

Historical re-enactors seek to re-create a wide range of people, periods, subjects and events. Though these can differ hugely from one group or society to the next all have a need for reproduction clothing or costumes. Whilst it would be impossible to thoroughly and comprehensively cover everything every re-enactor would wish to know about textiles and clothing in one short guide, I hope the following does provide a solid foundation on which people can make more informed decisions when researching appropriate fabric for making their own costumes. For those who share my interest in the period immediately before the Norman Conquest then there is a more detailed guide dedicated to the textiles of the "Dark Ages" available to down load from my web site.

Introduction

The days of re-enactors making highly ornate reproduction clothing from gaudily coloured nylon, polyester and other man made fibres are hopefully long gone, and there does now seem to be much greater emphasis on natural products more appropriate to earlier periods of history. However, claiming something to be "authentic" just because it is made of wool is not enough for many. The serious re-enactor should be looking to utilise all the available research to more closely match their costume to specific fibre types, thread counts, weave patterns, weights and colours of material common to specific periods of history. If you don't count yourself as a serious or dedicated re-enactor, and freely admit to being nothing more than a casual weekend hobbyist then you may find what follows overly long and drawn out and perhaps a little pretentious or elitist. If you consider research and authenticity to be the principle foundation upon which you base your activities then I hope the following proves to be both interesting and thought provoking.

If making a single reproduction item of clothing for museum display the exact cloth types, weights, weaves, colours, cut and construction may all be specified by the evidence and research we are presented with. However, when we, collectively as a group of re-enactors or Living History enthusiasts, look to make reproduction costume for use within our respective organisations we are faced with a common problem; personal vanity. Most re-enactors would freely admit to enjoying dressing up at the weekends, very few like to dress down. In view of this we must be careful regarding what we choose to reproduce such that our costume is actually representative of the people we choose to portray. Whilst most re-enactment groups claim to set out to give a flavour of what everyday life was like at a particular point in history, the majority of re-enactors all want to stand out from their peers. Consequently even if each individual's costume is well researched, and beautifully recreated lavishing much time, effort and money on getting all the fine details right, most people (many unknowingly) attempt to re-create the most elaborate clothing worn by the wealthiest elite of period society rather than what the evidence suggests was typical or representative of the period.

Few people choose to research or reproduce the everyday clothing of the ordinary masses, and fewer still seem to give as much attention to researching the cloth from which they choose to make their reproduction clothing. Furthermore, many people new to re-enactment start simply by copying the costume of the other re-enactors around them without fully understanding what they are copying. Much like a game of Chinese whispers errors creep in and get repeated and exaggerated each time they are copied which has led to an ever increasing abundance of poorly reproduced high status clothing across most periods of re-enactment. Very few people, especially the general public who visit shows, seem to realise that the clothes being worn are neither representative of ordinary everyday dress in the period portrayed, nor accurate copies of something rare or unusual. Sadly in the worst cases the clothing worn is little better than fancy dress costumes better suited to a historically themed children's party than an educational activity. Yet because they are presented as "authentic" few actually question how closely, if at all, they match the available evidence and as such they are endlessly copied further compounding the problems as more errors and changes creep in.

Without some form of strict regulation over who gets to play what roles within a particular re-enactment group and strict guidance from individuals actually interested in research, what is commonly represented by the clothing of many re-enactment societies, albeit unintentionally, are low quality portrayals of small niche or elite groups. Furthermore the clothes worn may then be inappropriate to the more menial nature of the characters or subjects being presented. Those re-enactors who do truly try to research and recreate the commonplace and everyday clothing of the majority of the populace tend to be the ones who stand out as being rare and unusual. We therefore need to encourage and help more re-enactors, and most particularly those new to the hobby or a particular society or group to actually study and replicate representative everyday costume such that it does appear commonplace within any group, and by inference, that which would have been rare and high status is restricted and does actually start to stand out as being special, rather than being the norm.

I freely acknowledge that many re-enactors could view the above as an elitist or condescending attempt to spoil their enjoyment of their hobby. However, as historical interpretation has grown from a minority interest only of relevance to museum employees, to a wide spread weekend pass time for thousands, indeed tens of thousands of people around the country, it seems inevitable that somewhere along the way the goals or aims of many groups should become obscured. Increasingly we are seeing splits and divisions amongst more and more re-enactment groups as those who view the hobby as an academic activity seek to separate themselves from those looking for nothing more than a good social life and a few beers around a camp fire. So, whilst any form of research may require a basic level of intelligence, these notes are not intended to be used to berate or exclude those with anything less than postgraduate level qualifications in relevant historical or archaeological subjects, they are there to guide and help all who aspire to improve the quality of what they do.

The Evidence

I therefore wish to begin with a very brief overview of the types of evidence available for the sorts of clothing worn by ordinary folk throughout history and how we can interpret this evidence. Obviously each piece of evidence must be assessed on its own merits, and the type and quantity of evidence available will differ from period to period with more recent periods of history generally being richer in available evidence. Nevertheless research can be broken into a few main types; Study of period documents and written sources, study of period illustrations, artwork, paintings, carving or sculpture and finally study of surviving costume or textile, whether these are heirlooms passed down through the generations or the products of archaeological excavations.

We must also distinguish between primary evidence, (real evidence from the period we can actually study ourselves) and the potentially less reliable or biased secondary evidence (reports of other people's research). There can be a wide gulf between these two extremes and despite our best intentions, what we normally have to deal with is a grey area in the middle. Good academics should report all the available facts and present the evidence in such a way that you can form your own conclusions from it, rather than simply stating their own opinions. What we normally have to contend with is a selective reporting of just those facts that support one side of an argument, done to support any individual's particular point of view or opinion. In every case we must take care in how we use any evidence as, by and large, most available sources of evidence will tend to be biased in favour of special more high status clothing. As such, the evidence we work with cannot often be reproduced directly, but needs to be interpreted to infer what the ordinary populace may well have once worn.

With respect to early written documents, the further back in time our period of interest the more biased in favour of the wealthy this is likely to be as the more basic literacy was a privilege of wealth. Furthermore it is a natural tendency of human nature to wish to remember or record that which is somehow special or unusual. As such, when dealing with early written sources which specifically mention clothes or textiles, then there is a high probability the clothes have been mentioned because they are somehow different from normal convention. So, although a very dubious approach to research, you could almost argue that the less frequently a garment, type or colour of cloth is mentioned the more commonplace and ordinary it might have been. Inventories or trade documents pertaining to cloth or costume may be a little more informative as they would not have been recorded for novelty's sake, but may again be biased in favour of the wealthy who would have been most likely to need such records. Only by about the eighteenth century do we start to find large enough numbers of wills and inventories from more ordinary folk that enable us to form a reliable overview of how everyday folk dressed. However, even here the inclusion of descriptive adjectives in such inventories is rare and it seems probable that unless very rigorously applied to everything in the inventory, the specific mention of colour, pattern or other features of clothing will have been made to highlight the expensive or unusual items.

One further point worthy of mention is the changing meaning of commonplace words through history. Simply seeing it written down in a period document is no proof of anything until you can prove the words had the same meaning to those who wrote them as they do today. Two classic examples would be the words "cotton" and "scarlet". Cottoning was a process used to produce a cheap fluffy woollen textile. Indeed there is some suggestion to support the idea that the Europeans named the cotton plant after the fluffy fibres of this type of common woollen cloth. Therefore prior to the eighteenth century goods described as made of cotton are most probably a cheap wool rather than cotton as we now know it. However, as cotton fibres were being used in textiles long before this we do need to take care not to arbitrarily dismiss the possibility of calicoe or fustian based textiles being used. Scarlet is a term we now use to describe a bright red colour. However, the medieval origins of the word are in a very fine high quality wool. Such was the quality of this wool it was only used by the wealthiest who could afford to dye it with the most expensive dyes such as kermes red. So whilst scarlet could in theory be any colour, the fact much of it was dyed bright red led to an eventual change in meaning of this word. There are, of course, other examples of changing meanings of words used to describe textiles.

