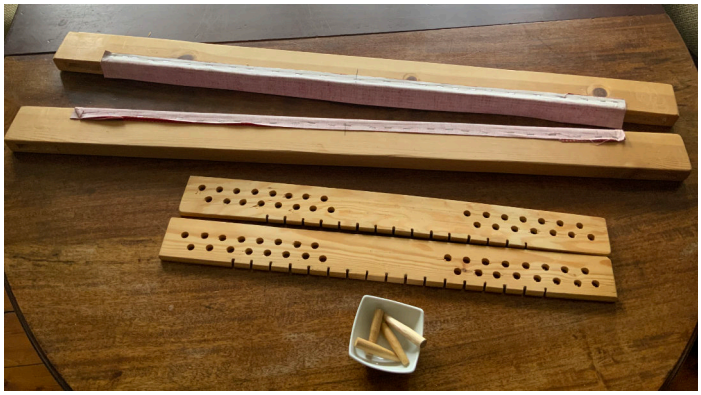
A Traditional Hand Quilting Frame



A traditional quilting frame consists of four pieces of wood.

2 main support bars
2 shorter spacing bars

And 4 wooden pegs cut from dowel and tapered.

The dimensions of the parts can be adjusted to suit the sizes of the work and the sizes of timber available so view any sizes I quote as being a guide

My support bars are generally 2½-3in wide and 1-1½in thick.

The spacer bars are around 3" wide, ⅜" thick and about 2ft long. They have a series of ⅜" holes drilled about ½in apart but staggered in 2 or 3 rows so as not to create any weak points in the wood. The hole size is slightly less than the diameter of the dowel used to make the pegs

A slot has to be cut about ¾in from the ends of the support bar to take spacer bar. It needs to be big enough to take the bar without force but no so big that there is a lot of play. The thicknesses to the two pieces must be such that when the slot is cut the remaining wood is strong enough. I have at least ¼" either side of the slot

The frame is erected by pushing the spacer bars through the slots in the support bars and using pegs to maintain the space between the two bars.

Note that the support bars have a piece of fabric attached (I use staples) between the slots to which the work is attached. This fabric can be any reasonable width. I would suggest a minimum of 3in. Traditionally webbing would be used. I tend to use a sturdy fabric folded over and sewn along the length and turned inside out so there are no raw edges that will fray

The width of the work that can used in the frame is determined by the space between the slots on the support bar. Ideally, I would ideally have a minimum 4-6in gap between the edge to work and the spacer bars. This determines the length of support bars.

I have 3 pairs of support bars at lengths of 3½, 5 & 7 ft which nicely accommodates the projects I'm likely to undertake

When in use the quilt frame needs to be supported a each end. A pairs of trestles is ideal for this but any two suitable objects of equal height would suffice.

My trestles are lightweight folding ones because I need to take them with me if I'm demonstrating quilting at Beamish Museum

A frame in use supported by trestles.

Note that the greater the leeway between the edge of the work and the spacer bars the less likely it is that the trestles will get the way of your legs.

An alternative that I sometimes use with a smaller frame when working a home is to clamp the back support bar to a workbench rather than using trestles. This more comfortable when working near the edges of the piece..

Demonstrating quilting at Beamish Museum, in Joe the Quilter's cottage..

The traditional way to mount the work on the frame is to have all three layers loose and attach all three to the front support and only attach the back layer to the back support. The backing is wound onto the back support and and the batting and top layers hang loose (as shown above and in the Beamish picture). You may have to gather up and loosely pin these layers to keep them off the floor.

As you work, you need to keep smoothing out the the batting and top layer to ensure you don't get any rucks. Generally it's best to work from the centre out. Each time I'm starting a new section I tend to smooth it out away from the completed work and outwards from the centre towards the sides and putting in pins to hold the layers in place until I get some stitching in

