape to the bottom of the scabbard and you are done.
Notes for Chapter 4

1 Possibly due to the sometimes corrosive nature of single buff. See Appendix 2 for more on types of tanning.
2 Blackmore, p40
3 Waugh, p29
4 Strabue, pp36-38
5 Waugh, p43
6 Blackmore, p40
7 ibid
8 Cowgill, p34
9 Mann, A528, A575, A639, A688
10 Cowgill, p37
11 For example, the bandoleer Royal Armouries XIII 91 has ten boxes and a powder flask.
12 Blackmore, p72
13 Blackmore, p74
14 A dry measure of about 40 litres
15 Battle Road website, citing an undated manuscript, probably mid-1700s, shown to the website author by Peter Oakley in 1995
16 Battle Road website; Information furnished in 1995 by Steven Eames, based on his doctoral thesis research on Massachusetts provincial troops during the colonial wars
17 Colonel Henry Tillier's Regiment of Foote website
18 http://www.ulo.ucl.ac.uk/devs/equipping.html, 28 Apr 2000
19 State Papers, 28/131
20 State Papers
21 Morris, p3
22 Spectacle Makers - History
23 Message to Medieval-leather by Bob Charrette, 13 April, 1999.
24 Cumming
25 Waterer, p50
26 Pilgrim Hall Museum website
27 Waterer, p43