When dealing with period pictorial records which show clothes and costume very early art forms can be very stylised giving little detail, whilst artists may have frequently documented events or people of which they may have had little first hand knowledge. Consequently their primary goal seems mainly to have been to produce pretty decoration rather than accurate references. Colours used frequently bear no resemblance to reality and many images show fantastical creations that could never have been real. The earliest illustrations, often those in religious manuscripts are often a succession of copies of even earlier pictures embellished and "improved upon" by each monk who copied them. Nor must we ignore the propaganda value of many early images which may have intentionally distorted the truth for a whole range of now incomprehensible or forgotten reasons.

Furthermore, as it is human nature to document the unusual and the significant rather than the mundane and ordinary, most images tend to be biased towards the notable events of higher status individuals and it is rare to find images that can be reliably identified as ordinary folk going about their everyday business. It tends to be the clergy, nobility or warriors/military leaders that are most frequently illustrated in any kind of records, and in later periods it is again the wealthy who were able to afford to have their portraits painted.

Dress has always been an important way of defining social status and class. As such it seems almost inevitable that the majority of people shown in any illustrations would be portrayed dressed in the clothes that defined their role or helped communicate the task they were involved with. We've only to look at modern photographs to draw a comparison. The majority of photographs on any family mantle shelf are going to be taken at special events or on exotic foreign holiday; These are all times where people are inclined to dress up in clothing that is quite radically different

from normal everyday dress, whether that be a white silk wedding dress, a mortar board and academic gown, wet suit and flippers or ski wear and goggles. How many photographs have you got of your family emptying your rubbish bins or cleaning the toilet? Consequently we must be careful not to assume that something is ordinary or representative just because it was frequently recorded. Clothes we see frequently recorded in period illustrations may still have been recorded because they were something different, special or important to the people shown wearing them.

Surviving costume or textiles are obviously the most reliable source of evidence on which to base reconstructions as they can be studied in the greatest detail and leave least scope for differing interpretation. We do, however, need to ask why they have survived. People save things because they are somehow expensive or special. As such the majority of early costumes that can be found in museums have survived because they were rarely worn. They were something expensive saved as best for special occasions. Consequently four hundred year old wedding outfits of the nobility may survive more frequently than two hundred year old work clothes of peasants. If our period of interest is sufficiently early that we are dependant upon archaeological finds for our evidence of clothing, it is rare for complete garments to survive. Consequently we may only get little scraps of textile remaining which tell us little about the cut and construction of individual garments. Whilst at face value it might be assumed that such chance finds are more likely to represent the everyday than the rare we must again ask ourselves how such scraps of textile have come to survive and pass into museums collections. The specific ground conditions needed to preserve textiles are rare and much of what we know about early textiles comes from mineral preserved remains found in conjunction with metal brooches, buckles and other dress accessories. This therefore immediately biases our understanding of textiles in favour of those members of society wealthy enough to afford metal dress accessories.

We also need to ask where the majority of archaeological finds are recovered from? A large percentage of recovered textiles come from burial grounds and cemeteries, as such we need to be asking about the burial practices of our period of interest and if it is probable that the people we are interested in were being buried in specially made or best clothing rather than something representative of the everyday or normal. Comparisons of textiles recovered from burials and settlement sites often differ quite notably as those from settlement sites are usually much coarser, though some of these may undoubtedly be industrial sacking or wrappings. Furthermore the majority of excavations tend to take place in towns and cities. Up until the industrial revolution in the 1700's the vast majority of the population lived worked and died in the countryside rarely travelling more than a few miles from home. The towns, small as they were, tended to be places where the wealthy traded or lived, so any evidence gathered from such places may again be biased in favour of the elite of society. Consequently whilst finds from city burials may tell us a little about how the wealthy died, do they really tell us anything useful about the way ordinary folks lived?

Whilst the very nature of historical documents and archaeological research may mean much of the available evidence may itself be biased in favour of expensive or special costume and textiles, the biggest thing we have to be careful of is the way others interpret this evidence and present it to us. We must never unthinkingly copy what we see, nor must we blindly base our costume on that of other re-enactors. For, as said earlier, much like the game of "Chinese whispers" every time something is copied little errors or deliberate changes creep in and the end result may be far from that of the original source upon which it was based. We should always, where ever possible, try to base our own costume upon research by going back to study as much of the primary evidence as we can gain first hand access to. Though for those who do not enjoy this aspect of the hobby it may be satisfactory to find others in your group who have a reputation for doing a lot of research and who actually know what they are talking about, and then act simply on their advice or instruction, seeking reassurance from how they justify their views.

Nevertheless, it is rare for most hobbyist re-enactors to be able to study primary sources of evidence directly, most have to make do with published books, reports and photographs describing historians, curators, and other academic's research. I consider myself fortunate to have spent a small part of my life working for various conservation laboratories, archaeological trusts, museums and archives where I have been required to care for and study numerous examples of early costume or textile myself. Here I was able to work alongside some of the notable authors of much of the published material most have to use as sources of research, and was able to discuss the information that doesn't make it into printed reports. For those interested in the more academic aspects of research I would also direct you to read my article "Authentic or just Accurate?" available as another download from my web site.

As I said earlier, we need to encourage far more re-enactors to recreate ordinary costume representative of everyday dress such that it does then appear commonplace within any group or society. By inference this will then make the remaining few who dress in the rare and unusual stand out as being just that. Sadly for most early periods of interest to historical re-enactors there is little definitive evidence that can be reliably used to recreate the clothing or textiles of the everyday man about town, (or in such a rural country should that be the man in the field?). We must work with scraps of evidence from our particular period of interest and interpret these as best we can, using higher status examples along with earlier or later periods as a means of charting an evolution of ideas or styles through our own time frame. Such an approach will always be subjective and open to debate but it is through debating different interpretations of the available evidence that our understanding will improve.

Despite concentrating upon textiles I suppose I must briefly finish this section by mentioning dress accessories like jewellery, belts, buckles, buttons, brooches and pins. Such little fittings are an obvious way of displaying wealth and status with many decorative gold, silver bronze and brass example surviv-

ing through history. The high quantity of such items that survive and the routine nature with which simpler pieces can be dug out of the ground by metal detectorists may lead us to believe that metal fittings were always commonplace. Before we jump to this conclusion we must first ask ourselves about other alternatives.

The practical functions carried out by all these decorative, or simpler metal dress fittings could be carried out equally well by carved wood and bone examples or by knotted cord or leather thong. These simpler alternatives would stand little chance of surviving through to the present day, and if deteriorated may not be easily identified or recognised even if found. Such simple items could have been cheaply made at home by the people who needed them and would not need to have been bought from specialist craftsmen. The high number of beautiful metal objects displayed in museums probably reflects much more on their far greater chance of survival, ease of recovery and aesthetic appeal than on the fact they may once have been common. We need to think about how many more we would be finding if everybody in the past had worn them?

As such we need to ensure that we aren't all wearing replicas of the same few stunning finds featured in glossy images on the covers of museum guides or archaeological reports. Every period of history or culture produces a few exquisite craftsmen but if we study the masses of surviving objects that don't get displayed in museums or get specific mention in archaeological reports, those dredged up by metal detectorists the length and breadth of the country we find most of the dress accessories from the past are rather plain and often crudely made. So, when portraying ordinary folk from earlier time periods I would strongly encourage restricting the use of any decorative metal accessories, sticking mainly to wood, bone or leather and keeping any metal fittings small and plain in cheaper metals like ironbut we all like the pretty shiny things don't we?

