

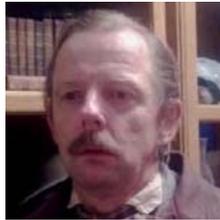
# Feature



## Recreating a Regency Boot: From Concept to Production

**Abel Land and Robert Land**

*A father and son team who make historical shoes for re-enactors show how a new design for a Regency woman's boot is born.*



When you read about the clothing in a Jane Austen or Georgette Hayer novel, and fantasize about being a part of a Regency world, you many only think about the woman's dress, or the man's tail coat, vest, and breeches. Whether you wear a pre-made costume to your next Regency event or create your own, if you stop with just the basics, you will still see a modern person looking back at you in the mirror instead of Elizabeth Bennet or Fitzwilliam Darcy.

At that point you go back and examine portraits and illustrations of the time, and realize that things like the right hair style, an elegant hat, or an impeccable neck cloth are also important. Even then, the perfect Elizabeth or Darcy still eludes you.

Finally it hits you: it's your feet! A finished look for any historic period costume requires the proper footwear to complete your ensemble.

When it comes to shoes, most people know their shoe size and what looks good on them, but not too much more. Even the most skilled costumers who can recreate period costumes in every detail know little about what goes into making period shoes, or have the necessary skills to make them. Those skills are as rare today as they were in the Regency period, over 200 years ago.

That's why historical costumers rely on companies like Robert Land Historic Footwear. Our family business started out in 1992. It has grown from one man, one sewing machine, one style, and two colours (black or brown), to a two man operation



Women's half-boots, 1820. Photo: Manchester Art Gallery.

that manufactures shoes and boots from the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century for living historians, re-enactors, historic sites, and the film industry. We have purposely remained small.

When we are looking for new and interesting designs of historical shoes, we visit archives, look at fashion plates, and examine original shoes that are available. When we see a style of shoe that appeals to us and that we think meets the needs of our customers, then it come down to mentally taking apart the shoes, and seeing how they were constructed and what they were made out of.

We will illustrate the process using one of the two new styles that we are currently working on. While looking through photos of original shoes we came across a pair of English woman's half-boots from 1820 that are in the [Manchester Art Gallery](#). (left) The boots are green twilled worsted, edged with darker green bindings, and have leather soles with slightly built-up heels. Blunt toes were worn after 1817 and predominantly after 1825. The boots were influenced by the 'Grecian Sandals' style as seen by the cross-lacing across the open instep.

Looking at the cut of the boots we were able to see what patterns we already had that matched them. The *vamps* of the boot, (the toe area) match some of our other cutting

patterns, and we were set to make the alterations to a new set to match the cuts on the front of the boots. The *quarters* of the boots, (the back part of the uppers) matched the pattern from our other Regency boot, minus the cut outs.

Now that we have a pattern that works and have tested it on a *last*, (the mold that the shoe is made on), we are set to *grade* the pattern to all sizes. This is done first by first doing a pencil drawing of the cutting patterns and then making a master of it out of masonite board. This master is then put into a large *grading machine* (below) that cuts the sizes from the master. This creates a full set of patterns for sizes 4 to 11. With these we can now cut any shoe we want.

To make the boots, the first thing is to pick the colour. If you think about how you pick a shoe colour today, you'd normally



Grading machine cuts patterns from masonite master.

match all your accessories on a common theme and colour palette. It was the same in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it was also taken to an extreme in many cases. (right)

Now that we have the basic pattern and have chosen a colour, the time has come to fit these to the lasts. In shoemaking the last comes first! Lasts are the basis of a shoe. Without these to use as the mold, a shoe cannot be made. (below) One for each foot is required for every size and every width. Early 19th century lasts differ greatly from today's production lasts used in factories. At that time they were hand carved, one at a time, normally with no left or right differentiation. But there's always an exception to every rule.

A good bespoke pair of shoes always had a left and a right last, so you will see some Regency period shoes with the left right configuration. The original shoes from the Manchester Art Gallery appears to have this slight left-right configuration from the photo. The reproductions also come in a slight left-right, but from the top you can't tell until the shoe has been worn for weeks.



Original wooden shoe last from the 1840s in the authors' collection.



Color-coordinated ensembles of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The machinery (three dimensional lathes) to produce shoe lasts for the masses in left and right were not around until the 1840's. Finding a last today to reproduce these early shoes on is quite a feat. All the

lasts we use in the shop have been remodeled from modern production lasts by adding fittings, along with removing material to give an early 19th-century look, to make the comfort we expect today. We have over 1000 pairs put away for use.



Sewing machines in the workshop.

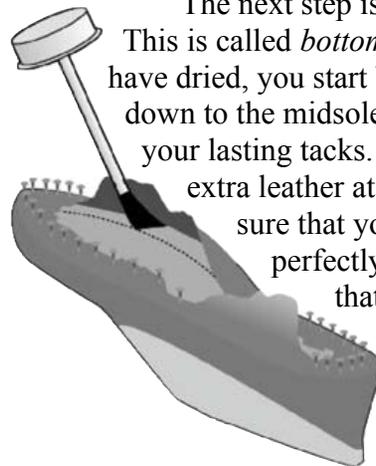
Once we have the lasts set, we need to *close the uppers*, (sew them together). All early 19th century shoes were hand sewn, since the sewing machine did not come into use until the late 1850's. We cannot close all our shoes by hand; some styles require as many as 48 stitched eyelets, which would take up to 10 hours. Labour then was much cheaper than the materials used in shoes. Today, both are now quite expensive.

