

# A Reliquary Pouch

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# 1 Background

## 1.1 Inspiration



*Figure 1: A heraldic fragment dating back to the 13th or 14th century, embroidered in brick stitch, and held in the Victoria & Albert Museum.*

This pouch is inspired by a textile fragment in the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London. That fragment, which may have been used for a pouch, depicts heraldic lions and eagles. Since my device consists of a silver squirrel holding a book, under three acorns, I decided to make an embroidered heraldic pouch inspired by the fragment.

Similar pouches would have been used in Germany in the 13th or 14th century, worn from the belt, as can be seen in Figure 2. In fact pouches were worn hanging from the belt all over Europe, but the brickstitch is most commonly found in Germany.

## 1.2 Changes from the Original Item



*Figure 2: Picture of a women wearing a pouch on her belt from [http://cottesimple.com/articles/aumonieres/\[McG\]](http://cottesimple.com/articles/aumonieres/[McG]), and a brickstitch embroidered pouch held in the Victoria & Albert Museum, where the diamonds are separated by white lines.*

The heraldic fragment is incomplete, and we cannot be sure what it was used for, but other brickstitch-embroidered alms pouches exist<sup>1</sup>, so I choose to make a pouch, and model the

<sup>1</sup>A brief overview is given at <http://cottesimple.com/articles/aumonieres/> with more examples of purses embroidered in geometric patterns available in [FL88].

construction on the brickstitch embroidered pouch in Figure 2. This pouch has diamond designs separated by diagonal lines, a drawstring made of braided cord, and a hanging cord, as well as decorative seam treatments. While some pouches have tassels, this one does not and I am choosing to follow that design since I am not fond of tassels. It is unclear exactly what kind of seam treatment is used from this picture, but as Crowfoot et al document, pouches such as in Figure 3 exist.

## 2 Methods and Materials



**Fig 84** (A) Pouch made from a silk lampas-woven cloth and stitched together with a tablet-woven edging, No 339, from a late 14th-century deposit. The handle is a fingerloop braid. Note the warp of the cloth is shown horizontally. (B) Reconstruction of the pattern on the cloth used for the pouch

*Figure 3: Late 14th century purse bordered with tabletweaving and with a fingerloop braid for a drawstring [CPS01].*

In this section I will describe the design choices I made in creating my pouch. Figure 5 on page 5 gives a very brief comparison of the methods and materials used in the heraldic fragment versus those used in my project.

### 2.1 Pattern

I designed the patterns I embroidered, inspired by my heraldic badge which blazoned as “Vert a squirrel maintaining a book argent, in chief three acorns argent”. The width of separating diagonals is 4 threads, and the pattern diamonds are 21 stitches to the side. The patterns are included in

Appendix A.

### 2.2 Materials

The materials I used were based on the original fragment, consisting of a linen base embroidered with dyed silk, and I used commercially dyed Splendor 12-ply silk, using 4 strands for optimal coverage. Silk was often imported, and could have either been dyed locally or purchased pre-dyed. The green could be accomplished either by dyeing with woad and then overdyeing with weld, or else dyed with common plants such as nettles. Since this is a darker green, it would most likely have been accomplished with woad and overdyed weld<sup>2</sup>.

The embroidery was done while the linen was stretched on a rectangular frame, and I covered the completed parts by basting scrap flannel over the embroidered portion so it would not fade or get damaged while I was working on it. The stitches are worked in German brickstitch, which is an very geometric embroidery stitch that is very soothing to work – as long as you don’t miscount the pattern<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup>The process is described in Complex Weavers’ Medieval Textiles, Issue 29 Sept 2001, which is included in the Appendices.

<sup>3</sup>So ignore the deformed squirrel! It’s not real! Mistakes that don’t get noticed until you’re reaching 80% completion aren’t mistakes; they’re features.

## 2.3 The Drawstring

The drawstring, again based on this pouch and the research of Master Wymarc<sup>4</sup>, the drawstrings are actually separate threads that are threaded through the embroidery, knotted on the edge, and then combined for a short length before separating into loose tassels. In the pouches I looked at, I could see no evidence of eyelets to pass the strings through, and by passing the strings through the embroidery the friction will keep the drawstring bag closed when the strings are pulled taut. Again to minimize the amount of loose thread floating around in my basket, I elected to make very small tassels right at the knots on both sides of the bag.