Although we can only work with the evidence we have access to, we must not assume that is the only evidence that exists, nor must we take it at face value and simply reproduce all the things shown in those easily accessible sources of reference. We need to interpret this evidence thinking not just of what has survived for us to study but more importantly on all that may have been lost along the way. Just remember that for every individual whose lives we can say a little about based upon an odd written record, period illustration, archaeological find or surviving artefact, there will be thousands more who died anonymously leaving no discernable impact on the modern world and no record of their existence. It is the anonymous masses that are most likely to be representative of what was once commonplace and typical of any particular period of history; it is these people we should be aiming to find out more about when judging what little evidence is available to us to form an understanding of the past. As much of a cliché as it may sound "An absence of evidence should in no way be interpreted as evidence of an absence". Nor should a scarcity of evidence force us to treat one single piece of evidence as being indicative of something that was once wide spread and commonplace.

What follows is my interpretation of the subject of everyday and commonplace textiles up until the introduction of machine woven cloth. I have deliberately avoided focusing on any particular period or citing detailed references as this is to be a fairly generic overview, and references from one specific period taken out of context and applied to another can lead to confusion. By necessity much of this is interpretive so feel free to disagree with me. It is merely offered as a basic reference to help others interpret their own research into their own periods. Something that may cause pause for thought and help all re-enactors interested in trying to make better costume. Those who wish to make an impression on their peers not through the elaborate or decorative nature of their costume but through being more authentic and true to what may once have been commonplace.

So what was commonly worn in the past?

It would be easy for me to waffle on and on and bore you with a wealth of trivia about this subject. Indeed I may have already done that in the previous section. Though if you're still reading this it suggests you're interested in what I have to say. Given the vast time spans that different re-enactment groups cover I cannot hope to cover each in depth. Furthermore although the technology of spinning and weaving showed advances over the two thousand years prior to mechanisation, allowing the rich or professional weavers to produce ever finer or more fancy cloth. The cloth being used and produced by and for those who would numerically make up the bulk of the population showed far less radical changes. Consequently, I merely aim to lay down a few basic guidelines governing how to choose suitable cloth for making period looking costume.

For much of the history of England there were three basic natural materials from which costume could be made from. The first of these are skins and leathers, the second is wool and the third is linen. Silk has been known about for a considerable while but up until recent times would have been an expensive import relying on foreign trade. Cotton was never such an expensive fibre but did not become commonplace until the introduction of large textile mills in the eighteenth century. To a lesser degree we must also consider other natural sources of fibres. Wool is traditionally obtained from sheep but there is also a long tradition of spinning goat hair and many other animal fibres could also be spun. Similarly the standard plant fibre for spinning is linen derived from flax, but jute, hemp and nettle and many other plants could also be processed to extract fibres that can be spun. Nevertheless it is my intention to stick to the three most common used by ordinary folk, leather, wool and linen.

Fashion has always been a means of displaying wealth and status and in earlier periods of history much of a person's wealth was carried on their back in the clothes they wore. Throughout history woven cloth has always been expensive because of the huge amount of time invested in producing enough cloth to make one simple garment. Consequently the use of lots of cloth to produce full or flowing garments, or produce a layered look from multiple garments has traditionally been considered a sign of wealth. The

cost of the labour of sewing garments together was always of lesser concern to that of spinning and weaving the cloth, and so even if it meant stitching lots of small panels together, the production of long, flowing, sweeping full costume was well worth the small additional time or cost in order to make a more opulent item of clothing out of all the cloth you owned. Poorer folk would tend to wear less garments, less layers and less full clothing because they had access to less cloth. Regardless of cut or style, all clothes would have been well made to last as long as possible, seams and hems would be neatly finished inside to avoid fraying, and all clothes would have been neatly patched and repaired if torn or damaged. Only the very wealthy could afford to discard old clothing and this would not be wasted it would be passed onto to others of lower social status. Even the most worn and patched of clothing would be cut up to make children's clothes before being reduced to rags for cleaning.

If you look back through old documents such was the value of any woven cloth that trading in old clothes or the inheritance of specific garments was always common, even if they needed unpicking and re-sewing to fit the receiver. Fripperers, people who made a living out of making up new clothes by re-cutting and re-cycling the cloth from second hand clothes have been common throughout much of British history, indeed the term frippery is still used to this day to mean any little luxury or indulgence that can be acquired for a more affordable price. Though the existence of largely non monetary self sufficient rural economies, differing levels of income and up to two thousand years of inflation make any kind of price comparisons almost meaningless, by attributing a modern hourly wage to an estimation of the hours of labour needed to spin and weave enough cloth by hand to clothe any individual we reach a price that would run into the thousands of pounds. If we then consider that many more people in the past would be living a hand to mouth existence with very little "spare" time and without the luxury of disposable income that many of us enjoy today and the cost of a whole new outfit could well be the equivalent in terms of difficulty of us saving to buy a new car.

Where period documents record expenditure or allow us to put financial values on period clothes it is quite common for people to be spending the equivalent of one years income on a single outfit. (whether that's the labourer buying a new outfit of coarse un-dyed brown wool, or the lord commissioning a suit of heavily embroidered foreign silk.) Put in these terms it is easy to understand why clothes were valued, looked after, handed down and why people did not own anywhere near as many garments as we do today. Machine spinning and weaving, along with the mass production of man made fibres has reduced the cost of cloth to almost nothing and made clothing a disposable item we replace at the whim of changing fashions, replacing items long before they are worn out.

The other means of demonstrating wealth was through dying cloth to colour it, consequently the higher the quality of the cloth or the garment the greater the chance it would have been dyed. Whilst there is no doubt that coloured cloth has been worn through out history by the wealthy, the extent to which ordinary folk would have been able or willing to spend their time and resources on dyed cloth is a topic of great debate amongst many historians, archaeologists and historical re-enactors. Modern dyes can cheaply achieve

all manner of bright colours such that coloured cloth is now no more expensive than un-dyed cloth. Sadly this seems to have prejudiced modern aesthetics and makes us treat bright colours as the norm making it difficult to appreciate just how special coloured cloth once was.

Natural substantive or mordant fixed dyes such as woad and madder used throughout history to create blue or red cloth were generally expensive to produce or buy and lead to more subdued colours than modern dyes. Bright colours could be achieved with period dyes, but things such as kermes were so expensive they really were only available to the elite of society. Within the subject of bright colours I also wish to include bright white and pure black, both are exceptionally time consuming to achieve naturally. The terms black and white when used historically in connection with clothing probably refer to strongly pigmented dark grey/browns and pale cream/beige colours. Most home grown plant and vegetable dyes that were easily or cheaply available to the rural populace, tended to produce very subdued colours which quickly faded or washed out needing to be re-dyed regularly.

Different people in different re-enactment groups or societies will tell you all manner of different things about the prevalence of dyed cloth in their own particular period of interest. For every strongly argued opinion you hear there will be an equally strongly argued counter view. You must form your own opinions based not just upon the evidence any individual presents to you to support their argument, but on a more widespread understanding of how applicable or relevant that evidence may be in terms of making a widespread generalisation. If intending to use coloured cloth when portraying the ordinary folk that would make up the majority of the population, I would suggest you stick to subdued colours; Most probably drab green/yellows or earthy red/orange/browns. Blues tended to be more time consuming/expensive and contrary to common opinion true vibrant greens were generally difficult to achieve and had to be created by over dyeing blue with yellow, consequently most cheap greens were actually just greenish shades of yellow. Obviously you must research not just the colours that were achievable in your specific period of interest but also how readily accessible each colour was. I personally would wish to strongly argue the case for a far greater use of un-dyed and naturally pigmented grey/brown cloth amongst all re-enactment groups and periods of history.

