

Original Source: <http://www.woolworks.org/sockheels.html>



An Humble Research: Summary of heel options for knitted socks

This document was written by Catherine Wingate, CAWingate@aol.com.

This discussion is only as complete as my knowledge and may, by oversight, omit a generic heel style. If so, please email me with details as I would like to include all of the basic heel styles for which there are references still available. Also, I have included references to patterns in several sources including Web sites, books and individual patterns sold through yarn stores or the creators. While I have tried to include many of the currently- available sources for patterns, this cannot be the Compleat Sock Pattern bibliography as new patterns and publications appear frequently. Consider it, then, a starter reference list for other knitters new to socks.

I only recently began knitting socks, after resisting the impulse for quite a while, thinking that attractive wool socks are, well, uh, easily-enough purchased and seemed to require an inordinate amount of work for a small payoff, and for something easily worn-out and, possibly, undervalued as a gift.

However, my innate curiosity, tempered by the bad influence of Knit Listers posting about sock-knitting obsessions, got the better of me and I did, finally, attempt a pair of socks, actually finish a pair, and became a fan of socks-knitting. They really are a lot of fun and are small enough projects to offer a risk-free chance to play with colors and learn.

Oh, and by the way, they are fun to make!

I made that one pair and got hooked and then wanted to explore the architecture of socks and the various ways of making them take shape. I became especially interested in this after learning that the first pair which I gave as a gift were being "saved" instead of worn until I told the person I could reknit the heels and toes if necessary....which began this humble research.

A lot of people have sent me suggestions and encouragement when I began knitting socks and answered questions which have come up along the way. I hope that I've thanked everyone along the way but, given my propensity to speed through email, I may have overlooked some. Therefore, I want again say thank you for the suggestions and the helpand hope that other sock-knitters will find some value in this overview. And especial thanks to Gennie and Joan (Hamer) for proofreading this as it grew like Topsy!

Enough non-tech. Here's the summary.

Styles of sock heels: construction, examples, variations, and how to reknit

- **Heel-flap-and-gusset**
- **Short-row**
- **Peasant-style**
- **Special: socks with sole knitted separately**
- **Spiral socks... no toe, no heel, no problem**
- **Miscellaneous notes and bibliography**

Heel-flap-and-gusset

This seems to be the most common heel used in many of the patterns I've seen. It is the heel used in almost all of the standard techniques books, the patterns in *Folk Socks*, in all of the patterns in Stahl Book No. 9 and in Patons' *Pull Up Your Socks*, the Classic Elite kits I've seen, and many other currently-popular patterns. This heel is made, at the appropriate place, during the knitting of the sock. That is, unlike the so-called grandmother's or peasant heel, this heel cannot be added easily later, after making a tube sock.

My first thought was that it *cannot* be added later, but that it would be underestimating the inventiveness of knitters to make such a statement. Suffice it to say that I don't know a simple or practical way to make this into a "knit now, heel later" sock as I think of the grandmother's and peasant heels.

For the basic sock, knitted from top down, you put the non-heel stitches (usually 1/2 the total stitches but not necessarily) on a separate needle or holder and knit the heel stitches for X number of rows until the heel flap is the desired length from the bottom of the cuff or ribbing to the bottom of the foot, where the heel is then turned.

A series of short rows are used to turn the heel, after which you pick up stitches along one side of the heel flap, knit the non-heel stitches, pick up along the other edge of the heel flap and continue to knit in the round, forming gussets with matched decreases to eliminate the extra, picked-up, stitches.

Variations

There are numerous ways to construct and shape this heel and affect both the fit and the style of the sock. *Folk Socks* alone lists the common heel, shaped common heel, Balbriggan heel, Dutch heel, and other heel-flap-and-gusset constructions. Also, Lois Baker has two custom-fit socks pattern books that offer several heel styles and technical discussion of them. (Even better, they include a template; you can a swatch, take your gauge and a few basic measurements, plug these numbers into the template to generate a pattern for well-fitting socks.)

To replace or reknit heel-flap-and-gusset

The best description I've seen for how to replace this heel is on page 232 (with illustration, thank heaven) of *Mary Thomas's Knitting Book*, published by Dover. Basically you carefully cut away the old heel, back to where you began to knit the heel while putting the "picked-up" stitches on needles to hold them. Then reknit the heel flap, transferring one stitch off the side needle and knitting it together with the last stitch of the row you're on to incorporate the already-picked-up gusset stitches.

References

Most sock knitting books have patterns which use one or more varieties of this heel, including those already mentioned. Joan Hamer's "Joan's Socks" are an easy introduction to this construction as well and the pattern is on the web. (See the [Notes and bibliography section](#).)

