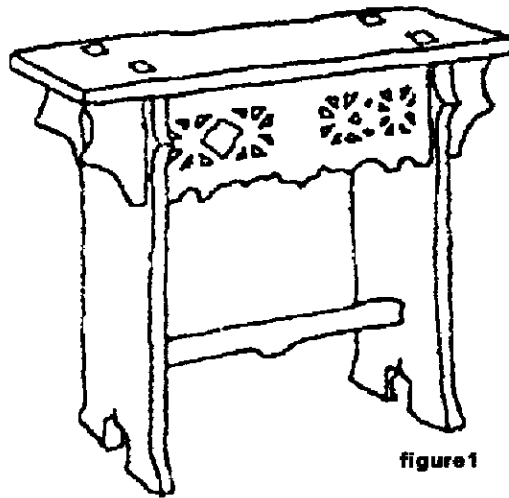


A Simple Gothic Bench

by Master Dafydd ap Gwystl



IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS, splendid medieval pavilions have taken over from blue plastic tarps at tournaments and camping events. The use of medieval furniture, however, has lagged somewhat behind this trend. Although a few craftsmen are making fine medieval and renaissance furniture, most of us still sit on directors' chairs at events. This article is aimed at making some medieval seating more accessible.

This article describes how to build a simple gothic bench. The materials are very inexpensive—about \$10 or so. The skills needed to make this bench are not very demanding, as the design is quite simple and doesn't require complex tools or woodworking experience. The bench that results can be taken down into a relatively flat set of boards for packing. Best of all, the result is both attractive and medieval.

A BRIEF HISTORY

THE BENCH DESCRIBED here is a simple slab-ended stool with a decorative underframe. Both vertical and angled supports (legs) existed in period, although vertical supports seems to be more common. Examples of this design of backless stool appear throughout the 15th and 16th century in paintings and manuscript illustrations. Finding an approximate

starting date for this type of stool has proved difficult. Manuscript illustrations are generally of little use before the rise of realistic portrayals of mundane objects in the 15th century, and surviving examples of furniture made before 1400 are rare.

Penelope Eames mentions slab-ended stools depicted in the Bayeaux tapestry, but furniture there is shown full-front and stylized, so her interpretation is uncertain.

The design is very simple, and closely related to that of the slab-ended or six-board chest. Slab-ended chests were common throughout the middle ages, with surviving examples from the 10th century to the 17th century. Note that slab-ended chests would also serve as seating, suggesting the existence of slab-ended benches from the 10th century forward.

Project Overview

Methods of Fastening

IN THE DIRECTIONS THAT FOLLOW, I leave it up to you whether to use screws or wooden dowels to fasten the bench seat to the rails. Screws would not have been used in period, but they are fast and effective fasteners.

If you do decide to use screws, 2-in. drywall screws work well on pine. Be sure to countersink the screws, and also be sure to predrill pilot holes for them, or the wood will split. After you place the screws, plug the countersunk holes with a slice of wood dowel and sand flush with the seat.

If you are using dowels, 1/4-in. hardwood dowels are best, in 2-in. lengths. Glue the hole carefully before inserting the dowel. As dowels are less sturdy than screws, you may want to use more than two to fasten each rail to the bottom of the bench seat. Leave a little of the dowel standing up out of the hole so that you can cut it off at the seat level and sand it flush.

It's important to note that these stools may have been built differently in period. In many examples, the top part of the leg pieces extends in two tenons that pierce the bench seat (as seen in figures 1, 2, 3 and 4) in two through-mortises. This design is more stable than pegging or screwing, but the mortise-and-tenon joints require more tools and skill. I have avoided this technique, to make the bench suitable for novice woodworkers.