I have discussed in the first part of this guide how the majority of evidence available to us is likely to be biased in favour of the wealthy. As such although you may easily be able to find lots of evidence of brightly coloured clothing in your period of interest it doesn't mean everybody was wearing it. Evidence to support what colour clothing the ordinary labourers and artisan classes of the past wore is almost nonexistent, but if you exclude all high status examples from your research what little is left points to a much drabber picture. Indeed if you look back to the old Viking sagas people are often described as notable for wearing coloured clothing, even if the colour itself is not mentioned. This could easily be taken to mean that any colour was exceptional. Consider the various sumptuary laws which were in place for much of English history. These governed the types and colours of clothing people of different rank and status could and couldn't wear. Whilst only

the lowest of social classes were forcibly restricted to un-dyed, naturally pigmented cloth, these people did make up a very large proportion of the population. If we look to the late Tudor period there is an expression “country grey” used to describe the clothing worn by rural folk (which at this time would be about 90% of the population) This didn’t mean a constant, even dyed grey as we might now think of for modern business suits, instead it referred to the mottled natural beige, creams, greys, russets and browns of naturally pigmented wools, linens and leathers. Even if you go back to living memory and rural England around the time of World War One, the vast majority of clothing worn in the countryside was sub-dyed natural un-dyed grey and brown hues. This was despite more brightly coloured “modern” fabrics being fashionable in the cities where the wealthy elite of society have always needed to appear successful in order to prosper.

I would further support my argument for the majority of re-enactors wearing very little coloured clothing on the basis of sheep production over the last two thousand years of history. Although England has been noted for its trade in wool throughout almost all of its history, the large scale exporting of woven cloth, as opposed to fleeces, for which England was to become famous, did not fully develop as a professional industry until around the 13th century. So whilst we now think of sheep as being white, woolly creatures farmed for their soft, fluffy fleeces, traditionally sheep were a meat/dairy animal. Although, breeds of soft haired white sheep were introduced by the Romans they took a lot of additional care to survive our climate and never really thrived. Native breeds of sheep tend to be more hardy and resilient wiry haired animals with smaller darker fleeces.

Consequently although evidence can be found for flocks of white sheep, these animals, farmed primarily for their better fleeces, would, for much of English history be less numerous than the more hardy breeds farmed for meat and dairy production. Indeed there is some evidence to suggest that the numbers of white sheep in England declined rapidly after the departure of the Romans. Numbers only started to increase again from the thirteenth century with the increasing demand for high quality white wool brought about by the wide spread commercialisation of weaving. This change in emphasis of sheep farming from meat and dairy to wool is reflected in the increasing ages at which sheep were being slaughtered as shown in the numerous animal bones excavated from archaeological sites around the country.

For much of history most rural families would probably keep a few of the smaller darker coloured native sheep for milk and perhaps meat, the wool although a useful by-product would not be of primary concern. Certainly for all of the first millennium, and for much of the second, women and probably children and older men would spend much of their time spinning yarn and weaving it at home for making their family clothing. As mentioned earlier it was not until about the thirteenth century that significant numbers of men started moving into weaving as a full time occupation. These professional weavers were initially supplying high quality cloth primarily for export or trade to a wealthy minority. From this point on we can trace a notable increase in the price of sheep with the softest white wool capable of making the best cloth both in terms of fineness and it’s suitability for dyeing. Such financial pressures

would undoubtedly have led to a gradual change in farming practices and selective breeding of the animals being reared. However, it was not until the sixteenth/seventeenth century that the majority of the mainstream population would be buying professionally woven cloth as opposed to spinning/weaving their own. Even then, much of the cheaper sorts of cloth being professionally produced for internal use by the lower orders of society was still being produced from the poorer qualities of coarse grey/brown fleece that were not suited to producing the best cloth for export or sale to the wealthy.

It only takes a small percentage of naturally occurring pigment in the wool of a sheep for the thread spun from it to take on a brownish grey or beige colour. Given the weak nature of most early dyes available, such thread or cloth would not over-dye very well and would lead to even more muddy looking colours. There is very little evidence from the archaeological record of such naturally pigmented wool being dyed, though simply patterned cloth woven from threads of differing degrees of natural pigmentation was seemingly common. The term “russet” is a generic one commonly used throughout much of history for the cheaper sorts of naturally grey/brown cloth used by ordinary people. However, look in more depth into “russet” as a type of cloth and you’ll soon find that the term seems to have been used for a wide range of types of textiles and as such an early Norman russet may be very different to a late medieval russet which in turn could be very different to a Tudor/Stuart russet. Un-dyed naturally pigmented grey/brown cloth was the dominant form of dress for the vast majority of the population for the vast majority of history. Nevertheless there was still a huge variety of these types of cloth produced and quite notable changes in weave, finish and quality amongst these “ordinary” types of un-dyed textiles. Most re-enactors wrongly choose to dismiss these as a single homogeneous type of fabric only suited to those portraying slaves and beggars at the very bottom of society rather than a widespread selection of textiles worn by the vast majority of people.

Linen the other common textile is regarded to be more difficult to produce and more difficult to dye. Furthermore it has been shown to be used predominantly for undergarments, bed sheets and other items of cloth that would need regular laundering. Given how poorly dyes take on linen without special pre-treatments and mordants, how quickly early vegetable dyes faded or washed out and how little of such undergarments would be on view when worn, there is little reason to envisage people wanting to colour linens. Even with all the bias of available evidence pointing to the use of coloured wool amongst the wealthy there is still very little evidence of dyed linens being used prior to the industrial revolution and particularly the invention of modern synthetic dyes. Most commonly linen would simply be allowed to fade from its natural pale greyish brown to a creamy white through wear and washing, or occasionally the process may be accelerated by bleaching to produce a whiter cloth, though this would still be far from the white we can now achieve with chemical whiteners and modern detergents.

Given the strong interest in military and battle re-enactment I suppose at this point I must mention coloured uniforms. Throughout history there have long been efforts made by formalised armies to standardise on important pieces of armour or weaponry, indeed the Romans excelled at managing to mass produce such equipment. However, it is comparatively recently that such an emphasis was

also placed on basic clothing. The majority of Romans probably wore a white tunic not because it was a special military issue but because most people of the time would wear a simple linen tunic. Furthermore it should be noted that from the demise of the Roman army to the formation of the new model army during the civil war(s) in the 1600's, the majority of any army would not be professional soldiers, but would normally be comprised of several smaller militia or retinues raised by local leaders or nobles. Their costume, and to some extent their weaponry and armour would most probably be what ever they happened to own as an individual. Distinctions between different cultures or peoples living at any one time such as the Saxons, Normans and Vikings would be difficult to identify through the dress of the common soldiery. It is perhaps only their leaders or warlords that could afford high status clothing that may show some cultural differences in decorative attire.

