

This Anglo-Saxon technique is surprisingly easy to learn and can be developed in numerous ways

by Jan Messent

PHOTOS BY IAN COLE

Bayeux Stitch – Ancient and Modern

Bayeux stitch, which takes its name from the famous tapestry on which it is used, is an Anglo-Saxon variation of an ancient technique known as laidwork. In this stitch, originally for reasons of economy, threads are laid across the surface of the fabric and then held down with

another laid thread and a couching stitch, leaving a minimum of threads on the reverse side.

This technique is surprisingly easy to learn and, once the basic method has been mastered, lends itself to a huge variety of developments with which Anglo-Saxon

This stitched piece was worked as an experiment in shading, using only fine crewel wools in the traditional technique, including outlines (also see page 16).



embroiderers, all women at that time, would not have been familiar.

The original materials, linen and wool, were all hand-made and dyed with plant dyes. Nowadays we have a far greater range of fabrics and threads at our disposal and so experiments with the technique can produce exciting and unusual results. In learning how to develop a technique, first identify its components and then decide how they can be changed.

On the Bayeux Tapestry, only one colour was used for the three elements: the threads laid on the surface, the second set of threads laid at intervals across them, and the tiny couching stitch used to hold the two layers together.

Not only can we use a different colour for each part but we can also use different thread thicknesses, fibres, random-dyed and metal threads. We can also work in different directions and on a huge variety of fabrics not known to the Anglo-Saxons.

Using a frame

The use of a frame is essential when working Bayeux stitch developments because the laid threads require an even tension over larger-than-usual areas. Any kind of frame will do as long as the fabric stays drum-tight throughout. If it slackens, tighten it.

Background fabrics

Because of the way the stitch is made, coarse fabrics create problems where the needle may emerge through the same hole as it went down, and vice versa. So choose medium-weight fabrics that are fairly closely woven rather than open-weave ones. Calico is ideal, as are other cottons, linen, silk and some synthetic fibres.

To give the background extra body, I recommend an under-layer of fine cotton-calico which is framed-up with the top layer and treated as one piece. This makes it easier to place the stitches very close together, to hide the beginnings and ends of the threads, and for finishing-off the ends of a stitch.

Threads

Originally, the same kind of thread was used for each part of the stitch and for the

outlining. However, the laid threads on the bottom layer will cover the shape more efficiently and quickly when they are thicker than the couching thread and holding stitch.

All the threads must at some stage be pulled through the fabric, even the couched threads that are laid on the top, so smooth threads are best. The thickness of the top laid thread will produce different results, as it will either mask the colour of the lower laid thread or allow it to show through. Generally speaking, I use doubled or thick threads for the bottom layer and finer ones on top.

The colour and type of fibre being used, whether it is shiny or matt, plain or variegated, whether it reflects the light well or absorbs it, all affect the look of the finished piece. Light reflection is important as the stitch has a strong directional element and the colour of the threads changes according to the direction of the light on it. Be aware of this and use it to advantage.

Make use of wools, linens, cottons (stranded and single), synthetics, silks, and any combination of these. Matt and shiny threads are equally useful, as are random-dyed (variegated) threads and metallic threads, in skeins or on reels, whether for hand or machine embroidery. Remember that different threads can be mixed together in the needle.

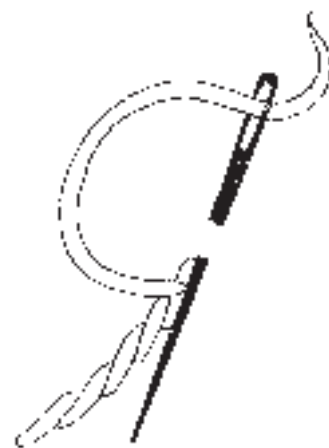
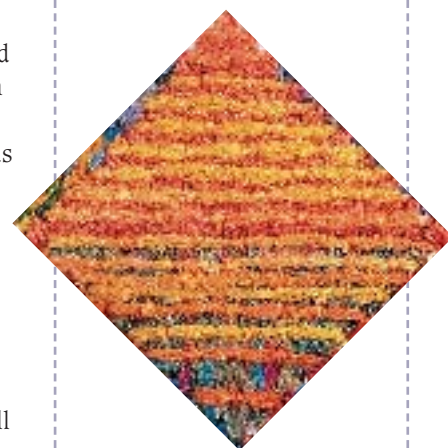
Ultimately, the thickness and type of thread will depend upon the scale of the work: fine threads for small-scale pieces, coarser threads (and fabric) for large-scale pieces. Experiment to see what works best.