## 2.4 The Hanging Loop

The hanging loop is sewn to the pouch before the tabletwoven seam treatments are applied, and is made using a simple broad fingerloop braid from the translation of “Tak V Bowes” by Barrett and Benns[BB06]. The braiding diagram is included in Appendix B. I used the same 20/2 silk, in green and white, that I also used in the tabletwoven seam treatments. Each loop is bicoloured, and created by tying the loop of green silk, and then passing the white silk thread through the green loop before tying it off also. Thus 5 loops each of green and white silk are combined into 5 bicoloured, doubled loops; the knots at the ends of the loops are all gathered and tied together. The belt loop is kept short since I do not often foresee wearing a belt, and – like the tassels – I want to keep exterior bits and bobs limited when in a basket.

## 2.5 Seam Treatments and Linings



*Figure 4: The weft is passed back underneath the weaving to close off the seam.*

The seam treatment is a very simple tabletwoven pattern using 4 wooden cards, each threaded with two green and two white silk. The warp was first measured out between two posts, and 4 pairs of cards were threaded on. Then cards were separated so that each end of the warp had 4 cards and the weaving actually started in the middle of the warp, and on a bottom corner.

The far end of the warp is tied to a stationary object (here, mostly the back of a chair), and the weft is carried on a needle and is used to sew the seams shut. The weaving is done in a circular motion so that the weft travels through in the same direction every pick; the weft travels through the tablet weaving

from right to left and then underneath from left to right, sewing the seam shut in the process.

The pouch is lined with white silk, to protect the back of the embroidery.

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<sup>4</sup>Master Wymarc describes the drawstring at [http://wymarc.com/asoot/german/stitch\\_article/stitchArticle.php?show=embellish](http://wymarc.com/asoot/german/stitch_article/stitchArticle.php?show=embellish).



2.6 Comparison of Period vs Project Techniques

Figure 5 on page 5 gives an overview of the period vs project techniques. The specific inspiration is a textile fragment, so that it is not possible to conclude from that remnant how the bag would have been finished. However, there are examples of other alms pouches which include edge finishing et al, and these other extant pouches are finished in a number of ways; with and without tassels, with braided or tabletwoven seam treatments (or with no seam treatments), with and without hanging loops and draw strings. Given the wide variety in finishes as seen in Appendix C, I chose finishes that suited my preferences wherever possible.

	Period (Heraldic Fragment)	Project
Base Fabric	52 count linen	32 count linen
Embroidery Thread	Silk thread (Black, cream, green, light blue, and white)	Silk thread (green and white)
Stitch	Brick stitch	Brick stitch
Lining	Unknown	White plain woven silk
Frame	Unknown	Rectangular embroidery frame
Seam treatment	Unknown	Tabletwoven seam covering
Drawstring	Unknown	Silk drawstrings
Hanging Cord	Unknown	Silk in a fingerloop braid

Figure 5: Comparing Methods and Materials.

2.7 Comments on Final Assembly of the Pouch

We don’t know necessarily in what order these pouches were assembled, especially when – as in this case – the extant inspiration piece is a textile fragment. In hindsight, the original choice to sew up the exterior seams first, followed by sewing the lining separately and trying to attach it inside the pouch, was not ideal. When I noticed how hard it would be to sew the pouch lining in after the tabletweaving was complete, I sewed the top of the lining to the pouch, intending to finish the other interior seams once the tabletweaving is complete. This meant that the area around the top seam got very busy, and realistically the best way to finish the tabletweaving ends was in simple fringed tassels. Luckily simple fringed tassels are a very period way to finish tabletweaving.

What I *should* have done instead is sewn the lining right face to right face to the embroidery, and inverted, so that when I was closing the seams with the tabletweaving I would also be finishing the pouch. By the time I realized that this would have led to superior finishing and assembly, however, I had already woven shut the bottom and one side seam, and unpicking those would have damaged the embroidery.

### 3 Conclusion

In conclusion, making this pouch was an exercise in unexpected frustrations; the embroidery was soothing if very time consuming, but the assembly of the pouch was unexpectedly challenging, especially in the upper corners were figuring out the correct order in which to sew the seams and still hide loose ends was the most tricky. Still, I now have a heraldic pouch with squirrels and acorns and books, oh my!