Even during the English civil war the majority of fighting troops were still drawn from smaller militias or privately raised bodies of men who would fight in their ordinary clothing. A few wealthy officers may have tried to provide their own troops with a coat of dyed wool to help identify them in battle though this was expensive and not all that common despite it's prevalence among re-enactors. However, each general or leader regardless of political or religious affiliations would dress themselves in as expensive a costume as they could afford so as to stand out and be recognised. The stereotypical distinction between the extravagantly dressed cavaliers and the soberly dressed roundheads is pure fiction. Royalists and Parliamentarians both dressed well if they could afford to do so. Furthermore much of the clothing of the common soldiery described as being grey would not have been dyed a uniform grey but would have been the mottled drab colours of the naturally pigmented wools they would have been wearing anyway. In the heat of battle there was often little to distinguish between the dress of your own troops and those of the enemy. Uniform in the sense of something that was dyed to be truly "uniform" from one soldier to the next did not really become common place until the Napoleonic conflicts.

Perhaps the one aspect of coloured clothing that is greatly under-represented amongst re-enactors is that of coloured embroidery and decorative needle work. England has long had a tradition for fine needle work and though styles changed a lot through time, examples from all periods of history can be found. The creation of such designs would require very little of the expensive dyes or white wools which are needed in order to produce clear colours from these dyes. Furthermore being used in such small quantities even silk threads may have been occasionally affordable to folk of more modest means. Nevertheless what we must try to distinguish is whether there would be any significant differences between the types of needle work applied to large wall hangings or religious artefacts from which much of our evidence comes and secular everyday clothing which may have been kept simpler if it was known it would be subject to greater wear.

Whilst we as busy modern people may consider such decoration to be excessively labour intensive to apply, we must remember that in the past the production of any item of clothing was very labour intensive taking hundreds, or maybe even thousands of hours to spin, weave, cut and sew. Consequently people would own very few clothes and a few extra hours just to enliven one garment with

a little coloured stitching, perhaps around the collar or cuffs or maybe along the seams was probably negligible compared to the time taken to make the garment in the first place. No doubt the most extensively embroidered and colourful garments would have been the preserve of the very wealthy and may have been reserved for ceremonial or special use, but it seems probable that many more ordinary folk may have owned costume with a little coloured decoration, even if the garments themselves were not coloured.

Based upon the evidence we have for textiles and cloth from the last two thousand years of history, along with the evidence we have for the raw materials this cloth would be made from and the techniques used to manufacture it we can draw certain conclusions. I feel confident to state that very few rural folk, people who would make up the majority of the populace for much of England's history, would have easy access to the raw materials needed to produce brightly coloured cloth. Furthermore I do not believe they would have any great incentive to spend a great deal of their resources and time on making such coloured cloth. It is for these reasons that the clothing of the wealthy merchants, clergy and nobility is so often described as being notable for it's opulence in terms of colour, quality and quantity of cloth used in it's construction.

A final point to note before moving on to sourcing materials for making reproduction costume is that it may not be appropriate for the ordinary folk we wish to portray to be wearing new clothes made to the latest fashions of the period portrayed. Clothing could well be second hand and may be more than one generation old. An important part of recreating the look and feel of everyday life may well be in the ways we subtly distress our clothing to make it look lived in and worn, though those who've been involved with re-enactment for twenty or thirty years may find their costume acquires such a look naturally. Unless playing a beggar for comedic value beware of overdoing this as all clothes would be highly valued and looked after. Nevertheless also bear in mind that getting new clothes was not the everyday occurrence that it now is. For much of history ordinary people were known and recognised by the set of clothes they owned. Whilst underwear and simple linens may have needed repair and replacement more frequently than outer garments, somebody getting a complete new outfit could well have been the talking point of the village and something of great note in a small community. If we are truly to give an authentic portrayal of any early period of history, new clothing should probably stand out as being special almost as much as elaborately coloured or decorated high status costume.

So what should I be buying to make my costume from?

What follows is an attempt to briefly outline the sorts of common leathers and textiles that have been made throughout history, those which would most probably have been common place and accessible to ordinary working folk. Perhaps more importantly I'll also try to relate these to the sorts of things that are available to us today that will provide a good approximation of these period materials.

In today's world we tend to think of leather as an expensive luxury item because of the amount of processing needed to turn the skin of a dead animal into a durable leather. Throughout history it would have required the same extensive processing it still requires today, it

was however generally cheaper than woven textiles as these would have required spinning and weaving by hand and so were even more labour intensive. Most modern leathers are made of cattle hide, but throughout history sheep, goat, pig, horse, deer, seal, cat, dog and many other animals have been used. The smaller animals tend to produce thinner leathers more suitable for clothing whereas thicker cattle hide is often more suited to belts and shoes. However, it is worth noting that in the past most skins used to make leather were the by-products of butchery for meat.

The most common skins would therefore be the ones being most commonly butchered and we must also take into account the methods of butchery. Some animals like cattle are skinned before butchering into joints of meat. Others like pigs may be butchered with the skin on producing cuts of meat still with the rind on and would therefore, not routinely produce skins for tanning. Consequently any animal that had to be butchered in a special or non standard way to remove the skin would probably have produced a more expensive leather. However, it is possible that in the past all animals would have been skinned as a matter of routine irrespective of butchering preferences because leathers would have been much more important owing to the greater cost of woven cloth.

You will often hear re-enactors of many early periods of history telling you, that aside from shoes, there are no surviving artefacts on which to base reproduction leather garments. If your period of interest falls into the early periods researched more through archaeology than written history then this is not surprising as very little leather survives anywhere. Furthermore being so time consuming to manufacture leather would be endlessly recycled until no longer usable. The chances of any large thin leather garment surviving intact for centuries, even millennia is remote. Nevertheless in the few archaeological sites where organic materials remain there is often a strong chance of recovering small scraps of leathers. These may include little bits of seams or hems trimmed off when recycling and reusing bigger items for some other purpose. The fact that we can't reliably say what was being made with all these little bits of leather we find hundreds of years later is no justification for not making garments out of leather.

In any instance where people want hard wearing, cheap and weather proof clothing, leather was an ideal choice and so would probably have been more commonplace with rural workers in the country than in towns. No matter how far back you go into written sources references to a wide range of leather objects and garments can be found. Whilst written sources may give no information on cut or construction they can at least give a good indication of what was being made. So, Whilst the thought of leather underwear may now speak of some manner of sexual perversion, there is documentary evidence from the seventeenth century of it being used to make underclothes for orphans because it was the cheapest and most hard wearing material available. If it was the cheapest material available then, it was probably the cheapest material available for much of history before this as, if anything, leading up to this point advances in the technology of leather tanning lagged behind advances in spinning and weaving.

When buying leathers to make reproduction costume there are a few things to bear in mind. Throughout history most leathers were

pit tanned often using oak bark. By the later medieval period there was a clear distinction between tanners dealing mainly in oak tanned cattle hides and whitewyers dealing in alum and oil tanned skins of the smaller animals to produce softer, finer, paler leathers for clothing. Most modern leathers are mechanically processed and chemically tanned using chrome or nickel salts. The behaviour of these nickel/chrome tanned leathers can be quite different from a craftsman's point of view, particularly if you intended tooling any form of decoration onto it or doing a lot of hand stitching. The use of modern abrasives and mechanical polishing to remove much of the growth marks and grain pattern left having removed the hair from a skin also results in a very smooth surface which although not impossible to achieve by hand in the past would have made such finely finished leathers the preserve of the very wealthy. Furthermore most modern animals, cattle in particular, are selectively bred to produce hornless varieties, or are de-horned when young so as to promote more rapid growth for faster meat production. This also results in much less injury to animals through fighting and skins with much less scar tissue or scratches. The use of plastic ear tags for identification instead of branding has also reduced the amount of "flaws" in most skins, such that what we now regard as poor low grade skins would probably, for much of history, have been the norm in terms of marks and irregularities.