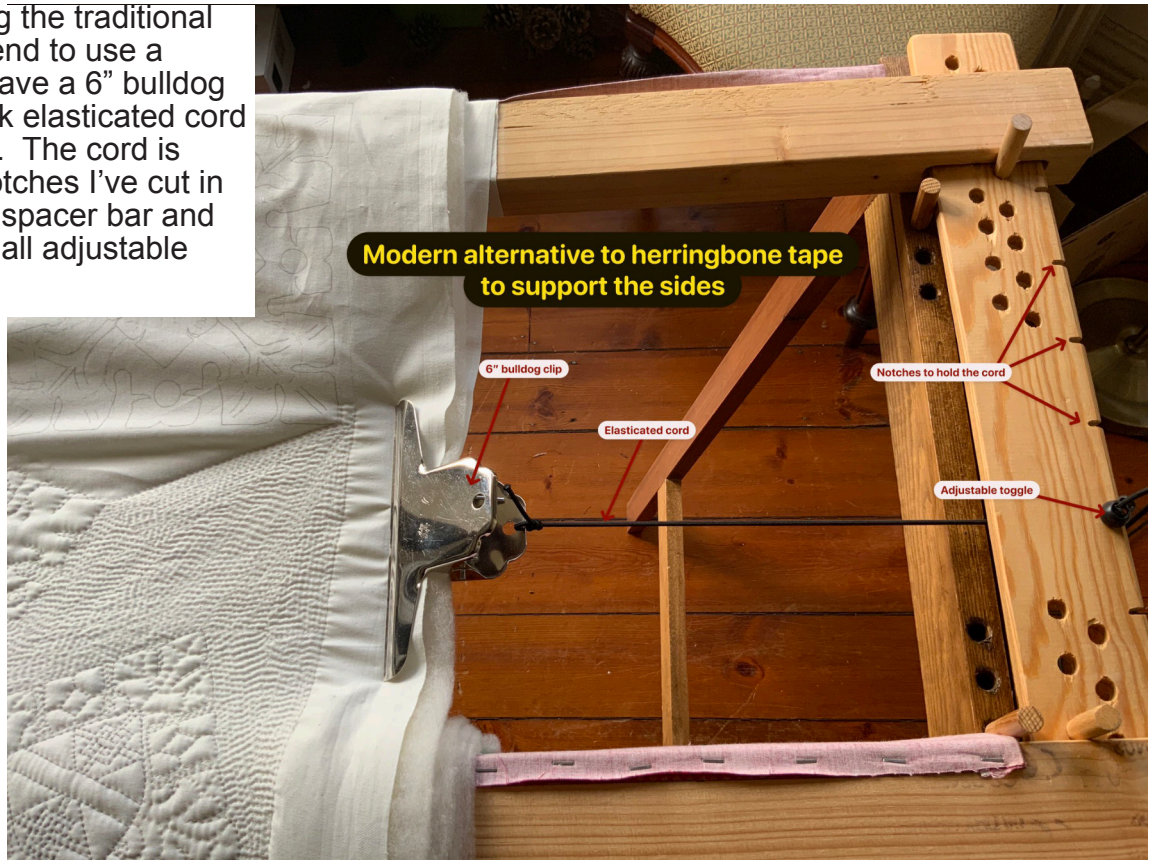
Quilting is started at one end and you work towards the other end. At any one time the amount available to be worked is governed by the spacer bars. Once you have quilted far enough from the front support across the entire width, then you can remove the side supports (see below) and the spacer bars. Turn the front bar to take up the completed section and turn the back bar to give more material to work with. Replace the spacer bars etc. and repeat the process until you reach the end.

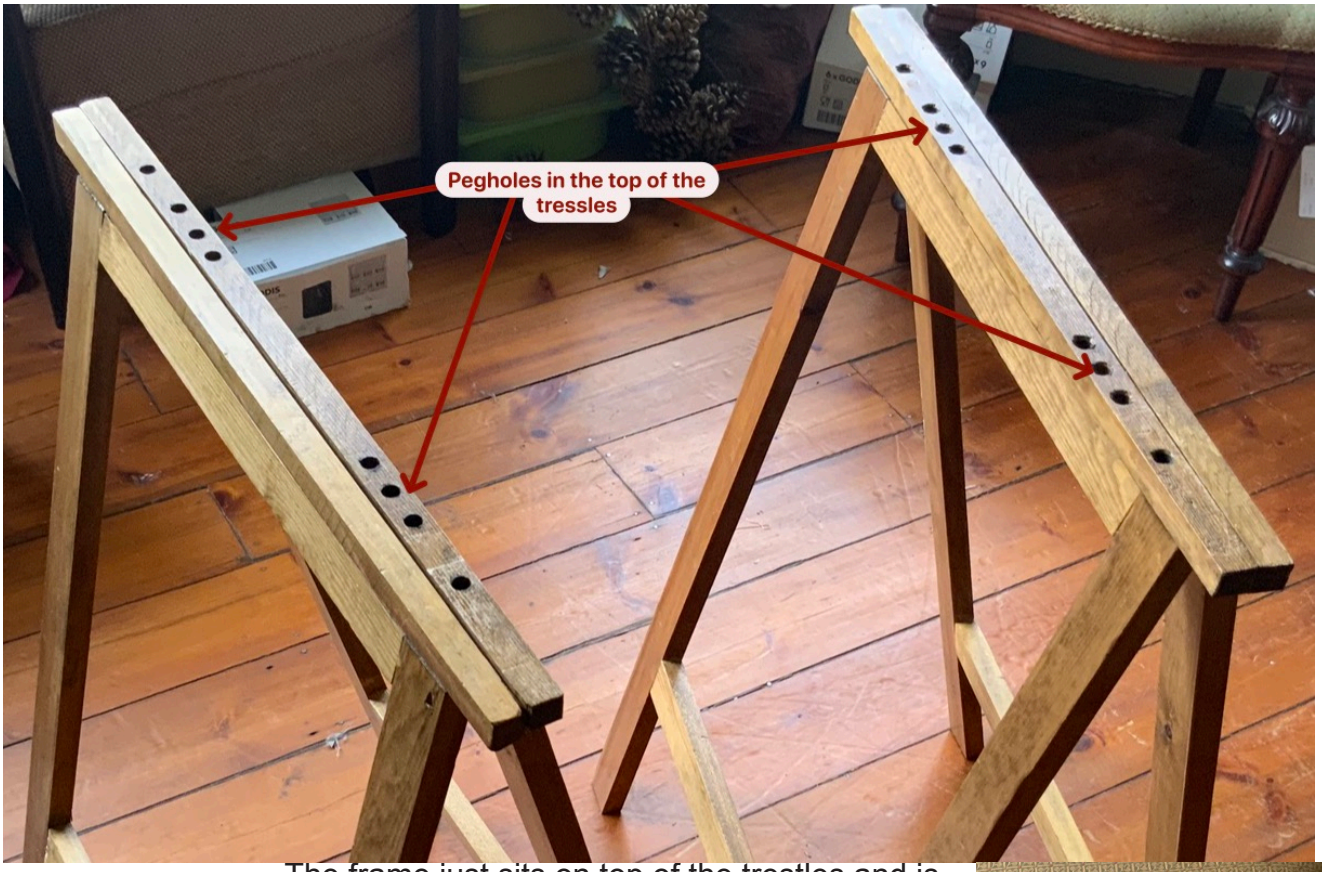
Tip. The amount that you need to quilt before you can have a *roll on* will depend on the dimensions of your timber and the amount for work already completed. As the work progresses the finished work on the front bar increases it's effective diameter and so the amount taken up by each roll on increases.

