

A Practical Guide to Wool for Early Medieval Re-enactment

By Darren Orritt, Regia Anglorum, May 2026



Why Wool?

Why it matters in re-enactment

Wool is the primary textile for most clothing in early medieval northern Europe, including Anglo-Saxon and Viking-period dress. It is the most widely available and archaeologically evidenced fabric for both everyday wear and higher-status garments.

For re-enactment purposes, wool is not simply a convenient modern choice. It is essential for creating a historically believable impression. Wool behaves in ways that closely resemble surviving textile fragments and is suitable for the full range of garments worn in the period, from simple tunics to heavy cloaks and outerwear.

Wool has several practical advantages which also explain its historical importance:

- Excellent insulation, even when damp
- Natural water resistance due to lanolin content
- Durable and hard-wearing for regular use
- Available in a wide range of weights and qualities, from coarse cloth to fine finished textiles

In the early medieval period, wool dominated outer garments and most visible clothing. Linen was also used, particularly for under layers such as shirts and shifts. Silk existed but was rare and strongly associated with wealth and trade access.

For re-enactors, choosing appropriate wool helps create the correct visual impression of the period. Weave, weight, texture, and colour all influence how convincing a kit appears. Understanding wool properly is the foundation of building a believable early medieval outfit.

Understanding Weaves and Their Use

When buying wool for re-enactment, the weave structure is one of the most important factors in achieving a convincing appearance. Different weaves affect drape, durability, texture, and how closely the fabric resembles surviving archaeological textiles.

The following are the most common weave types encountered when sourcing wool in the UK and Europe.

Plain Weave (Tabby)

The simplest weave structure, where warp and weft threads alternate evenly.

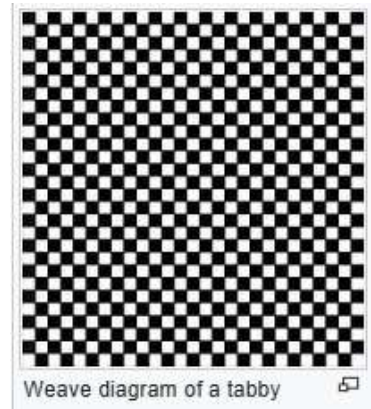
Characteristics

- Stable and durable
- Simple, even surface
- Can vary from coarse to refined depending on yarn and finish

Best used for

- Everyday tunics and dresses
- Lower and middling-status impressions
- Undergarments and linings where appropriate

Plain weave is entirely appropriate for early medieval clothing, particularly for simpler garments and practical working impressions.



2/2 Twill

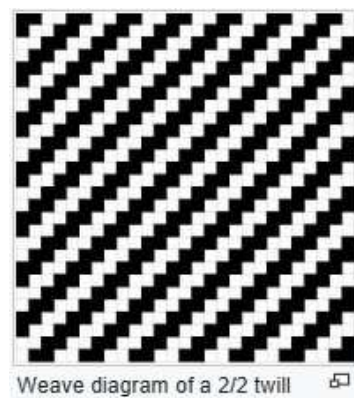
One of the most important and widely evidenced early medieval wool weaves.

Characteristics

- Distinct diagonal rib pattern
- Strong and flexible
- Excellent drape

Best used for

- Tunics
- Dresses
- Cloaks



- General-purpose re-enactment kit

For most re-enactors, 2/2 twill is the safest and most versatile starting point.

2/1 and 1/2 Twill

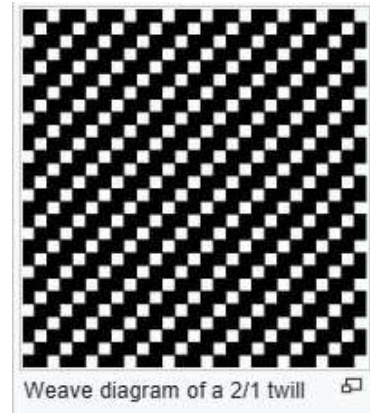
Asymmetrical twills with a stronger directional appearance.

Characteristics

- More pronounced diagonal pattern
- Often slightly finer in appearance
- Can appear tighter and more refined

Best used for

- Better-quality tunics and dresses
- Higher-status everyday clothing
- Selected outer garments



These weaves work particularly well for kits intended to represent prosperous freemen or wealthier impressions.

