

# Elizabethan House - Robert and Laura Mellin

## Persona

(University of Atlantia, February 6, 2010)

In the SCA, we talk about having a persona, but what does that really mean? For all practical purposes, our personas are a vague mix of the times we like, a place (or several) that we like, or have some kind of attachment to, and often, a long complicated life story that attempts to justify the combination of all the things we like and want to do. Once we do that, we forget about it most of the time, except to trot out the story for documentation, or to make our friends laugh.

Laura's persona, "Isobel", started as a Scottish woman living in a seaside town that was a haven for smugglers, was captured by French raiders, sold as a courtesan in Italy, stolen by gypsies and taken to Eastern Europe, where she was married to a Russian trader who took a fancy to her. Then she travelled all over Europe with her husband. All this was in aid of being able to combine pretty much any accessory from anywhere in Europe during a vague period between 1450 and 1600.

Robert, on the other hand, got *really* creative; he tells his persona story thus:

"Born to a Catholic family in England (somewhere in Islingfuzzyton-shire), the family was forced by the Reformation (and the bonfires) to move in with relatives in Ireland (somewhere near Dub-ya-alebeer-town), where good Catholics could still go to mass \*and\* the pub on Sundays.

The Irish school system being what it was (drunk), my father sent me to live with his uncle-cousin-brother, a condottiere near Sisilly-for-tuna, where I was to be educated in a Jesuit university (Go, Lambs! ).

Upon my graduation, I traveled back to old Blight-y, ready to earn my fortune while hiding my religious persuasion. This wasn't difficult, as college had caused me to lose all interest in religion (just like today).

Having learned the martial arts from my uncle-cousin-grandpater, I fought with swords. That was unfulfilling, so I took to fighting others \*with\* swords, which worked out better. I had no other occupation, nor interest in one, until I met a lovely lass from Ditchingham (which is pronounced "ditch-in-ham" and sounds less-than appetizing, unlike the lady).

Thereafter, I evolved.

THE END"

The SCA does not require, nor does it have any official advice on creating, a persona. We have built a culture that has a ranking structure, heraldry, traditions, and rules/awards that do not have any parallel

in the historic periods we cover, and this means that the awards we get and the rules or heraldry we follow often clash with our personas. In the face of this conflict, most people tend to keep their persona as a vague idea, and not think about it a lot of the time. Because there are no rules or requirements about persona, approximately 70% of us were kidnapped by pirates at some point.

There is nothing wrong with this. No, really; the SCA doesn't care what your persona did. However, if you want to bring your persona to a more authentic place, for whatever reason, the development of a more reasonable life story can help you focus your efforts to create a more period look in your clothing and accessories. Though it seems more complicated on the surface, it actually simplifies your research, since it allows you to narrow down your research to a specific era and place.

Robert and Laura have taken their personas from a general mish-mash of clothes and things to a specific town, era, and class level, which has enabled them to use their time and money more efficiently.

They also volunteer at the Jamestown Museum and Settlement, a living history museum in Virginia; everything in the living history areas must be researched and approved before use, so the research that has gone into their Jamestown work gets used in the SCA.

But you don't have to be authentic enough for a museum to play in the SCA! All you need to do to get a period feel at events is to cover or keep your modern items out of sight. How easy is that? Beyond a name, an attempt at period clothes, and maybe heraldry, the SCA makes no requirements of its members. All research and education is self-driven, and no-one should pass judgment on anyone for choosing a level of authenticity different from their own, as long as they make the basic effort required by the SCA.

First, you are never committed to only one period. Robert and Laura keep clothes in their closet for various periods, usually to participate in themed events. The other periods aren't as deeply researched, though they make the effort to make the clothes look nice. They reserve most of their time and money for their favourite period. So, if you change your mind, or you can't decide which period you like, you don't have to give it up - just pick one to focus on for the moment.

The choice to go further into your persona and presentation is entirely yours. If you want to develop your focus, there are some basic things to think about:

Time - What period do you like the most? Is there a specific time that coincides with your other interests, such as Medieval France, or Renaissance Spain? What crafts or skills are you interested in? Do you like Norse bone carvings, or singing Italian madrigals? Let your imagination roam free, and if you can't decide, look at some books and pictures.