Needles

Use whatever size crewel needle is appropriate for the thread; keep a range of sizes handy for different thicknesses and purposes.

The outline

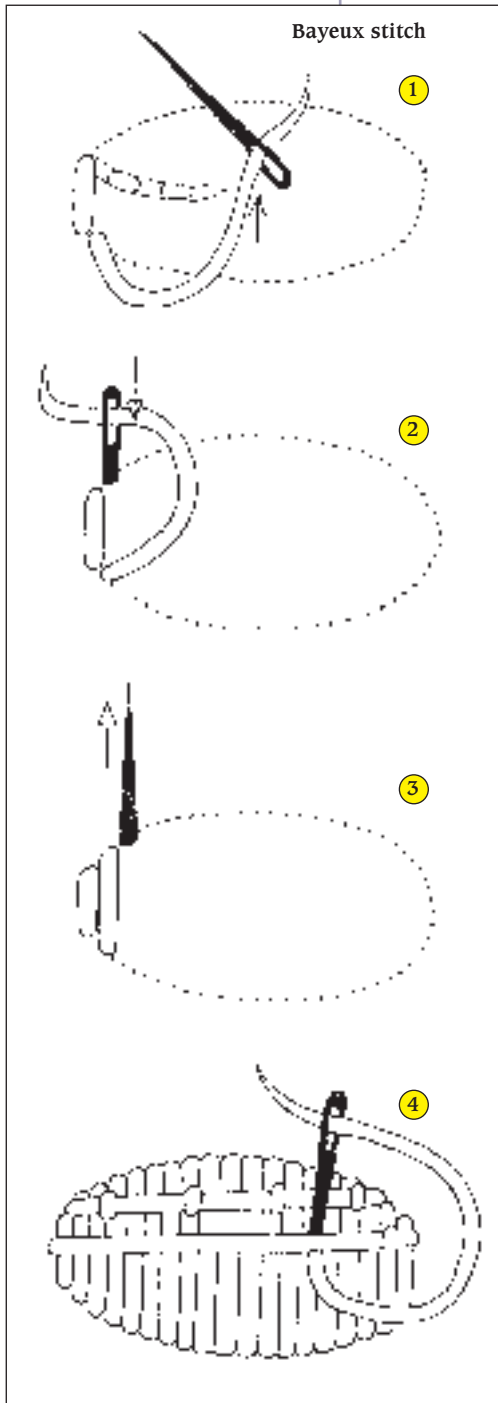
Traditionally, each shape was outlined with a variation of stem stitch called 'outline stitch'. The outline can be worked either before or after the filling, though traditionally the outlines were always made first. Today, either stem or outline stitch may be used, or even no outline at all.



Outline stitch

Outline stitch is made in the same way as stem stitch except that here the thread is held to the left instead of to the right, creating a twist to the stitch in the opposite direction. The point of the needle comes out at the head of the previous stitch, not at an angle to it.

Bayeux stitch



Bayeux stitch

To begin, work a few running stitches towards the point where the first stitch will start (these stitches will be covered by the laid threads).

- 1 Bring the needle up from the reverse side to the surface and take the thread across to the other side of the shape, as shown. This makes the first stitch, which should lie firmly – without looking pulled – upon the fabric. Now bring the needle up again as close as possible to the place where it went down, not across the back of the fabric.
- 2 Insert the needle at the other side of the shape, keeping the stitches so close that no fabric shows between them.
- 3 Bring the needle up again close to where it went down, ready to make the next stitch.
- 4 When the shape is covered, bring the needle up at the side of the shape ready to lay threads across in the opposite direction to the

stitches, and at intervals, as shown. Each top laid thread is now couched (i.e. held down) by tiny stab stitches in which the needle enters and emerges at the same place. Couch each thread down as soon as it is laid, returning to the same side of the shape each time, ready to begin the next line. Continue in this way until the whole shape is couched down with cross-wise threads.