Herringbone and Chevron Twill

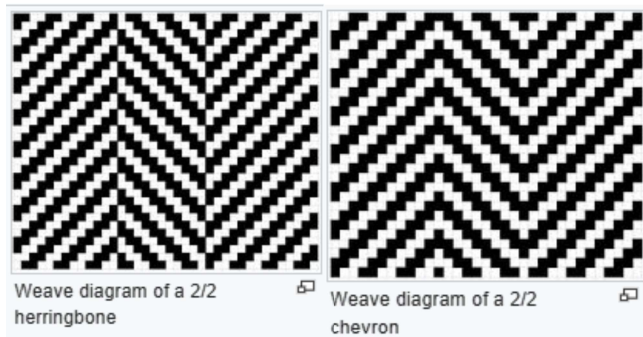
Patterned twill where the diagonal direction reverses repeatedly, creating a broken zigzag effect.

Characteristics

- Visually distinctive
- Strong archaeological parallels
- Suggests finer textile production

Best used for

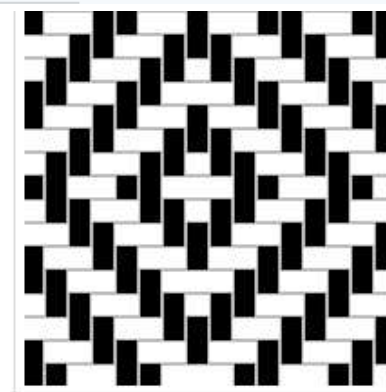
- Cloaks and mantles
- Decorative outer garments
- Higher-status clothing
- Trim and visible panels



Herringbone cloth is best used selectively rather than across every garment in a kit. It works especially well for cloaks and visible outer layers.

Diamond and Broken Diamond Twill

Complex patterned twills forming diamond-shaped motifs.



not broken

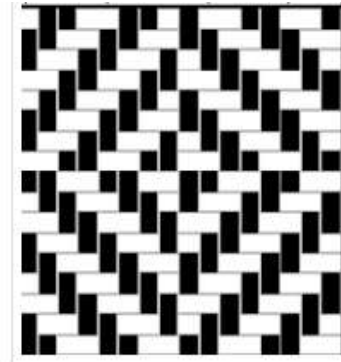
Characteristics

- Labour-intensive weave structure
- Visually striking surface
- Strongly associated with higher-quality cloth

Best used for

- Elite or high-status impressions
- Decorative cloaks
- Statement garments
- Trim and contrast panels

These fabrics are highly effective when used carefully and sparingly.



broken

Broken Twill

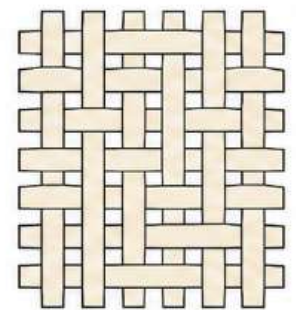
A variation of twill where the diagonal direction is interrupted.

Characteristics

- Subtle texture variation
- Less visually obvious than patterned twills
- Well represented archaeologically

Best used for

- Mid to higher-status garments
- Cloaks and over tunics
- Subtle visual upgrades from plain twill



Broken twill

Broken twill is often one of the most useful options for improving a kit without becoming overly decorative.

Worsted vs Woollen

This is not a weave type, but it is an important distinction when buying fabric.

The terms refer to different methods of preparing and spinning the wool fibres before weaving.

Woollen cloth is usually made using carded fibres, where the fibres are shorter and arranged in multiple directions. This creates a softer, loftier yarn with a fuller and slightly more irregular surface.

Worsted cloth is made using combed fibres, where the fibres are aligned and generally longer. This produces a smoother, tighter, and more uniform yarn with a cleaner finish.

Worsted wool

- Smooth
- Tight spun
- Uniform appearance
- Often looks modern or tailored

Woollen wool

- Softer texture
- Slight irregularity
- Fuller surface
- More historically convincing

Most early medieval textiles are better represented by woollen-style cloth than highly refined worsted fabric.