### References

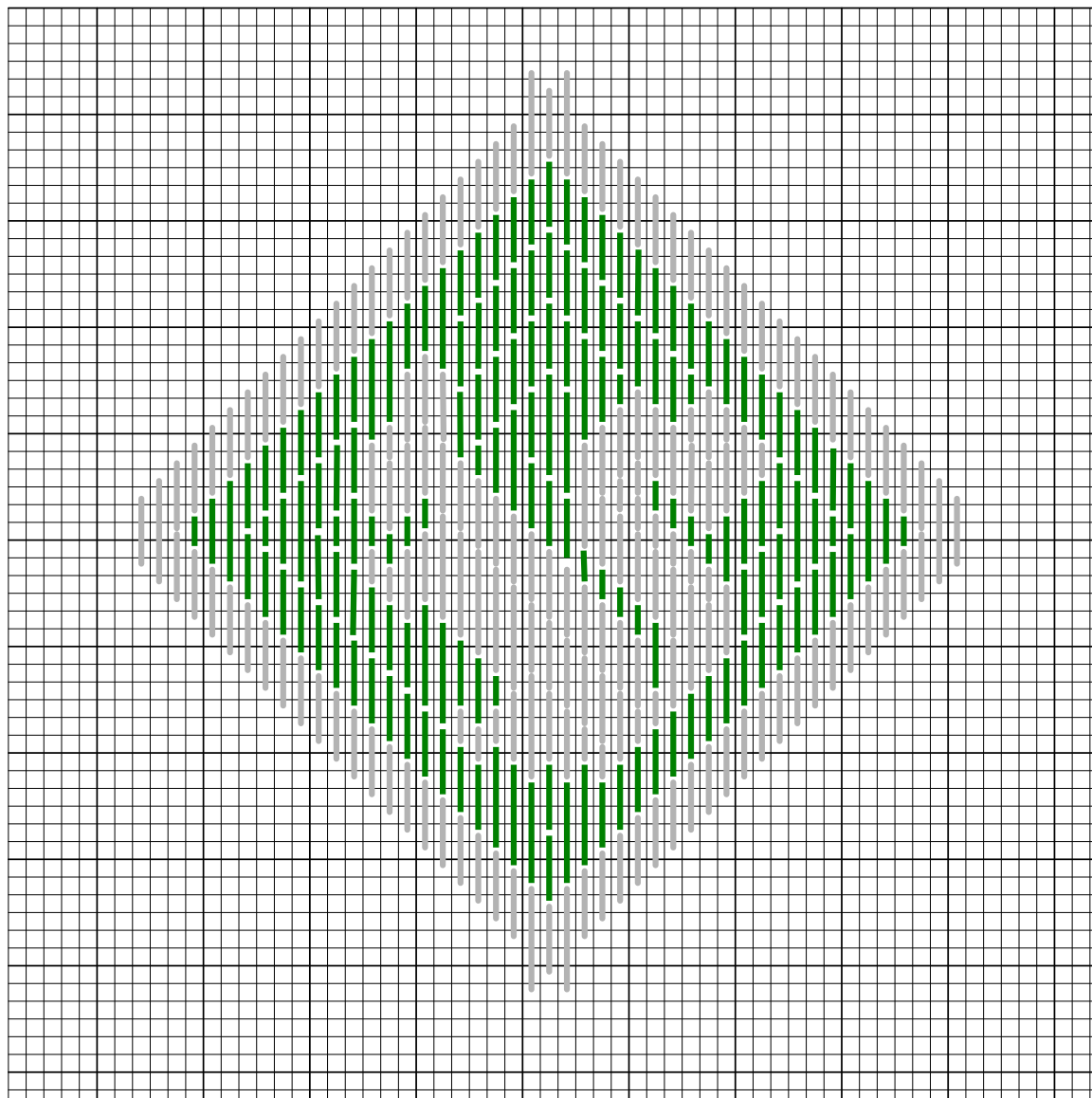
- [BB06] Elizabeth Benns and Gina Barrett. *Tak V Bowes Departed; A 15th Century Braiding Manual Examined*. Soper Lane, 2006.
- [CPS01] Elisabeth Crowfoot, Frances Pritchard, and Kay Staniland. *Textiles and Clothing 1150-1450*. Boydell Press, 2001.
- [FL88] M. Flury-Lemberg. *Textile Conservation and Research*. Bern, 1988.
- [McG] Tasha Kelly McGann. <http://www.cottesimple.com/>. Visited 9/15/2015.
- [Wym] Master Richard Wymarc. <http://www.wymarc.com/asoot/asoot.php?show=germanPatterns>. Visited 9/12/2011.