Most ladies had the needlework skills required to cut and sew their own uppers. The shoemaker may have only provided the patterns. This could account for the great variety of surviving examples of shoes. All they needed the shoemaker for was to last and bottom their shoes for them. This could have been worked out in trade so to allow him to have some pre-made shoes in stock for the people who could not wait for a

bespoke pair of shoes. Our shop has nine sewing machines, one for every job. (left)

Lasting is still done by hand with the same tools that have been used for hundreds of years: lasting pliers hammer and nails. One of my favorite tools is called a *crab*: a clamp that looks like a crab's claw that grabs the leather in the shank area of the shoes and draws it in. This tool was made 150 years ago and is still in use today.

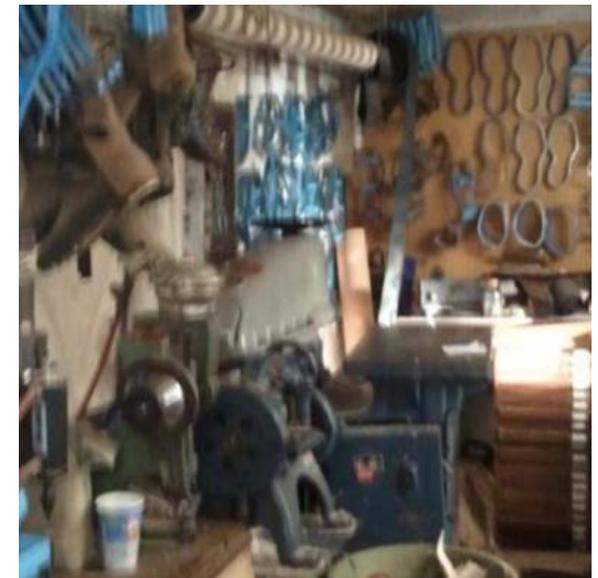
Lasting shoes is a skilled trade. Knowing just how much to pull without tearing or over-stretching the leather or fabric takes a long time to master. You first tack the heel to the last, and then pull the leather at the toe with your lasting pliers; this takes out all the front-back stretch. Then you work your way around the shoe pulling each side and nailing it in place. Normally 14 pulls are done to last a shoe. You now put it back on the rack or hang it up to dry for a few days. Lasting is almost always done when the shoes are wet.



The next step is attaching the soles. This is called *bottoming*. Once the shoes have dried, you start by gluing the uppers down to the midsoles, and removing your lasting tacks. You then remove the extra leather at the toes and make sure that your shoe has a perfectly level foot bed, so that there are no ridges, bumps or lumps. You may now attach your soles.

Every sole is cut by a large hydraulic *clicker* or press (below) that pushes heavy steel dies through the leather. Think of these as cookie cutters on steroids. Ours is a 1960's vintage swing arm hydraulic model. Push the button and the piece is cut. There is one die for each piece of a shoe. To cut left right items, the dies are sharp on both sides, you just turn the die over to get the other foot. A set of dies for a full run of sizes for a simple shoe is 24 to 36 pieces.

Once the leather is pulled over and secured you have a couple options how to "bottom" your shoes. The most common method in use today is what's called cement soles. This has soles attached by nothing but adhesives. This was not an option 200 years ago. Adhesives of that time were only good enough to hold the shoe together until you stitched everything into place.



Hydraulic clicker for cutting soles with dies on wall..

The traditional method is inseaming a *welt* around the upper, then sewing this welt to the sole. (below, left) Robert likes nothing more than to hand inseam a pair of shoes; it's a true labour of love. Unfortunately few know how much love has gone into such a pair of shoes. The inseaming stitch is completely unseen from the outside of the shoe. He can normally inseam a pair of shoes in 2 hours of hard nasty sewing.

The style of soles we use on our reproductions is a cement sole that is *McKay stitched* in place. (below, right) McKay stitching goes through the sole, through the upper and midsole, securing everything into place. This type of sewing was not used until the invention of the sewing machine in the 1850s. It is near impossible to do this stitch by hand. We have found this to be the most time efficient and durable method of securing the soles to our shoes.



Stamps hide holes where soles were nailed to the lasts.

The method for attaching the soles on almost all period ladies shoes was in the form of a *turnshoe*. The upper is pulled over the last inside out, with the sole nailed to the last. Then the upper is sewn to the sole through the sole's edge. The shoe is removed from the last, turned right side out, and then re-lasted, to give it its shape. This is most common on women's and light weight men's shoes.