General guidance for beginners

For a first kit, simplicity matters more than complexity.

A strong starting point is:

- 2/2 twill for most garments
- Plain weave for simpler items
- Medium-weight wool
- Muted or natural colours

More complex weaves such as herringbone or diamond twill are best treated as upgrades once the foundation of the kit is established.

Wool Weight and Fabric Thickness

Wool weight is one of the most common areas where beginners make mistakes. Fabric that is too heavy can make garments stiff and unrealistic, while fabric that is too light often resembles modern clothing rather than early medieval textiles.

Modern wool is usually measured in grams per square metre (GSM).

Lightweight wool (approx. 150–250 GSM)

Characteristics

- Thin and soft
- Good drape
- Less insulating

Best used for

- Lightweight tunics
- Layering garments
- Some under layers

Very lightweight wool can sometimes appear too modern if overly smooth or refined.

Medium-weight wool (approx. 250–400 GSM)

This is the core recommendation for most re-enactors.

Characteristics

- Balanced drape and structure
- Durable for regular use
- Warm without excessive bulk

Best used for

- Tunics
- Dresses
- Trousers
- Most cloaks

This weight range gives the best balance between authenticity, practicality, and comfort.

Heavyweight wool (approx. 400–600+ GSM)

Characteristics

- Thick and insulating
- Wind resistant
- Structured appearance

Best used for

- Cloaks
- Winter outerwear
- Heavy mantles

Excessively heavy wool can begin to resemble modern over coating rather than early medieval clothing, so use it carefully.

Simple beginner rule

If it feels like modern suiting fabric, it is usually too light or too smooth.

If it feels like upholstery fabric, it is usually too heavy.

Colour and Status in the Early Medieval World

Colour in the early medieval period reflected access to resources, labour, trade, and textile quality. It was not governed by rigid rules, but stronger colours and finer decoration generally clustered around wealthier impressions.

Status is best understood as a combination of:

- Weave complexity
- Fabric quality
- Colour intensity
- Decoration

No single feature defines status on its own.

Lower-status impressions

Typical colours

- Undyed wool
- Browns
- Greys
- Off-whites

Decoration

- Minimal or absent
- Little or no tablet weaving

Fabric choices

- Plain weave
- Basic twill
- Medium to coarse wool

These impressions rely on simplicity and practicality rather than decoration.

Free or middling-status impressions

This is the most common re-enactment category.

Typical colours

- Muted blues
- Earthy reds
- Ochres and yellows
- Olive and sage greens
- Natural wool tones

Decoration

- Limited trim
- Occasional tablet weaving
- Some contrasting fabric use

Fabric choices

- 2/2 twill
- Broken twill
- Medium-weight wool

This level reflects practical clothing with modest access to dye and improved textiles.

Noble or elite impressions

Typical colours

- Rich reds
- Deep blues
- Strong yellows
- Carefully controlled contrast colours

Decoration

- Tablet weaving
- Embroidery
- Decorative panels
- Patterned textiles

Fabric choices

- Fine twills
- Herringbone
- Diamond twill
- High-quality finished wool

Wealth in early medieval clothing is usually shown through refinement rather than brightness alone.



Colour swatches dyed by Carrie Ferris, demonstrating a range of historically plausible colours achievable through natural dyeing methods. These examples are intended as a useful visual guide rather than an exhaustive representation of all colours available in the early medieval period.

Common misconceptions

Bright colours do not automatically equal wealth

A muted outfit made from good cloth with restrained decoration often appears more convincing than bright modern fabric.

Complex weaves should be used selectively

Patterned cloth works best in cloaks, trims, facings, or statement garments rather than every item in a kit.

Undyed wool is correct at all levels

Natural wool appears across the social scale, particularly in practical or layered clothing.

General principle

Simple people wear simple cloth.

Wealth shows through refinement, textile quality, and controlled decoration rather than exaggerated colour.



Examples of Regia Anglorum members wearing historically plausible colour combinations for Viking Age and Christian European impressions, taken from the Regia Anglorum Photographic Authenticity Guides. While not an exhaustive representation of the colours available in the early medieval period, these examples provide a useful visual guide to the sorts of tones, contrasts, and combinations commonly used within historically grounded re-enactment kit.