# Appendices

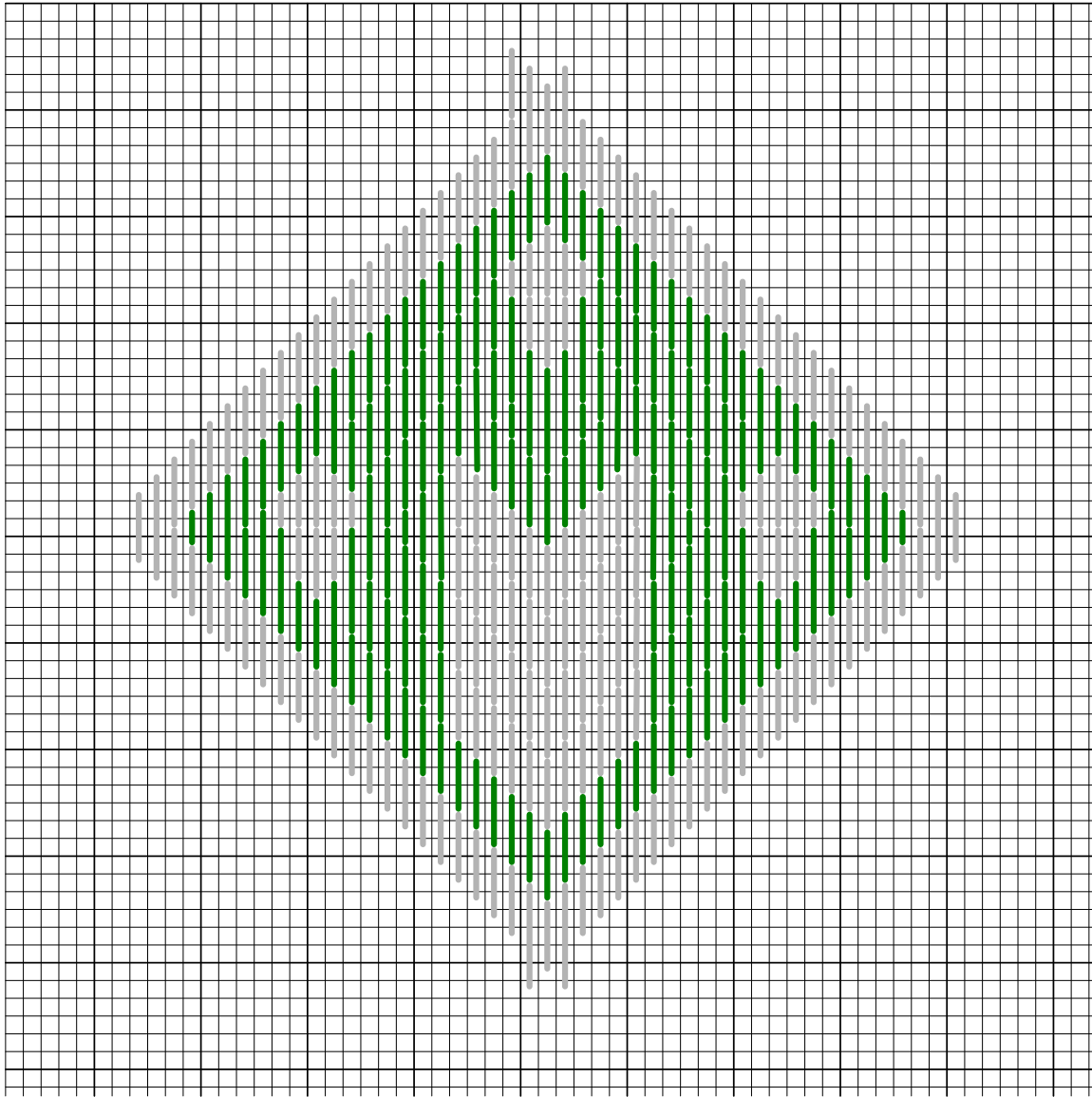
## A BrickStitch

These patterns are based on my heraldic device; a silver squirrel maintaining a book under three silver squirrels, on a green field. The width of separating diagonals is 4 threads, and the pattern diamonds are 21 stitches to the side.

### A.1 Patterns



*Figure 6: The pattern for the diamonds containing the silver squirrel on a green background.*