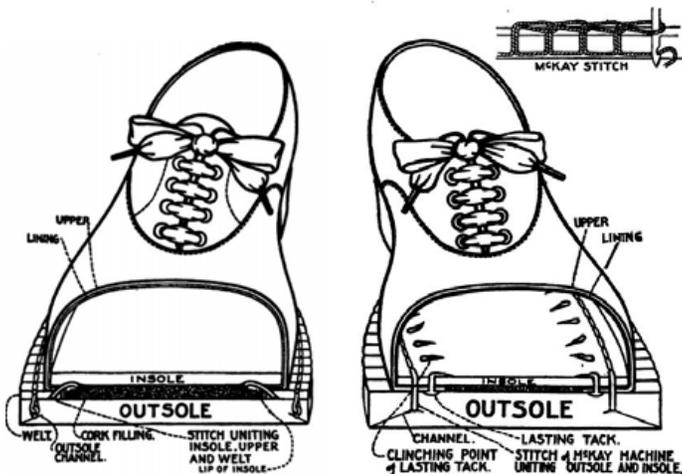
When you examine a pair of original shoes, look at the soles. Many will have a little decorative stamp in the middle and sometimes one just in front of the heel. These stamps are hiding the nail holes where the shoes were nailed to the lasts during the bottoming operation. (above) Now you know why those marks are there.

Another method that came into very common use on inexpensive men's shoes and boots were the use of rows of wooden pegs driven into the soles to secure the soles to the uppers. This was most common from the 1840's onward. Machinery being developed by the 1850's to do this job for you. Pegging soles on military boots and heavy work boots was still used in the 1960's.

The Manchester half-boot described in the article is made by us as a cemented sole, with a McKay stitched shoe. The original shoe was without a doubt a turnshoe. These shoes have a low 1/4" high heel. They are done with a wedge of leather placed under the sole at the heel. This just gives ladies that little bit of a lift that we find they desire. A lot of ladies tell us that they cannot wear flat shoes.

The Manchester boot has now had all the bugs worked out. We had a lot of work

to do dealing with the binding. (left) We use a grosgrain ribbon that is stitched around the edge of the upper. Getting it secure in all the angles was a devil of a job. We actually had to completely rebuild the binding attachment on the sewing machine we use for this job to allow it to follow the tight curves. Also just finding



Goodyear welt soles (left) and McKay stitching (right), Illustrations c. 1916. Source: [Wikimedia](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shoemaking_1916.jpg).



Matching grosgrain ribbon bindings.

the right spot to end the binding was tricky, leaving it out in the open made it look unfinished, but where could we hide it? It is now hidden under the ribbon used to cover the side seam. There is no visible end, and the shoe looks finished.

We even went so far as to bind the eyelets with thread, as were the originals. Metal eyelets would have looked horrible and totally destroyed the historic look of the shoe; they were not used on shoes at that time. Many people wouldn't worry about this, but on a shoe that is of this value, everything has to look and feel right.



Photo of reproduction Manchester boots for the catalogue.

We have come up with our new design, made our patterns, adjusted our lasts, and tweaked and fiddled with every detail. Will it sell? The first pair is always finished in a size 6, Robert's wife's size. She gets the first pair to show off and wear around. Then it is back to the shop, as there are always little things that still have to be fixed up here and there. This is all long before the shoes make

it into our catalogue or onto the website, hopefully in mid-September 2013.

It has been a long journey, but a rewarding one, especially when you hear a young lady at a re-enactment yell with joy when she finds the one and only pair of your newest shoes in your newest colour are in her size. Then you know you have a winner.

I hope this give you some insight into the amount of research, blood, sweat, tears, and time that goes into the art and mystery of today's *cordwainer*. There are probably no more than 100 people today in North America who can call themselves a

*cordonnier*, or a true shoe maker. This is a skill that, unless brought back into today's trades, is going to be gone, just like the histories of the men and women who wore their products and are not mentioned in our modern history books.

*Abel Land is a member of the 41st MLHG and attends as many Reenactments as possible. He has been involved with his father's business for as long as he can remember. In the last year he has been part of the TV show called "Copper" set in downtown New York in 1865, and the documentary "A Desert Between Us and Them" on the war of 1812. He plans on having a long life in the hobby.*

## Shoecabulary

**Bespoke** – custom, made to order

**Bottoming** – process of attaching the sole to the uppers

**Clicker** – hydraulic machine that uses dies to punch soles out of leather

**Close the upper** – sew together the pieces of the uppers

**Grading machine** – machine that cuts all required pattern sizes from a master

**Last** – the mold that a shoe is made on

**Quarter** – the back part of the uppers

**Sole** – the bottom of a shoe

**Turnshoe** – a shoe constructed inside-out, then turned right-side out to finish

**Upper** – the top part of a shoe

**Vamp** – the toe area of a shoe.

**Welt** – piece of leather sewn to upper, used to attach the upper to the sole

*Robert Land has been making historic shoes for 20 years. After losing his job in shoe repair, he decided that there was a market for historical shoes, and that it was time to exploit it. His love of history came from previously owning a coin and military antiques business. This is where he became interested in reenacting, starting with the Revolutionary and U.S. Civil War. Not until later did he become involved with the War of 1812. Both his wife and son are involved with [Robert Land Historic Footwear](#).*