Short-row heel

This heel can look the most like commercially-made socks. It is knitted while knitting the sock, not as an afterthought. Again, noting the caveat above, there *may* be some easy way to knit it after a tube sock is made, with waste yarn holding the heel stitches. I'm unaware of such a method and suspect that it wouldn't be easy.

Technical aside on short-rowing

Short-rowing can be used to give a third-dimensional shaping to an otherwise flat fabric or for extra-precise fitting, for example to make a knitted, tailored suit jacket fit more closely in the bust or shoulder areas. (Conceptually, if you were knitting a contour map, you could use short-rows to create mountain ranges. Expert knitters, overlook the oversimplification, but it's a graphic analogy which might help the explanation since I cannot illustrate with a drawing.)

Basically, you make short-rows by working part of a row, turning and working back, then turning again. Short-rows are usually worked in pairs as, eventually, you go back to working complete rows again. For example, you might work all 20 stitches in Rows 1 and 2, the first 13 of Row 3, turn, 10 of Row 4, then all 20 stitches for Rows 5 and beyond.

In order prevent "holes" where you turn mid-row and work back, most knitting references suggest that you anchor the work by wrapping the next unworked stitch before turning and, when you later work that stitch, work the wrap as well.

[Editor's note: Jackie Erickson-Schweitzer posted excellent [instructions on how to wrap a stitch](#) to the Wool Works discussion boards.]

However, you may choose not to work the wrap, or not to work it on all stitches, to give an intentionally lacy or textured effect.

All of the major knitting books have descriptions about how to short-row (and, then, long-row) back and how to handle the wrapped stitch. For a fuller discussion, please see *Handknitting Techniques from Threads Magazine* ("Short rows: The secret is wrapping" by Meg Swansen, p. 80) or virtually any standard, comprehensive knitting reference.

For socks, put the non-heel stitches on a separate needle or holder. Knitting just the heel stitches, you "short-row down" to a desired number of X stitches, by making each row one stitch shorter than the previous until you have X heel stitches. Then, you knit the X stitches, knit all of the other sock (non-heel) stitches and begin to "short-row up" on the heel, increasing the number of heel stitches until you are back to the original number. (Or, as Meg Swansen refers to this phase, "long row" back up to the original number.) From this point, continue to knit in the round until beginning the toe shaping for the sock.

Variations

- i. In addition to how to treat the short-row end stitch (knit or purl the "wrap" when you work the stitch... or not... or only in one direction... each giving a different appearance to the heel) you can also consider whether to knit any "in the round rows" between "short-rowing down" and "short-rowing" back up. The patterns I've found usually call for 1 or 2 such rows to separate the wrapped stitches but one pattern eliminated these rows for an eyelet-lace effect.
- ii. Another variation is to only "short-row down" and skip the rest of the short row increases (the long rowing). This was suggested by a knitter who said that she "short-rows" down to X number of stitches, then knits the X and all of the non-heel stitches and then continues in the round from there to make golf and tennis socks which are comfortable and stay in place well, even though very short. (N.B. This is similar to the Mamluke Sock mentioned below, albeit inverted.)

To replace or reknit short-row heel

Replacing this heel requires grafting. Carefully unravel the entire heel and any in-the-round rows you did between the "short-rowing down" and "short-rowing up" phases. Put the non-heel stitches aside on holders. Pick up the heel stitches you've unraveled to, knit the entire heel exactly like the original, including any in-the-round rows and graft the heel and in-the-round rows in place.

Ergo, remake the entire heel and graft it into place.

Another take on the short-rowed heel

An interesting, and lovely, variation on this heel is in *Folk Socks* in the Mamluke Socks pattern (p. 76) wherein a round-heel is made through short-rowing, beginning with shorter row and increasing, then knitting in-the-round until beginning the toe. In a sense, you short-row up (without having short-rowed down first to a smaller number of stitches), making a sock with a less-than-perpendicular angle between the foot and top of the sock.

References

Kim Salazar's Pine Tree Socks use this heel in a toe-up pattern. Also the Logical Socks by Countrywool use this in a basic pattern adaptable for any size or knit gauge. And, for the Mamluke Socks, see *Folk Socks* by Nancy Bush.

Peasant heel

IMHO, the neatest thing about this heel is that it is self-contained and, therefore, can be knit after the rest of the sock is done and is easily replaced. I think of it as the Depression-era homemade sock... when handknit socks were common and, perhaps, made more out of economic necessity than personal style. It is also called a grandmother's heel and a waste-yarn heel.