Place - this follows on from the time. What country do you like? What countries does it have contact with in the period you like? Can you deal with some of the restrictions that period and place might put on you? What limits on travel are you willing put up with? Do you want to live in a rural area or a city?

Who is at war with whom?

(Someone is always at war with someone else.)

Social Status - The SCA ranking systems makes us all nobility, but you are not required to have a persona at the top level of society. Perhaps you would have more fun as a beggar. Maybe your budget or skills don't allow for the cost or complexity of an upper-class outfit. You could be a farmer, or minor nobility that has fallen on hard times. Class level affects the clothes and accessories you will have, so give it some thought. You can always go up or down a level (or three) if you decide you want something different, but start with a definite level so you can put together a coherent outfit.

Occupation - what do you want to be when you grow up? If you're a man, you have most occupations open to you (dependent on social status), but if you're a woman, the options you have depend on the time, place, and class level you choose. Do some investigation.

Keep all these things in mind as you decide, and don't rush yourself.

Of course, all of these questions require a basic knowledge of history, which brings us to...

## **Research**

A lot of people cringe at the idea of research, possibly because their educational experience has been that learning is boring. But you're taking this class, and it's fun and interesting, right? Learning doesn't have to be a dry, thankless chore, and really, it should never be boring, especially in the SCA, where all your learning is done by choice. Follow the things that interest you - it's actually a great way to work out some of your persona questions - does military history grip you? Maybe your persona could be a soldier. Do you like reading about political intrigue? You could be a diplomat. Are you into soap operas, and the drama of human interaction? Hello, Lady in Waiting to the Queen.

If reading really isn't your thing, start by looking at pictures. There are bunches of museum catalogues on the web now - browse them and read the short descriptions of each thing that catches your eye. If a subject piques your interest, see what else you can find out about it on the web. Check out books at the library, or see if a friend knows of any good books. Books that include the writings of people from the period you're interested in can be like reading an old diary, full of drama and romance. Inventories and wills tell you what people owned, how much it cost, and their social status. Descriptions of events will tell you what happened (much more interesting than memorizing dates!), and the writings of social critics will tell you what people did for fun, since social critics always seem to have the biggest problem with the stuff people enjoy doing.

For instance - Robert and Laura have personas that live just outside London, in the borough of Southwark, in the late Elizabethan era. Elizabethan London and the surrounding area was a pretty

swinging place in the late 16th century - young men and women spent a lot of time together, and as long as they got married before the baby came, no-one really cared if the girl got pregnant (you did have to get married, though - a single mother was considered unemployable). People spent a lot of their time shopping, socializing (gossiping), and attending entertainments. The workday started early and ran late, but most people had a break of at least three hours in the middle of the day for lunch, and social activities went on well into the night. A middle-class couple, like Robert and Isobel could expect to have a lot of leisure time, and Isobel would have enough servants that she did not have to do much domestic work. This was appealing to both of them, and they built their personas to fit the time and place.

Once you decide on the basics, start making lists of the material culture of your time - what was available? What would your persona need and use? What would you want to own? Everyone in every culture social climbs, so look at the social level above yours to see what they had. Don't go wild - a rural farmer would not eat off gold plates, but he could well be using pewter with a couple of small silver pieces if he was prosperous.

When choosing the objects and accessories to furnish your persona, be aware of the effect the 500-1000 years of aging has on surviving objects - don't buy or make things that look like antiques. Colours should be bright, not faded, woods should be new, not stained black, metal should not be tarnished or pitted. Antique collecting is a very modern phenomenon. Throughout the SCA period, people would have wanted the newest, brightest, and best things they could afford. In fact, one of the reasons we don't have much silver or gold tableware is because families would periodically have their precious metal pieces melted down and recast in the latest styles. The value was in the metal itself, not the design.

Socially, objects that looked faded or aged or patched simply meant that you couldn't afford to buy new things, and no-one wanted 200 year old furniture in their house. When you purchase or make your things, consider what they would have looked like when new, and choose accordingly.