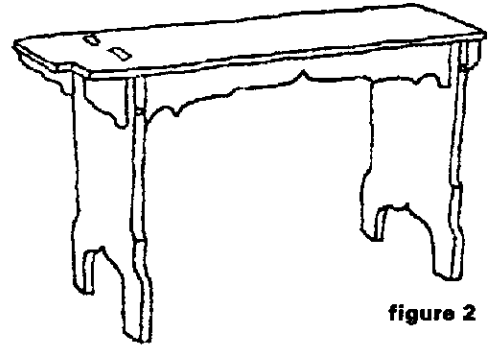


figure 2



figure 3

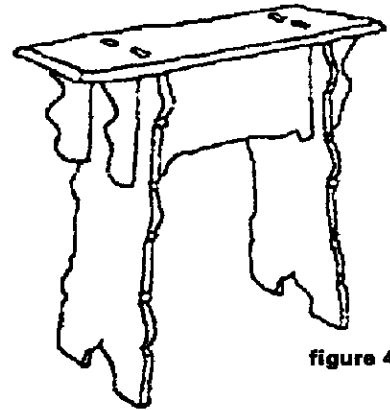


figure 4

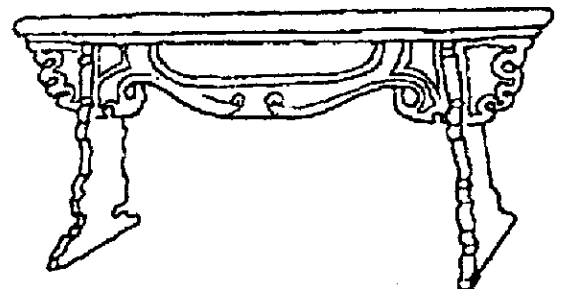


figure 5

Materials

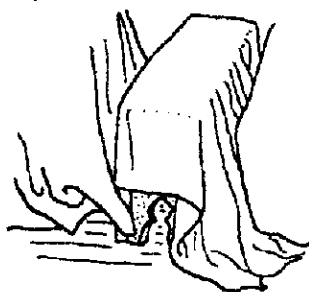
6 ft. @ 1x12

6 ft. @ 1x4

1/4-in. diameter dowels or 2-in. drywall screws
wood glue

THE BENCHES I HAVE MADE using the pattern that follows have been made of pine, which is very inexpensive. The two boards needed for one bench cost

figure 6



me only \$10. In poplar, the materials might cost \$20; oak, maple or nicer hardwoods would cost more (red oak runs about \$60 at my source). In harder woods, the work will take slightly longer.

Any of the common woods for furniture would have been used for these benches. Oak was favored wood for furniture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Poplar and Pine also saw common use, but almost any hardwood would be a possibility. Elm, Walnut and Cypress are among examples seen in period chests and chairs.

Tools Needed

Drill and drill bits

Scroll saw (or jig saw and crosscut saw)

Sandpaper or files

3/4-in. wood chisel and mallet

Screwdriver and countersink bit if screws are used.

THE TOOLS ABOVE ARE MINIMAL. You can make the whole bench without any power tools—a scroll saw for the decoration, a cross-cut saw, a hand-drill and a chisel. With a bandsaw and planer, it took me about two hours to finish a single bench. Doing the decorative cuts by hand and using a hand planer will take longer, but one bench should still be a half-day project.



figure 7

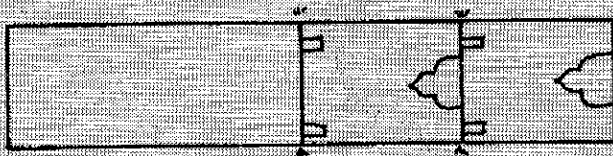
Decoration

A LITTLE DECORATIVE SCROLLWORK will make the difference between a crude-looking bench and one that is really attractive. Sources show a variety

Step-by-Step

Construction

1. Cut the 6-ft. board of 1x12 lumber into three pieces: one 36 in. long (for the seat) and two 16 in. long (for the legs). Use the diagram below to assist you.



2. Cut the 6-ft. board of 1x4 lumber into two pieces, both 35 in. long. These will form the rails (see illustration below (overhead view of flat board).