To make this heel, knit to where the heel will begin, knit X amount of stitches (X being the number of intended heel stitches) on waste yarn, put those X stitches back on the left needle, and reknit them with the sock yarn. After completing the sock, take out the waste yarn and put the resulting loops on facing needles (one needle will have one more loop than the other!) and "make a heel." Generally the heel is similar to a toe and, in many socks, the heel and toe are shaped identically, both being shaped by double-decreasing.

Elizabeth Zimmermann offers her "afterthought heel" which differs from the grandmother's heel in that you do not knit a "marker" with waste yarn, but knit the sock with no heel or heel placement. After the sock is completed, you determine where to place the heel and carefully snip a section of yarn to release the opposing loops. Pick up the newly-freed stitch loops and make a heel. The advantage to this is the ability to determine exact heel width and placement.

Variations

Because of the double-decreasing, it looks a little like the short-rowed heel, or commercially-knitted socks, with a textured row (in this case the matched decreases) forming a straight line, at a 45-degree angle, from the bottom, back of the heel up to the ankle.

There are many variations of matched double-decreases to play with and, yielding different textures and stylistic effects.

To replace or reknit peasant heel

Just carefully unravel the heel and make another one.

References

Again, *Folk Socks* has a few patterns that use this heel, including the Ukrainian Socks on the cover of the book. A good all-around sock book, and with a lot of patterns for money, is the Nomis booklet *Hand Knit Socks* (formerly *Hand Knit Socks for Men, Women and Children*). The Sport Socks No. 2244 in this book use the waste-yarn, knit-later heel.

Special: socks with sole knitted separately

I'm not certain where this fits in, but while reading up on various generic heel types, I came upon the "Separate Sole" sock in the inimitable *Mary Thomas's Knitting Book* (page 224).

For the double-point-needle-averse (yes I know you can use short circulars, but some knitters find them hard on the hands)... these can be knit on two needles. Basically you "knit the sole and form the toe. Knit the instep and toe, and seam the two together when complete. Knitted thus, a sock is easily refooted." Hmm...there's no end to the inventiveness of knitters!

Variations

The variations would be for the sock itself, rather than for the heel style.

To replace or reknit whole sole

Undo the seam, reknit the heel and seam it back up.

References

See *Mary Thomas's Knitting Book*, page 224.

Spiral socks... no toe, no heel, no problem

As this is really just a simple tube sock, knitted in a spiraling rib stitch, perhaps it doesn't exactly belong but... it's a sock pattern, furthermore, with a long history. Cast on an appropriate number of stitches and rib for X number of rows, then move the rib over by a stitch for X number of rows... and repeat the pattern that develops. For example, cast on 68 sts and K3, P3 for 6 rows. On 7th row, move on stitch to the right, that is, P1, 3, P3, K3, P3, etc. On 13th row, P2, K3, P3, K3, P3, etc.

The spiraled rib gives the sock a shape, without a toe or heel, as, when the sock is put on it is adjusted by straightening the rib so it is straight on the foot and not spiraled.

Variations

This is a very simple sock but can be very attractive as there are many different rib stitches which can be used for texture.

To replace or reknit heel

This is less important with this sock as there is no established heel always taking the brunt of wear. Theoretically, however, you can reknit the foot part by unraveling the foot, picking up the stitches and reknitting in same rib used originally.

References

This is an old pattern for making socks and can be found in *Mary Thomas's Knitting Book*, the *Bucilla Hand Knit Socks for Men, Women and Children* and, undoubtedly, many other sources.

OK, OK... an exception: heelless sock with toe

See reference sources for the website for this glamour sock from the 1950s. Quelle chic!

Miscellaneous notes and bibliography: April, 1998

(Note from JN: I have not checked any of these links - I imagine most won't work.)

Second caveat: with reference to Web sites, all of the URLs work at this time but cyberspace is a continuing experience so that which works today, may not, tomorrow. New patterns, new sources, new addresses, changed formats, stale sites... all occur, making "hard copy" appealing all over again as paper degrades, but more slowly and with grace.