Putting together the possessions and clothes of your persona is not an overnight thing, unless you're very rich. It has taken the authors 15 years of construction, sewing, and collecting to put together their look, and the search for new things never ends. Persona development is an ongoing hobby, part of life in the SCA, and a lot of fun is had on the journey. Quite by accident, you may find you've become an expert on your time and place!

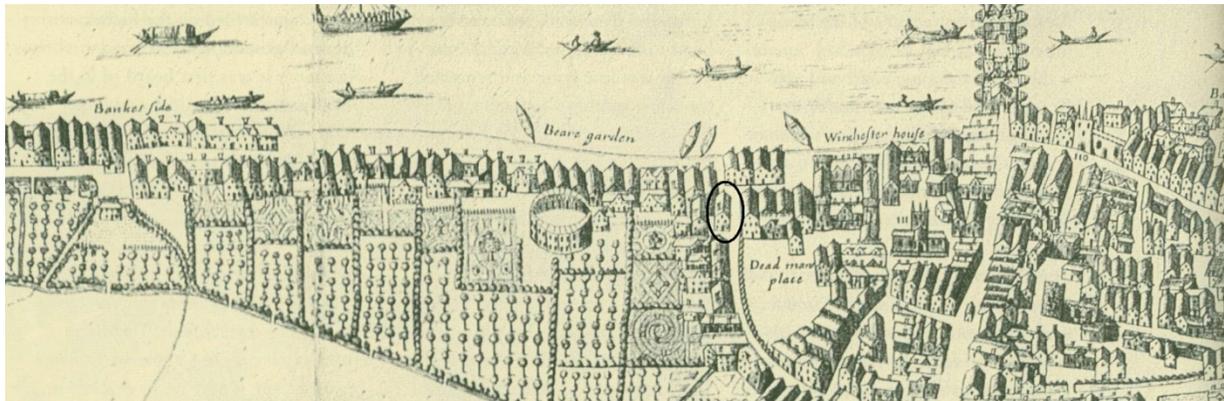
And don't forget that you don't need to hurry; you are re-creating a static moment in time, one that will not go out of fashion. Unless you completely re-do your persona, you'll be able to use these things for the rest of your time in the SCA. Take your time now; the SCA will be there when you're ready to unveil your new look, and the SCA thinks you're just fine while you're getting things together. The great thing about this organization is that you don't have to be perfect to play.

Finally, it's the details that really pull together the feel of your persona, and help you really feel like you're in another place and time, even if only for a moment or two. Even the things that people can't

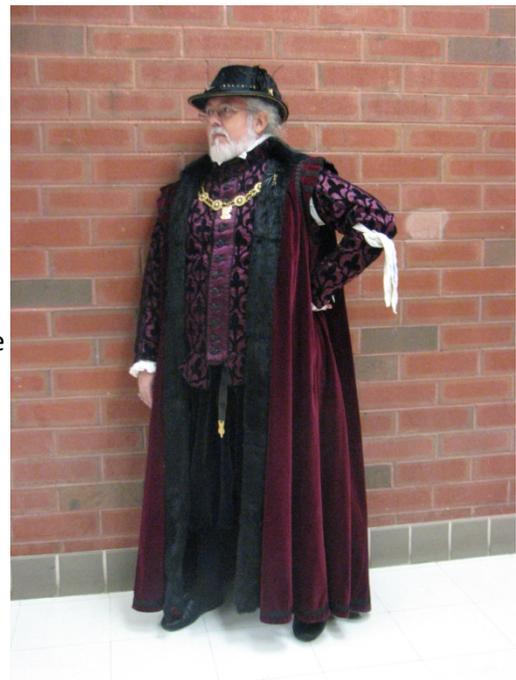
see can contribute to the feeling - a charm worn under your shirt, for instance - and the things that only you know - the street on which you live, maybe - create a whole person that you can inhabit. The coins you tuck in your pocket, the hand-sewn linen shirt, the delicate embroidery and lace on the hem of your shift - it's all part of the magic.