3. Pencil the decorative scrollwork patterns onto the rails and legs. Also, pencil the locking slots onto the top of the leg pieces and the bottom of the rails as shown. These slots must be exactly 3/4 in. thick, the thickness of your boards. On the legs, the locking slots are exactly 2 in. deep; on the rails they are 1 1/2 in. deep. The decorative scrollwork dimensions are not crucial. Be creative. Thin pieces will be fragile, however, so try to leave as much thickness on the rails near the locking slots as possible.

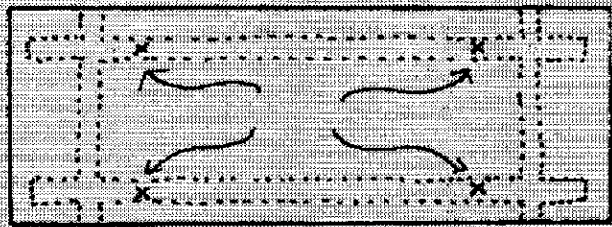
4. Using a jig saw or scroll saw, cut along the marked lines to create the decorative patterns and slotted areas.

5. Use a 3/4-in. chisel to remove the waste from the locking slots.

6. Check the locking slots for fit. File until they fit closely. They should not need to be forced, nor should they fit too loosely (the bench will wobble).

7. Place the seat on a flat surface upside down. Put the rails and legs together and place the assembly on the bench, so you have the whole bench together upside down. Carefully center the assembly on the bottom of the bench seat, then mark along the rails with a pencil, creating a line between the legs of the bench.

8. Take the legs and rails off the seat. Drill four holes through the seat, centered on the rails (as shown in sketch), about 2 inches from where the rails attach to the legs.



9. Put the leg and rail assembly together right-side-up on the floor. Turn the seat over and reposition it on the rail/leg assembly (making sure the holes you have just drilled are directly over the rails), then drill into the rails using the holes in the bench as a guide for the drill.

10. Spread glue on top of the rails where they contact the seat, then screw or dowel them to the bottom of the seat. Clamp until the glue is dry. Cut off the protruding ends of the dowels with the wood chisel and sand flush—or plug holes over counter-sunk screws. Clean up any visible glue waste.

11. Finally, sand the surface of the bench, and use files to clean up the decorative cuts if necessary. A couple of layers of butcher-block wax or bowling alley wax make a good finish.

Editor's Note: See the article on period woodworking tools in this issue. This project is ideal for hand tools.

of designs, from simple (figures 8, 9 and 11) to ornate (figure 5). Pierced decorative designs were also used, as seen in figures 1, 5 and 6.

Some of the benches shown have a simple runner near the base of the legs. Figure 10 shows a bench with two runners at the feet.

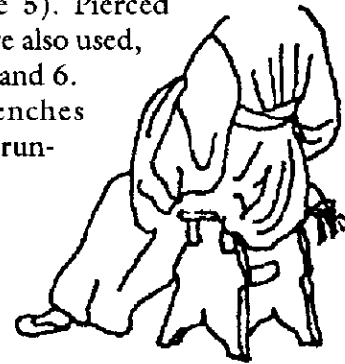


figure 8

Primary Source

Eames, Penelope, *Furniture in England, France and the Netherlands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century*, (London: Furniture Historical Society, 1977).

Figures

1. Gothic stool in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters Collection. (Eames)
2. Another stool from the Cloisters Collection. (Eames)
3. Detail of *The Last Supper* by Dieric Bouts, c. 1468. (Eames)
4. Oak gothic stool, temp. Henry VIII. Wolsey, S.W. and Luff, R.W.P., *Furniture in England: Age of the Joiner*, (New York: Frederick A Praeger, 1969).
5. Gothic bench on exhibit in Victoria & Albert Museum (Eames).
6. Detail of "Allegory of Gluttony and Lust" by Hieronymus Bosch, late 15th or early 16th century.
7. Detail of the scrollwork decoration of a slab-ended chest from Wroxeter, c. 1300-1350. (Eames)
8. Detail of "Dib new Bockspyl" an anonymous woodcut of 1519.

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