If you need to distinguish between traditional veg/bark tanned and metal tanned leathers then the smoothness of the surface can be a give away, though this technically has little to do with the tanning process and just reflects the routine practice of mechanically polishing nickel/chrome tanned leathers some what more aggressively than veg tanned which may easily be made with an equally smooth polished surface. Furthermore, much of the graining and texturing on modern leathers is actually created through polishing the skin smooth and then applying a more aesthetically pleasing texture with a heavy press or roller, so this is hardly a foolproof system. A better test to distinguish the two is that good veg tanned leather usually soaks up water like a sponge bubbling furiously as it does so, whereas the metal tanned leather is much more water resistant.

However, perhaps the biggest difference between modern and period leathers is in the colours. Almost all modern leathers are supplied dyed, sometimes in bright colours. sometimes natural "flesh" colours simply to achieve a more uniform look. Although naturally dyed leathers would have been available to the more affluent of the past, un-dyed vegetable-tanned leather is obviously preferable to us as re-enactors and well worth seeking out as it can still be found for sensible prices. Nevertheless, bear in mind that almost all vegetable tanned leather now available is tanned using a concentrated extract of chestnut to give a more rapid tanning. True oak bark tanning is very slow, is now very rare and consequently expensive. Oak tanned leather takes on a pale yellow/brown hue, whilst chestnut tanned leather takes on a very pale reddish/pink hue. Oil/alum tawed leathers tend to be very pale cream colours and can be almost white, however whilst they can still be obtained today expect to pay very high prices for them as they tend only to be used by specialist book binders.

When portraying ordinary folks clothing from the past we should probably be looking for leathers with quite pale natural flesh/skin tones or very pale yellow/brown colouration depending upon the

animal the skin came from and the process involved in tanning it. The rich dark red/brown colours we tend to think of as traditional leather colours aren't actually part of the tanning process but come about through subsequent waxing or oiling to soften and water-proof the stiff leather. Though you can buy un-dyed veg tanned leathers which are waxed and polished to achieve this colour it is far more probable that any affordable leathers that look like this will be nickel/chrome tanned leathers dyed rich red/browns to simulate a more antique look. Besides, waxing and oiling leathers is quick cheap and easy to do yourself at home, and often needs doing after forming or tooling so there's little point in paying to have it done in advance. Consequently don't look for such dark shiny brown veg tanned leathers, don't look for the very shiny and polished chrome tanned leathers, and certainly don't buy or use the thick black leathers now used by motorcyclists for making protective jackets or trousers.

Leather is obviously a natural material so no two skins are going to be the same. They are typically priced by the square foot, and you should note that the irregular shape of skins means that to get a rectangle 2 foot by 3 foot may mean you may need to buy a skin of about 8-10 sq.ft. to allow for wastage around the edges. Cattle hides may be up to about 10mm thick in places but are typically sold at 3-4mm thick and whole hides may easily exceed 50sq.ft. These are the sorts of things to use for belts and shoes, and you may well be using them for scabbards and sheaths and other craft projects. Cattle skins may also be available as thinner "splits" where the grain side is separated from the flesh side, thereby producing double the square footage by turning one thick skin into two thinner ones.

Goat skin, sheep skin and pig skin are the other easily obtained leathers still available today. All are likely to be available in skins about 5-15sq.ft. with goat skins generally being the smallest of these three types. Goat skin is typically regarded as one of the best quality skins you can buy, it has a soft feel and a supple drape hanging nicely despite being quite thick, sometimes up to 2mm thick. Sheep or lamb skin tends to be a thinner leather but is just as supple. Pigskin is most commonly available as a split, so whilst pig skin has a very characteristic and recognisable grain pattern from the removal of the bristly hairs the cheaper suede finished half of the split will not have this. Nevertheless pig skin suede splits are some of the cheapest leathers available and are very thin (less than 1mm) lightweight skins that drape nicely for clothing.

If you buy your leathers from large commercial dealers trading to the public you can expect a good choice of nickel/chrome tanned leathers at cheap prices but they may have only a minimal selection of veg tanned hides for which you may have to pay upwards of £3-4 per sq.ft. and three to five times that for oil/alum tawed skins if they have them. Traders at re-enactment fairs dealing in leathers may have less selection but even if selling nickel chrome tanned leathers they may have a better choice of skins died natural looking colours. They may also be able to sell you part hides if you only want small quantities and may be able to keep their prices below £2 per sq.ft. even for veg tanned hides. As with all things in life the cheapest way of sourcing anything is to buy direct from the manufacturer providing you have need of the largish minimum quantities they may stipulate you must buy as a trade customer.

Whilst living near Northampton I got to know the folk at my local tannery quite well, and as they got used to my somewhat odd requests I would often be given their rejects and the odd hides that were pock marked scarred or which did not dye evenly. Such things rejected by modern upholsterers were ideal for re-enactment as most of what I wanted could be cut around the worst scarring and a bit of texturing added to the overall look of most reproduction leather projects. It is difficult to suggest how much leather you may need for any particular garment since styles of clothing changed so much through out history. However for a typical doublet, something close fitting, long sleeved and with a minimal skirt or small tabs below the waist you may need a hide of about 20sq.ft. or perhaps two hides of about 12-15sq.ft. where wastage may be higher. As such it is unlikely that it should cost you more than £60 to get enough veg-tanned leathers to make such a garment and it is probable it will cost you less than half this. Modern chrome tanned and highly polished leathers may be much cheaper still but to my eye rarely look right.

When it comes to buying woollen cloth this is certainly the area where there is the biggest choice and the most problems for re-enactors. The first point to note is that whilst we may think of wool as being fibres from a sheep, many modern traders use the word as a generic term for cloth. If you want pure wool ask for "pure wool" or "100% wool", generic wool is often wool blends based largely on acrylic or polyester. This can make the cloth appear a bit too shiny and it certainly makes a big difference in terms of safety.

Historical re-enactors spend a lot of time around open fires and/or gunpowder. When man made fibres catch fire they melt and burn quickly causing a lot of harm to the people wearing them, natural fibres smoulder more slowly, and can often be put out before you suffer serious burns and are scarred for life. As a matter of routine I test scraps of all my cloth before making it into garments. Quickly touch a lighted match to a thoroughly washed and dried off cut of the textile. If the cloth won't ignite easily, smells of burnt hair, burns slowly or the flame peters out as soon as the match is removed it is probable it has a very high wool content. If it ignites quickly burns brightly and the flame continues to burn when you take away the match then it probably has a high percentage of man made fibres in it. Other natural fibres such as linen tend to burn a little more easily but not so readily as man made fibres, and many of the protective dressings applied to wool are also excessively flammable (hence the recommendation to wash the cloth before testing). Perhaps the best way to identify man-made fibres is to study the residue. Man-made fibres tend to melt to form blobs of sticky black plastic gunge rather than a fine powdery ash. If it looks like natural fibre and isn't going to be a fire hazard then I'm happy to use it, absolute scientific identification of fibre types is rarely demanded by any re-enactment society.

There are three basic points to consider that differentiate different types of woollen cloth from one another and which should be used to distinguish textiles from different periods or separate high quality cloth from lower status examples. 1) The thread count, that is how fine and how closely spaced the threads are, measured by counting the number of warp or weft threads in a 1cm wide strip of cloth. 2) The type or pattern of weave, that is how the weft thread is passed over or under the vertically stretched warp threads as it is

passed side to side when weaving. 3) The final point of note is the colour of the cloth, whether that be natural grey/brown pigmentation or an artificially applied dye.