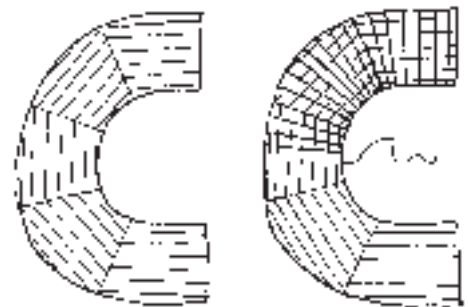
- 5 To finish off a thread, run the needle between the two layers of fabric, either onto a part of the design that has not yet been filled or beneath a filled part. Bring the thread up and snip the end off close to the surface, being careful not to snip any surrounding stitches. Press the cut end with a finger to make it disappear through to the back. A backstitch on the reverse side will also help to secure it.

Note: leave enough room at the sides for the top threads to tighten up as the stab stitches are worked, otherwise the shape may become distorted.



Direction

As long as the bottom threads are close and parallel to each other, they can be laid in any direction. The top laid threads should be evenly spaced at right-angles to these, and the couching stitches arranged equally apart. The top laid threads generally dictate the direction unless the top thread is very fine or the bottom layer is striped. Experiment.



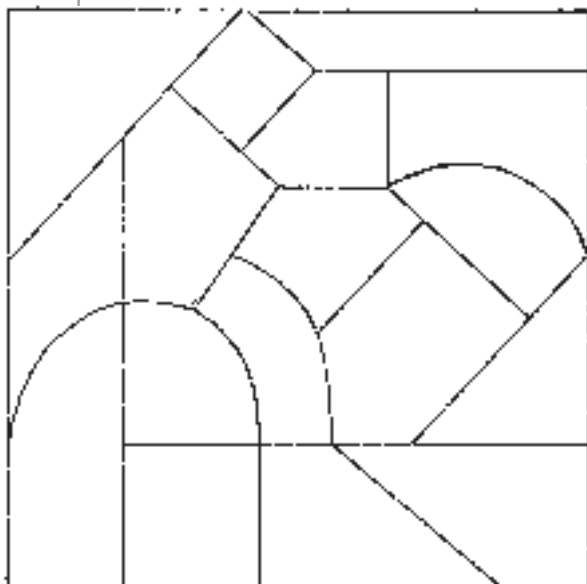
Curves

One way to deal with curves is to work the laid stitches in sections, as shown. The top laid thread and couching stitch should be placed in slightly radiating lines so that the joins between the sections are covered.

Variations on Bayeux stitch

Once you have learned the basic stitch, you will want to develop it. Try some of these ideas on your sample.

- Leave some of the shapes void.
- Use a painted/patterned background fabric and allow parts of this to show in the voided areas.
- Spread out the lower laid threads to allow the background to show.
- Vary the spacing of the small couching stitches. Work them in pairs or in groups of three.
- Vary the thickness of the threads, using both matt and shiny ones together.
- Try out different tones of colour on the same shape, laying dark on light and vice versa. As with paint, pale blue on pale green will produce turquoise: try out other mixtures. Even the stab stitch will create another colour, as will metallic threads.
- Use tiny beads with the stab stitch.
- Outlining is your own choice. Use it for extra sharpness (as seen on the deer designs).