### Persona Stories

To get you started on your own story, here are the persona stories of Robert and Isobel:



**Robert Bedingfield** is a barrister (lawyer) working in Southwark just outside the city of London. He is a distant cousin of the Bedingfield who held the Princess Elizabeth captive at Hatfield House during the reign of Queen Mary, but he keeps that pretty quiet. A gentleman, Robert attended and received a degree from Lincoln's Inn, one of the Inns of Court in the city. He now works for the Bishop of Winchester, who oversees the parish of Southwark. The parish is outside the city walls, but considered a part of London by everyone who lives there. Since it is outside the city proper, Southwark has fewer restrictions and laws, making it easier for a man to make his fortune here. As the head of a household, Robert would command great respect and formal address, even from members of his family. Isobel would refer to him as "my Master", or "Master Bedingfield" if she were talking to him, and "the Master" when referring to him in conversation. Robert would spend his life trying to accumulate enough possessions to make sure that his family would be able to continue living at the same class level after his death. While he may not have been as concerned about his wife's fortunes (there are examples of wills where everything is left to the children, and the wife, if she survives her husband, is left dependent on them for everything), he would have been very concerned about his children, especially the boys. Robert has one son who is being taken care of by a nanny and wet nurse in the family home at Ditchingham until he is old enough to start



school. He is being kept out of the city for fear of plague.



**Isobel Bedingfield** is Robert's wife - a Norfolk girl who married young but extremely profitably. Her time is spent learning and practicing the skills considered appropriate for a society woman - embroidery, singing and writing. Most women could read, but fewer could write, and Isobel's writing is much rounder and more childish than her husband's. Girls were educated exclusively at home - schools were for boys - and Isobel's family did not employ a tutor when she was young, so she is trying to learn skills now so she can fit into the social level of her husband. While most women did work for a time when they were young, Isobel, once married, would not work outside the house, and would be completely dependent on Robert for money. She considers herself lucky to have married a man with enough money that she is not forced to take in sewing or do laundry to earn extra money. Women in England had more freedoms than on the

Continent, especially further up the social scale, but Isobel would still be expected to maintain the household and bear children. This was a much easier job in Southwark than it would have been in the country, and Isobel would have plenty of free time to visit friends, shop, and share in the local gossip. Women could go about town on their own, but Isobel would keep a servant with her to show her status.

### Daily Life

The Bedingfields are fairly well-off - Robert is doing well at his job, and has some money of his own, and they have servants and a nice, spacious house, furnished with a few good pieces and hangings, with soft furnishings either purchased or worked by Isobel. Food is purchased every day to feed the household, and a lot of it is bought ready-made and cooked - bread, pastries, and prepared dishes are all readily available, as is meat and fish, both fresh and salted. The Bedingfields keep up with the latest fashions in food and tableware, and Isobel is an accomplished sugar cook, providing candied fruits and moulded sweets for social occasions.



Their clothes are nice - nicer than most people these days think - and are well cared for and kept clean. Clothes are a status symbol, so Robert and Isobel make sure that they are dressed as well as they can afford - Robert is too sensible to spend all his money on clothes like the men at Elizabeth's Court, but has a very fine fur edged gown and a velvet suit for best. Isobel would dress in cloth of gold every day

if she could, but makes do with coarser silks and embroiders her own coifs and shifts. She might wear a carefully mended petticoat under her nice petticoat, but would never go out in public in patched or faded clothing - worn or unfashionable clothing is given to the servants.

Robert spends most of his day working, but takes a break in the middle of the day for 2-3 hours for "dinner". His working day starts at 8am, and goes until 4pm in the winter and 9pm in the summer.

Robert and Isobel both enjoy cards and gambling, but only Robert would play such games in a public house - Isobel plays at parties and with friends. Though there is considerable nightlife in Southwark, it is dangerous for women alone at night, and Isobel would probably stay home unless she and Robert were going out together. Robert might go to the bear-baiting or to cock fights, but Isobel doesn't, as only low women go to such things. Robert has some professional dealings with the bawdy-houses or "stews" that are owned by the Bishop, but he does not frequent them, as they are frowned on by polite society (and risky - not only for disease, but men are frequently robbed at such establishments).

Lastly, while marriages for money or to combine aristocratic families are not uncommon, Robert is not so high up the social scale that he couldn't marry for love. Robert and Isobel are very close, and enjoy each others' company, so do many things together, like going to plays and performing music for friends.



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