As always, I suggest starting with the Wool Works website. This wonderful website has a lot of information for knitting-related sources, tech tips, ideas and pattern and hyperlinks galore. There were, at last count, 38 sock patterns, and the famous Joan's Socks by Joan Hamer. Wool Works' URL:

- <http://www.woolworks.org/>

Wool Works' socks overview URL:

- <http://www.woolworks.org/socks.html>

Pine Tree Sock Pattern (using short-rowed heel) by Kim Salazar. URL:

- <http://home.sprynet.com/sprynet/salazar/>

1950s heelless sock with toe, excerpted from *McCall's Treasury of Needlecraft*, Simon and Schuster (New York), 1955. The pattern is available at Suzu's website collection of vintage (and droll and funny) glam patterns of yesteryear. The URL for the heelless sock is

- http://www.interlog.com/~suzu/s_ka50g.htm

There are free patterns at Arlene Williams' Quanah for Yarn Web site:

- <http://www.rose.com/~quanah/patterns.html>

Sock of the Month Collection by Mary Dominski (aka Dr. Sock). These and other lovely sock patterns are available at Blackberry Ridge in Mt. Horeb, WI.

- +1 (603) 437 3762
- <http://www.blackberry-ridge.com/>

There are a lot of new patterns and a lot of sock patterns at The Mining Company's Guide to Knitting home page:

- <http://knitting.miningco.com/mbody.htm>

There are also a few videos on knitting socks available at Patternworks and other knitting supply stores and booksellers like amazon.com.

- <http://www.patternworks.com/>
- <http://www.amazon.com/>

Classic Elite Sock Kits are available at many local yarn stores and major mail-order sources like Patternworks.

Wonderful patterns and kits, many by local designers, are sold at yarn stores throughout the country. Nancy Bush's store, Wooly West in Salt Lake City, sells patterns by other designers as well as by Nancy.

- +1 (801) 487 9378

Beth Brown-Reinsel sells her many sock patterns, separately or as kits, and each teaches a particular technique so you can select patterns to learn by and well as wear. Her store is Knitting Traditions.

- KnitTradit@aol.com
- <http://members.aol.com/knittradit/>

Printed reference sources: books and magazines

And A Time to Knit Stockings, Katherine Pence

Custom Fit Socks Pattern Books (there are two different ones): Cuff-to-Toe Socks; Toe-Up Socks, Lois Baker. Available from Lois Baker, gypsy@magicnet.net or <http://www.benefitslink.com/knit>. *Ethnic Socks and Stockings: A Compendium of Eastern Design and Technique*, Priscilla Gibson-Roberts. This book is full of information on peasant heels, as well as all kinds of construction and design techniques: cast ons, increases, circular intarsia, twined stitches, and lots of inspirational socks. Also, the Winter, 1997, *Knitter's* magazine has a sock pattern by PGR featuring the peasant heel: Afghanistan socks, pp. 112-114. Another PGR sock can be found in the Winter, 1995, *Knitter's* #41 Magic Carpet Pizazz, pp. 68-69. Both of these are toe-up socks.

Fancy Feet: Traditional Knitting Designs of Turkey, Anna Zilboorg.

Folk Socks, Nancy Bush, Interweave Press.

Hand Knit Socks, Bucilla Yarns (available at local yarn stores and at Patternworks: +1 (800) 438 5464).

Hand-Knitting Techniques from Threads Magazine, "The Shape of Socks," by Theresa Gaffey, p. 72, Taunton Press.

Knitting Around the World from Threads Magazine, "Socks, Socks, Socks: Knit Fair Isles to Fit Your Feet," by Peg Richard, p. 62, Taunton Press.

The Joy of Socks, a *Spin-Off* reprint, 1992, Interweave Press. This booklet includes a few sock patterns and good, long articles about materials and shapes and durability.

Knitting Without Tears, Elizabeth Zimmermann. Has a brief discussion of the afterthought heel.

Logical Socks, Countrywool. Email Ctrywool@aol.com to purchase pattern.

Mary Thomas's Knitting Book, Mary Thomas, Dover.

Patons' Pull Up Your Socks, Coats Patons-Coats Canada, Inc.

Ribbing - Plain & Fancy, Joy Slayton, 2nd edition. Contains instructions for basic ribbed socks, 25 ribbing variations, and 3 heel variations. Also includes directions for a tiny sock and includes bibliography. At knit shops and the **Joyknits Web site**.

Socks : A Spin-Off Special Publication for Knitters and Spinners, edited by Rita Buchanan and Deborah Robson, 1994, Interweave Press. This is a collection of patterns, including the entrelac socks. The cover features a pair of pretty lace socks.

Stahl Socka Series, Stahl Wolle.

Vogue Knitting Socks (Vogue Knitting on the Go), Trisha Malcolm, editor.

Wool Gathering #55, "Form-Fitted Arch Stockings," newsletter by Elizabeth Zimmermann, Schoolhouse Press. +1 (800) YOU KNIT.

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- <http://www.tollfree.att.net/>

Emily Way (emily@woolworks.org)