Where to Buy Wool (UK and Europe Guide)

No supplier is perfect. Suitability always depends on checking:

- weave
- fibre content
- weight
- colour
- overall finish

Different suppliers are useful for different stages of kit building, from affordable beginner fabric through to specialist reconstructed textiles.

The following is not an exhaustive list of suppliers, but these sources have been widely used by members of Regia Anglorum over many years. Inclusion here does not constitute official endorsement by Regia Anglorum.

UK-based General Fabric Suppliers

These suppliers are useful for beginners, budget-conscious kit building, and sourcing practical wool cloth in the UK. Careful selection is still important, as many fabrics are modern in finish or weight.

Herts Specialist Fabrics (UK)

<https://www.hertsfabrics.co.uk/>

Pros

- Easy UK access
- Affordable starter options
- Occasional suitable wool twills

Cons

- Historically inconsistent
- Some fabrics too modern in appearance
- Requires careful checking

Best used for

- Budget starter kits
- Trial garments
- Entry-level tunics

Edinburgh Fabrics (UK)

<https://www.edinburghfabrics.co.uk/>

Pros

- Good range of wool coatings and tweeds
- Reliable UK shipping
- Useful heavier fabrics

Cons

- Some fabrics too modern or refined
- Requires careful fibre checking
- Not re-enactment-specific

Best used for

- Cloaks
- Winter outerwear
- Heavy wool purchases

Bernie the Bolt Cloth Merchant (UK)

<https://www.facebook.com/p/Bernie-the-Bolt-Cloth-Merchant-100057537545518/>

Pros

- Frequently stocks wool suitable for re-enactment
- Good source for affordable fabric finds
- Useful for practical everyday kit fabrics
- Regularly updated stock through Facebook

Cons

- Availability varies significantly
- Requires careful checking of fibre content and weave
- Not exclusively historical fabric

Best used for

- Budget-conscious tunics and cloaks
- Everyday “Free status” impressions
- Finding occasional good-quality wool bargains

Fabworks (UK)

<https://fabworks.co.uk/>

Pros

- Large and varied wool stock
- Good value pricing compared to many re-enactment suppliers
- Occasional excellent twills and coating wools
- Useful weight and composition information

Cons

- Requires careful selection
- Some fabrics are too modern in colour or finish
- Stock changes rapidly

Best used for

- Medium-weight tunics and dresses
- Cloaks and outerwear
- Budget to mid-range kit building

Woolsome (Poland)

<https://woolsome.com/>

Pros

- Wide fabric range
- Accessible pricing
- Some suitable muted colours

Cons

- Modern colour ranges mixed in
- Not re-enactment-specific
- Requires careful selection

Best used for

- Beginner garments
- Budget tunics and dresses
- Practice projects

Re-enactment and Historically Focused Wool Suppliers

These suppliers specifically cater towards re-enactors or historically inspired textiles. They are often the best source for reliable weave choices and historically believable colour palettes.

The Cloth Hall (UK)

<https://www.facebook.com/theclothhall/>

Pros

- Reliable re-enactment wool stock
- Good colour ranges
- Useful practical advice
- Regular updates

Cons

- Limited availability
- More expensive than general fabric retailers

Best used for

- Core garments
- Mid-level impressions
- Reliable everyday kit

Historical Fabric Store (Sweden)

<https://historicalfabricstore.com/>

Pros

- Historically focused textile range
- Good wool weave selection
- Strong re-enactment colour palette

Cons

- Higher prices
- UK shipping costs
- Popular fabrics sell quickly

Best used for

- Mid to high-quality kit
- Tunics and dresses
- Historically informed upgrades

Sartor Bohemia (Czech Republic)

<https://www.sartorbohemia.com/>

Pros

- Excellent historical textile research
- Strong reconstructed weave range
- Very suitable for elite impressions

Cons

- Premium pricing
- Some fabrics overly specialised for beginners
- Availability varies

Best used for

- High-status garments

- Specialist reconstruction work
- Decorative textiles

L'Atelier de Micky (France)

<https://www.facebook.com/latelierdemicky/>

Pros

- Historically informed textile work
- Strong visual suitability for Viking and early medieval kit
- High-quality finished garments

Cons

- Variable availability
- Smaller stock range
- Expensive for beginners

Best used for

- Higher-status kit
- Finished outerwear
- Layered clothing systems

Handwoven and Specialist Historical Textiles

These suppliers focus on handwoven cloth, reconstructed textiles, or historically informed dye work. They are generally more expensive but provide some of the most convincing fabrics available.