There is a common perception amongst many of the public that our early ancestors were unsophisticated and that early textiles must therefore have been coarsely woven but this does not seem to have been the case. Much of the distinction between cloths was not based upon weave pattern or colour but on weight and fineness of weave. I don't wish to go into all the numerous different names used throughout history for different types of cloth, much has been written about this before and if you truly want to learn to distinguish between plunkets, habergets, sergies, friezes, burels, kersies, dozens and kendals and all manner of other textiles I suggest you seek out specialist publications on the subject specific to your period of interest.

Woollen cloths were produced in a wide variety of qualities from the cheapest wrappings and sacking to the finest quality clothing. Thread counts have been shown to range from as little as three or four threads per cm. to well over twenty threads per cm. though for much of history counts of around 8-12 seem commonplace for much mainstream cloth. It was normal for warp and weft counts to be roughly similar though the number of warp threads was often a fraction in excess of the thicker fluffier weft threads and in certain speciality ribbed cloths known as reps there could easily be twice as many warp threads as wefts. For those really interested in textiles you can start looking not just at the thread counts but at the particular types of fibre that the threads have been spun from, the particular breeds of sheep they have come from, the way in which these threads have been combed, the direction in which different yarns have been spun or even how different threads have been plied together to make thicker stronger threads. However although interesting, all this tends to be taking things further than most re-enactors would wish to go.

When first woven the weave of a new cloth would be clearly recognisable, though in cases where the cloth has a heavily dressed or fulled surface the thread count and pattern of weave may be obscured by the matting or felting of the surface. Age and excessive wear will inevitably felt a woollen cloth also. Loosely speaking, and I do mean loosely so check out the specifics for you period of interest, prior to the large scale commercialisation of weaving by men around the 13th century warp and weft threads were spun differently to give strong warp threads (those vertically placed in the loom) and fluffy weft (those which are actually woven in and out of the warp to form a cloth) This practice continued with domestic spinning and weaving after the 13th century but the top quality professionally woven cloth used much finer spun threads for both warp and weft to get a better quality smoother more even cloth.

Since warp and weft were spun differently, often from fibres from different sheep or different parts of the same fleece they often looked different with differing textures and amounts of natural pigmentation. Consequently cloth woven from these threads took on a basic pattern of subtly alternating hues based upon the type of weave. The simplest pattern of weaving used throughout history and still the most dominant weave today is the simple tabby weave (a 1-1 weave where the weft passes over one warp thread then under

one warp repeating across the cloth) Though surviving examples of cloth are rare from early periods of history this type of cloth has been found in use in most periods and cultures simply because it is the easiest to make. The use of subtly different shades of warp and weft produces a rustic type of cloth still being produced today under the name of Donegal tweed or sometimes salt'n'pepper tweed. Very early cloth often shows traces of checked patterns created through weaving with a selection of coloured yarns, but these seem to diminish in popularity with the demise of the Romans.

As a general rule prior to the Norman conquest almost all cloth would be home spun/woven and the most common type would be a simple tabby weave. England also seemed to show a strong tradition for a variety of complicated patterns of weaving known as twills. Here the weft would pass over or under more than one warp thread at a time, if each row of weaving was offset from the previous, then diagonal stripes could be created from the differently pigmented warp and weft. 2-2 twill is perhaps the simplest twill giving long diagonal stripes through the weave in a simple pattern now often referred to as Shetland weave. However, twills were commonly used as broken twills so as to change the direction of the diagonal stripes. Through clever changes in the way the weft was woven over or under the warp, little chevrons, larger herringbone or complicated diamond patterns can be created. Such herringbone patterns are still popular for many modern business suits though the threads in these cloths tend to be dyed uniform greys rather than being naturally pigmented and are much finer cloth than most period textiles.

Around the period of the Norman Conquest there was a change in fashion brought about by a change in loom technology. Basic tabby weaves remained common but 2-1 twills seemed to replace 2-2 twills as the other popular choice, here the warp would be predominantly visible on one side of the cloth with the weft dominating the other giving the two sides of the cloth a very different appearance. It is also about this time that we start to see the early signs of professional weavers setting up business. For those interested in re-enacting these earlier periods all manner of complicated "un-dressed" twills continue to be made to this day where they often tend to fall under the generic term "tweeds", you'll just need to identify those that are most suitable for your needs

Perhaps the biggest change in textile history came about around the 13th-14th century as professional weaving takes off as a major source of income for Britain as we start exporting large quantities of cloth. Sheep farming changes emphasis towards supplying best quality fleeces for this industry rather than dairy/meat products. We also see the start of the first signs of the gradual change towards more people beginning to purchase cloth rather than make their own. Fulling and surface dressing of professionally woven cloth also becomes more commonplace around this period. However, at the bottom end of society there would still be a large number of people hand spinning/weaving their own basic types of cloth from the coarse fleeces of native sheep kept as much for dairy/meat as for wool. By the late 14th century the wide spread use of twills seems to have fallen from favour and the basic tabby weave becomes standard, however, types of striped cloth known as rays maintained the idea of more decorative effects created through weaving. In Scotland the tradition of weaving plaids also continued the idea of

decorating textiles by weaving a pattern into the cloth at the time of manufacture using differently coloured threads, rather than dyeing the cloth a single uniform colour after it had been woven..

It is only around the time of the Tudors and Stuarts that we finally see the wide spread demise of home spinning/weaving as the majority of people choose to buy professionally woven cloth rather than make their own. It is also around this period that fulling and dressing the surface of cloth becomes the common norm, rather than a special treatment for better qualities of cloth and similarly it is around this time that dyed cloth starts to become more accessible to ordinary folk and less of an expensive luxury. Consequently choosing cloth that replicates the colours of natural period dyes may be more important than matching particular weave patterns which may be obscured by the surface finishes. However, corresponding with this shift towards purchasing professionally produced cloth, we also start to see a greater emphasis on production of “cheaper” sorts of cloth produced for the internal domestic market. Made from the coarser naturally pigmented grey/brown fleeces of the types the peasantry had always used, not all professionally produced textiles could be seen as an improvement in quality over earlier textiles, simply a move away from wide spread home production.

Linens are generally a simpler thing for re-enactors to source than wools. The textiles mills of Ireland and to a lesser degree elsewhere are still producing pure linen cloth and selling this in a natural un-bleached and un-dyed state. With a few exceptions linen was almost always woven with a simple tabby weave (known to many as linen weave) though the threads were generally finer than those of wool. The main thing to consider with linens is the colour. Linen fibres show less natural variation than wool, generally being a dark beige/grey often described as having a slight hint of silvery green. However the processing of these during spinning and cloth making can result in products with a considerable spread of finished colours ranging from mottled darker grey/browns through to very pale cream or beige. Bleaching or excessive washing can lighten these to produce bright whites and many linens are now dyed natural colours to achieve a uniformity of colour. It is hard to find any reliable evidence as to exactly what shades of linen were most common in the past all we can say is that the evidence supports the use of lots of undyed and unbleached linens. So stick with the off-white, pale grey shades rather than the brightest of whites or coloured varieties which are now available.

Linens tended to show a greater variation in the thread counts owing to the possibility of spinning finer threads. Counts ranged from the coarsest cloth at little more than five or six threads per cm. through to the finest examples being over 30 threads per cm. Though for those wishing to portray ordinary folks clothing I suggest something around 10-20 threads per cm. Such specifications on weave pattern and thread counts may seem a demanding list of requirements to be met by a modern cloth but the practicalities of what makes a good cloth have changed little with time and so there are lots of modern textiles out there that fit these descriptions and perseverance will find something suitable to fit even the tightest budget.