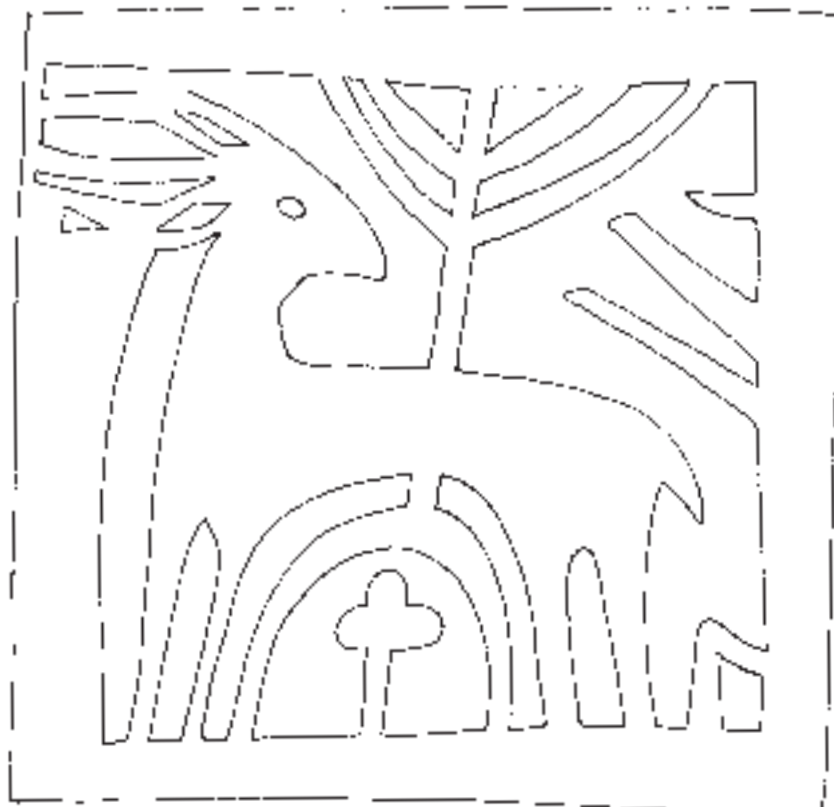
This grid can be used as the basis for a small Bayeux stitch sample similar to the multicoloured sample. You may prefer to work to a limited palette of colours or use any leftover threads in a rainbow version. Copy the design onto your fabric (see *Back to Basics*, page 48), then fix it to your frame with calico behind it (see *'Background fabrics'*, page 13). Begin embroidering in the centre, as then your choices of what to do next will be greater than if you begin in a corner.



Multicoloured sample

This small sample is worked on calico with stranded cottons, silks and metal threads. Beginning in the centre, each block of laid threads (i.e. the first layer) travels in a different direction from its neighbour, with the top (couching)

thread adding another direction, sometimes in the same colour, sometimes in a different one. Note how the random-dyed yarns in the laid threads create a striped effect, which is difficult to mask.



This deer design is taken from a floor tile in the medieval ruin of St Mary's Abbey in Winchester, a nunnery built on the site of the Anglo-Saxon Nunnaminster which may have been

one of the Wessex nunneries where the Bayeux tapestry was made. Reduce or enlarge the design and transfer it to your fabric (see *Back to Basics*, page 48).

Canvaswork sample

Worked on coarse 10 holes to the inch single canvas, this sample combines tent stitch with Bayeux stitch using wools, perle cottons and thick metal threads. This coarse canvas made it possible to use slubbed wool to give an interesting texture, but the uncompromising grid of the canvas was no help with the placing of stitches. However, the random placing of the couching stitches and the irregular spacing of the top threads created some very attractive areas.



St Mary's Tile 1 (see page 12)

Size: 17 cm square

To achieve the shaded effect shown:

- 1 Begin stitching with one shade (a) in the needle.
- 2 Next, mix shades (a) and (b) together in the needle.
- 3 Change to shade (b).

On fabric as coarse as this, a finer-weave backing fabric holds the thread if the needle has to come back up through the same hole as it went down.

St Mary's Tile 2

Size: 25 cm square

A larger version of the deer was worked in wools, stranded cottons, slub cottons and random-dyed threads. The background is worked using the same multi-directional method shown on the small sample, and the shading is achieved by changing the tone of the laid threads and the couching threads very gradually in certain areas. Often, both tones were used in the needle at the same time (see St Mary's Tile 1). Shading can also be achieved by closing up the position of the tiny couching stitches, or opening them out. On the central tree, the top laid stitches and couching stitches were not worked. The background fabric is linen backed with unbleached calico.