Handwoven Wool (Czech Republic)

<https://handwovenwool.com/>

Pros

- Authentic handwoven textiles
- Strong archaeological basis
- Excellent reconstruction quality

Cons

- Expensive
- Limited availability
- Often undyed only

Best used for

- High-status reconstruction

- Specialist garments
- Cloaks and statement pieces

A. Salum Tyrol (Belgium)

<https://www.facebook.com/asalumtyrol/>

Pros

- Excellent natural dyes
- Historically informed colour palette
- Traditional dye techniques

Cons

- Expensive
- Small production runs
- Advanced kit building only

Best used for

- Elite garments
- Prestige cloaks
- Historically dyed textiles

Cloaks, Leg Wraps and Finished Outerwear

These suppliers are especially useful for cloaks, mantles, leg wraps, and finished outer garments suited to field use and layered impressions.

Echo Historical Textiles (Ukraine/France)

<https://www.echo-historical-textiles.com/>

Pros

- Archaeologically inspired textiles
- Good handwoven wool range
- Strong weave and colour research

Cons

- Expensive
- Limited production cycles

Best used for

- Cloaks
- High-quality outer garments
- Advanced kit development

OldCraft (Serbia)

<https://oldcraft.org/>

Pros

- Durable wool cloaks
- Good field-use practicality
- Strong visual fit

Cons

- Dye accuracy varies
- Longer shipping times

Best used for

- Cloaks
- Functional outerwear
- Cold-weather impressions

Old People Style (Poland)

<https://oldpeoplestyle.com/>

Pros

- Handwoven wool cloaks
- Some naturally dyed options
- Good Viking Age visual style
- Authentically dyed leg wraps

Cons

- Limited range
- Inconsistent stock

Best used for

- Cloaks
- Outer garments
- Layered winter impressions
- Leg wraps and accessories

Elisabeth Da'Born Art and Textiles (UK)

<https://www.etsy.com/shop/earthtribes/>

Pros

- Excellent handwoven textiles and accessories
- Particularly strong for authentic handwoven leg wraps
- Historically informed colours and textures
- Strong visual fit for Viking and early medieval impressions

Cons

- Handmade items can be expensive
- Small-scale production means limited availability
- Shipping times may vary

Best used for

- Handwoven leg wraps
- Higher-status accessories
- Layered outerwear and textile details

Regia Anglorum Membership Weavers (UK)

Pros

- Occasionally produces excellent handwoven wool fabrics
- Strong authenticity potential
- Often informed directly by archaeological evidence
- Can provide highly individual textiles not available commercially

Cons

- Availability is irregular
- Usually dependent on individual members
- Not a consistent commercial source

Best used for

- Specialist reconstruction garments
- High-authenticity projects
- Handwoven trims, cloth, and accessories

Final principle

There is no perfect supplier, only appropriate cloth choices.

A convincing impression comes from how weave, weight, colour, and decoration work together rather than from the supplier name alone.

Budgeting Your First Kit

One of the most common beginner mistakes is trying to buy everything immediately. A strong kit is built in layers over time.

What to prioritise first

Core garments should always come first:

- Tunic or dress
- Trousers where appropriate
- Hose
- Cloak

These create the visible structure of the impression.

Recommended spending order

Stage 1 - Core kit

- Medium-weight wool tunic or dress
- Wool hose
- Heavier wool cloak
- Practical muted colours

Stage 2 - Improvements

- Better quality wool
- Improved fit
- More refined colours
- Additional layers

Stage 3 - Controlled decoration

- Tablet weave
- Decorative trim
- Patterned textiles
- Status indicators

Decoration should support an already complete kit, not replace one.

Practical starter kit breakdown

A typical beginner setup might include:

- 1 x medium-weight wool tunic or dress
- 1 x pair of wool hose
- 1 x heavier wool cloak
- Optional second tunic for layering or rotation

This forms a complete and historically convincing base impression.