When I start a new section, what I do before replacing the spacers is try turning the front bar twice to see how far I have to go to get the next two sections done. I mark with pins at the side for each turn so I have two sets of pins. That way I know that I have to stitch up to the first set of pins to complete this section. There is always a question of how far beyond those pins should I go. The second set of pins tell me that If I can comfortably go that far then that line or section won't need to be touched after the next roll on.

The work needs to be supported at the sides. The traditional way to do this is with some herringbone tape pined to the work and wrapped around the side.

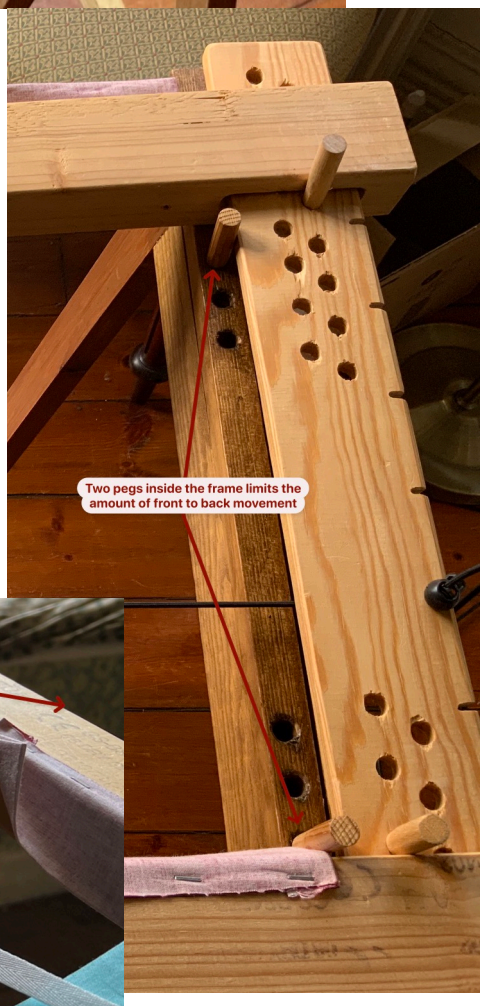
If I’m not demonstrating the traditional way of quilting then I tend to use a modern adaptation. I have a 6” bulldog clip with a piece of thick elasticated cord tied to one of the arms. The cord is caught in one of the notches I’ve cut in one of the sides of the spacer bar and help in place with a small adjustable toggle.