*Figure 7: The pattern for the open book below three acorns.*

## B Fingerloop Braiding

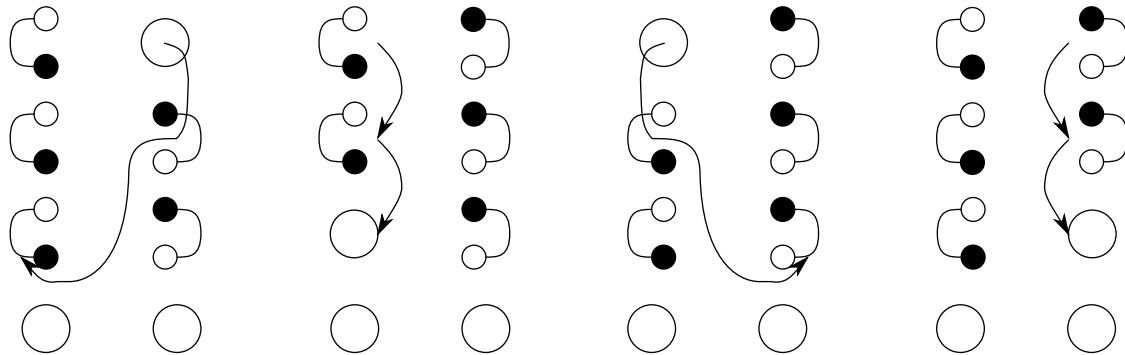


Figure 8: The four steps of braiding a 5-loop half-round braid. Round circles indicate fingers which are currently not holding a loop (and the pinkies are not used here).

Fingerloop braiding is a method of making trim or braids that uses loops of thread held around the fingers of both hands. The fingers are read from high to low with the top finger being the forefinger and the lowest finger being the pinkie. In the diagram, as a first step the left hand has loops on all three fingers, each with the white on top, while the right hand has loops only on the middle and ring finger. The active finger will pick up a loop from one of the other fingers, after going through one or more loops, and in the first step the right forefinger will pick up a loop from the left ring finger.

If we label the hands as L(ef) and R(ight) and the fingers from A (forefinger) to D (pinkie), the pattern becomes can be described as the following four steps, which are repeated until the braid is as long as desired, at which point the strings are knotted to end the braid.

1. RA goes through RB and picks up LC reversed.
2. Lower the loops on left hand: LB goes to LC, LA goes to LB.
3. LA goes through LB and picks up RC reversed.
4. Lower the loops on right hand: RB goes to RC, RA goes to RB.

## C Inspirations

When I was researching and planning this project, I spent a lot of time online, looking at examples of German brickstitch. These are some of those websites, all visited in Sept 2015.

- <http://wymarc.com/asoot/asoot.php?show=germanPatterns> - A collection of German brickstitch patterns by Master Richard Wymarc.
- <http://www.doctorbeer.com/joyce/emb/embroid.htm> - Charted examples by Joyce Miller, including pictures of the original artefacts.

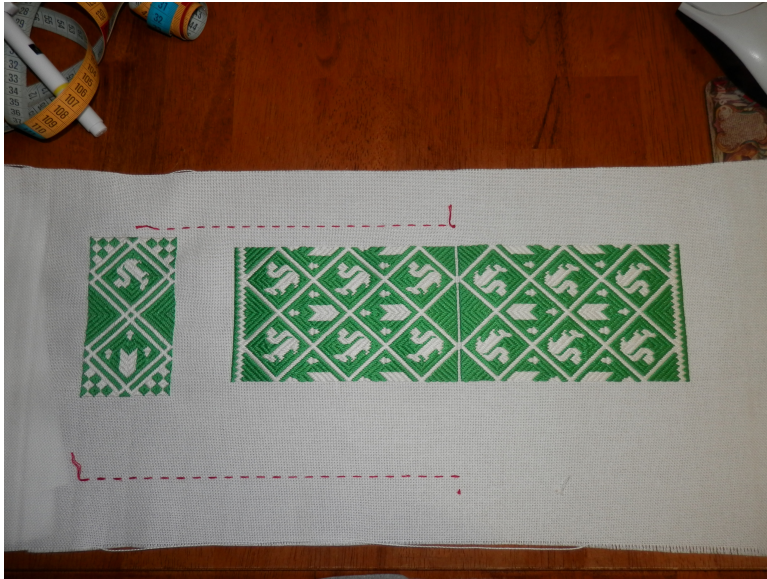


- <http://medievalpurses.blogspot.com/> - a journal documenting Tristan Z.'s obsession with purses and pouches from the European Middle Ages. Currently pretty dormant<sup>5</sup>, but much interesting work in the archives.
- [http://www.cottesimple.com/alms\\_purse/alms\\_purse\\_history.html](http://www.cottesimple.com/alms_purse/alms_purse_history.html) - A history of alms pouches, including lots of pictures.
- <http://m-silkwork.blogspot.com/> - Medieval Silkwork; a journal about medieval embroidery.

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<sup>5</sup>One entry in 2011

## D The Project in Pictures



The finished embroidery



Beginning the tabletwoven seam on the bottom, with warp going in both directions



Sewing up the side, and closing the seam.





Two sides finished; notice both decks of cards.



Hiding the end of the braided loop in the seam.



Turned around the corner and now weaving along the top of the pouch. At this point the lining is attached to the pouch at the top edge, but no other seams have been sewn in the pouch. Hence the extraneous cloth which later had to be trimmed down.