Cloth is sold by a variety of means and the most normal is by length, either by the metre or the yard. Modern machine made cloth is typically about 150cm (60”) wide but can vary. Also bear in mind

that if the cloth we are purchasing is specialist reproduction cloth made on traditional looms or bespoke hand woven cloth it could be narrower down to as little as 60cm (24” wide). The narrower the cloth the greater the length we may need to provide us with enough surface area to cut out the entire garment. However do bear in mind the old phrase “cutting ones clothes to suit ones cloth”. Modern cloth is cheap so if pattern pieces don’t fit a short length of cloth, we tend to buy more and accept a higher degree of wastage. Throughout many early periods of history it was common, even among the clothes of the wealthy to find the odd irregular seam across a particular panel of a garment, where off cuts of textile have been sewn together to create a new piece of cloth big enough to cut out another piece of the pattern. Such an approach has been known by many names but the old Tudor term of “cutting your clothes from cabbage” is one that I always find amusing.

The amount of cloth needed for any particular garment is obviously going to be determined by the style of that garment. It may be possible to construct small garments from as little as one metre of 150cm wide cloth. Tunics and shirts may need two or three metres depending upon style whilst longer fuller dresses or robes may need four to six metres. Remember also that if clothing in your period of interest was lined or even stiffened with interlining you may need two or three times this quantity of fabric. People in your group will advise you on the amount of cloth needed for any particular style of garment. Pure wools and linens have a high retail price if bought from high street haberdashery shops, often around £25-45 per metre. As such you could easily spend several hundred pounds putting together a basic costume of just two or three simple garments. Man made and mixed fibre textiles tend to be much cheaper but are much less appropriate. However, very few re-enactors ever pay such high prices for natural fibre cloth. High street retailers charge a premium price for keeping in a good quantity of cloth so as to be able to guarantee a supply. When they get down to the last few metres on the roll they will tend to remove it from their standard product lines and sell off the last remnants at a discount price.

There are many specialist traders catering for re-enactors who will source such roll ends and remnants, selling them on at living history fairs for about £5-10 per metre, Most of these will be dyed obviously modern colours but with luck you may find something that could pass for a naturally grey/brown cloth more suited to typical period clothing. Pure wools and linens at these prices represent a decent price but do check you are actually getting pure wool and linen as many of the textiles for sale at these fairs are man made or mixed fibre equivalents. There are also traders like myself who commission the production of specialist reproduction cloth, accurately recreated based upon known period finds or historical sources. Such cloth will, by necessity, be a little more expensive, but it is well worth the additional cost if you plan to put a lot of effort into making a particular item of clothing or if you take the subject of authenticity seriously.

The cheapest option if you are restricted in terms of your budget is to put in the effort yourself and start visiting the textile mills and discount retailers, looking for the roll ends and bargains that the traders at re-enactment fairs may also be trying to find to sell on at a profit. In this case you may find oddments of pure wools and linens

that work out as little as £2-3 per metre, the best I ever managed was 10m of pure black wool for just £3, that's just 30p a metre. I don't know what I'm going to do with pure black as is bit too high status even for my later periods of interest, but it seemed too cheap to leave behind. That's the thing with sourcing bargains you have to pick up what's available and store it until you have need of it or can swap it with other re-enactors for something more useful. It's very rare that you can go out looking for something specific and happen to find it going cheap that day. Consequently most re-enactors soon end up with at least one large cupboard or room full of part bolts and roll ends of all manner of cloth types that "...will hopefully be useful for something at some point in the future!" I'm sure in many cases it may be cheaper to just pay the extra price for the accurately recreated cloth you need for a particular garment than to keep filling cupboards with "cheap" roll ends that you never actually get around to using because you never have in exactly what you need when starting a new garment.

Perhaps the last thing I will mention with regard buying cheap remnant or roll ends is places that sell by weight. If you've never bought cloth by weight before and can't actually measure what you've found, it can be a bit disconcerting to try work out how much cloth you might actually be getting. Is a bundle of 2kg enough cloth to do something useful with, and at what price does it become cheap? Obviously the length of cloth you get for a specific weight is dependant upon the width of the cloth and the density of the cloth. Assuming a standard width of 150cm heavy coat weights of wool weigh around 600-900g/m. Medium clothing weight wools around 350-600g/m whilst the finest lightest weight luxury wools may weigh around 200-350g/m. Linen cloth tends to be thinner than wool but is generally more densely woven. As such light weight linens may look much finer than lightweight wools despite weighing roughly the same per metre. Unless looking to make tents, ships sails or other heavy weight items most clothing weights of linen are likely to be around 200-400g/m. Consequently light weight cloth priced at around £12/kg is probably quite cheap at an equivalent of about £3-5/m whilst thicker heavier cloth at the same price may work out at about £6-10/m

Having discussed natural materials for making reproduction costume, it is worth briefly mentioning one or two points that may be of use to those new to costume making. It may seem obvious when written down but it's easier to trim a little bit off cloth than to add a little on. So when cutting out pattern pieces, provide for a generous seam allowance. If a garment has a complicated shape that is going to be difficult to tailor exactly, then start with a polyester bed sheet or other fabric you can get cheaply and have a trial run. A practice run like this known as a "tuile" will enable you to refine the pattern to fit you and show how much you do need to be leaving for seam allowances, avoiding expensive mistakes on pure wool or linen cloth. A generous seam allowance also makes finishing the raw edges off inside much easier, making garments more durable and less likely to fray or fall apart at the seams. We've all learnt the hard way and had clothes split or fall apart the first time they were washed because we left raw edges of fabric inside where we thought they wouldn't be seen.

Natural fibres may shrink, stretch or generally change shape the first few times they get wet. It is sensible prior to cutting out any

costume to wash and dry all your wools and linens at least once, to minimise any change in shape that may happen later when finished garments are washed or simply get wet in the rain. It is therefore a wise precaution to buy a little more cloth than you think you might need, maybe an extra 10-15% if it's available. Take care when buying very short roll ends, they may be cheap, but if they shrink even a little when first washed they may end up too small for what you intended. Buying a little extra fabric and pre washing it before cutting out should hopefully stop carefully tailored, snug fitting clothes ending up too small, or as can more easily happen with differential shrinkage of layers of linings, inner stiffening and outers, the whole garment pulling itself dreadfully out of shape.

Washing your cloth before cutting out can also be used to remove various chemical treatments applied to the cloth helping soften and possibly fade it, should you feel this desirable. Worth considering is what you use to wash your costume on a day to day basis. Modern detergents, used with machine washing tend to include all manner of bleaches and fluoressors and artificial whiteners to produce dazzling whites. Having gone to the trouble of choosing subdued, naturally coloured or pigmented materials, and perhaps having distressed these a little to introduce elements of dirt and staining, it is best to hand wash linens with a simple bar of soap in warm water so as to preserve the natural colours of your textiles. Wools are often best dry cleaned but where possible, if not too dirty, simply turning woollen garments inside out and hanging them outside to freshen up and reduce the smell of wood smoke can often be all that is needed. Ordinary working folk of the past certainly wouldn't be laundering the majority of their costume on such a regular basis as we now consider desirable. Only underwear made of more durable linens was washed regularly.

Well that's covered enough basics to hopefully give you some idea about the sorts of materials you should be looking for. Whilst the clothing of the wealthy and elite often change rapidly based upon fashion and personal taste, the clothing of ordinary folk would change much more slowly. Such clothing would be much less subject to changes in fashion, being governed far more by what was practical, what they already owned and what they could easily make themselves. It is for this reason I feel I can write a generic overview about several hundred years of textiles. It is obviously important for each individual to do their own research into the period and people they portray but I hope these notes provide some sort of framework in which to place your own research and some sort of context in which to interpret the inevitably patchy and limited information available for what ordinary people were wearing long before we were born.