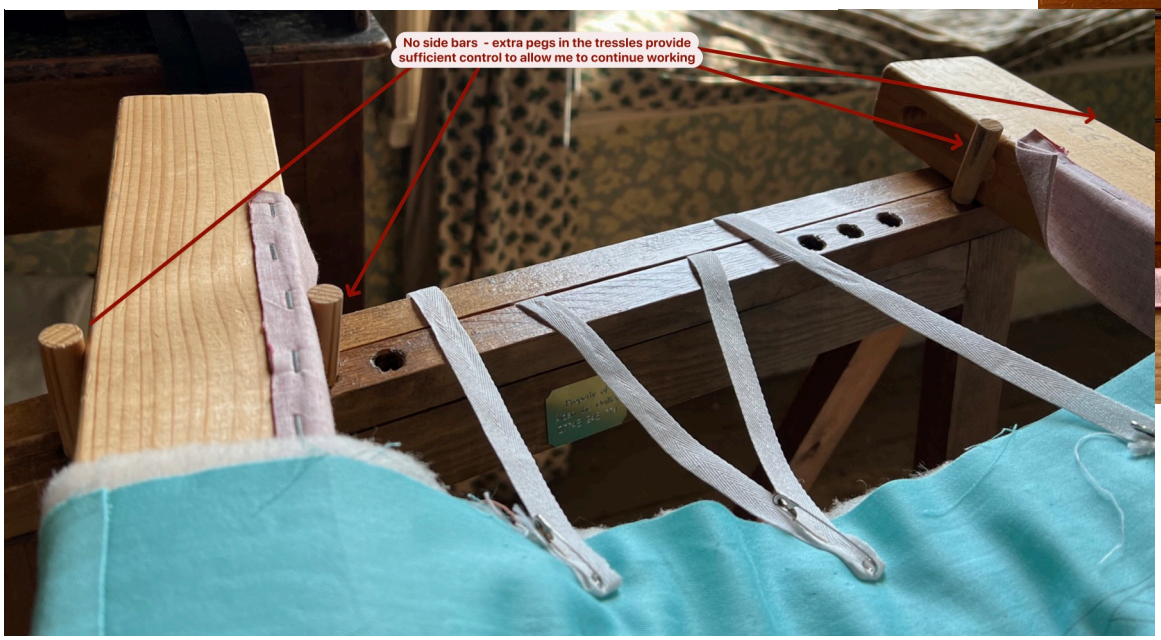


The frame just sits on top of the trestles and is free to move which means you can accidentally push it of the trestles.

In the picture above you can see a small refinement where I have drilled some holes the top of the trestles so I can put in some extra pegs which will allow the frame to still move freely but restricts it so that it won't actually fall off the frame.

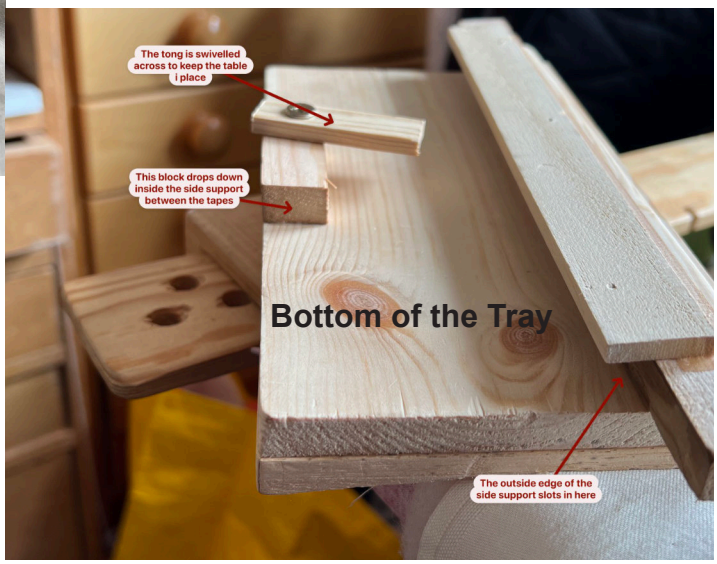


One day, I accidentally left the side bars at home but was able to use the holes in the trestles to give sufficient control that I was able to continue quilting



I sometimes find that when I’m working I have nowhere to put stuff (pins, thread, scissors, thimbles etc.). I was just leaving it on the work but I found that when the piece in question was narrow it was all to easy for things to fall off.

I solved the problem by constructing a couple of small trays that sit on the side bars



When I’m quilting at home, I don’t usually use the trestles shown in the previous pages.

Instead, I clamp the back of the frame to a solid stable surface (a workbench from IKEA). This has the advantage that there are no trestles to be accommodated by my legs which is much more comfortable.

I usually use an office chair with castors and so I can easily adjust my working position without any restrictions

The small amount of play on the slots holding the side bar means that there is small rake front to back which also adds to the working comfort.

N.B. There is a tendency to lean on the front bar while working so there is need to ensure that the side bars are strong enough to take the extra force when working in this mode. So far this has not been a problem for me.