General principle

Get the structure right first.

Refinement comes later.

Common Beginner Mistakes and Quick Reference Checklist

Common mistakes

Choosing fabric that looks too modern

Avoid:

- Smooth shiny suiting wool
- Uniform synthetic-looking surfaces
- Fashion fabric with no texture variation

Using colour too aggressively

Avoid:

- Neon or modern tones
- Entire outfits in strong colours
- Overly saturated fabrics

Overusing complex weaves

Avoid:

- Patterned cloth across every garment
- Diamond twill everywhere
- Treating decorative fabrics as standard clothing

Prioritising trim before garments

Always build:

- Tunic
- Trousers or hose
- Cloak

before decoration.

Ignoring fabric weight

Correct weave and colour can still look wrong if the cloth weight behaves incorrectly.

Quick checklist before buying wool

Ask yourself:

- Is it fully or mostly wool?
- Is the weave appropriate?
- Is the weight suitable?
- Does the colour look believable?
- Does it drape like cloth rather than tailoring fabric?
- Am I buying for a real garment rather than decoration?

If the answer is mostly yes, the fabric is probably suitable.

Final Principle

A believable early medieval kit is built from consistency rather than complexity.

Simple, well-chosen materials will almost always look more convincing than expensive fabrics used without structure, restraint, or context.

Further Reading

Practical Re-enactment and Textile Resources

Gale R. Owen-Crocker

Dress in Anglo-Saxon England
Boydell Press, revised edition, 2004.

One of the foundational works on Anglo-Saxon clothing and appearance. Particularly useful for understanding garments, terminology, colour use, and the interpretation of surviving evidence.

Penelope Walton Rogers

Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England AD 450–700
Council for British Archaeology Research Report 145, 2007.

Probably the single most important archaeological study of Anglo-Saxon textiles and dress currently available. Extremely detailed but invaluable for serious re-enactors and authenticity work. ()

Penelope Walton Rogers

Textiles, Cordage and Raw Fibre from 16–22 Coppergate
York Archaeological Trust, 1997.

A highly detailed study of Viking Age textile finds from York, particularly useful for fibre types, spinning, weaving, and textile production

Frances Pritchard and John Peter Wild

Northern Archaeological Textiles
Oxbow Books, 2005.

A strong collection of archaeological textile studies covering northern Europe, including weaving techniques, dyes, and textile analysis.

Medieval Clothing and Textile Studies

Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (eds.)

Medieval Clothing and Textiles series
Boydell Press, 2005 onwards.

An excellent long-running academic series covering clothing, dyes, textile construction, reconstruction, and experimental archaeology. Particularly useful for advanced re-enactors. ()

Gale R. Owen-Crocker, Elizabeth Coatsworth and Maria Hayward (eds.)

Encyclopaedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles of the British Isles c. 450–1450
Brill, 2012.

A substantial reference work covering textiles, clothing terms, weaving, dyes, embroidery, and garment evidence from across the medieval British Isles. ()

Elizabeth Coatsworth and Gale R. Owen-Crocker

Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain
Boydell Press, 2014.

Useful for broader context and developments in medieval textile interpretation.

Dyeing and Textile Craft

Dominique Cardon

Natural Dyes: Sources, Tradition, Technology and Science
Archetype Publications, 2007.

One of the best modern references on historical dyeing techniques and dye sources.

Jenny Dean

Wild Colour
Mitchell Beazley, revised edition, 2010.

A more accessible practical guide to natural dyeing using historically plausible plant dyes.

Online Resources

The Lexis of Cloth and Clothing Project

<http://lexisproject.arts.manchester.ac.uk/>

An extremely valuable academic resource exploring textile terminology, clothing references, and material culture in early medieval England. ()

Medieval Colours

<https://www.facebook.com/MedievalColours/>

A useful visual resource showing naturally dyed yarn and cloth samples, particularly helpful for re-enactors attempting historically plausible colour palettes.

Historic Enterprises Colour Guide

<https://historicenterprises.com/colors-ezp-6.html>

A practical visual guide to historically plausible colours and natural dye tones suitable for medieval re-enactment clothing.